



TESTIMONY OF THE FAYETTE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE REGARDING WORKFORCE ISSUES IN FAYETTE – OCTOBER 4, 2018

Good Morning and on behalf of the membership of the Fayette Chamber of Commerce, welcome to beautiful Fayette County - we are pleased to have you here and we hope that you will find your trip to be both informative and relaxing. I know that today you will travel our countryside and visit many of the sites that been a part of the building of our great nation as well as locations that have made impact in the world of art and architecture. Enjoy every moment.

My name is Muriel Nuttall and for the past 20 years, I have had the privilege of working alongside our business community as Executive Director of the Fayette Chamber of Commerce. Allow me to take just a minute to tell you a bit about the Fayette Chamber. This is a dynamic group of about 630 businesses and individuals who have chosen to band together to build a stronger and more prosperous business community in Fayette County. The membership includes our smallest “mom and pop” businesses, our crucial non-profits, and the largest corporations in the area. The group is diverse – coming from different backgrounds with differing goals, but together forms this wonderful, exciting, optimistic, energetic team, united to build a better Fayette County.

I also consider myself privileged to have been invited to speak with you today. As a diverse organization, the Fayette Chamber has a robust Program of Action that directs our activities in many areas of importance to our businesses, of course member marketing and advocacy are two of them, but by far, the issue that has become the primary focus for our organization – rising in importance daily – is workforce development. This issue quickly came into the limelight in Fayette about six years ago when, through a survey to my membership, found that by far the biggest challenge that they were facing on a daily basis was finding, hiring, and keeping qualified, skilled employees. The need was dire. We immediately worked to refocus our programming in an effort to insure that our employers had the ability to build a workforce that would allow them success and growth.

Through the Chamber’s associated non-profit, The Redstone Foundation, the Fayette Business Education Partnership was born. This arm of the Fayette Chamber is solely focused on programming that enables our students and residents to obtain family sustaining employment right here in Fayette.

A couple of weeks ago, I spend the day at retreat for our regions Workforce Development Board. At the onset of the meeting we were first asked to reflect on the current workforce situation. A gentleman immediately replied in a way that summarizes things beautifully. He said, “If we had 100 of our colleagues in the room right now, 50 would say that they couldn’t find employees, the other 50 would say that they couldn’t find jobs – we need to find ways to bring them together.” Exactly!

Next we were asked to solve the problem. My response was the reason that I'm sitting before you today. I understand that I am asking may not be directly in your purview, but I know that you all are out there every day, talking with your colleagues about the issues that can make an impact on the Commonwealth – about how to make Pennsylvania better, stronger, more vital. Well, here it is – at least from my vantage point.

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the [Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\)](#), which reauthorizes the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Developed and passed with strong, bipartisan support, ESSA replaced [No Child Left Behind \(NCLB\)](#) as the nation's main education law.

For Pennsylvania, ESSA presents two important opportunities – the chance to move away from the prescriptive policies and unintended consequences of NCLB, and toward state-level efforts that enjoy broad, bipartisan support, including more equitable and predictable funding for public schools and valid measures of school performance that look beyond standardized test scores.

Pennsylvania also requires all school districts to have a K-12 School Counseling Plan as part of Chapter 339. This plan addresses the importance of career planning for all students related to labor market projections and workforce needs.

In the workforce world, these two together seemed to be a great launching pad for a stronger focus on preparing our young people, not just to graduate from high school, but to create a vision for life beyond those school hallways – a vision for a prosperous, family sustaining, taxpaying, civically engaged way of life.

Governor Wolfe has created a solid investment in the workforce conversation in our schools through Business Education Partnership Grants, investment in apprenticeship and pre apprenticeship programs, and more. This is all welcome and, I believe is making great change in our communities. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that our own Business Education Partnership is a part of that change as recipients of a portion of those grant dollars.

But less than two years ago, the PA Chamber surveyed their membership and found the following from the employers in the Commonwealth...

52% say that recruiting candidates is very or extremely difficult

57% believe that it will get even more difficult to find candidates in the next five years.

56% have difficulty filling technical or skilled positions

Only 21% - that only ONE out of every five of our Employers ranked the labor force as excellent or even good.

There is \$189 million dollars lost each year in productivity or training of new employees.

It's easy to look at these numbers and see them as rather innocuous – just numbers from anonymous businesses all over Pennsylvania, but I'm here today to tell you that the businesses that are members of the Fayette chamber of Commerce – those businesses that I talked about earlier who are diverse – coming from different backgrounds with differing goals, but together form this wonderful, exciting, optimistic, energetic team, united to build a better Fayette County – those businesses are desperately in need of employees – they need human capital.

I'm here to say to you today that the things that are happening – the programs that starting and the dollars that support them are all good – thank you for any level of support that you've put behind them, but I'm also hear to say that it's not enough. At the Fayette Chamber and through the Fayette Business Education Partnership, were working our butts off with our schools and those businesses who want to be a part of the solution, but we're not there yet, and not able to move fast enough with the support that is in place to give our employers the chance to grow and prosper.

Pennsylvania - all of Pennsylvania has a workforce need – but Western Pennsylvania, we're in a workforce crisis – bottom line, I need to be able to get employees into the doors of my business members – their future depends on it – it is the difference between success and failure. I met with an employer the other day that needs 400 employees by year's end – 400 employees whose starting wage – just the training wage is over \$11.00 an hour – all with full time opportunities and they are struggling.

So what was my answer – how would I solve the problem? In short I said that we need to put more emphasis and perhaps more dollars into the workforce crisis. We need to not only incentivize our schools for good performance through ESSA, we need to award them in even greater ways when they grasp the reality of the long term benefits of the 339 plan and intentionally work to put their students on a path to success – not just get to the cap and gown, but to get to the family, the house, the car, the future that will make Pennsylvania shine. And in this process, we need to engage the parents –help them to be the role models of the right way to live – demand accountability and responsibility.

And find ways to award our business community when they invest their time and energies into helping solve the workforce problem – not just complaining about it.

You will all travel through this beautiful county today – you'll see what we consider to be the gems of the Laurel Highlands. The beauty lies in a stark dichotomy to our economic situation in Fayette. We have good people, we have good business, we have the beauty of nature, yet we are struggling to bring our unemployed population into the multitude of open positions.

What I'm asking of you today is to think about these communities, consider all of the good things that are happening in trying to make change, and look for ways to help us move forward. Great things will happen here with your help.

Respectfully Submitted on October 4, 2018

Muriel J. Nuttall
Executive Director