

[MUSCATINEJOURNAL.COM](#) > NEWS

> **Loebsack visits with business, education officials**

By **Cynthia Beaudette** | April 18, 2009

MUSCATINE, Iowa — The connection between Iowa's economic future and its educational opportunities hit home Friday in Muscatine.

Rep. Dave Loebsack, D-Iowa, sat down with Muscatine-area business and education officials to discuss legislation designed to reinforce that connection before touring Muscatine Community College's technology center.

The legislation, Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success Act, also known as SECTORS, was crafted to encourage Iowans to develop skills that will help them get jobs in business and industry.

Loebsack, an Iowa State University graduate who taught at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, said he values a college education, but realizes the need for other types of career training.

Patricia Kier, chancellor for the Eastern Iowa Community College District, said many people who come to the district's community colleges are looking for specific skills.

"Over the years, it's clear to me that when people get skills to get a job, most are in the middle skill range," she said. "What most people want is to get to work quickly. Unemployment benefits only last 26 weeks."

Kier said community college staff members also meet people who are afraid to go back to school for training because they aren't sure what to expect or they don't know how.

Money is another roadblock.

"When you don't have a job, that's the last thing you can come up with is \$900 to take courses," she said.

Loebsack said partnerships among business and industry and community colleges can yield affordable programs that provide people with opportunities to take classes and obtain training

that targets specific skills.

"We have to make it clear to people that they can go out there and get the skills they need to succeed," he said.

Federal money to help fund such programs is available, said Loebsack, but educators and industry officials need to be aggressive in applying for it, because there is competition for those funds.

Barry Pence, human resources manager of the Muscatine office of Musco Sports Lighting, said creating such programs could address a basic need in Iowa's work force. There is a shortage of skilled labor in the industrial sector, said Pence, especially in the area of welding.

Pence said his company partners with MCC to provide its work force with the opportunity to gain certification in welding.

High school students provide another source of future skilled workers, he said.

Rich Bridenstine, superintendent of the Columbus Community School District, said the hope of providing students with skill training is significant in his District, where many residents are first-generation immigrants from Mexico and speak English as a second language.

"They are hard working, but the subsets of skills they need, such as a GED and speaking English, need to be in place," said Bridenstine.

Providing work-related education for these new Iowans will also benefit the local economy, said Bridenstine.

"It will take new immigrants to back fill Iowa's work force," he noted.

Loebsack said he is working on legislation that targets educational opportunities for high school students and encourages teachers and administrators to create programs that will link them to the workforce.

That type of educating could also encourage more students to stay in school, said Loebsack.

Gary Carlson, vice president of member and community relations for HNI Corp., told Loeb sack his company works with MCC, the Center for Industrial Research and Services, (a division of Iowa State University Extension Service) and the Energy Star Program from the U.S. Department of Energy. The goal is to reduce energy costs and create sustainable energy operations within HNI Corp.

"All manufacturers need to look at what to do to reduce their costs," said Carlson.

Carlson said the program's developers are discussing developing a training program for energy auditors who could provide that service for industries throughout the region.

Loeb sack said the regional approach is one way for communities to maximize resources.

"There is no place in Iowa that is growing significantly in terms of population," said Loeb sack. "Regionalism makes sense."

Loeb sack said he was impressed by the turn out of nearly 20 officials from Muscatine and Louisa counties educational, industrial and business communities and the Iowa Workforce Development agency.

"When I try to introduce something like this, just bringing folks together and having conversation is important," said Loeb sack. "I feel today has been a success already."