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## Better education, better businesses

Leaders set out to improve work force

By [TODD BISHOP](#)

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER REPORTER

More businesslike evaluations for teachers. Better coordination between community colleges and universities. Improved communication between universities and businesses. And a more streamline process for certifying industry retirees interested in teaching math and science.

Those were some of the ideas floated yesterday during a University of Washington conference focus on changing the state's education system to produce graduates better suited to the needs of employe a technology-focused economy.

Gov. Christine Gregoire, speaking during the conference, described her recent series of meetings at Paris Air Show with aerospace suppliers, some of them already in the state and others considering putting operations here. She said each of them asked about the quality and direction of education in state.

In recent weeks, Gregoire said, she also has been in "constant contact" with other employers considering relocating to the state. She didn't name the companies but said the state's education syst and labor pool are key factors they're considering.

One key, she said, is work force flexibility. She described as outdated the traditional scenario in whi someone uses the same expertise in the same niche for an entire career.

"Companies are looking for a work force that is highly skilled and highly trained but not an expert i one thing that leads them to be incapable of adapting to a new economy, a new challenge," Gregoire said.

About 180 business leaders, academics and legislators attended the conference, organized by UW economics professor Theo Eicher, of the university's Economic Policy Research Center.

The event drew a high-profile list of attendees, such as Helen Sommers, D-Seattle, House Appropriations Committee chairwoman; Phyllis Kenney, D-Seattle, state House Higher Education Committee chairwoman; and Bob Drewel, Puget Sound Regional Council executive director.

One attendee, Rep. Skip Priest, R-Federal Way, said the broad attendance was "a very good sign," indicating that there may be the level of interest needed to enact reforms.

Speakers at the conference included Microsoft Corp. General Counsel Brad Smith and researchers from universities across the country.

Some of the findings challenged widely accepted truths in education. For example, Stanford University's Eric Hanushek presented research showing that reducing class sizes and increasing funding are less important than improving the overall quality of teachers. He said schools should adopt more comprehensive measures, along the lines of those used by businesses, to evaluate and upgrade quality of their teachers.

Other highlights from the event:

- Apart from improving the education system, Smith cited the need to make immigration policies less restrictive to increase the pool of eligible workers whom companies can bring to the United States.
- The presence of "star" scientists is a significant factor in the creation of new companies in fields such as biotechnology, said Giovanni Peri, a University of California-Davis professor. He showed data putting Seattle ahead of most areas of the country in that regard, but still trailing such cities as San Francisco and Boston.
- The state's community colleges and universities need to work better as a system to increase the number of people moving to four-year universities, said Thomas Bailey, director of the Institute on Education and the Economy at the Teachers College of Columbia University. He said bilateral pacts between individual institutions aren't as effective as more comprehensive state systems.
- Washington ranks 11th in the country in the share of the population with bachelor's degrees, but its colleges rank 43rd in a measure of bachelor's degrees awarded as a percentage of undergraduates. That means companies in the state need to bring in many educated employees from other states. Bailey said it is important to boost the capacity of Washington's university system in case it becomes tougher to recruit from elsewhere.

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