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Governor putting focus on job training

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By Joe Vardon

Consider Connor Espenshade, age 7.

Connor was hanging out at his grandfather's company on Monday — Intelligrated in Mason, Ohio — where Gov. John Kasich was on hand for the company's announcement of 200 additional jobs.

Kasich was enthused not only to meet Connor, who carries the title of "VP of Fun" at Intelligrated, but also because the boy had his own company keycard. So Kasich brought Connor with him to face reporters after the company's jobs announcement.

It's through examples such as Connor, after all, that Kasich plans to "fix education" in Ohio.

"The point of the matter is, when you take young kids and you start to connect them with something that they think is really fun, then education begins to mean something to them," Kasich said of Connor, later adding: "It's a little young, but even if we can get kids in the first and second and third grade just to start thinking about 'what do I like, what's cool?'"

"And as they get older and older and they begin to move into the ninth grade and 10th grade, and we begin to connect them with real economic opportunity, based on the things that they really like, that's how we're going to fix education. That's how we're going to do job training. That's how we're going to create the next generation of executives to run these kinds of places and the next generation of engineers."

Kasich has participated in four companies' new jobs announcements in seven days — a promise of 250 new jobs by MAC LTT in Kent yesterday pushed the total to about 2,000 during that span. But as Kasich pushes to entice companies to expand or locate in Ohio, his staff is working to reshape worker training and education (from K-12 through college) to meet employers' needs.

"The effort is being made to connect companies with all of education, and we'll have more to say about this," Kasich said. "This is a huge undertaking, but it's really critical for Ohio's future."

The administration wants to create a “career pathway” that exposes students at a young age to businesses and business leaders through field trips and mentorships, entices them to study core subjects based on budding career goals, helps them identify potential careers in high school, and directs those whose career goals wouldn’t best be met by attending a four-year college toward a more suitable program after high school.

Rick Lewis, executive director of the Ohio School Boards Association, said he agrees with Kasich’s premise but said “the logistics of coming up with a mentor for 1.9 million students would be a challenge.”

“There are some great things in there,” Lewis said. “If you’re able to reach out and connect with a student, whether it’s an individual teacher who’s able to tap into what the governor calls an individual’s passions, or parents who can make that connection, it makes school more meaningful.

“But I’m not sure that’s the panacea.”

Lewis said schools still are required to conduct standardized testing, receive annual report cards and operate under other state mandates that make it difficult to determine the feasibility or impact of linking curriculum to a child’s potential career interests.

Lewis also said there are school-funding issues that need to be addressed, citing a recent school-levy failure in Westerville that will cause the district to trim \$23 million in costs. That could lead to the cancellation of all extracurricular activities, among other cuts.

“I don’t want to make it sound like it all comes down to dollars,” Lewis said. “I know the governor is interested in school boards being more efficient and making decisions so they can avoid asking communities for more money, but the reality is, some districts have no choice. ... Extracurricular opportunities contribute to academics as well. That’s why it’s tough to be a school board.”

The more immediate components of Kasich’s worker-training plans may come into focus soon. The administration’s jobs website, co-sponsored by Monster.com, shows about 83,000 current job openings in the state, and Kasich often says businesses tell him the state’s work force does not have the skills to fill those jobs.

Kasich is encouraging community colleges and four-year schools to partner with businesses in developing curriculum that would make more workers available for jobs faster. The administration also would like to boost programs in which businesses hire and train new workers through state subsidies.

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