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East-West rail: an idea worth studying

Garry T. Eagles and Rollin C. Richmond/for the Times-Standard

As educators, we are sometimes asked why we involve ourselves in community issues that seem to have little to do with classrooms and teaching. Why, for example, do we spend time discussing tourism or medical care? Why do we care, aside from personal reasons, about our airport service? Why do we have an interest in economic development? The answer is that these things are all deeply connected. Our success in educating today's students is directly linked to the health and welfare of those students, which in turn is tied to the strength of our **local economy**.

So, in recent months, when we have heard serious individuals from throughout our community talk about the possibility of an east-west rail connection, we have been intrigued. It's a big idea with positive potential for our community. To us, that means it's an idea worth studying.

Ten years ago, we, along with Dr. Casey Crabill from College of the Redwoods, convened a series of community meetings to talk about improving K-12 education in our community. Students, parents, educators, elected officials, and representatives from business and industry tackled two questions: 1) How could we increase the number of students who graduate from high school on time? 2) How could we encourage more of our graduates to pursue some form of post-high school education or career training? Ultimately, we wanted to know how our local educational system could help improve the prospects for economic self-sufficiency of individuals and families as well as strengthen the economies of our North Coast communities.

We have seen much progress since then. A higher percentage of students are graduating from our local high schools than ever before and more of our young people are going on to some form of post high school education. We can credit many factors, including the commitment of outstanding teachers, innovative programs such as the Decade of Difference Initiative, and the strong support of the public and local community organizations.

We also now have a wider variety of educational options for students attending our K-12 schools. There are more International Baccalaureate and Advanced Placement courses; an Early College program; fine arts, science, technology and mathematics themed programs; multiple charter school options; and online courses that complement traditional classroom instruction. Efforts are underway, such as First Five Humboldt, and United Way's Schools of Hope initiative to improve every child's readiness for kindergarten. Expanded career exploration and preparation programs have been introduced. Scholarship and financial aid assistance activities are being enhanced.

But as educators, we are concerned about some trends that we can't control. Two of the most troubling are increases in childhood poverty and the tragic fact that many of our young families are choosing to move away. Both are tied directly to weaknesses in our **local economy**.

Our county's overall population has increased over the past two census periods from 119,118 (1990) to 134,623 (2010), an increase of 14 percent, while K-12 enrollment decreased 13 percent, from 20,776 to 17,958. We continue to see a decline in enrollment as more families with older children move away, and our schools report that, for many, this is due to better employment and career opportunities elsewhere. At the same time, our schools are challenged to serve a growing number of children from families that are struggling economically. A recent report from the Center for the Next Generation shows that in 2011, just

over 22 percent of children in Humboldt County were living in poverty. That is an increase of nearly 10 percent from just three years before.

Educators at all levels are working creatively to address the workforce needs of local businesses and industry. But to keep our young families here, and to encourage more families to come to Humboldt County, we need more jobs, diversification in employment, and expanded career ladder opportunities. We need to strengthen our **local economy**.

That is why we applaud the discussions surrounding harbor district improvements and the exploration of an east-west rail connection. At the same time, we also support further expansion of Internet capacity and other infrastructure improvements.

The efforts that were launched 10 years ago have led to improving the skills and abilities of our local workforce. Now that our students are being better prepared, we need better opportunities for their employment. We hope that today's conversations will prove as successful ten years from now as those conversations about students were 10 years ago.

Garry T. Eagles is superintendent of the Humboldt County Office of Education. Rollin C. Richmond is president of Humboldt State University.

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