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Education can elevate Colorado's economy

By Kelly Hupfeld

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On Monday, Sept. 19, the business community has a real opportunity to make a difference in Colorado education.

On that day, key business and community leaders will come together at the E3 Summit to launch a business-led partnership intended to improve Colorado's education policies and practices. The summit was designed by a steering committee representing some of Colorado's most influential companies and is sponsored by The Colorado Trust, the Daniels Fund, the Donnell-Kay Foundation and the Rose Community Foundation.

"E3" stands for Education to Elevate Colorado's Economy, reflecting the fact that a quality public education system is critical to Colorado's economic future.

Your eyes may have skimmed over that last part, so let me repeat it: A quality public education system is critical to Colorado's economic future.

You may have heard that before, but have you ever really thought of all the ways in which education affects the economy?

Education affects your work force. If you hire locally, Colorado's education system determines the quality of your work force. Ninety-two percent of Colorado's children are educated in public schools, where they learn basic skills and work habits. If you require workers with specialized knowledge or skills, you probably rely in large part on our system of community colleges and four-year higher education institutions. Colorado's ability to educate all students, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, affects your ability to hire a diverse work force.

Our education system also affects your work force if you recruit nationally for Colorado job openings. Star recruits with families weigh the quality of the local schools when deciding which job opportunities will best meet their needs. If you had small children and job prospects across the country, would you rather have your children attend school in Mississippi or Connecticut?

Education affects your customer base. Someone with a college degree makes \$1 million more over the course of their lifetime than a high school graduate does. That's money to spend on your products and services.

Education affects the context in which you do business. High levels of education contribute to stable communities and lower the need for public spending on programs such as welfare and health care, and the costs of our corrections systems.

In short, it makes sense for business to invest in a quality education system, since education produces long-term returns for business.

In today's competitive environment, business leaders across the country are recognizing the high stakes involved in improving public education, from preschool through higher education. They're driving state education policy through organizations like the Texas Business & Education Coalition, the Public School Forum of North Carolina and the Indiana Education Roundtable.

They're lending their particular expertise in areas like school and district reform through organizations such as the Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education, the Boston Compact and the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence. Across the country, business leaders are committing to public education for the long term as an investment in their own economic futures as well as the futures of their communities.

Successful efforts in other states to create strong business/education partnerships often have three factors in common. First, although these organizations are highly collaborative, they usually enjoy the dynamic leadership of influential people within the local business community. Without focused leadership from someone whom others are willing to follow, reform efforts tend to flounder and good intentions are lost among the conflicting obligations in today's world.

Second, business leaders understand the need for long-term commitment. As with other complex systems, improving public education is a process, not an event. Many of the successful organizations across the country have been doing their work for decades, and expect to be permanent players in education reforms in their communities.

Finally, leadership is collaborative. Business leaders forge strong partnerships with political and education leaders. Policies and practices in education will not be improved without leadership from those who have the power to effect change. Nor will education improve without buy in from the professionals who will be implementing those changes in their daily work. Whether this joining together happens through the sheer political power of the business community or through a mutual willingness to lead in the same direction, it must happen if true change is to occur.

At the E3 Summit, business leaders in Colorado have an opportunity to decide what role they want to take in improving education in Colorado. We're all looking forward to that important conversation.

Kelly Hupfeld is the director of policy and research at the Public Education & Business Coalition in Denver. For more information about the E3 Summit, contact Jennifer Gonzales at jgonzales@dkfoundation.org.

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