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Steven Paine: Helping W.Va. students succeed
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As West Virginians might know, I started the new year with a new job. It is in the private sector, but I remain committed to the work I performed as a state schools superintendent — raising student academic achievement and solidly preparing our youth for college and the workplace.

It is a crucial task. While unemployment is still high — 8.9 percent nationally and 10.3 percent in West Virginia, according to the latest figures available — employers say good jobs are going begging because workers don't have the technical, verbal and computational skills to fill them. In a 2009 survey of manufacturers by the Manufacturing Institute, Deloitte and Oracle, more than 50 percent of respondents reported a shortage of skilled production workers.

Our universities and community colleges also are feeling the burden of the preparation gap: the National Center for Education Statistics reports that 42 percent of public two-year college students and 28 percent of students across all institutions took remedial courses during their first year. According to the U.S. Department of Education, students who take remedial courses are less likely to receive a postsecondary credential than those who take no remedial courses. This is troubling, for these students and the economy overall, because while the United States is expected to add 14.4 million jobs by 2018, nearly half of them will require a postsecondary degree, according to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce.

I am proud of what we've accomplished in education reform in West Virginia, in particular the Global 21 teaching and learning initiative that calls for universal pre-kindergarten, tougher graduation requirements and more challenging curricula. But we need to keep raising the bar. We need to set even higher standards, impose tougher requirements and inject more rigor into the curriculum.

A rigorous education prepares students for college without remediation and for training for good jobs. It gives them solid prospects for employment, which boosts the economy overall. The relationship between education and employment is dramatically illustrated by the unemployment figures for February. The national unemployment rate for workers with no high school diploma was 13.9 percent; for those with a high school diploma it was 9.5 percent; for those with some college it was 7.8 percent; and for those with a bachelor's degree or higher the unemployment rate was just 4.3 percent.

The need for more challenging curricula was made clear by the results of the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress — The Nation's Report Card. West Virginia was one of 11 states to volunteer for a NAEP pilot initiative that year. We wanted to see how our 12th-grade students perform on NAEP's rigorous reading and

mathematics assessments, and how our students' performance compared to the nation and to other states. The results point to the connection between rigor and achievement. As just one example, in math in West Virginia, 11 percent of the 12th-graders tested reported that they had taken calculus, and the state had an average math score of 141, significantly below the national average of 152. By contrast, in Massachusetts, 27 percent of students tested had taken calculus, and the state had an average math score of 163.

Participation in NAEP provides important information for states that can help us in moving forward.

I am a member of the governing board that oversees NAEP, and its 12th Grade Preparedness Commission. Because the academic preparedness of 12th-grade students for college and job training is a key to the nation's security and prosperity, the governing board is working to transform NAEP 12th-grade reporting into an indicator of academic preparedness. NAEP is uniquely positioned to serve as this indicator because it is the only regular source of nationally representative student achievement data at the 12th grade.

To determine whether NAEP can assume this critical role, the governing board has authorized more than 30 research studies. The results so far are promising.

Researchers found a high degree of overlap when comparing the 12th-grade NAEP in reading and mathematics and the ACT and SAT college entrance exams. Soon we will find out the relationship between student performance on NAEP and these other assessments. The governing board also is conducting a national survey of colleges to gather information about cut scores on tests used for deciding whether college freshmen need remedial courses. Panels of experts in postsecondary education and training are being convened to identify the knowledge and skills on NAEP needed to qualify for credit-bearing college courses and for a variety of job training programs. All of these studies will be evaluated collectively to determine the scores on NAEP that represent academic preparedness for college and job training.

Along with the hard work we have already performed in West Virginia — work that must continue — these important studies will set a firm foundation for further educational reform, help inform future education policy, and, most important, help us in West Virginia ensure our students are ready for the future.

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