

Initiative raises bar for public schools

BY BETH FITZGERALD
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Dana Egreczky stood in front of parents at a Jersey City elementary school and asked, "How many of you love your kids?" Every hand went up. Then she asked, "How many of you want your kids living with you when they're 45?"

And every hand went down.

Education gets children out of your house and into lucrative careers, she said — and when today's kindergartners leave high school, most jobs will require two or four years of college, or some post-high school training.

A former high school biology teacher, Egreczky runs the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence, a nonprofit arm of the state Chamber of Commerce. The coalition was launched 10 years ago in response to employer complaints they couldn't find enough qualified New Jersey high school graduates to fill their jobs.

The BCEE is a little-known initiative that is trying to give employers an influential voice in state educational policy. A nonprofit whose nearly \$1 million budget is funded by corporations, the BCEE lobbies in Trenton for higher public school standards and funds websites the public can use to compare test scores among schools. And Egreczky regularly visits schools to tell parents and teachers what employers want — and to lavish praise and recognition on schools and teachers that raise the academic bar.

The BCEE is chaired by Art Ryan, who retired in December as Prudential's chief executive and

has been at the forefront of corporate America's education reform efforts since the mid-1990s.

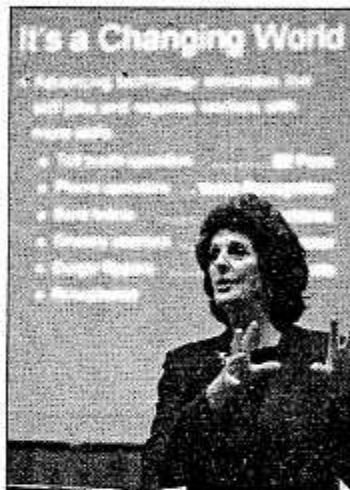
"When we got started, hardly any states had standards and assessments," Ryan said. "Basically, we were not expecting enough of our kids, and we weren't assessing them to make sure they were learning. Today, all 50 states have these tools."

For Ryan, nationwide standardized testing is evidence of the success of BCEE and other corporate-led education initiatives. No Child Left Behind, the 2002 federal law that mandates each state develop basic skills standards and tests, and puts pressure on schools to improve, was the watershed event for educational standards.

The law is under fire for zeroing in on schools with lagging test scores and branding them as failures. But BCEE's broad agenda goes beyond testing. Egreczky has spoken to hundreds of parents and children — telling them point-blank that employers won't hire kids who fail in school. BCEE holds annual award ceremonies to recognize high-performing teachers and schools.

And the BCEE seeks to influence the school-performance conversation by funding websites that put school performance data at the fingertips of the public. "We use the data as a flashlight, not a hammer," Egreczky said.

BCEE supports a national database, just4kids.org, which reveals how individual schools are doing on New Jersey's standardized math, science and reading tests. The website then compares the school



BILL PERLMAN/THE STAR-LEDGER

Dana Egreczky, who runs the Business Coalition for Educational Excellence, explains why education is important for the work world.

with others in New Jersey that educate a demographically similar student population. The goals: identify schools that perform well despite high rates of poverty, or have high percentages of non-English-speaking students; find out what they're doing right; and encourage other schools to emulate them.

The BCEE-designed website, learndoeam.org, which urges kids to develop a work ethic while they're in school, is picking up endorsements from other business groups across the country, Egreczky said.

Joyce Powell, president of the state teachers' union, the New Jersey Education Association, generally applauds the BCEE's efforts.

"But we're not enamored with 'just4kids' — comparing one school

to another could be detrimental to a particular school," she said. "Test results are not the sole measure of a school's program. Education is more subjective. These high-stakes tests give a snapshot of a particular point in time, but in the real world, people are assessed over a broad range. You look at the growth of the individual, not how they performed on one day. A business can be an alarming underachiever on some days, and still be a great success."

State Education Commissioner Lucille Davy wants BCEE to tell parents what employers are looking for. "The business community can drive home the message that rigorous preparation is important, that homework is important, that when the teacher says you have a project to do, you're supposed to start working on it. They can drive the message that parents shouldn't let their children fall behind."

Employers who can't find enough homegrown talent in New Jersey to fill jobs can recruit from throughout the nation and the world — or they can move the work overseas.

Ryan said he avoids raising the specter of outsourcing.

"If outsourcing becomes a threat, it gets politicized, and that doesn't help anyone. We need a sense of urgency, not a sense of fear. Most business leaders were born and raised here in the U.S., and we have a commitment to this country beyond what we need in our businesses," Ryan said.

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