

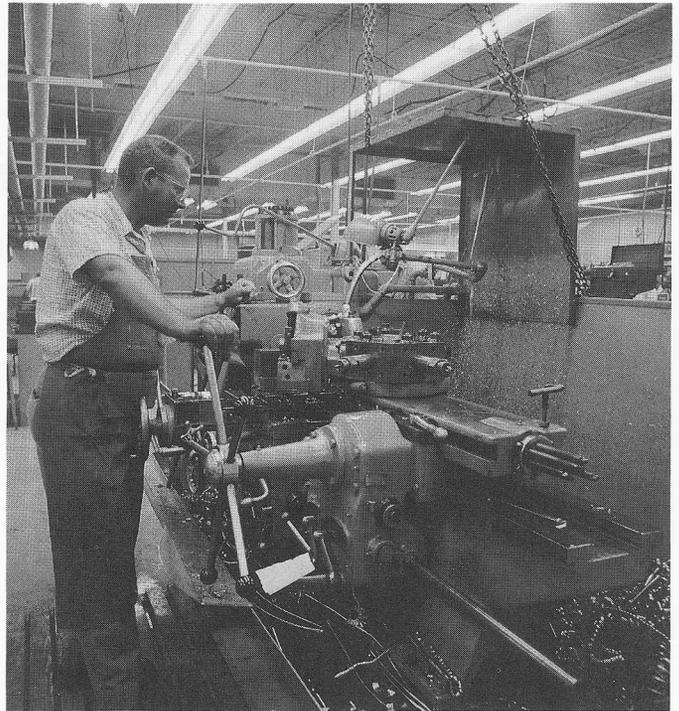
Business and the Public Schools

In the business world, success depends on the performance of workers at all levels of production. In education successful educational outcomes of one level of the system depends upon successful outcomes at lower levels. This, plus the fact that while the number of workers with college degrees has increased from one in seven in 1979 to about one in four today, the majority of Florida's work force has not pursued education beyond the high school level, seems to suggest that our concerns are best served if we concentrate on improvements in the K-12 years, elementary and secondary schools.

As the following chapters describe, Florida has undertaken a massive overhaul of elementary and secondary education. We are proud to have been among the first of the states to raise our high school graduation requirements; to institute competency based testing as a prerequisite to promotion at grades 3, 5, 8 and 11 to lengthen the school day; to fund model programs to improve retention of students; to promote innovative curriculum design and to provide opportunities to earn additional compensation through demonstrated excellence of performance.

Product quality and the evaluation of services are essential elements in the business environment. Likewise, if we use improved test scores as a measure of success, it is obvious that our schools are experiencing positive change. Since 1979, when test scores for United States students reached an all-time low, there has been a steady increase in SAT and ACT performance by college-bound youngsters nationally. In Florida our minimal performance measurements for students at all grade levels also have shown improvement since the initiation of these testing programs.

Business has taken an active part in supporting educational excellence at the K-12 level in several ways. The Council of 100, which represents business and industry across the entire state, initiated its K-12 focus with a major program on K-12 issues in the Fall 1982. This provided a basis for the "Education Means Business" campaign of 1983. Associated Industries of Florida, a member group of 3500 businesses, both large and small, communicate regularly with legislators concerning the mutual goals of education and industry. The Citizens Council on Education, Inc., is a private organization of concerned business leaders involved in improving curriculum and standards, instructional quality and educational services at the K-12 level as well as the professional image and job satisfaction of teachers through increased entry level salaries and recognition of superior performance with financial incentives. These latter efforts acquire even greater significance when we realize that Florida schools produce only about 30% of our required teacher work force; the rest are supplied to us by other states who, faced with teacher shortages in critical subject areas, are increasing the incentives for their teacher graduates to stay at home to pursue their careers.



On a more local level, chambers of commerce throughout Florida are establishing Partners in Education alliances between business and our public schools. Sharing our expertise in the classroom means not just enhancing the school curriculum but seeing firsthand what teachers and students experience daily.

Business in Florida is also concerned about improving student retention. The student dropout rate is much more than just a statistic. Each number represents an individual who fails to achieve what we consider a minimal education, who will likely settle for a low-paying position which he will not keep, whose contribution to the state will never be sufficient to offset the state's investment in his education, and who may well join the ranks of a shockingly high percentage of Americans who are functionally illiterate. If that dropout is female, chances are she is pregnant, and both she and her child will become an expense to the state's welfare system. Even more importantly, both mother and child will fail to achieve their potential.

Florida is now taking a hard look at improving student retention and raising the levels of performance and expectation of our student populations. Exciting progress is being made through experiments like the Gadsden Demonstration Models Project and the Precollegiate Program, two efforts being sponsored by the Florida Institute of Education. As businessmen, we have learned that the better prepared the worker is who comes to us the more valuable he or she will become. As an investment in human potential, an excellent education will pay high dividends.