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Innovation Key to Transforming Education

When there is a good idea, a truly viable option to move our state forward, we should work together to transform that idea into a tangible opportunity. The road to progress has fewer bumps when we travel in the same direction. As State Agriculture Commissioner and State Treasurer, we agree that “road to progress” begins with education.

Recently, we traveled to Roscoe, Texas with other state and local officials to learn more about P-20, a cutting-edge public-school program that should and will be replicated in the Mountain State.

What is P-20? It is a unique, early college, STEM academy where high school students can earn a two-year associate degree upon graduation. The name derives from the concept of educating children with focused curriculum that starts in preschool and is completed in early adulthood.

Why look to Roscoe, Texas? Rural Texas and rural West Virginia face many of the same challenges, and this program has proven successful. In Roscoe, students are granted automatic membership to their local 4-H program. If you have attended one of West Virginia’s rural schools, you are probably familiar with 4-H. If not, 4-H is a national program based on four pillars, head, heart, hands, and health, with the mission to engage youth in the hopes they reach their fullest potential while advancing their field of study. Most of these programs focus on agriculture, forestry and natural resources. The goal is to teach young people about the sciences that drive those industries.

After becoming enthralled in the principles of 4-H, and maybe later on FFA,

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students in Roscoe's high schools are given the opportunity to graduate from 12th grade with both a high school diploma and a two-year associate degree. These students, from a town of a little more than 1,300, are earning valuable life skills and training opportunities while still in the public education system. The focus is not only on technical skills, but also on instilling positive attitudes of success within the students. Most importantly, it gives hope to a community and its residents that their children will be ready for the workforce and the challenges of adulthood.

During our trip, we learned Roscoe ISD offers a drone class where students are able to obtain their drone pilot license. A team of seniors presented a project where they studied ultrasounds of dog hearts to see the differences size and sex had on the animals. A fourth-grade team presented their experiment on photosynthesis. They focused on how they learned about sunlight effects growth in plants. Each and every one of these students show tremendous passion and advance skills necessary for successful lives.

We believe West Virginia is ready for change, but it takes innovation and cooperation to make it happen. The good news is partnerships are starting to develop to bring concepts and lessons learned in Roscoe to West Virginia. Under the direction of West Virginia University, WVU Extension Service and State Superintendent of Schools Dr. Steve Paine, a pilot project is underway at Boone County's Van Elementary and Van Junior/Senior High School.

The long-range goal of this project is to replicate the model we saw in Texas throughout the state. The program does not have to be limited to just agriculture, forestry or natural resources; it has application to all sciences and job skill needs. If we desire a well-trained workforce to bolster our economy, let's provide tools for success as early as possible.

This program has promise for our state, but it will take more collaboration. School personnel in Boone County will be vital to the success of this pilot project and, as we speak, are going through extensive training. This project would not be possible without support from the Boone County School Board, State Superintendent Paine, WV School Board Vice President Miller Hall, State Senator Ron Stollings, Delegate Rodney Miller, Southern Community and Technical College, and, of course, Dr. Gordon Gee and all the great folks at WVU. We all agree we can do more for our students, and it all starts with programs and partnerships like this. For more information about the WV P-20 program, you can email davisinfo@mail.wvu.edu.

John Perdue
State Treasurer of West Virginia.

Kent A. Leonhardt
West Virginia Commissioner of Agriculture

The West Virginia Department of Agriculture protects plant, animal and human health through a variety of scientific, regulatory and consumer protection programs. The Commissioner of Agriculture is one of six statewide elected officials who sits on the Board of Public Works.

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