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Town meetings tackle state brain drain

By Mary E. O'Leary, Register Topics Editor

HARTFORD — The dire statistics have been around for a while, but officials Monday said low educational outcomes in high school, coupled with the exodus of young adults to other states, is setting up the Connecticut economy to fail.

Business groups and educators will hold four town meetings across the state starting this week and ending Monday at Southern Connecticut State University, where officials will look for a consensus on addressing the problem.

"A skilled work force is critical. Without this work force, we will not be able to compete five, 10, 20 years down the road," said Jeff Blodgett, vice president of research at the Connecticut Economic Resource Center, at a news conference at the Legislative Office Building.

With an aging population and a shrinking educated work force to support retirees, officials said policy decisions are needed now to fully train students to compete in the global market.

From 1990 and 2005, 25 percent of those 18 to 35 years old left the state, Blodgett said. John Shemo, vice president of economic development for the Metro Hartford Alliance, said businesses make decisions on relocating based on the talent pool in a state.

"Not only do we need a pool of labor that has the skills ... but that pool of talent also needs to be growing. Companies want to relocate to areas where the population of 18-35 year-olds are growing," Shemo said.

On the achievement end, in 2002 only 6 percent of sophomores in the five poorest cities passed all four components of the Connecticut Academic Performance tests, while 60 percent in the richest communities did so. In 2006, only 15 percent of black and Hispanic students had a passing grade.

"It is critical that everybody who remains in Connecticut be able to contribute, become a sustaining member of our economy and of our society. We can no longer afford to have a single dropout, never mind the 20 (percent) to 30 percent dropout rates we see today," Blodgett said.

Another report found that 13,000 students drop out of high school each year and 8 percent of the state's strongest academic students do not continue on to higher education.

A 2007 CERC report, *Benchmarking Connecticut 2007*, said the state ranked 44th in the growth of technology capability and 40th in the growth of human capital, an important component to the amount of output an economy produces.

David Carter, chancellor of the Connecticut State University System, who organized the forums, said it is important to convince parents "that without an educated citizenry, there are no jobs."

Beyond this, Carter said, "learning, yes, can be fun, but must be rigorous. We are competing globally, but we have an obligation locally. Our students ... must be able to excel. ... The bar must be raised. It is education, that in the final analysis, will determine the future of Connecticut."

Achieve Inc., in a 2007 report, found that nearly two-thirds of employers consider most high school graduates deficient in reading comprehension; U.S. high school students placed 17th in science and 24th in math among industrialized nations.

Shemo and others said it was particularly important to continue investment in the state university system, where 86 percent of the graduates remain in Connecticut.

The discussion at SCSU will be held from 6:30 to 8:15 p.m. at the Michael J. Adanti Student Center. Panelists will be Juan Figueroa, president of Universal Health Care Foundation; Frances Rabinowitz, superintendent of schools in Hamden; Anthony Rescigno, president of the Greater New Haven Chamber of Commerce; and Robert Santy, president and CEO, Connecticut Economic Resource Center.