MEET THE TEAM THAT WILL UNITE BUSINESS AND EDUCATION IN ALABAMA

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Editorial: BCA will unite business community and public education

The quality of public education has enormous implications for Alabama’s economic prospects, so a serious, committed alliance of education and business interests could be a great asset for the state. We hope the organization being formed by the Business Council of Alabama will be exactly that.

BCA says the Business Education Alliance “will provide objective research and support for proven and innovative education programs” and “advocate for the implementation of new and needed education reforms, such as public charter schools and expanded school choice options.”

BEA took a commendable first step in naming Joe Morton, the former state superintendent of education, as president and chairman. Morton is a highly regarded educator who can operate comfortably and credibly in both the education and business camps. That’s important, because even though business and education should be natural partners, political tensions have often existed between the two in our state.

“Business depends upon a qualified and well-educated workforce in order to fill the 21st-century jobs that Alabama is attracting. But in many areas of the state, schools are in need of improvement and measures of their effectiveness are often lacking,” Morton said in a statement.

“Rather than creating a conflict between the business community and public education, the Business Education Alliance will work to unite the two so that students and parents are better served, our economy is improved and Alabama employers are guaranteed the trained and effective workforce they need in order to remain here.”

If that outcome can be achieved, Alabama will be much the better for it. Clearly, it makes sense, especially in the longer term, for the business community to support proven education efforts such as the First Class voluntary pre-K program, Alabama Reading Initiative, Alabama Math Science and Technology Initiative, ACCESS Distance Learning and 21st Century workforce training. Businesses need employees with the skills these programs help develop.

Some points of contention are sure to arise. Charter schools, for example, are controversial within the education community. We have argued for years that charter schools are not some magic bullet for the ills of public education, but that there may be situations in which they are a sensible option. Surely it is unwise to maintain rigid barriers against them that prohibit them from even being considered. Reaching a reasonable, politically feasible compromise on charter schools would be a huge accomplishment for BEA.

School choice is another area of potential dispute. It’s a sound concept and there certainly are places where it can work, but the hard reality in Alabama is that school choice scarcely exists for tens of thousands of students. There simply aren’t realistic options in some parts of the state, which only underscores the importance of renewed efforts to improve existing schools.

Given Morton’s fine reputation and the obvious potential benefit for the business community of a better public education system, we believe BEA can become a valuable tool for advancement. A healthy dose of open-mindedness will help as well.

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During our parallel careers as an educator in one case and a legislator in the other, it was not uncommon to see special interests in Montgomery working to pit the business community and the education community against each other in order to promote selfish agendas or to pursue flawed political goals.

Rather than creating a conflict between the business community and public education, we always thought someone should be working to marry the two so that students and parents are better served, our economy is improved, and Alabama employers are guaranteed the trained and effective workforce they need in order to remain and thrive here.

The Business Council of Alabama recently announced the formation of the Business Education Alliance of Alabama, commonly known as BEA, to provide guidance and offer solutions to the challenges of providing a well-trained workforce.

We both agreed to put aside other projects in order to lead this independent, non-profit foundation that is designed to improve the state’s future workforce development and industrial recruitment prospects by advocating for needed public education reforms, such as establishing charter leaders, public education professionals, elected officials, and others with a vested interest in preparing our children for the jobs of tomorrow.

Establishing relationships among these various groups will enable Alabama’s public education system to excel so all students may learn at high levels. This simple accomplishment will give existing and future Alabama employers assurance that their investment in our state is not only wise and profitable, but will be envied by those yet to locate here.

The reward is great for everyone -- students, their families, teachers, employers and government leaders. Failure to act now and act decisively will haunt our state for decades to come.

Over the past decade Alabama has demonstrated it can show encouraging results in both economic development and education, but the results are neither consistent nor uniform across the state.

While fourth graders in our schools now read at nearly the national average, they are below that in math, and eighth graders are well below that average in both reading and math. The high school graduation rate has improved noticeably over the last decade, but still trails the national average. The goal of 90 percent of all high school students graduating on time is attainable, but not yet in our grasp.

From the Tennessee Valley to the Gulf Coast, rockets are being built in Alabama and, soon, commercial airplanes will be as well. A variety of world-class automobiles are made here, and suppliers to those international companies employ tens of thousands of Alabamians at highly attractive wages. Medical and biotech breakthroughs that have worldwide impact have their genesis here, in our state.

Yet at the same time, large pockets of our state still suffer from crippling poverty.

Correlations are plentiful between a person’s lack of education and their eligibility for increasingly expensive state programs such as Medicaid. A recent study by the Alliance for Excellent Education revealed that if Alabama could cut its high school dropout rate by 50 percent, we could save $69 million annually on Medicaid costs alone.

Today and in the future, global competition in both the education and the economic sectors will be what separates the winners from the losers. All of us want Alabama to be a leader among the winners.

To ensure our state’s success both economically and educationally, the BEA will focus on ideas, initiatives, alliances and policies that forge a new direction when necessary and, sometimes, simply stay the course and remain focused on a plan that works, even if it takes time.

And unlike some organizations that reject ideas outright because they do not conform with a narrow agenda or serve the specific interests they represent, the BEA will welcome participation, encourage debate and discussion, and dare our fellow Alabamians to think bigger than they ever have before when it comes to improving the public education our state provides so the economic future of Alabama may be bright.

Join our effort to create a better Alabama by visiting our website at www.beaalabama.com or following us on Twitter at @beaalabama.

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“To compete and lead in today’s global economy, America must be a global leader in education. The shortfall of highly skilled workers in America is a looming national crisis which requires urgent action. The answers to solving this problem are best suited to come from the local and state level which is why we applaud the Business Education Alliance for making a stand in Alabama to ensure that 21st century American jobs are filled with individuals that have 21st century skills.”

- Thomas J. Donohue, President and CEO – U.S. Chamber of Commerce

“The growing skills gap in the manufacturing workforce threatens our nation’s competitiveness. Eighty-two percent of manufacturers report a shortage in skilled production workers, and three-quarters of manufacturers report that the skills gap has limited their ability to expand. The creation of the Business Education Alliance in Alabama couldn’t come at a more important time. It will help build a long-term relationship between two very important groups: those that prepare our future workforce and those that employ our future workforce.”

- Jay Timmons, President and CEO – National Association of Manufacturers

“Politics of division seem to be a sport in Alabama, but our students are the ones who suffer when these tactics are used to divide those who care about improving education. Today’s students are tomorrow’s workforce, which is why the Business Council of Alabama has for years been advocating for such an alliance between business and education. The future is now!”

- William J. Canary, President and CEO – Business Council of Alabama

“We look forward to this opportunity to advance our education/business partnership through the Business Education Alliance of Alabama (BEA) as we work collaboratively to ensure that every student is a graduate and every graduate is prepared for college, work, and adulthood in the 21st Century.”

- Dr. Tommy Bice, State Superintendent of Education – Alabama Department of Education

“Coming from the Community College System, it has always been immediately evident that business must be a strong partner and ally if we are to collectively maximize the potential of our resources and maximize the impact we can have on Alabama students. We are committed to partnering with business and industry which is why I applaud this effort to unite the voice of existing industry and public education.”

- Dr. Mark Heinrich, Chancellor – Alabama Community College System

Joe Morton, Ph.D – Chairman and President

As Alabama’s Deputy and State Superintendent of Education, Joe Morton guided the creation and implementation of the Alabama Reading Initiative; the Alabama Math, Science, and Technology Initiative; the Alabama Connecting Classrooms, Educators, and Students Statewide (Distance Education) Initiative; and FIRST CHOICE (a new graduation plan for Alabama’s students). Under his leadership, Alabama showed significant academic gains in reading and math assessment scores and was judged a national leader in training future teachers and principals. In 2010 Alabama had the largest gain in the nation in Advanced Placement enrollments and students scoring 3-5 on AP exams, and had the third highest gain in the nation on increasing the high school graduation rate. In 2008 Dr. Morton was awarded the “State Policymaker Award,” a national award given by the State Educational Technology Directors Association.

Jay Love – Finance Chairman

Jay Love is a small businessman and former state legislator who served in the Alabama House of Representatives from 2002 – 2013. In the legislature, he chaired the powerful and influential Ways and Means Education Committee, which is responsible for allocating almost $6 billion in funding to K – 12 public schools, community colleges and public universities throughout Alabama. As chairman, Love drafted three education budgets that funded essential public education programs without the need for proration and helped secure the largest expansion in Alabama history for Alabama’s top-ranked voluntary Pre-K program which will enable an additional 1,670 4-year-olds the opportunity to attend a high quality Pre-K. The Montgomery Chamber of Commerce named Love as one of the “Top 40 Business Leaders Under 40.”
THE BUSINESS EDUCATION ALLIANCE OF ALABAMA was created to assist in providing the best education opportunities and skills training available for Alabama’s public school students. We help provide the tools that prepare students for the competitive 21st Century workforce, and we work to increase high school graduation rates statewide so Alabama can reach its maximum economic potential.

THE FUTURE IS NOW.