

“Your Individual Prosperity and Arkansas’s Economy,” Dr. Chris Jones

In Arkansas, the relationship between education and workforce development is crucial. Together, they impact both individual prosperity and our state’s economic growth. However, the current state government’s unskilled oversight of these critical areas stifles our progress, affecting industries and individuals alike.

Diverse educational paths are essential in meeting the varying needs of our economy. While higher education remains a cornerstone of career advancement, vocational training is equally important. Fields such as manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology require skilled professionals, many of whom emerge from vocational programs. By investing in both higher education and vocational training, Arkansas can cultivate a workforce that is adaptable, skilled, and ready to meet industry demands.

While I was Executive Director of the Arkansas Regional Innovation Hub, we started the ***Skills to Launch Program***. It is a 10-week scholarship-based, hands-on program designed to provide technical skills and soft skills training to individuals 18 and older seeking a new career in one of several highly valued trades, such as ***Industrial Operations, Construction, Production Welding, HVAC, and Solar Panel Installation***. The program has trained over 200 participants and has a job placement rate that is now over 80%.

These are the types of programs that our state should heavily invest in and support.

Unfortunately, current state investment in these areas is nonexistent or severely lacking. Robust educational systems offer many benefits: they prepare individuals for meaningful employment, attract businesses seeking a skilled workforce, and stimulate economic growth. Yet, policies from Sarah Sanders and her republican supermajority fail to provide adequate funding for these essential programs. This leaves many Arkansans without access to the training and education they want and need.

Support programs that bridge the gap between education and industry's needs are also crucial. Initiatives such as internships, apprenticeships, and partnerships between educational institutions and businesses can provide Arkansans with practical experience and a direct pathway into the workforce. These programs not only enhance the employability of graduates but also ensure that industries have a pipeline of ready-to-work professionals.

Ignoring this issue impacts everyone. Unfortunately, our current governor chooses to ignore it. Meanwhile, industries face a shortage of skilled workers, hindering their growth and innovation. Let's not forget that this also means individuals, particularly those from rural Arkansas, miss out on opportunities for advancement and economic stability. The ripple effect of this neglect extends to the broader economy, stifling progress and competitiveness.

It is vital that Sarah Sanders and the GOP supermajority reevaluate their priorities and recognize the critical role of education and workforce development. Increased investment and support are not just beneficial but vital for the future of Arkansas.

It's **your** tax money, and should be invested back in you, your neighbors, your children and grandchildren. Your individual growth is the key to Arkansas's growth.

Call and write to your elected officials. Let's urge these public servants to take immediate action and invest in the diverse educational paths that will drive Arkansas forward.

Share your thoughts and comments at chrisjoneslistens@gmail.com.