

Kay Ivey: Schools undergird economy

DECEMBER 8, 2009

The greatest engine that drives Alabama's economy is an educated and highly trained workforce. We have an abundance of energetic and hardy people willing to work. Our state has the natural resources, geographical location and a favorable business climate that gives us a leg up on the competition from neighboring states when we recruit new companies to locate here.

What we don't have, quite frankly, is the national ranking of being in the top half or top third of educational achievement.

We can do much better, and I plan to lead us there.

An election year is fast approaching and much will be said about improving education. Like clockwork, our politicians will dust off the campaign platitudes they think the people want to hear. They'll suddenly care very deeply about improving the way our children learn -- right up until Election Day. After Election Day, education issues will get handed back over to the bureaucrats and special interests, and the politicians will place their platitudes back on the dusty shelf until the next election.

Improving education is more than a campaign platform for me: it's a personal passion. I'm the only candidate running for governor who has actually served as a classroom teacher. I taught high school English, civics and economics after I graduated from college.

I know the dreams and aspirations of young minds. It pains me deeply to see petty politics shortchange our children's potential.

Alabama's economic success starts in the classroom. While important decisions are made in Montgomery, our state's future is determined by the standards of student learning our schools produce.

We've made great strides in education over the past 20 years. But much more work remains to remove us from the bottom five states in national education rankings. As your governor, I pledge to move heaven and Earth to make sure Alabama attains educational

excellence. I want us in the Top 25 states in the nation when my time as governor ends. That's a mighty tall order. But it's achievable if we get the right leadership in place.

For starters, let's get back to basics: we must restore discipline to the classroom. Common sense tells you no learning can go on in an atmosphere where teachers and students battle distractions and worry about their personal safety.

Next, we must establish priorities and stick to them. We need to eliminate unnecessary and misdirected spending in the education budget. Tax revenue has shrunk, and every possible penny must reach the classroom. Did you know that currently more than 40 cents of every tax dollar allocated for education pays administrative overhead costs? This is indefensible, unacceptable and requires better management of scarce resources.

Next, we must insist that students are learning at high standards. No more mediocrity. Today's intense global competition requires we produce graduates who are properly prepared and skilled. Schools must stop "teaching to the test" and focus on shaping and inspiring intellects instead.

One way we can do this is to introduce needed reforms into the public school system. I was the first candidate for governor to propose and support creating charter schools here in Alabama. In 40 states and the District of Columbia, they have turned failing schools into productive ones.

Competition is just as healthy in education as it is in business. When parents and teachers are released from the shackles of bureaucratic education, their creativity emerges where they can experiment and apply new approaches. Charter schools offer hope and a way out for students trapped in failing academic environments. When traditional schools don't work, charter schools can.

And it's time we take a new look at higher education, too. A four-year college education isn't a good fit for all students. We must help parents realize that a technical education can lead to a career that is every bit as productive and prosperous as one that comes from a traditional college or university.

For instance, Alabama is becoming a leader in the field of robotics. The future for that career choice is wide open and brimming with possibilities. A high school graduate who completes two years of robotics education can graduate from a technical school and earn

\$85,000 a year here in Alabama. Technical colleges are a good option for our students to be effective in Alabama's workforce of tomorrow.

Education is a topic where possibilities are limitless and the results affect us all. The Alabama our children enjoy tomorrow will be determined by the decisions we make about education today.

I assure you that with Kay Ivey in the governor's office, you will have a strong advocate who has the passion and experience to make sure your child receives the education he or she needs -- and so richly deserves.

Kay Ivey, currently state treasurer, is a Republican candidate for governor.
