

9/11/13 – Testimony regarding Education/Business Perspective

Good Afternoon Senate Finance Committee:

My name is Crystal Nygard, CEO of the MatSu Business Alliance, (MSBA), a *small business located in the Mat-Su Borough working hard everyday to connect and educate the market.* Our mission is to promote business development, family wage jobs, and local responsible government. That is why I am here to speak to you today because we asked our client to engage in the discussion about education and have concluded the two are disconnected. (thank you to Alaska Policy Forum for sharing the current Sweden system where their school system works with entrepreneurs and local businesses to design school choice.)

Since 2009, MSBA has been hiring students, referred students, and courage students to talk with employers. MSBA has been working with our community, marketplace, and clients concerning business. Recently our clients participated in a short survey about K through 12 educations and it relationship to the work place. I will share those results with you today, share a business perspective about partners, and lastly offer solutions around policy reform pertaining to education.

Your committee, constituents and audience may be asking what BUSINESS has to do with education. Well, first EDUCATION is BIG BUSINESS. The Mat-Su Borough spends 2/3 of its entire budget on education. Yet, as the fastest growing area in the state we have in return one of the highest unemployment

rates in the State of Alaska. Those unemployment rates are even higher for youth 16-18 years.

Let's examine what our clients had to share. Approximately 200 business leaders were asked to participate in this survey. They were not given multiple choice formats, but rather asked to write their responses and return back to us. Just over 10% of the clients returned their survey for this testimony. They were asked the following questions.

- 1) Has your organization hired high school students in the past? Yes, but not for many years; the high schools no longer have their program helping place students into jobs.
- 2) What did you find was lacking in the high school student your organization employed? Most student were lacking a good work ethic, not self-motivated, don't use observation as a learning tool, don't understand how private industry works, and punctuality.
- 3) What did you find was the best attributes of the high school student your organization employed? Not intimidated by technology, more easily accepts change and the willingness to learn.
- 4) What are the three most important qualities you desire in a high school student you employ? 1) Ability to fill out a timecards; 2) a student who wants to work and is not there because his parents told him he must work. Most young people don't feel the need, nor do they want, to learn to work; 3) reliability, critical thinking, customer service/communications; 4) smile,

willingness to learn, willingness to follow our dress code, understand that the business needs their help.

- 5) When looking at a high school student's job application/resume, what is the most important thing you look for? Most are looking for part-time work while going to school and they have few, if any, skills; therefore they do not have references. I pay more attention to a verbal interview than a resume. Evidence of interest in the industry outside of work/education, such as in volunteer projects, or hobbies. Reference, presentation of themselves, classes they have completed in office systems. The length of time they will be available for work. Would they be a candidate for a full time permanent job in the future? Evidence of interest in the industry outside of work history/education, such as in volunteer projects, or hobbies.

For each of these questions, "high school student" is defined as currently in high school or recently graduated high school and is pre-college.

There is apparently a SERIOUS disconnect between the business community and the education community. The skills of critical thinking skills, reliability, and communication are the three factors referenced in our survey. I think it clearly shows that:

- ✓ Academic results such as test scores don't directly correlate or translate to real world experience; (i.e. a top calculus student doesn't mean they understand construction practices)

- ✓ Forcing information into students and then quickly taking a test doesn't matter nor does it prepare them for the workforce; Repetition matters
- ✓ Application of information taught is when learning begins; Geometry in the class is different than building a house;
- ✓ Conformity is depleting our number of thinkers and motivation zapper; what can they do? How can they do?
- ✓ Lastly, standardization of test doesn't create critical thinking, but keeps the education and business cultures separated.

I think the discussion about our Ferry is very similar to this discussion today.

Initially the conversation was centered on the ability to obtain federal funds for the design/build of a large ferry. We committed to the funding and began the building process, however, the end product wasn't able to provide the services it was initially thought to provide and there were no other markets that were willing to purchase the vessel. So, we have a ferry with no means of using it and no ability to sell it. That is where we are with education. Almost every conversation starts with federal funds or federal standards and the state has to invest in the resources necessary to conform and keep the funds or meet the standards. We make that investment knowing it is not sustainable and have no exit strategy. The end results is you have a culture that was built on what looked like a strong offer to build an overpriced product and a limited market that is appreciating or partnering in the success of the product, our children.

The questions are: Who is going to be the long-term partner for education: the Federal Government, State of Alaska, collective groups of voices representing Business and the Education Community.

- ✓ The Federal Government will provide standards, funding in the beginning, matching grants etc., but they don't know what our local market needs nor do they care regarding talent;
- ✓ The State of Alaska will provide the leadership, funding long-term, and policy that can move the market into running our education like an enterprise and give the success tools to the schools based on the needs of the market;
- ✓ The Business Community can partner with the school by finding ways to minimize operating costs, complying with federal and state requirements, increasing the amount of internships available to our students; incorporate all types of schools in the system; develop a culture of competition and not conformity;
- ✓ Special Interest can provide what they have always provided at a higher cost;

Our local school district states that “all students can and want to learn; success breeds success; the needs and best interests of students drive all decisions; and stakeholders’ participation is crucial to student success. “ That stakeholder needs to be the business community so we can partner and teach real finances, entrepreneurship, real sales, real management, real math, real science etc..

So our solution is:

- ✓ Re-evaluate your partners;
- ✓ Partner with business and re-connect the market;
- ✓ Let the business community teach how to build a culture of running an enterprise not an institution, by partnering and demonstrating how that works for that school;
- ✓ Allow businesses to be a part of the schools and interact with the students listening to their ideas and working to provide conversations that produce critical thinkers.
- ✓ In business FEATURES (i.e. choice of schools) tell and BENEFITS sell (i.e. employers access to employees); COMPETITION drives SUCCESS and if you don't raise the standards based on the what the market needs, lower costs, you won't have an enterprise that moves forward but one that stands still and lets the market pass by.

If we want to develop critical thinkers, self-motivated, and driven for success we have to build a culture of an enterprise and educate students on how to own or start a business not just have a job. Let's Inspire their thinking and begin the conversation WHY policy, partner, stakeholders, educators. does matter and why your job is so important.

Crystal Nygard and her husband Scott have been married for 19 years. They are raising three boys in all attending public schools in the Matsu Borough, area representative for

foreign exchange students, co-founder of the Matsu Business Alliance (MSBA) and small business owner.