



## **Strong K-12 Public Education Is Vital For Business**

*By Tom Oxholm, former WCPSS board member and executive vice president of  
Wake Stone Corporation*

Every business leader knows that our companies are only as good as our people. But too many of us think that because North Carolina's community colleges and universities are well-regarded and companies keep moving here, our public K-12 education must be in good shape.

Wrong!

Astonishingly, only about 30% of our rising 9th graders test at grade level in reading and math. In our highly competitive world, that's unacceptable. How well-prepared, truly, are the graduates that your company hires?

While our state budget lacks proper public-school funding for teacher pay and classroom supplies, working-class and middle-class taxpayers subsidize ever-expanding vouchers for wealthy parents who can already afford to send their children to private schools. That upward resource diversion is dubious morally and indefensible economically.

The main factor in student success is a well-qualified teacher in every classroom – which North Carolina frankly doesn't have. The reason is simple economics: teacher pay starts at only \$41,000 a year, worst in the Southeast. Teachers with 15 years' experience earn \$53,880.

Teachers get no scheduled raises in years 15-24, and they max out at \$55,950 no matter how long or how hard they work. Would smart, capable, professional employees in your business (or any other) be willing to work their entire careers with so little opportunity for advancement? (Some counties supplement teachers with additional compensation.)

In 2010, facing a gaping budget deficit in the wake of the Great Recession, our state legislature cut the funding for public school supplies in half. Despite our state's subsequent economic resurgence and billions of dollars in budget surpluses, lawmakers have not restored that funding. Most of our counties are now the sad scene of charity campaigns to buy basic public-school classroom supplies so that our underpaid teachers don't have to purchase them for their students.

In light of all this, it's no wonder that our state schools that train teachers have seen enrollments plummet 70% over the past 20 years. That's a flashing warning sign not only for our schools, but more broadly for the future of North Carolina. Starvation is a lousy strategy for survival.

### **A sobering business summit**

Last fall I helped organize [a summit of statewide business leaders](#) concerned about public education. Hosted by the nonpartisan Public School Forum of North Carolina, the summit drew about 100 business leaders from 40 counties across the state.

When presented with [a multitude of facts](#), most of the attendees were aghast to learn how poorly our K-12 school students perform in our competitive world — the direct result, I believe, of our state's miserly funding of public schools. They were shocked by our chronic teacher shortages, our low teacher pay scale, our poor principal pay, and numerous other educational deficiencies.

About 80% of our conference's attendees hadn't paid much attention to the shortcomings of our public education system. The other 20% were aware of the problem but had no idea how to fix it.

Step One in improving public education is to face facts, just as any business would regarding its own goals, requirements, and performance. Then get going and tackle the challenge.

Step Two is to push our local and state chambers of commerce to get off the sideline and advocate for greater investment in public education. Job growth depends on workforce development, which in turn relies on a strong system of K-12 public education. Chambers are focused narrowly on economic development while K-12 issues scream for attention.

Step Three is to help state legislators understand the pressing need for greater investment in public schools, from higher teacher pay to more support staff and adequate classroom supplies. Most voters — Republicans, Democrats, and independents alike — agree that we need a well-educated citizenry. We won't do well for long with the ignorant alternative.

### **Get in the game**

Which is more important to business leaders: reducing North Carolina's already-low corporate tax rate further to 2.5% or 0%, or having all kids prepared to enter school and reading at grade level? Our legislature should instead *raise* the corporate tax rate and do whatever it takes to educate students properly. Workers of the future need more days in school, after-school tutors, classroom supplies, and better pay for teachers and principals.

From the local level to the upper echelons of state political and economic power, we also need closer cooperation among businesses, educators, and elected officials. Too many government officials and business leaders are disengaged from our public schools. Too many local school districts stubbornly eschew the experienced advice of business executives. And too many myopic chambers of commerce look the other way.

Wake up! Strong public education matters to us all in North Carolina, including business leaders. Let's act like it — before it's too late.

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