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GOVERNOR

OPINION

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EDUCATION REMAINS OUR TOP ECONOMIC PRIORITY

By Governor C.L. "Butch" Otter

Idaho is desirable. With its great natural beauty, abundant farmland and exceptional recreational opportunities, Idaho truly is a magnificent place to live and work. Then add in the tremendous work ethic of our citizens and our family-oriented communities and Idaho seems like a can't-miss proposition.

Indeed, that winning combination has enabled us to attract entrepreneurs and new businesses while helping ensure our existing businesses have the tools they need to thrive. But to really compete for the best and brightest, we have some important work to consider.

Economic development and education work hand in hand. Students graduating from Idaho schools will become the skilled employees, entrepreneurs and innovators who help our economy grow.

We have a variety of incentive programs designed to foster business opportunities in Idaho, but the most important thing we're able to provide is our people. Idahoans are creative, resourceful and hard working – exactly what growing businesses need. But we also need to provide graduates who are prepared.

Education is the key to higher-paying jobs. By 2018, more than 60 percent of jobs will require some form of postsecondary education or training. Whether you want a career where you sit at a desk or one where you work with your hands, in the information age a certification or degree in your craft is necessary.

Based on conversations with existing Idaho companies, there is great and growing demand for skilled workers. Collaboration between industry and colleges are showing results in meeting that demand, but we need more. Just as economists work with supply and demand, so should education. If industries demand a certain skill set, they are willing to pay for it. When Idaho students are equipped with relevant skills, they'll earn higher wages and Idaho businesses will prosper.

Chobani was ready to launch last year largely because of a strong workforce training program at the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls. This year, the [Chobani plant was named Food Engineering's Plant of the Year](#) – something that would not have happened without skilled employees working in the facility.

This symbiotic relationship between higher learning institutions and businesses happens all around the state. Graduates from our universities and community colleges quickly find their way into positions with local companies. But getting our students prepared to make the transition from high school to postsecondary education and training is critical, and will require stepping up our game.

We all should feel a sense of urgency about improving education. Changes to a system take time to implement and even longer to see results. If we were able to apply an entirely revised system of education this fall, it would still take years for our students to matriculate through the system and for the positive changes to affect our economy. But by anticipating future workforce needs in emerging and existing industries, we can provide Idahoans with consistent work and a healthy economy.

The Idaho Department of Commerce is working to help businesses create career opportunities for our citizens. Technology, software and manufacturing, as well as other industry clusters, will provide good prospects for Idaho families and strengthen our state's economy. But for that to work, we need to create opportunities for our students to succeed too.

The Office of the State Board of Education and the Department of Labor's Workforce Development Council continue to pursue parallel missions focused on the goal of 60 percent of Idahoans 25-34 years old having some kind of post-secondary credential by 2020. And the Board of Education itself continues to shepherd my Education Improvement Taskforce, working hand in hand with educators to determine the best ways to prepare our students and our teachers for the challenges of creating a seamless and world-class education system.

That kind of collaborative process of developing shared goals, and paths toward achieving them, is our best bet for realizing a better educated population and a better prepared workforce for Idaho.

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