

Alliance pushing for educational improvements

Progress will require chipping away on several fronts, leaders say

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HUNTINGTON — The Education Alliance wants to see some changes.

It wants West Virginia students to truly get a full 180 days of instruction each year. It wants more effort put into making sure West Virginia elementary students are getting the help they need to master reading by the third grade, a critical benchmark, and it wants to ensure quality teaching for all students.

These are the first three goals of the alliance's new Policy Institute, a long-term program it has established to tackle educational priorities in the state.

To accomplish them, it's going to take many voices together, said Patricia Kusimo, president and CEO of the Education Alliance, as well as Charles Patton, president and chief operating officer of Appalachian Power.

In an effort to raise awareness in Cabell County about the new Policy Institute and its aims, representatives of the alliance visited Pullman Plaza Hotel in Huntington on Friday and invited a few dozen business and education leaders from the community. The banking and energy industries, as well as the Huntington Regional Chamber of Commerce were among those represented.

"Time needs to be well spent with good materials and quality teachers in front of them," Kusimo said. There are a lot of resources to help kids struggling at the high school level, but the focus needs to shift to the early years, she said.

"We want students to be so strong that they go from learning to read to reading to learn," she said. "We're asking business leaders to help us on this journey."

The Education Alliance is a statewide local education fund that wants every student in West Virginia to graduate from high school prepared to succeed in post-secondary education and the global workforce. It uses demonstration projects, issue-based research and partnerships with schools, businesses, community groups and other nonprofits to try to achieve its mission.

Some of the issues that need to be addressed were illustrated statistically at Friday's event, including the fact that on West Virginia's standardized WESTEST in 2011, only 46 percent of third-graders achieved reading scores at the mastery level or above.

The state's college-going rate was 58.58 percent in fall 2010, and the four-year college completion rate at West Virginia's institutions ranged from 11 percent to 59 percent, including first-time freshmen who finished within six years.

The two-year degree completion rate ranged from 7 percent to 24 percent for first-time freshmen completing within four years.

Poverty is one indicator of lower achievement in school, Kusimo said, and West Virginia has a significant challenge with its level of poverty, with 56 percent of the state's 282,000 students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunches.

And unfortunately, "Children have no ability to make their parents be more responsible," she said. Children don't get to choose their families, and many children have parents who have problems with addiction or are simply irresponsible, she said.

It's easy to play the fingerpointing game, Kusimo said. Each teacher and institution wants to blame the previous ones, and then the families. But it's going to fall on members of the community who care—who want to see all children reach their full potential, not only for themselves but for the betterment of society to help create change, she said.

The evidence is there of the wide impact that education, or lack thereof, has on the state. Patton cited Toyota as just one company that has reported seeing a difference in the past 10 years in job applicants' mathematics skills. They're not getting as many job candidates with the skills needed to fill positions, he said.

The business community has a key role in addressing the issues, Kusimo said. Not only can people from the working world—welders, electricians, mechanics and various types of professionals—help by participating in the alliances mentoring program done via computer. They can also help advocate for the three goals of the alliances Policy Institute.

Those who attended on Friday expressed support for change.

Kimberly Lewis, CEO of Goodwill Industries of KYOWVA, said she often hears concerns about workers coming out of high school without work maturity, demonstrated by inappropriate behavior and dress and simply not showing up when expected.

Mark Bugher, president and CEO of the Huntington Chamber, pointed out that nationwide, there are low-income schools that have seen tremendous turnarounds through creative new programs, but legislative constraints seem to be roadblocks to those sorts of changes in West Virginia.

The legislature is pretty controlling about what can be done and what can't be done," he said.

Marshall University President Stephen Kopp said some of those constraints come from the federal level as well.

If we continue to build a labyrinth of forced regulations, we're never going to succeed, he said.

Kopp also expressed concerns about how high school graduation isn't always a guarantee of college readiness, and colleges have the challenge of identifying and meeting each college student's individual needs to attain four-year degrees.

The challenge for those working toward change is that educational issues such as merit-based pay for teachers are very complex social issues, Patton said. The goal is to get a diverse group together representing several factions of the community that acknowledges these problems and voices support for chipping away at some solutions.

These are so controversial they fall on their own weight," he said. "Then we get in a quagmire of not being able to address anything. ... I know it's a heavy lift, but at some point, you have to keep pressing on."