

OPINION

CREATING TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE

Keep future bright for young workers

BY GLENDA POLING

Today, companies considering relocation or expansion first look at an area's available workforce. Those seeking the cheapest labor choose foreign countries or low-wage regions in the United States. Clearly, they aren't coming to Oregon, and frankly we shouldn't try to attract them. Our future prosperity depends on businesses that need a skilled and reliable workforce — and value what Oregon has to offer.

We focus on attracting and keeping traded-sector companies, ones that sell goods and services in regional, national or international markets and infuse new dollars and resources into our community and state.

Across the country, workforce development comes up as a common topic, especially in discussions of how we deal with profound demographic shifts. As the huge baby-boomer generation edges toward retirement, vacancies in the job market will increase. Yet there are fewer people in the succeeding generation to fill those vacancies. The result? Increased competition among companies for a dwindling labor pool.

Some describe this as a crisis. If you are an employer seeking workers, it certainly seems like one. But if you

are a young person entering the workforce for the first time, or a parent whose children will be entering the job market in the years ahead, this is an opportunity.

Unlike baby boomers who flooded the job market in the 1970s and created a decade of declining productivity and falling real wages, the next generation of workers will enjoy a seller's market. Companies will offer better pay and benefits (including working conditions) to attract workers.

It is time we quit sending our kids a negative message about their future. The demographic changes that are under way will actually work to their benefit. But they must be prepared to take advantage of the situation.

Communities also have a role, because those that succeed in attracting and keeping the most desirable employers will be those that have a reliable, skilled workforce. That doesn't happen by accident.

Here in Lane County, our workforce is considered outstanding. That's because we have good schools, good families and an attractive quality of life. But to maintain that advantage, we will have to work even harder to build on what we have. Now is not the time to rest on our laurels.

"Leave no child behind" has unfortunately become a contentious and politicized phrase, yet it is a truth that we must embrace. As our potential workforce dwindles in number, we can't afford to let kids slip between the cracks — academically or behaviorally. Young people who drop out of school, develop substance abuse problems or have criminal records will have to work hard to make themselves employable.

We have a responsibility to reach out to children at risk, so they have the opportunity to lead satisfying and productive lives. But it takes the whole village to make sure we leave no child behind.

If we are to keep Lane County and Oregon's workforce ahead of the pack, schools will need to offer classes leading to a variety of career tracks and post-secondary education. An array of training opportunities will need to be

accessible. In addition, we need to increase our community's investment in continued training beyond a formal education — that's an essential part of making and keeping our workforce ready for the jobs that will be created in the 21st century.

Recently, companies such as Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines, Molecular Probes and Williams Bakery chose to locate or expand here in large part because of our excellent workforce. Continuing to attract and keep such companies as these will require greater investments in education and workforce training in the years ahead. If we make those investments, we will reinforce our reputation as a great place to live, work and raise a family. As a community, our quality of life will be enhanced as the quality of the lives for local workers is improved, because their earning power has increased.

Glenda Poling is an economic development practitioner for the Lane Metro Partnership. She serves on the Lane Workforce Partnership board, the Oregon Economic Development Association board and the Regional Investment board, and is vice-chair of the Lane Economic Committee. This is the second in a series of biweekly columns on developing Lane County's workforce.

As our potential workforce dwindles in number, we can't afford to let kids slip between the cracks — academically or behaviorally.
