



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Career Readiness Takes Many Paths

The Honorable Robert H. Plymale, Senator  
State of West Virginia

Robert Plymale is currently serving his sixth term in the West Virginia State Senate. He is chair of the Senate Education Committee.

In 2003, Senator Plymale was appointed to the Board of Control for the Southern Regional Education Board and now serves on the executive committee. He also is president of the Council of University Transportation Centers.

He is CEO and director of the Rahall Transportation Institute (RTI) and the director of the Multimodal Transportation & Infrastructure Consortium (MTIC), a Tier I University Transportation Center, led by RTI.

Senator Plymale is the recipient of the Presidential Citation from Glenville State College, a distinguished service award from the West Virginia Athletic Directors Association, and the Michael Prester Award of Excellence, in recognition of his efforts to improve the lives of individuals living with behavioral health issues. In 2005, he received the Distinguished Service to the Community Award from Marshall University.

Senator Plymale is a graduate of Marshall University.

As in all states, meeting the workforce demands of the future is of critical importance to West Virginia. According to a June 2013 report by the Center on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University, 55 percent of jobs in West Virginia will require postsecondary education by 2020, while current average attainment levels are only at 46 percent. The report also indicates that by 2020, 23 percent of all jobs will require a bachelor's degree or higher, while 31 percent will require some college, an associate's degree or a postsecondary vocational certificate. These data indicate that while increasing the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in West Virginia is important, even more focus needs to be placed on increasing the numbers of students receiving associate degrees and postsecondary certificates. The traditional attitude has been that a bachelor's degree was needed to be successful, but earning associate degrees and postsecondary certificates can lead to successful careers as well.

Many strategies can be used to help meet the workforce demands of the future. One of these strategies is the College and Career Readiness Initiative, which was passed as a part of Senate

Bill 359 during the 2013 regular session of the West Virginia Legislature. This initiative was highly promoted by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) and various forms of the initiative have been passed in other states as well. It requires that a determination be made prior to the 12th grade as to whether a student is college- and career-ready in English/language arts and math. If it is determined that a student is not college- and career-ready, that student is required to take a transitional course in the 12th grade. This gives students another chance at college and career readiness that they did not previously possess. It certainly is my hope that this initiative will decrease college remediation rates substantially and produce a much higher number of high school graduates who are college- and career-ready.

Another important strategy is cross counseling. Cross counseling is a program in which staff of the community and technical colleges counsel public education students early, preferably before high school. This program has potential for numerous benefits. It educates students about career options available to them and also what students must achieve in order to qualify for





those options. Although this program was not included in Senate Bill 359, it was a part of West Virginia Governor Earl Ray Tomblin's education reform package. In a letter to the president of the State Board of Education in February 2013, Governor Tomblin requested the State Board to pursue a cross counseling program.



Another important workforce-related request, included in that same letter from the Governor, related to SREB's Advanced Career Initiative (formerly known as Preparation for Tomorrow). Under this initiative, SREB is partnering with a consortium of state and industry leaders to develop sequences of academically rigorous, standards-based career-tech courses. Since traditional learning styles are not effective for all students, these courses embed rigorous academic skills into hands-on team projects. I highly anticipate that these courses will significantly improve high school achievement, graduation rates and readiness for college and careers. The Governor's letter requested that the State Board require every career center and comprehensive high school in the state to adopt or develop at least one career pathway that meets the SREB standards adopted as part of the Advanced Career Initiative. This initiative, and a new comprehensive middle school approach for career exploration, are needed to expose students to various careers that could be available to them as they proceed through their current and future education and career options.



There are still other areas in which the state can make progress in order to meet the workforce demands of the future. Better alignment in courses between public education and higher education is just one example. Meeting these workforce demands has many benefits. It benefits not only our children individually, but also our state's economy. It is commonly accepted that the education level of the parent is the best predictor of the academic success of a student and, therefore, increasing educational attainment in areas where jobs are available within our state is an investment in future generations as well. For these reasons, it is critical that we continuously strive to meet the workforce demands of the future. ▽