

PERSPECTIVES

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Tomorrow's work force

We must prepare young people for available opportunities

Recently a report by the Allegheny Conference identified 14 target jobs in the energy industry for which there will be high demand in Western Pennsylvania in the decades ahead. For many years our region has suffered "brain drain" as young people earn their education here but then leave to start careers in other parts of the world. This report tells us that there will be ample career opportunities for young people in Western Pennsylvania; our primary challenge is raising awareness about those opportunities and preparing our young people to compete for those jobs.

In November, the Governor's Advisory Commission on Postsecondary Education issued recommendations to ensure that our children — the work force of tomorrow — will be able to fill those target jobs and benefit from the economic opportunity the energy sector represents for our region. Specifically, the commission recommended transforming postsecondary education by making it learner-based and driven by consumers and by ensuring that all K-12 students have access to practical, age-appropriate educational and career-planning resources. At Junior Achievement, we couldn't agree more.

For more than 70 years, Junior Achievement of Western Pennsylvania has given young people the knowledge and skills they need to own their own economic success, plan for their future and make smart academic and economic choices. Our corporate partners and community volunteers deliver relevant, hands-on experiences that give students from kindergarten through high school knowledge and skills in financial literacy, work-force readiness and entrepreneurship.

The recommendations of the governor's advisory commission make possible the opportunity to realize the long overdue need to expand the reach of work-force readiness messages to thousands more young people in schools throughout our region. If the state provides financial backing to support the commission's recommendations, we could expand on our work, specifically Junior Achievement's Careers in Energy program.

A little over a year ago, we developed and launched with industry partners a successful pilot of the Careers in Energy program to provide a comprehensive understanding of the energy sector and the economic impact it can have on a region. The program teaches youth

about the uses and sources of energy and informs them of the wealth of career opportunities available to them in the energy industry. The ultimate goal of the program is to be all-inclusive and to present a fair and balanced perspective of the entire energy industry, including renewable and nonrenewable sectors, to ensure that kids are armed with the facts so they can form their own opinions.

Due to the success of the program and the continued support of our energy-sector partners, Junior Achievement will expand this offering to more students in more counties throughout Western Pennsylvania in 2013.

I've reached out to the governor's office to discuss how his commission's recommendations align with the work that Junior Achievement is already doing in the hope that we might partner with his administration. I also encourage business leaders and interested volunteers to contact our offices. Together we have a real opportunity to instill a new sense of hope in the children of our region about the prospects for a prosperous future here in Western Pennsylvania.

Dennis Gilfoyle is president and CEO of Junior Achievement of Western Pennsylvania.