

State's future in hands of schools

By Eileen FitzGerald Staff Writer

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A confluence of events, the growing diversity of the population, the advance of technology and the demands of a global marketplace threaten Connecticut's economic future unless the state's education system has better results, panelists at a Tuesday forum at Western Connecticut State University said.

"Speaking of the importance of education in Connecticut is not only timely, it's urgent," said Marc Herzog, chancellor of Connecticut's community colleges. "To be able to address the relationship between economics, education and business, we need a common conversation.

"Connecticut needs knowledgeable workers to compete in a global marketplace. There are extraordinary gaps in what we do in education. We need to do a better job, be more resourceful and more relevant."

There was no argument Tuesday about the need to improve student performance in Connecticut schools by the educators and business leaders gathered at WestConn.

That's because students from minority and low-income backgrounds are less likely to get a college degree than white students, state employers need staff with advanced degrees more than ever, and workers need the salaries that come with a degree to earn a living wage in the state.

The Connecticut State University system, joined by a statewide coalition of groups, is playing host to town meetings at the four state universities about why education is so important to Connecticut's future.

Tuesday was the first of the meetings. Chris Bruhl, president and CEO of the Business Council of Fairfield County; Gary Chesley, superintendent for the past decade of Bethel's public schools; James Comer, a professor of child psychiatry at Yale Child Study Center; and Noel Hord, CEO of the Hord Foundation, served as panelists.

Hord said he is an optimist about the future, but the state needs to provide more support for struggling students. His foundation has given out \$3 million in scholarships to African-American students and helps students plan early for college.

Hord said 70 percent of the African-American children in Danbury go to college, which shows that a committed community can change the destiny of its youth.

Chesley said students need to envision their future in the state, which they don't now. That's going to take businesses and schools communicating better to students about opportunities for their future.

Twenty-five percent of the best science and math students now leave the state because they don't see a future here, he said.

Bruhl didn't limit the problem to teaching relevant skills in schools and developing students committed to continue to learn. He included workers on the job now.

"It must start tomorrow, the linkage with workers whose skills are already obsolete," he said. "It isn't about formal skills, it's about creating lifelong learners. In the end, Connecticut and the United States has to produce high-quality kids."

No one wanted to assign blame for poor performance in the state's schools Tuesday.

Chesley said business professionals don't know the challenges educators face these days, such as more and more students coming to school with no English skills and having to give more tests, which don't advance skills, to satisfy federal standards.

But, he admitted, educators aren't comfortable breaking new ground and that must happen.

Comer returned several times during the two-hour meeting to voice his frustration that the state and schools don't support the development of children, especially those whose home life fails them. He blamed the situation in part on the schools, which he said must show teachers that their job is not to pass on education but to help children grow and develop.

If a student is nurtured in developing, the strong academic growth will come naturally, he said.

"I worry about talking about the jobs for the future when we aren't talking about development. We talk about what's going to be needed, but it's quality of overall development we have to pay attention to," Comer said.

"It starts before the child is born. Someone has to teach parents that their job is to get their children on a path to lifelong learning. This change must occur."