Business Council of Alabama fights for competitive work force

by David Zaslasky
photography by Robert Fouts
When William J. Canary was a member of Leadership Alabama nine years ago, his
class visited George Hall Elementary School
in Mobile.

He talks about it as if it was yesterday. “I
saw the excitement of the faculty. I saw by
looking in the eyes of these children a simple
thing – hope. They had been one of the
worst-performing schools in that community
and had risen to the top. And they did it
because they were willing to make changes in
an environment, where challenge was with a
huge capital C.”

Canary, the president and CEO of the
Business Council of Alabama (BCA), said
after that visit, “I walked away believing, I
really believe if this organization and if the
business community would be willing to step
up and take this on (education) … We knew it
was going to be a long journey.”

Thus the organization became a champion for
education and not just willing to say the right
things, but use its resources to bring about
change. He said the BCA was sometimes
criticized for its engagement in education. It
was not a role that businesses traditionally
had taken on.

“As you can imagine, there are some out
there who like the status quo,” Canary said.
“We’re status quo busters in this regard.
The status quo has not been good for
employment. It has not been good for our
children. It’s not been good for us to compete
economically around the globe.

“Often times, we have an 18th century model
to teach a 21st century work force. That alone
in some definition begs for change. Change
doesn’t happen without passion; change
doesn’t happen without sacrifice.”

The change was necessary to produce a
competitive work force. “Today, each and
every job based on global competition
requires a 13th grade education,” Canary
said. At the minimum that means one
additional year of training after high school.

A quality education is one of the
organization’s two pillars, with the other
being economic development. As Canary
will remind you – there is no economic
development without education.

“The argument we make is, imagine if the
state had a 100 percent quality graduation
rate?” Canary asked. What would that do for
economic development? It would go through
the roof.”

That is why the BCA launched the Business
Education Alliance, which is guided by former
state school superintendent Joe Morton and
former State Rep. Jay Love, who chaired the
House education committee. Morton is the
president and chairman of the BEA and Love
is the finance chairman.

Canary called the Business Education
Alliance “a true collaboration of working
together with the business community
and the education community.” He said
everybody is “focused on representing our
children and ensuring that they get the very
best education possible.

“In order for this to be all that it’s capable
of being we had to merge the business
community with those in the education world.
It’s an important statement for the business
community that we’re stepping up; joining
hands; we’re embracing the importance of
education …” Canary said.

Canary said that in Montgomery you see
how the business community and education
community has come together “for one single
purpose: to make education the very best
that it possibly can be. It’s just a question
that you have to have an education in order
to have a competitive work force. That’s one
of the battles that I believe that the business
community throughout the state has rightfully
taken on.”

One of the key aspects in that battle is pre-K.
The BCA is now in its third year of a 10-year
plan to help fully fund a pre-K program for all
the state’s 4-year-olds. There are now nearly
70,000 4-year-olds.

“If you already bring a child to school ready
to learn, we strongly understand and the
documentation will prove that they have a
gerater chance of reading at the third-grade
level at third grade or better,” Canary said.
“It ultimately increases the end product – the
number of young individuals graduating high
school with the proper competency to go on
to meet the requirements of our 21st century
work force.”

The BCA has annually supported a
wide range of education and work force
preparedness initiatives as part of its
legislative agenda.

“You’re beginning to see walls come down
and barriers come down, where individuals
are starting to clearly establish the importance
of education,” Canary said. “It’s exciting
because we’re getting to see change occur.” •

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- William J. Canary, president
and CEO of the Business
Council of Alabama
POLICY COMMITTEES HELP
DRAFT LEGISLATIVE AGENDA

by David Zaslavsky

The annual legislative agenda for the Business Council of Alabama is a work in progress that continues during the legislative session.

The organization, which advocates for a diverse membership of nearly 1 million, including a partnership with chambers of commerce, will amend its legislative agenda as necessary.

The organization may elect to oppose or support an issue after moving it from review, according to William J. Canary, president and CEO of the Business Council of Alabama (BCA) since March 2003.

“Our members drive the BCA’s goals, policies and actions,” Canary said in a statement. “The importance of the guidance provided by our committees cannot be understated. The committees design our blueprint for the BCA in the new legislative session.”

During the legislative session, which started in January, the BCA conducts a Tuesday morning briefing with its governmental affairs staff and often invites a member of the Legislature to talk about the issues.

To determine its legislative agenda, the BCA has policy committees, including education and work force preparedness; environment and energy; health; judicial and legal reform; labor and employment; small business; tax and fiscal policy; and the governmental affairs committee.

“Each and every committee has the full attention of the organization and they are first among equals,” Canary said.

“There is not one committee that has more value than another and there is not a committee that has any less value than another.”

Each committee has a chair and co-chair and members may participate in any committee or committees. The committees, which range in size from about 20 members to 150, hold meetings and many have a sub-committee structure, Canary said.

In November, the BCA conducts its Committee Leadership Days when each committee votes on issues. After those votes, the agenda moves to the governmental affairs committee, which then makes a recommendation to the organization’s board of directors. The board then decides to adopt the legislative agenda at the BCA’s annual meeting.

With primaries and a general election looming this year, Canary expects that lawmakers will want the legislative session to end as soon as possible. He noted that the Secretary of State announcement of moving up the qualification date for candidates from April 3 to Feb. 6 “is a game-changer.” Canary said revising that date “reduces a lot of the political drama.”

The organization’s committee structure fits into the BCA belief that the two pillars of progress are economic development and education. “There is not a single committee that doesn’t fit within the confines of those two pillars,” Canary said.

“It’s exciting because we’re getting to see change occur.”

- William J. Canary, president and CEO of the Business Council of Alabama

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This year’s awards luncheon is scheduled for Wednesday, May 14 at 11:30 a.m. at the Alabama Activity Center in Montgomery. The keynote speaker is Jason Hoff, president and CEO of Mercedes-Benz U.S. International.