

Reauthorization of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education Act:
Education for the 21st Century Workforce

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Witness:

Harry Lightsey

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President

Testimony

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss with you the need to support career and technical education by reauthorizing the funding for the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical program.

Four years ago a diesel systems technology company decided to build a facility to manufacture cutting edge diesel fuel injectors in the Midlands of South Carolina. They wanted to hire about 500 local people. But, the company couldn't find enough skilled workers. The first 1,000 applications were a combination of adults and recent high school graduates. The company hired about 50 of the applicants. Only 35 started work.

I share this story with you to illustrate the fact that today's workers do not have the skills for the modern workplace. Our current education system is not producing a future labor force with the higher level skills that technical businesses need to be successful in the competitive global economy. Plus, only 70 percent of the students who are enrolled in the eighth grade today will graduate from high school.

As a result, technical companies and other businesses suffer, even though desirable job opportunities, salaries and benefits are available. That impacts South Carolina's economy. Today, South Carolina's per capita income is only 80 percent of the national average. South Carolina's unemployment rate is the third highest in the nation.

To help resolve this problem, a coalition of business leaders are partnering with the South Carolina Department of Education to rebuild our economy around higher skilled, higher paying jobs by improving academic and technical skills of high school graduates entering the workforce and post secondary education. One of these companies, BellSouth recognized the need to help improve the quality of education in the Southeast by establishing a foundation in 1986. Strengthening the South's economy and improving the quality of life for all Southerners is dependent upon a highly-skilled workforce. Since its inception, the BellSouth Foundation has awarded 587 grants to 421 institutions totaling \$46,400,000.

Recently, BellSouth and the BellSouth Foundation gave a \$1 million grant to the SC Department of Education address the need for more workers with higher skill levels to help improve our economy. The grant helps fund two programs: Project Lead the Way

and FIRST Robotics.

Project Lead the Way is a national program that forms partnerships among public high schools, higher education institutions and the private sector to increase the quantity and quality of engineers and engineering technologists. In South Carolina Project Lead the Way is a partnership between BellSouth, the South Carolina Department of Education, and the University of South Carolina School of Engineering. Project Lead the Way offers a four year sequence of courses which, when combined with traditional mathematics and science courses, introduces high school students to the disciplines of engineering and engineering technology. But, Project Lead the Way is not just for students interested in engineering, it is also for students interested in developing technical skills needed in our workforce. Currently, 52 schools in South Carolina participate in the program. We plan to grow that number to 100 by September, 2005.

The Project Lead The Way graduate is better prepared for engineering programs and more likely to be successful. In the 2002 Southern Regional Education Board NAEP Assessment, South Carolina led all 28 SREB states in Math, Science, and Reading Assessments. The majority of the South Carolina schools ASSESSED have the Project Lead the Way curriculum in place.

The other exciting program is FIRST, an acronym that stands for “For Inspiration and Recognition of Science and Technology.” FIRST, a national program, challenges high school students to work with professional engineering and business mentors to design and build a robot in six weeks. Each team must use the same kit of parts and a standard set of rules. Then, the students and their robots compete in an intense, action packed, two minute competition that measures the effectiveness of each robot, the power of team strategy and the collaboration and determination of students.

FIRST encourages students who may not be predisposed to science, math or technology to participate and it is designed to inspire, motivate and encourage students to learn basic principles while challenging more experienced students. Since there are critical roles for students in everything from design and building, to computer animation, to fundraising and research, every student can actively participate and benefit.

There are literally hundreds of examples how FIRST and Project Lead the Way have inspired students, especially women and minorities, to get involved in engineering, technical programs, and robotics. These students learn more than technical skills. They also learn skills that are desperately needed in our workforce like innovation, teamwork, project management, leadership and ethics.

Earlier this year, South Carolina hosted the inaugural Palmetto FIRST Regional Robotics Competition, where 42 teams of high school students from across the nation competed. Because of the excitement the FIRST competition generated in schools throughout the state, we’ve seen a 100 percent increase in the expansion of Project Lead the Way pre-engineering programs.

We need 21st Century Learning to encourage students to stay in school and actively learn skills for future jobs. There is so much noise in the world today. Our young people are bombarded from different directions, TV, video games, multidimensional technologies, instant messaging, etc. Asking them to sit in a conventional classroom to learn is asking the impossible for many. For real learning, we need to pick up these students and shake them with hands on learning. That is what Project Lead the Way and FIRST does.

Congress needs to encourage more private/public partnerships to help improve education in this nation and to help prepare our students to be successful in the world economy. For example, high schools could use “adjunct faculty” from technical schools and businesses to work with students on programs like FIRST. Businesses and the public sector should help improve the academic integrity of vocational and technical education programs at both the high school and post secondary schools to ensure these classes provide relevant skills training for 21st Century jobs.

Another important factor is federal funding. Funding of the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Technical Education program is critical. Our schools need the federal grant funds for career and technical education to shake up our young people so they can develop the skills to work in future technical careers.

Thank you.