

EDUCATION & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Goal: Develop a strong education and workforce training system that produces skilled workers whose skills meet the needs of businesses.

Business cannot thrive without a skilled workforce, making education at all levels– K-12 schools, community colleges, four-year universities, and worker training programs– vital to the economic health of the state. To be competitive in the 21st century “innovation economy,” Oregon cannot afford to disinvest in education, nor can we afford to have a reputation as a state that lets its education system fall apart.

Provide Schools Adequate, Long-term, Stable Funding. While long-term stable funding for education has been a mantra for Oregonians for years, little progress has been made in achieving this goal, and schools continue to suffer as a result. Despite disagreement on how to provide stable funding, the Oregon Legislature must continue searching for a consensus on this vitally important issue.

Responsibility: State

Fulfill Federal Education Funding Commitments. When Congress passed the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) more than two decades ago, it mandated that states and school districts provide a free appropriate education for students with disabilities. Congress agreed to pay 40% of the additional costs of educating the disabled in order to reduce the burden on states and districts. Unfortunately, Congress has only appropriated enough money to cover less than half of the amount it originally promised, leaving states and districts to pick up the higher costs. Fully funding IDEA would bring \$137 million in additional funding for education to the State of Oregon each year, which would eliminate a portion of the state’s education shortfall. In addition, the No Child Left Behind Act’s (NCLB) effort to meet high standards imposed new mandates on educators without providing the money needed to help all students succeed. This year’s proposed budget falls more than \$12 billion short of meeting NCLB’s authorized funding level; full funding would provide Oregon an additional \$124 million annually.

Responsibility: Federal

Capitalize on Willamette University’s Presence in the Community. As one of the top liberal arts colleges in the nation, Willamette University is an important presence in Salem. However, the community has not always maximized the benefits the university can provide by fully integrating the school and its students into Salem’s economic life. While Willamette provides innumerable cultural and educational benefits that enrich the community’s quality of life, its potential for enriching the local economy with well-educated workers has been underutilized. Most Willamette alumnae leave the Salem area after graduating; enticing more of them to stay

in the Salem area could provide a wealth of well-educated individuals and benefit local businesses. The school already has a strong emphasis on service learning and internships, and more students could be placed in local businesses. This would foster stronger ties between the University and the community and encourage Willamette graduates to remain in the Salem area, helping the local economy benefit from the skills and creativity that a liberal arts education fosters. In addition, Willamette's efforts to implement an ambitious campus transformation and expansion project that will enlarge the campus beyond its traditional core offers an exciting opportunity to better integrate it into the surrounding community and improve central Salem.

Responsibility: Private Sector, City

Build on Chemeketa's Contributions to the Region. Chemeketa Community College has become one of the most important institutions for economic development in Marion and Polk counties. With its network of campuses scattered throughout the region, Chemeketa offers academic courses and workforce training opportunities valued by the region's employers. The college's Training and Economic Development Center and Small Business Development Center offer important services to the business community, and its partnerships with the Mid-Willamette Workforce Network and the Enterprise for Employment and Education make it an invaluable player in developing a skilled workforce. Chemeketa's new Advanced Manufacturing and Technology Institute, a federally funded effort which recently began offering courses in areas such as automation technology, Oracle and computer applications, and micro-electromechanical systems, will be another important asset for the region's economy. Chemeketa has had many great successes, and the college should continue working with community stakeholders to build on its strong foundations to provide services that are vital to growing the region's economy. Continued programmatic support from the state and federal governments could also help this dynamic institution expand its role in the region's economy.

Responsibility: Private Sector, State, Federal

Strengthen Connections to Oregon State University. Most of the nation's most economically dynamic regions are centered around at least one major research university that provides both skilled labor as well as a source for innovation in the area's major industries. The presence of OSU, for example, has helped Corvallis attract firms such as Hewlett-Packard, CH2M Hill, and Summit Information Systems, as well as federal facilities such as a Forest Service research center and an EPA laboratory. Unfortunately, Salem lacks this asset: while Willamette University produces many skilled workers who add to the region's economy and Western Oregon University's focus on training for careers in the public sector fits the region's focus on government employment, neither focuses on research. In order to fill this gap, the region should seek to build stronger ties to Oregon State University. OSU's focus on natural resources has already proved very beneficial to Marion and Polk counties, whose farmers and foresters have benefitted immensely from research done at OSU as well as the services provided by the OSU Extension Service, which helps farmers implement improved farming techniques. In the future, OSU's efforts to build a nationally-recognized engineering program and create a nanotechnology research center will help provide skilled workers and a source of innovation for local industries. Marion and Polk county employers should find ways to tap into this nearby pool of talent and ideas by forming partnerships with the university, and the state and federal governments can help provide the research funding that will make OSU an engine of economic growth for the region.

Responsibility: Private Sector, State, Federal

Fund Worker Training Programs. Because local economies need the flexibility to respond to local markets and business needs, several years ago Congress revamped the nation's job training program under the Workforce Investment Act to include more local control and input from businesses. Oregon's economy is changing, and much of the workforce will need additional training to fill new positions. Continued federal support for workforce development programs will be critical to fulfill the needs of both workers and their employers.

Unfortunately, Congress has failed to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act, and the version being pushed by the House leadership would reduce the role regional boards made up of employers and other stakeholders would have in the system. Congress should ensure that local boards that understand the regional economy and the needs of local employers continue to have a strong role.

Responsibility: State, Federal