



From the office of Texas Workforce Commission

Commissioner Tom Pauken

Opinion/Editorial

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Champion Cooler Sets Example for How to Create Good Manufacturing Jobs

By Tom Pauken

At our annual conference this week, the Texas Workforce Commission presented Champion Cooler Corp. with the 2012 Texas Workforce Solutions Employer of the Year award for its successful efforts to bring new manufacturing jobs to Denison, Texas. Champion Cooler is the largest manufacturer of evaporative coolers in the U.S. and has been in Denison for more than 50 years.

As one who believes that the U.S. needs to have a strong manufacturing base in order to maintain a strong economy, it is especially gratifying to me to see a company like Champion Cooler receive recognition, not only for its strong manufacturing presence in our state, but also for its work with local high schools and community colleges to encourage more young people to consider careers in manufacturing. Champion Cooler partnered with Denison High School to identify and hire interested students to complete the Industrial Maintenance Technician Program at Grayson College.

After seeing initial success in its efforts, the company then worked with the Denison Development Alliance, Workforce Solutions Texoma and other firms in the region to create the Industry Intern (I²) program. This industry coalition has created 10 scholarships for students to enter this program.

The program teaches students how to assemble, repair and operate various types of equipment used in manufacturing. Students learn math, communication skills, the operation of electrical motors, hydraulics and pneumatics, and much more. The program includes a paid internship with a local business. Once students complete it successfully, they then have the opportunity for full-time employment.

Champion Cooler's story is an example of how industry leaders can work with educators to help improve the pipeline of skilled labor that is critical to business success.

In Texas and across our nation, we're facing a crisis in manufacturing. A recent survey by the consulting firm Deloitte "found that 83 percent of manufacturers reported a moderate or severe shortage of skilled production workers for hire." The results are similar here in Texas. Just to cite a few examples: the average age of a welder is 55, a plumber 56, and a stone masonry craftsman is 69.

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Superintendents, principals and teachers want to help address this problem and prepare students for good jobs after graduation. But to do so, there must be a partnership between schools and local industry. That's why it's so critical for companies to follow the example of Champion Cooler and establish two-way communication with our schools.

Statewide leaders cannot force such partnerships by legislative fiat. But, they can do a great deal to remove roadblocks and create an environment in which local partnerships are more likely to be created and thrive. I am working to help provide flexibility and local control to school districts so they are free to work better with industry. The state's current "one size fits all" policy that pressures every kid into a restrictive 4x4 college-preparatory curriculum isn't working. We need multiple pathways to a high school diploma, including ones that lead to industry certifications and good jobs post-graduation.

I also believe that our state's overemphasis on standardized testing (including the current STAAR program) harms good vocational education programs. There's more to education than filling in bubbles on an answer sheet.

We can rebuild our manufacturing base for the 21st century. But revitalizing American manufacturing also requires creating a skilled-labor pipeline that encourages young people to enter this field. Cooperation from industry, the state and education is critical to achieve these goals. The success of Champion Cooler's forward-thinking practices serves as a positive example for employers across Texas of how education and business can work together to promote economic development and prosperity for our young people.

Tom Pauken is Commissioner Representing Employers on the Texas Workforce Commission and author of "Bringing America Home."

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The Texas Workforce Commission is a state agency dedicated to helping Texas employers, workers and communities prosper economically. For details on TWC and the programs it offers in coordination with its network of local workforce development boards, call (512) 463-8556 or visit www.texasworkforce.org.