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The cost of education

By Ron Kitchens
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"If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." -- Derek Bok

Education seems to be a constant theme in discussions these days. Whether it is the dozens of calls I get each month from communities considering their own versions of the Kalamazoo Promise or the discussions of funding sources for kindergarten-through-college programs or the creation of meaningful lifelong learning opportunities, people seem to be focused on education.

All of this talk has led me to wonder what will become of our education systems and what will the long-term effect be on our economic standing. I am reminded of the French term, "terroir" which describes the effect soil and climate has on the taste of food. Perhaps "academic terroir" should describe the impact community and support has on educational outcomes.

We are blessed in southwest Michigan with some great educational institutions and opportunities, from our 40,000-plus college students to our world-renowned science and math education to the Kalamazoo Promise. This region has always stepped up and made education a priority. Michigan's first publicly supported kindergarten and high school programs were founded here.

However, what we have today is what was required to meet the needs of the past. If we want to be an effervescent, economically vital region in the future, we must invest in the key infrastructure of the future: education.

In this crowded global marketplace, it is no longer acceptable to just be a good community. Good communities are popping up all over the world.

Our competing good communities can participate in the market place in most cases with lower costs, access to new markets and abundant raw materials.

For southwest Michigan to be successful and to become great in the eyes of our customers, the companies that are maintaining and creating new jobs, we must find ways to reduce company's actual or perceived risk.

How do we as a community lower that risk? Think like farmers.

The lifecycle of a farmer is fairly straightforward. Each growing cycle, a farmer must prepare the soil, plant seeds, feed and water the plants and then, if everything was done well and with a little luck, our farmer gets to harvest the results of a year's work.

Education is a lot like farming. We must prepare the soil, or in the case of education, create facilities that are conducive to academic growth. We must plant seeds -- a farmer uses machines to do this, education uses curriculum and programs that are globally relevant.

Next, the farmer feeds and waters his or her plants. In our case this nurturing process is achieved through our region's educators.

Unlike the farmer, we are not forced to wait until the end of a growing cycle to harvest the results. Our results show up every day in the knowledge that is gained.

However, like the farmer, our work is never done. There is no graduation from learning in our community. Futurist Tom Peters states that just a few years ago, one-third of everything you knew was obsolete in seven years; that number is now down to 18 months.

If Tom is correct, and I believe he is, the economic fruit of the vine will indeed be harvested by those regions of the world that invest in and prioritize education at all levels.

So when asked by our community to support our education systems here in southwest Michigan, let's do so. Because, to borrow a line from those popular MasterCard commercials, the cost of education: priceless.

Ron Kitchens, www.RonKitchens.com, is CEO of Southwest Michigan First and the general partner of the Southwest Michigan First Life Science Fund. He is the author of the soon-to-be-released book "Community Capitalism" and a frequent speaker on economic growth.

Read "The Community Capitalist," the new blog from Ron Kitchens and Southwest Michigan First, at www.mlive.com/businessreview/western.