

Texas Workforce Opinion

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: June 4, 2008

MEDIA CONTACT: Ann Hatchitt

PHONE: (512) 463-8556

Developing a More Skilled Workforce in Texas

AUSTIN – A Message from Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) Chairman Tom Pauken:

The world is not the same as it was in the 1950s when 60 percent of jobs could be filled with unskilled workers. Today, 80 percent of high-growth, high-demand jobs require some education beyond high school. Research has shown students are not preparing for skills needed in today's workplace.

Texas has been very successful in job creation and attracting companies to our state in recent years. One area where we need to show more progress, however, is in aligning career and technology education with what is needed in the workforce. Without more skilled workers, we will be unable to maintain the rate of job growth we have seen over the past several years in Texas. An important requirement of employers seeking to relocate or expand their businesses is the availability of a skilled workforce. We must be able to supply workers on the employers' timelines in order to remain competitive in attracting jobs to our state.

Unfortunately, the Texas Workforce Commission continues to hear from employers that students are not learning the skills necessary for a modern economy. These employers are not alone in their opinions. According to a survey conducted by Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies, college instructors report that 42 percent of entering freshmen are unprepared for college work, and employers estimate that 45 percent of recent high school graduates lack necessary skills. These perspectives are shared by the high school graduates themselves: 35 percent of college students say that they graduated from high school with large gaps in basic academic skills, and 39 percent of high school graduates entering the workforce report such gaps.

There is an objective basis for these concerns. A study of Texas high school graduates taking the ACT in 2004 found only 18 percent had the foundational skills for college and work. In addition to learning the basics, students must also develop good analytical skills. Employers report that such applied skills as critical thinking, teamwork, and effective communication are essential to the preparation for today's workplace. For some occupations, these applied skills are even more important than basic or specific technical skills that can be gained on the job. Therefore, it is critical that our young people know how to learn on their own and how to analyze issues, identify solutions and develop recommendations for solving problems.

– more –

Employers are especially concerned about the broken link between educational institutions at all levels and the businesses that employ their graduates. While one can make the argument that Texas is doing a reasonably good job of producing the quantity of four-year degrees, there is a huge mismatch between the areas of study and the jobs being created. As Tom Luce of the U.S. Department of Education pointed out in a recent column in the *Austin American-Statesman*, “America now graduates more sports exercise majors than electrical engineers,” adding that “there were twice as many physics graduates in 1956 as in 2004.”

But our real deficit is in the number of two-year technical degrees Texas produces. Employers tell us that their greatest needs can be met through *quality* high school education followed by associate degrees or advanced certification programs.

Right now, the message parents are hearing is that their children *have* to get at least a bachelor’s degree in order to obtain well-paying jobs. We have to work with parents and guidance counselors to educate them about the jobs being created and *all* of the potential career pathways, including *good* options requiring fewer than four years of college.

A case in point is one of Gov. Rick Perry’s major economic development initiatives — the Texas Energy Cluster. This Texas Industry Cluster Initiative encourages skills training for good-paying jobs in the following areas: oil and gas exploration and production, power generation, mining, power transmission, and renewable energy sources, such as wind, bio-fuel, solar and geothermal energy. This cluster added 85,465 jobs from 2004 to 2007, but many of the technical professionals in the cluster are approaching retirement. The energy industry, as well as other high-skill, high-wage industries, will lose as many as half of its professional talent over the next five to 10 years as baby boomers retire.

Unless we can align career and technology education with what is needed in the workforce, we will simply not be able to realize the vast potential of the Texas Energy Cluster or other high-growth sectors.

In order to make the best use of our state resources, I believe that our education system should make a shift to one that is market-driven and takes into account the skills needed by employers.

Tom Pauken is Chairman of the Texas Workforce Commission

###ash

The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in unison with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.