



Moving the needle

By Nick Christ

An interesting statistic caught my attention recently. Southeastern Massachusetts is starting to move the needle to improve educational attainment.

Over the past number of years, the Education Committee of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce has worked to get those numbers to improve. Southeastern Massachusetts has been crippled for too long by a lack of educational achievement. The world of work is changing fast, and research shows that more than 60 percent of the job openings in the next decade will require a post-secondary credential. Our region, and most particularly in the cities of Fall River and New Bedford, have historically lagged in high school graduation and college completion.

The great news is that both Fall River and New Bedford saw significant gains last year in completion rates – a 15% increase in high school completion and 3% increase for college completion. Kudos to the educators, parents, and the students themselves for their hard work that is turning these completion numbers around. They deserve our congratulations and continued support.

This information emerged in the draft report of the Southeastern Regional Planning and Economic Development District, or SRPEDD. The organization plans for the future of southeastern Massachusetts, focusing on a number of issues that affect economic opportunity. They look at educational attainment because it is clear it improves the capacity to earn a good living, as well as makes a region more attractive to businesses who may want to take advantage of the great quality of life we offer. The U.S. Census reports that those with a bachelor's degree make an average of \$1 million more over their lifetime than someone with a high school diploma. A strong pool of people with the skills needed for tomorrow's jobs will bring businesses here to build, pay taxes, pay people well, and provide our residents with good jobs.

The connection between educational attainment and economic growth and the need to provide the support our educators, parents, and students to keep this trend going is why the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce has made such a commitment to this effort. The Chamber's Education committee oversees the EdUP campaign, whose goal is to help raise aspiration and awareness about education and keep this effort in the forefront of policy and budget discussions. Some of the activities we've led are geared to strengthen possibility thinking for students and their parents. They include:

- Members of the education community take turns writing regular opinion pieces in the Herald News, which are also curated on the EdUpaspire.org web site.
- An information campaign is engaging residents in the city of Fall River about the planning underway for a new Durfee High School. For more information, visit DurfeeRising.com.
- College Day, coordinated on a day in June, focuses the attention of children and their parents on college from a very young age. Research has demonstrated that support aimed at higher educational attainment is a powerful tool for getting children to aspire toward college attendance. Children learn college fight songs, wear college gear, meet local residents who have achieved their own dreams through education, and spend the day immersed in activities designed to bring college attainment into their sphere.
- Other information opportunities include the Chamber's The Voice of Business radio show, where host Robert Mellion, Esq., President and CEO of the Chamber often invites educational leaders on to discuss the business and education connection.
- The Committee has taken editorial stands on policy topics, including the effort last year to encourage the local school districts to fund net services spending at levels required by the Commonwealth.

We still have a way to go – SREPP reports that we are behind statewide in both high school and college completion levels. But we can all be proud of this good news of moving the needle. Let's work together to keep it going in the right direction.

Nick Christ is the president and CEO of BayCoast Bank and chair of the Bristol County Chamber of Commerce Education Committee.