

Excellence in Education — an Investment in the Future

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Two of the great forces which have shaped the world as we know it today are American business enterprises and the American educational system. For decades we led the world in an industrial revolution that dramatically improved our standard of living, while at the same time we basked in the glow of pride of being the most literate nation in the world. Now we find ourselves faced with new and dangerous challenges as our economy shifts from an industrial base to an information/technology base and as we strive to maintain our position in an increasingly competitive global economy.

Much of the success American business has enjoyed results from our ability to develop and apply new knowledge. This ability comes from our continued focus on developing an educated population. By 1981 roughly 70% of our population had achieved a high school diploma. Nearly 30% of the entire world's supply of skilled workers was in the United States.

Now, however, with the post-World War II Baby Boom over, we face new challenges in business and education as our demographic profile changes. As our population grows older and the percentage of young people in our society shrinks, we have less newly educated people to enter the work force. Over 90% of our nation's existing human resources will still be in the work force as we enter the 1990's, but many of them will find that their former jobs will have either changed dramatically or disappeared forever. Therefore, we find it even more critical to educate our young people well, as well as to reeducate our existing work force.

As the demographics of the population experience great change, so business faces a transformation from its former industrial base to a new orientation centered on information, service and high technology. This rapidly changing work orientation also underlines the compelling need to acquire and train or retrain the kinds of workers who can adapt and perform in the new economy.

Florida is now actively engaged in analyzing the impact of the future and the effects of the past on our economic production and our educational needs. In my view, the two concepts of "working" and "learning" are inexorably linked, not dichotomies or opposites on some continuum. Human resource development has become a crucial investment for our economic survival.



Mr. Bronson served several years as Chairman of the Florida Citizens Council on Education while also providing major leadership in industrial development, prison reform and enhancement of higher education. Formerly heading a major Florida corporation in mining and materials, he is now chief executive and chairman of the board of Ideal Basic Industries in Denver, Colorado.

American business has always had an interest in education, since we must depend on our educational institutions to provide us with our work force. However, in the past, that interest (especially at the K-12 level) has been more or less an arm's length relationship. In recent years, however, business has become alarmed and increasingly disgruntled about the products of our educational system — youth who have had little acquaintance with and minimal mastery of science and mathematics concepts, graduates who are unable to write and communicate clearly, with an inadequate command of the English language, and workers who lack an understanding of their place in the organizational scheme of things. These weaknesses seem especially glaring at a time when America's economic position is facing its greatest competition from other nations.

As Florida's business, educational and governmental leadership assessed our position and our future, it became obvious that no one element could make the needed changes alone. If business were to support educational excellence through supporting increased taxes, then we would insist upon a voice in programs to be developed and accept the challenge of collaborative remediation. The concepts of working and learning must be seen to be mutually interdependent, with educational excellence as a long-term investment in the future of Florida's economic strength.