

As I see it

By Doug Wood, District 5

Workforce development in Johnson County (and the nation) is more important today than ever before. We are blessed with a diversified and growing economy, and in many ways Johnson County is the economic engine for the state of Kansas. Nearly half of the state's net job growth from 1994 to 2004, nearly 111,000 jobs, occurred in Johnson County. That is more than 11,000 new jobs per year!

But things may change. We in Johnson County (and the nation) urgently need to meet the challenges of the two great forces that confront us: changing demographics and a global economy.

As the workforce ages and the baby boomers retire, we will face the ever-increasing problem of "brain drain." Our most experienced workers, in our most critical positions, will retire, and we will not have sufficient numbers of workers to replace them. And that doesn't factor in the additional numbers of experienced workers needed for an expanding economy. Although our economy may be experiencing a slowdown at the moment, unemployment is still below historic averages and thousands of jobs locally and nationally are unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants.

Although unskilled and low-skilled immigrant workers have helped to fill low-paying jobs (a situation that has helped keep prices for goods low and some of our businesses competitive in the global marketplace), we need skilled workers—people who are well-educated and trained in critical thinking. We must turn around the trend in which half of our children are failing to graduate from high school in our urban centers. Locally, we need hundreds of engineers, scientists, mathematicians, educators, doctors, nurses, and others who have post-secondary degrees. But in the 21st century we will also need thousands of technicians, mechanics, plumbers, electricians, contractors, laboratory assistants, and other skilled workers in manufacturing jobs that don't require a four-year college degree. In fact, in the 21st century, 85 percent of all new jobs, some of which don't even exist at present, won't require a four year college degree but *will* require those employees to be able to think critically.

With India and China matriculating 10 or 12 times as many engineers and scientists as we do in the United States each year, it won't be long before international high-tech businesses will outsource their jobs overseas, just as many of our low-tech and unskilled jobs have been outsourced to low-wage-paying countries.

Presently, we don't have enough scientists and engineers in the pipeline to replace the scientists and engineers who will retire in the next five to 10 years in our aerospace and military armaments industries, to say nothing about the numbers needed to build and rebuild our country's infrastructure. We cannot allow ourselves to become vulnerable to foreign manufacturers or countries as a result of outsourcing our military supply capabilities.

So, what are we to do? We need to work together. Our elected leaders need to support higher education, especially our community colleges and vocational and trade schools. Perhaps we should provide additional compensation to our teachers in the form of "performance payments" based on the increased reasoning ability and knowledge level of their pupils. Perhaps we should consider a voluntary all-day kindergarten program and after-school child care and tutoring.

This area's Workforce Investment Board has privatized the workforce centers in Johnson, Wyandotte, and Leavenworth counties this past year. We continue to train and retrain displaced

workers, but we are placing an emphasis on helping people develop skills that will enable them to *start a career*, not just to *get a job*. We perform a needs and skills assessment through a program called “job keys” to help counsel them in determining what training they need to establish their career path. In addition, we are revamping our youth work program with the help of Kieser-Umos, our contract provider, to improve eligibility, program, and performance criteria.

Furthermore, we recognize through evidence-based programs that the recidivism rate of criminal offenders can be reduced by at least half if before release they are given a risk and needs assessment to determine what can be done to prevent them from reoffending and returning to prison. One determination is what they need to get a job and succeed at it. Our contract provider is assisting in that effort. In fact, the state of Kansas started such a program a year ago with a \$5.6 million grant from the JETT Foundation of New York. The state recognized that it had a choice: reduce the recidivism rate or build more prisons.

We are also participating in programs funded by the \$15 million federal WIRED grant to the Kansas City area to enhance training and employment in nursing, manufacturing, and the biosciences.

But we can use your help to do more. If you are interested in joining my special Task Force on Workforce Development as an adviser, mentor, or volunteer, please contact my office at the Board of County Commissioners: Call 913-715-0435, e-mail Doug.Wood@jocogov.org, or write me c/o Johnson County Board of Commissioners, 111 S. Cherry St., Suite 3300, Olathe, KS 66061.