

Local Business Must Lead for Change in Education

In 2009, a local group of business people were asked to support the installation of technology infrastructure and computers at the century-old former Kuss Middle School, which was serving as the temporary home of Morton Middle School. One of the groups participating was the Greater Fall River Development Corporation. The GFRDC is a local non-profit entity whose purpose is to promote, stimulate, develop and advance the business prosperity and economic welfare of the City of Fall River and neighboring towns of Somerset, Swansea, Freetown and Westport.

Our group's participation in the project at Morton was an eye opening experience. As business people, we assume that the technology we use each day is the same that is in use at our schools. This was far from the case. The only thing mechanical in the class rooms at Morton was the clock on the wall. There were no computers, printers, email or internet access, video projectors, scanners, digital cameras, or any other electronics. The classrooms did not even have sufficient outlets to power these devices. We expected some issues at an older school like Morton, but as we visited our second school in Somerset, we found the same issues prevalent in the town's newest school, built in the mid 1970's.

The observations we made during these school visits were the catalyst leading our group to establish the GFRDC Educational Fund. In Fall River, the GFRDC has donated money to install wireless internet, computers, and interactive video projectors at Morton, provided materials for a robotics program at Durfee, and purchased computers for Tansey and Spencer Borden Schools. At Somerset North Elementary, we purchased computers for the students, and at Westport Middle School, we funded after school math and reading programs. Just as important as the financial support, we also had board members volunteer their expertise implementing the technology and acting as mentors to the students.

The GFRDC had an opportunity to go back and revisit Morton Middle School a few months after we provided them with a \$15,000 donation. With this donation and the money donated by other businesses they progressed toward modern 21st century classrooms and made numerous curriculum improvements. Word Documents and PowerPoint Presentations were incorporated into the curriculum. The school can now collaborate with other schools in the district. Teachers can share single books with the entire class on the digital screen. Students and teachers use websites such as Google Earth for history, geography, and social studies lessons. Eno Interactive Boards (digital projectors) are in use for presentations and students now incorporate digital pictures into their reports. Perhaps the most impressive feedback we received from one of the Morton teachers was that she found the students more engaged in the curriculum and enthusiastic to learn.

In order to attract new businesses to our area, we are going to need a ready workforce. By this I mean a workforce that has the education and skill set required to meet the requirements of emerging businesses. In Massachusetts the largest numbers of jobs lost were in occupation classes such as fishing, manufacturing, and trucking while growth was in occupations such as healthcare, computer programming, training, and finance that required greater workforce skills and a higher education level.

Jobs that are routine and can be done by a computer will continue to be replaced. Unskilled labor intensive jobs will continue to be sent to foreign countries offering lower wages. Remaining jobs that do not require a higher educational degree or skill level will barely pay a living wage and will lead to a greater income spread between less educated workers versus highly educated and skilled workers.

Tony Wagner from the Harvard Graduate School of education interviewed 600 CEOs to find out which qualities they look for in employee candidates. The top qualities were critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, curiosity and imagination, and the ability to assess and analyze information.

If our area is going to stimulate and accelerate its economic recovery, it is going to need to support the schools and teachers and push for changes that create a more employable workforce. Fortunately in Fall River and Somerset, the state has paid the majority of the cost to build modern schools with the latest technology. These students are now in state of the art facilities but budget restraints create challenges in faculty training and maintenance. The schools need to act more like businesses by staying current with technology and investing in both facility maintenance and professional development. Most importantly, they need to accept change.

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