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The Boston Globe

## Blueprint for success is based on schooling

By Mary Grant and Dan Bosley | June 25, 2006

ROLLING HILLS dotted with fields and meadows, mountains, streams, cultural destinations, and idyllic New England towns -- the Berkshires. While the image is real, Berkshire County also is home to a gracious community of hard-working, innovative people, many of whom struggle to get by after the departure of large manufacturing companies. These companies provided an important source of well-paying jobs and served as the economic base of Berkshire County. County residents had access to steady, generational career paths where advancement and new opportunities could be realized through seniority and on-the-job training.

Determined not to let the area stagnate, a group of business, civic, legislative, cultural, and educational leaders undertook an intensive assessment of the county's economic strengths and weaknesses. The result is the Berkshire Compact, a blueprint for the future.

Innovative small- to mid-size technology, specialty manufacturing, and healthcare businesses are transforming the new economy. Berkshire County's reputation as a premier cultural venue is driving jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, and is also one of its greatest assets in attracting new businesses and residents. It is a "one-two punch" not many local economies can match.

While the Berkshires' quality of life, cultural amenities, and lower cost of living are attractive lures, the gap between the workforce needs of current and future employers and the skills that the region's residents possess presents a challenge. It is a problem bedeviling all of Massachusetts, with more than 70,000 jobs vacant statewide and a loss of more than 94,000 technology jobs since 2000.

The changing economy increasingly demands higher-order skills than a high school education provides. Higher education translates directly into higher earnings. As jobs follow people, expanding the educational level of residents is the most important investment. Every resident of Berkshire County should attain at least 16 years of education and training.

This is a commitment that Massachusetts as a whole must make if recently documented losses in population are not to snowball into broader economic decline.

The vision begins with raising the aspirations of residents by changing a culture that accepts a high school diploma (or equivalent) as the educational endpoint to one that promotes lifelong learning. This process must begin in the home and in primary grades, when expectations are being formed; high school is too late to begin talking about higher education. Across the state, an integrated system of curriculum, opportunities, and culture must be established to promote a successful transition to post-secondary learning.

The barriers to higher education must be removed. For many students and families, access to higher education is blocked by financial barriers. Massachusetts must reverse recent declines in student financial aid and commit to strong and sustained funding of the public higher-education system, a priority of the new Joint Committee on Higher Education, which has been supported by encouraging budget numbers in the current House budget.

The Berkshire Compact proposes a Higher Education Passport, which creates a pathway to success from pre-K thru college for all students. Under this proposal, students could achieve credits on their Passport, for example, for attending summer enrichment programs, maintaining an excellent attendance record, achieving improved MCAS scores, and participating in dual high school-college enrollment courses. Linking the Passport credits to financial incentives for attending college is part of the long-term vision.

The Compact calls for investment in the region's technological infrastructure and networks, and for providing K-12 students with more intensive technology-oriented learning experiences. It looks to expand linkages

between new technology-oriented firms and schools, creating internships for high school and college students, and externships for teachers.

The success of the region will depend upon the ability to forge a new social contract between employers and employees. While this may sound anachronistic in an age of workplace uncertainties, it is only by marshaling collective resources and creating new opportunities for learning and earning that the region can compete.

The Berkshire Compact provides a model for the rest of the state. It is based on the sober realization that there is no economic-development shortcut; the best tax and regulatory incentives cannot compensate for the single critical defining issue in any region's economic future -- the quality and depth of its labor force. Today, that quality and depth depend on access for all to higher education.

Mary Grant is president of the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in North Adams. Representative Dan Bosley is chairman of the Committee on Economic Development and Emerging Technologies. ■

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