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All kids need a great education

How our students can succeed and prosper

By Bill Berezowitz and Tim Sheehy

July 28, 2012

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As the CEO of Manpower Group, Jeff Joerres knows a lot about what's required to fill the job needs of employers all over the globe, and as he has noted "we are in the human age, where economies compete and survive based mainly on talent."

Wisconsin's release of a new measure of student academic performance in grade and high school was a warning sign worth our attention ("Student scores slip with new standard," July 17). Credit goes to the state Department of Public Instruction, led by Superintendent Tony Evers, for its on-point and timely release of this new data showing how Wisconsin's students perform when we use a higher common standard to compare with students in other states.

The results were tough to swallow, 36% proficient in reading and 48% proficient in math on standards that are more representative of what is needed to compete nationally and globally. It looks as if we have been training our students on the low hurdles, when in reality we are running in an international high-hurdle race where jobs are the finish line.

We recently attended a conference sponsored by GE on this very topic. The national audience of business and education leaders came together to better understand the implications of all states adopting a common core set of standards to measure educational performance in K-12. Wisconsin has significant ground to make up.

More than 46 states are working to adopt these new common standards for what is taught and how subject proficiency is measured. We offer these observations and recommendations for business leaders, educators, policy-makers and parents so our students can succeed and prosper in the human age.

Better prepare our students: Too few of our high school graduates are prepared for postsecondary education, with about one-third of our high school graduates needing remedial courses. Too many are not prepared to meet the needs of their employers, and too wide is the gap with our international competition. According to research by Dr. William Schmidt, director of the Education Policy Center at Michigan State, "In fourth grade, our kids are above the international average, by eighth grade they are average and by 12th they are near the bottom."

Change what we teach: At the heart of the Common Core Standards is the principal of teaching fewer subjects, with deeper understanding and higher levels of comprehension. For example, countries such as Singapore, Finland and South Korea have similar strategies for teaching math. This includes the sequence, number of subjects covered and the depth at which they are taught, all resulting in higher performance relative to their U.S. counterparts.

Benchmarking against top performing countries, U.S. eighth-graders would engage in 21 topics in math instead of the 34 they study today, and the math book would shrink from 800 pages to 300. Better math skills in a broader range of students give us the potential foundation to fill the shortages we face in science, technology and engineering.

Don't shoot the teacher: Our low test scores are not due to poor teaching but a reflection of the need to change both what is taught and how we go about teaching it. Better preparation on a focused number of topics will make for better results from our teachers.

Don't shoot the messenger: Evers and the legislative leaders supporting Wisconsin's move to higher standards, like the Common Core, have it right. Our current state test needs to be replaced and aligned to meet a standard that compares to what students need to learn in a fast changing economy.

We need more messengers who understand the implications of what is being described as the most fundamental change in U.S. education policy in the past 30 years. Wisconsin's current test puts us far, far behind other states as this new standard is scheduled to be introduced in 2014-'15.

Take the lead: Employers have much at stake in supporting improved educational standards. We rely on the analytical thinking and critical communication of our workforce; it is the foundation for our economy, as one business leader at the conference noted about our citizenry "what they know is critical to economic growth." To this end, we plan on engaging business leaders through a presentation on Common Core Standards and What They Mean to Your Business this fall.

Finally, we cannot ignore the need to close our local education gap here in Milwaukee; it is not enough to move some of our students to a higher standard of performance. The international experience of common standards shows that it results in better education, across the entire distribution, not just the elite.

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To move Milwaukee forward, we need to improve the performance of *all* our kids. There is simply no other option if we want our city to be an economic engine for generations to come.

Bill Berezowitz is vice president at GE Healthcare; Tim Sheehy is president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.

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