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BEI: Local Educated Workforce Means More Personal Income Plus More Top Businesses Choosing Blount County with New Jobs

BEI Advocates Investing in Education to Ensure Blount's Future Economic Well-Being

Maryville, Tenn. – Want more jobs in Blount County? If so, then it's important for all citizens in the local area to ask a critical question – of themselves, according to the Blount Education Initiative (BEI).

BEI urges citizens who want Blount County to attract and retain employers that offer well-paying, secure jobs to first ask themselves, "Does my own education level offer enough to attract a new employer to Blount County?"

The reason: every resident's education level is included in local-level statistics on Blount County's overall educational and workforce readiness. And for Blount County, the current statistics are not always competitive.

"Many local residents don't realize the responsibility that we all share in helping this community put its best foot forward to attract new employers here," said Bonny Millard, executive director of the Blount Education Initiative.

According to local experts, employers weigh local workforce education levels as a major site selection factor. The lower the average numbers of a local community's high school and college-educated workforce, the less chance the community will be chosen for a new corporate or facility location.

"It's tremendously competitive," said Bryan Daniels, executive vice president of the Blount County Economic Development Board. "Blount County goes toe-to-toe with other communities across the state, the nation, and sometimes even the world when we compete for great companies to locate here."

Daniels said he hears more and more from manufacturers and other businesses that a secondary education is a minimum, base-level workforce qualification for the jobs they intend to bring to a local community.

"Most employers require at least a two-year degree or some type of certification just to consider a candidate for hire in this day and age," Daniels said. "Employers look at the local stats on education when making site selection decisions, and they expect those numbers to reflect a community with well beyond a high school diploma."

"The jobs they offer require employees to have a solid education," Daniels said. "And because of many highly educated communities across the United States and the world, employers can not only expect it, they can demand it. And they do. Blount County has to compete in a tough marketplace. The global economy is struggling, and everyplace wants those jobs in their own backyard."

Matt Murray, chair of the Blount County Economic Development Board, agrees.

"Businesses are attracted to an area because of the skill and education of the workforce, and if a community can prove it 'has the goods' from a workforce-readiness standpoint, then the local economy benefits tremendously with companies choosing to locate there," said Murray, who also serves as president of BEI and associate director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at the Univ. of Tennessee.

Unfortunately, when competing with other locations across the nation and world, Blount County cannot always tout its workforce as being educationally on par with other communities. In fact, even within Tennessee alone, statistics from the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau show that Blount County ranks below the 19.5 percent state average for bachelor's degrees, at just 17.9 percent locally.

The good news, however, is that a wide range of local resources exists for Blount County citizens to ratchet up their educational credentials.

In addition to college-degree programs, non-traditional educational opportunities are available for working adults who do not have the time or resources to attend classes on a regular basis. Such non-traditional options include online courses and evening classes.

According to the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at the Univ. of Tennessee, counties in Tennessee with a more educated population have a higher percentage of their working-age adults participating in the labor force, which will make a community more attractive for the location and expansion of business. This situation, in turn, means more job options for community members.

Stronger businesses help feed the local economy through taxes. The taxes these businesses pay help alleviate some of the strain for local citizens and provide relief for everyone.

Also, according to the Institute for Higher Education Policy, the personal economic benefits are overwhelmingly positive of attaining a college degree, versus only a high school diploma.

In 1975, earnings for workers with a college degree were 50 percent higher than the earnings of similar aged workers with only a high school education. By 2002, college graduates earned 88 percent more.

In addition to higher personal earnings, the 2007 "Education Pays" College Board study reports that the availability of employer-sponsored health benefits and pension plans increases with every level of education completed.

For example, almost 70 percent of full-time employees with at least a bachelor's degree have access to pension plans, while only 53 percent of high school graduates have that access. The percentage drops to 32 for employees who do not have a high school degree. Likewise, the level of participation in available pension plans increases as education levels increase.

"Investing in education is a sensible way for a community to ensure the well-being of future generations," Millard said. "Communities must have a vested interest in their local students' pursuit of higher education to obtain a positive economic impact. A better-educated workforce is crucial for economic success."

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About Blount Education Initiative

The Blount Education Initiative's (BEI) mission is to make education the Blount County community's top priority by developing a sustained public awareness campaign focusing on the critical issues related to education, supporting local schools in their efforts to provide a top-notch education for all students and serving as a bridge between the educational community and businesses to develop meaningful collaborations.

Achieving consensus about education's vital importance, and what forms of support are required to achieve educational excellence, requires an organized, concerted campaign involving information exchange, dialogue, learning and persuasion. That's why BEI exists – to facilitate this process. **For more information, visit www.blounteducation.org**