

EDITORIALS & LETTERS

Education never ends

Lane's work force is Lane's future

On the opposite page, an essay by Bobby Lee concludes a 12-part series of columns on work force development in Lane County and Oregon. Every two weeks for the past six months, authorities from the fields of education, training and economic development have discussed ways to ensure that Lane County's workers are prepared for well-paid jobs, and they have described the efforts of local schools, employers, unions and others to meet that challenge.

It's a big topic, with big implications. Among the biggest are these: Education doesn't end with a diploma; education is everybody's business; and the line between education and work increasingly is blurred.

Education might be called training in some settings or apprenticeship in others, but in all cases the common denominator is learning. Public schools are doing their best to give students the skills they will need to lead productive lives. But workers already need to be prepared to continue learning as their jobs change, or as old jobs disappear and new ones are created. The ability to adapt through learning will be even more important in the future as the pace of change accelerates and as the global economy becomes more competitive.

Employers can't afford to stand by and expect that schools will teach young people everything they need to know; even the best high school, community college and university education will need to be refreshed periodically. Opportunities for life-long learning must be available, both through formal institutions of education and at the workplace.

Nor can employers afford to expect workers to update their skills on their own. Businesses that hope to compete for the best workers will need to be active partners in training and education — supporting educational institutions and creating in-

house training programs.

Shortages of skilled workers in such high-demand fields as health care are well-known, but as Lee reports, a survey of Lane County manufacturers found that 68 percent have trouble finding the workers they need. Competition for skilled workers will grow more intense as baby boomers reach retirement age. The demographic crunch will compound pressures to move jobs overseas, where companies can find low-cost, as well as highly skilled, workers.

Ensuring that Lane County has a first-rate work force today, and has the means in place to ensure continuous improvement for tomorrow, thus becomes a matter of economic survival. Local businesses can't prosper without productive workers. Existing businesses can't grow, and new ones won't emerge, unless they can find workers with the skills and knowledge they need. A failure to develop Lane County's work force will ensure that jobs requiring high levels of skill and education will go elsewhere. That's a prescription for a low-wage economy and all the ills that attend it, ranging from poor public services to a high incidence of social problems.

The 12 installments of the Building Lane County's Work Force series have described a number of public and private initiatives to provide training and education. They range from skill-building curricula in high schools to industrial training consortia. Several installments in the series also have told of efforts to ensure that veterans, the disabled and other groups are recognized as having the potential to make important contributions to meeting future work force needs.

These are good starts, but they'll have to be steadily deepened and broadened. If it is to be successful, the task of building Lane County's work force will be a project that can never end.