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Skilled workers key to attracting business

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The executive director of the N.C. Eastern Region economic partnership said Thursday that the region's efforts to boost Eastern North Carolina's economic growth depends on partnering with other agencies and organizations.

Al Delia, a former administrator with [East Carolina University](#), cited as an example the need for partnering with the community college and university systems. Working together, he said, makes it possible to identify, develop and promote programs that provide the kind of training the local work force needs to meet the employment demands off businesses operating in Eastern North Carolina.

Jack Best, a region commissioner from Wayne County, expressed concerns about the high dropout rate of area county high school students. He added that dropouts, who lack the skills to obtain a job, are likely to eventually end up in jail or become dependent on the social services system.

"Not everyone is going to go to college, so we need to teach them a way to make a living," Best said. "We need to get the colleges and high schools not to make trades a second class program.

"The schools need to get away from considering students to be second class if they are not going to college," he added. "In my opinion, all students are first class if they make a contribution to their community."

Economic developers present at Thursday's meeting agreed that an unskilled local work force can deter a business from locating within the region.

"If we are going to attract businesses to the region, we need to fill the workforce with skilled workers," said Mark Pope, Lenoir County's economic developer. "The education process needs to start earlier (than high school).

Pope added that he often hears from businesses considering locating in the area that job applicants do not know how to read, fill out an application or prepare resumes. Many applicants are also not punctual to scheduled interviews or arrive at interview in attire that is inappropriate for the occasion, he said.

Donna Phillips, an economic developer/manager for the N.C. Department of Commerce, told board members she hears many of the same complaints from business clients as does Pope. She added that Florida-based Cobia Boats located in the western part of the state after too few skilled workers in Eastern North Carolina answered an employment advertisement placed by the company.

Jesse L. White Jr., head of the UNC-Chapel Hill Office of Economic and Business Development, told commissioners that education and economic development are "intimately tied."

"You have to get the message out that dropping out of school is not the way to go," he said. "I've been told that every time someone drops out of school it is a million dollar decision.

"You need to be creative in reaching out to these people and getting them back into the educational system," White added. "If people go back to the community colleges, they can get the skills needed to take positions with many businesses."

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Pullout

2004-05 dropout rates for area high school students in grades 9 through 12. Information provided by the N.C. Department of Public Instruction.

Lenoir County: 5.66 percent

Greene County: 6.36 percent

Jones County: 8.60

Wayne County: 5.09 percent

Duplin County; 5.23

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