

MAINE VOICES

State uniting education and business

By Laura A. Fortman

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About the Author

Laura A. Fortman is commissioner of the Maine Department of Labor.

Economist Charles Lawton's Dec. 3 Business section column ("Educators, employers must collaborate in pit crew") raised a number of interesting questions regarding our state's focus on transitions between education and employment and between one job and the next. To someone who interacts with workers and employers regularly, they were thought-provoking

questions. However, I believe that his solution - a 21st-century extension service targeted at providing technical assistance to employers, while interesting, is too narrow to address the enormity of the challenge facing Maine.

Recent research by groups such as the National Governors Association strongly recommends that to compete in this new global economy, we need innovation to thrive. Innovation requires that "silos", discrete areas of expertise, be dismantled and ideas be exchanged across disciplines. For Maine to compete in the 21st-century economy, core competencies will be required of all workers, such things as critical thinking, literacy, computation skills and the ability to be both a team player and a leader. Those skilled workers may obtain the expertise they need through a variety of paths, community colleges, universities, career technical education, employer-sponsored training and apprenticeships.

Regardless of where workers gain their skills initially, they need to embrace lifelong learning. Since the world is changing rapidly, workers frequently need help identifying their options and navigating the road to keeping their skills marketable. For many, the Maine Career Centers help fill that "navigator" role. Last year, Maine Career Centers served nearly 100,000 people in transition. Some of those the Career Centers worked with included the recent graduates Lawton mentioned in his column, but the most typical person using the centers has been someone who is already in the workforce but is searching for a new or better job. Increasingly, the Career Centers are also serving immigrants and refugees, people with disabilities, and older workers who are helping to expand the Maine labor force and fill existing job openings.

However, helping people access the jobs of today isn't enough. We need to provide people with the tools they need so that they can constantly re-invent their skills for the opportunities of tomorrow.

The Workforce Alliance, a national nonprofit think tank, described the need for lifelong learning in a recent report: "State economies in large part will thrive or decline based on how well they cultivate and retain 'knowledge workers': individuals who possess postsecondary educational credentials (though not necessarily a bachelor's degree), technical aptitudes, the ability to learn rapidly and an entrepreneurial approach to employment."

In addition to providing access for workers to the training they need, we must also align systems, especially workforce, education and economic development programs, to work in partnership to provide increased opportunity for all Maine people and businesses. Gov. Baldacci has already taken action to model realignment. The governor created the Workforce Cabinet, consisting of the commissioners of Education, Economic Development, Labor, and DHHS, the directors of Maine State Housing Authority and FAME, the chancellor of the University of Maine System and the president of the Community College System to network across departments. He has championed better outcomes for Maine students by working with Education Commissioner Sue Gendron to ensure that all students are "college, career and citizenship ready," and to form the governor's Pre-K-20 Task Force.

One of the best working models we have at the moment is Maine's North Star Alliance, which is a collaborative effort leveraging state resources and a federal grant with business leaders from the boatbuilding, marine trades and composite industries, R&D, K-20 education, venture capitalists and others to strengthen our heritage industries (marine trades and boatbuilding) and expand an emerging one, composites. By taking a targeted, cluster approach and aligning workers and businesses, 2,000 workers will have new opportunities and new skills and businesses will also have new opportunities and prosper. The North Star Alliance provides a blueprint that can be followed as all of us are adapting to the impact of the "flat world" that New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman identified for us.

There is much work ahead of us, however, we must be bold and tackle the core challenge ahead: transforming Maine into a state that has a culture of innovation; a state that expects its institutions and industries to partner; a state that has high aspirations and opportunities for its people.