

# Public education improvements promote economic development

By Craig Gunsaulley  
Editor

Ongoing reforms to Oklahoma's public schools and higher education system are critical to the continuing economic development of the state. That was the message of education and business leaders gathered last week at the Skrivin Hotel for the "State of the Schools" forum, sponsored by the Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber of Commerce's Greater Grads program was designed and implemented two years ago to encourage local employers to recruit and retain Oklahoma's college graduates in state, explained Meg Salyer, owner of Accel Financial Staffing and a member of the Chamber's Board of directors.

The Chamber of Commerce sponsors a Career Fair for college students and graduates that featured 150 Oklahoma employers. The fair attracted some 1,000 students from 17 colleges and universities this year, said Salyer.

The summer internship program matches college students with Chamber of Commerce members to provide work experience that will hopefully lead these students to establish their careers in Oklahoma, rather than seeking opportunity in other states, according to Salyer.

"Improving public education in Oklahoma is critical to workforce development," stated Salyer.

Chancellor Glen Johnson of the Oklahoma State System of Higher Education told the audience that the state's colleges and universities are graduating more students every year, and that greater numbers of these students are finding work in the Sooner State.

Currently, with 22 percent of Oklahoma adults holding a bachelor's degree, the state ranks 42<sup>nd</sup> nationally in higher education, said Johnson. Surveys show that 85 percent of Oklahoma's college graduates are employed in state one year after graduation. Five years after graduation, 72 percent of graduates are employed in Oklahoma.



At the State of the Schools forum, speakers (from left) Cliff Hudson, Meg Salyer and Glen Johnson prepare to answer questions from the audience.

Photo By Craig Gunsaulley

"The key to growing and competing globally is to increase the number of college graduates," said Johnson. "We definitely are stopping the brain drain. In our state, the majority of graduates stay in Oklahoma."

Working with Gov. Brad Henry and the Legislature, Oklahoma's Regents for Higher Education are putting more resources into colleges and universities to increase the number of students and graduates. Enrollment in colleges and universities has increase 10 percent over the last decade.

To make higher education more relevant to employers who need skilled and educated workers, colleges and universities are improving alliances with 28 technical education centers to provide college credit courses to their students.

Colleges are also offering more courses for high school students and working to improve programs for adult learners that have college credit but haven't graduated, according to Johnson. This year, some 9,000 high school students took college courses through tuition waivers provided by the Legislature.

Oklahoma is also working to provide more tuition assistance to high school students to keep higher education affordable, said Johnson. "Our goal is to give students who demonstrate an ability to achieve the opportunity to go to college, regardless of the ability to pay," he stated.

Oklahoma City Public School Board Pres. Cliff Hudson concluded the forum by appealing to local employers to help support the proposed school bond issue that will continue the capital improvements begun by the MAPS for Kids program.

Improved public schools are also critical to future growth in Oklahoma City, said Hudson, who is also CEO of Sonic Corp. "Public education also drives the economic engine of the state of Oklahoma," he said. "In business, you never stand still. You either move forward or you fall back. The same is true in public schools."

Hudson said that since being elected president of the school board in 2001, some \$430 million in MAPS for Kids sales tax revenue and bond revenue has been invested in public schools, resulting in the construction of three new high schools, one new elementary school and renovation projects in 71 schools.

Financial audits of OCPS have improved dramatically, said Hudson. Test scores are up and the district is finding it easier to recruit and retain teachers. However, as the existing bonds are retired, the district needs approval of \$248.3 million in new bonds to continue renovating schools, to build new classrooms, and to purchase new buses and technology. If approved by voters Oct. 9, the new bond issues will not increase property taxes, Hudson emphasized.