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It's Time to Embrace Change in Public Education

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — West Virginia lawmakers and lobbyists are at an impasse on education reform.

Gov. Joe Manchin's special session came to an abrupt halt May 19, though the Legislature will reconvene June 7 to continue work on a series of bills the governor believes will help West Virginia transform its public education system.

Consensus on education reform has been noticeably hard to reach, but the leaders at **Vision Shared** hope legislators, the Governor's Office and education lobbyists can strike a compromise, make the changes necessary and give our children access to an innovative public education system.

West Virginia's policymakers — the governor, legislators and lobbyists — have a lot of experience reacting to a crisis.

When the state's workers' compensation program was on the brink of bankruptcy because of a cacophony of policy decisions and a variety of program failures, the governor, lawmakers and lobbyists worked together, reached a compromise and made the changes necessary to save the system for injured workers.

When doctors walked out of hospitals because of skyrocketing medical liability insurance rates and an unpredictable civil justice system, the governor, lawmakers and lobbyists worked together, reached a compromise and made the changes necessary to save the system for health care providers and patients.

When the tragic Sago and Aracoma mine disasters put a shining spotlight on the need to improve coal mine safety standards, the governor, lawmakers and lobbyists worked together, reached a compromise and made the changes necessary to provide better protection for miners.

The relative success or failure of these examples isn't the point — the point is that when a crisis is bearing down on West Virginia, policymakers get the job done. We are hopeful, given the urgency of the situation, that key players in this education debate are capable of the same positive collaboration. But this begs the question of why the state of our public education system has not been seen as a crisis that demands the kind of swift yet thoughtful and mature consensus-building that we know our elected officials and advocates have demonstrated.

Instead of taking action and embracing change, however, debates have swirled throughout the past week about whether we're really in trouble. Is our public education system really so bad? Did we even need the special session? These and related questions continue to be asked in the media.

No one knows yet who will win the debate, but at Vision Shared, we hope the advocates for change within academic, business, labor and government communities cross the finish line because West Virginia simply

must start producing high school graduates who are better prepared either for today's high-tech workforce or higher education. Our increasingly knowledge-based economy depends on this transformation, and to disagree with this statement is an exercise in dooming West Virginia to third-rate status in social and economic indicators for future generations.

Most are familiar with Einstein's definition of insanity – doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. So it stands to reason that maintaining the status quo in public education will not produce different results than we have been getting. And what are those results? To put in plainly, they're not good.

Each year, Vision Shared measures a variety of economic development performance measures that run the gamut from fourth-grade reading skills to entrepreneurial activity. When government and private sector leaders first created Vision Shared in 2000-2001, they set benchmarks for achievement in each of the 40-plus economic measures.

According to our most recent Performance Measures Report, which will be released publicly next month, West Virginia's performance significantly lags behind the nation in nine of the 15 education indicators we track. We have failed to reach the original benchmarks in all but two education indicators, and while our competitive position is improving in some areas, the pace of progress over the last 10 years has been slow at best.

Vision Shared is far from being the only group trying to sound the warning bell that West Virginia students are not competing well with the nation and globe in educational attainment. Earlier this month, news circulated that in West Virginia, three out of four fourth-graders are not reading at grade level, making West Virginia 43rd in the nation in grade-level reading proficiency, according to the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress. If children are not reading by fourth grade, they are not learning.

Our poor performance is ample motivation for lawmakers to take action now so our public education system can evolve. The most important proposed changes have broad support. Many of the components in Gov. Manchin's special session bills, such as teacher evaluation and merit compensation, are consistent with the Obama administration's blueprint for national education reform, are in alignment with the State Board of Education's strategic plan, are endorsed by national teacher union leaders and confirmed by educational research and actual experience. Good teachers are the surest path to improved student outcomes, and we need fair and accurate means of determining who is good, of rewarding good performance and of insuring that every child has a good teacher.

West Virginia can make these changes now or later. Conventional wisdom holds that it's better to be driving the train than chasing the caboose. The issues being debated at the state capitol right now are not new, though they're finally getting the kind of media attention they deserve. Perhaps it requires an even keener focus by the media on the state of our public education system to make the populace aware that a crisis isn't just brewing, it's here.

We are confident that if all parties involved prioritize the needs of our children, keep our state's future prosperity in mind and build trust, then an innovative, successful solution can be generated that will place West Virginia in a leadership position among states.

Yes, change can be scary; it also can be exhilarating. At Vision Shared, we hope our lawmakers choose exhilaration.

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