Workforce Policies and Priorities: A Report from D.C.

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For good reason, Joey Hatch is passionate about supporting workforce development through education and internships. It's the pathway that took him from a low-income upbringing to technical college (he was the first in his family to earn more than a high school diploma) to a four-year internship, university degree and a 44-year career in construction.

Hatch, now Executive Vice President/General Manager for Skanska USA Building, is involved in workforce development in a number of ways, from serving on the Tennessee Board of Regents to the state's STEM Innovation Network Executive Council. Recently, Hatch traveled to Washington, D.C., with a group of Nashville-area workforce development experts to share their concerns and priorities with Tennessee's senators and representatives and their staffs. The trip was part of his role with Business Leaders United (BLU), an organization representing employers from a range of industries that focuses on more aggressive investment to address skills gaps and the training needed for better-paying jobs,

During his presentation at our November "Tennessee Manufacturing Beyond the Box" luncheon, here's the message that Hatch says he and others took to the nation's capital.

First, said Hatch, "We have an outdated model. We would like to see better alignment with employer needs" — with more focus on career and technical education that provide certificates and credentials, plus many more apprenticeship opportunities.

More specifically, Hatch continued, "We asked them to support sector partnerships to help small and medium-sized businesses find workers, keep them in school and prepare them for the workforce. He cited a program used in Jackson, Tennessee, by Black & Decker as a model. He also called on federal lawmakers to use subsidies and tax credits to incentivize investments by businesses in work-based learning, and for creation of a fund to provide unskilled workers with apprenticeship opportunities.

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Finally, said Hatch, the BLU delegation urged lawmakers to pass the JOBS Act, which would redirect some Pell Grant funds from four-year programs to aid students enrolled in one-year (or shorter) programs focused on workforce skills. The act would also increase investment in partnerships with connections to employers and local labor.

In response, Hatch says, "We were told, 'You guys in Tennessee are doing a great job! We wish everyone else was doing this well.'"

While that message was welcomed by the Tennessee businesspeople, Hatch also offered a word of caution: "I'm not sure how much (if any) help is coming from D.C.," he said. "We need to solve this at the local and state levels."

What can Tennessee businesses do? "There are dozens, maybe hundreds, of organizations [working on these issues]," Hatch said, and many opportunities for involvement. In pointing manufacturers toward those seeking solutions to our workforce issues, he quoted Dr. Valerie Jansen, a Vanderbilt oncologist who came to this country from Laos: "Immigration matters, science is real, and public education is vital."

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