

Publisher decries 'low-skill, low-wage' strategy

By Pat Murphy
staff writer

Partly because of a deficient educational system, some U.S. companies have adopted a "low skill, low wage" strategy, according to the keynote speaker at the education conference of Leadership Oakland.

The result has been displaced workers, plant relocations and a decline in the real earning power of the average worker over the last 20 years, said Philip H. Power, chairman of the Suburban Communication Corp.

"We're losing the international economic war . . . we're losing good jobs . . . and American workers are getting poorer as a result," Power said Wednesday at the all-day conference at the Michigan State University Management Education Center in Troy.

Power is a regent at the University of Michigan and a member of the Commission on the Skills of America's Workforce, appointed in 1989 by the National Center on Education and the Economy to develop proposals for building a world class education and training system.

His 45-minute talk was the conclusion of a series of meetings and discussions on various aspects of the educational system.

SOME, LIKE Power's, were critical. Others — like the luncheon talk by Jerry H. Robbins, dean of the college of education at Eastern Michigan University — contended the schools are doing a reasonably good job given limited resources and often conflicting objectives.

"The discussions were provocative," said Zan Niccoli, a partner with Dickinson, Wright, Moon, Vandusen & Freeman in Bloomfield Hills, and one of about 40 people to attend. "There is no consensus about the state of our educational system."

Power painted a bleak picture of the existing educational system,

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characterized by high drop-out rates and functionally illiterate graduates. "It's also a system that gives the back of its hand to youngsters not bound for college." He said many of his views are similar to those contained in "America's Choice," a report from the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce published in June, 1990.

Some proposals contained in that report were incorporated into U.S. national policy in October with adoption of the High Skills, Competent Workforce Act.

Power said many factors have contributed to the demise of the U.S. educational system. Because of that demise, he said, "Employers believe workers — entering the workforce or already on the payroll — don't have enough education and skills to work at high productivity."

Accordingly, Power said, companies reduce jobs to minimum levels and paying correspondingly low wages. That "low-skill, low-wage strategy enables companies to use available workers while simultaneously cutting costs.

Foreign competitors don't use that strategy because it is not effective in the long run, Power said. Neither do progressive U.S. companies.

"GE, Motorola and other firms have figured out what the Germans did years ago," said Power. "You can achieve competitive success, productivity and profit through applying the brainpower of a skilled workforce."

"Investing in workforce skills is a path to matching company profits

with a good standard of living for workers."

POWER SAID part of the blame for schools being deficient can be placed with employers. "One hundred years ago, school curricula and structures pretty accurately reflected the needs and wants of employers. We've gotten away from that."

"Today, school districts worry more about what parents want and think than what employers need. Most boards don't have members who lead local companies."

Power urged business and industry to redefine the relationship between employers and schools and to adopt a more involved strategy. "If we articulate clearly what we need, schools are more likely to provide it."

Power advised business and industry to:

- Enter into partnerships with schools, providing financial support and making available technicians and other highly skilled employees for consultation.

- Donate old equipment or adopting a school isn't enough," he said.

- Work with school districts to

ensure career preparation is current and relevant in a rapidly changing workplace.

"That can mean offering teachers summer internships; arranging to bring employer technical staff into

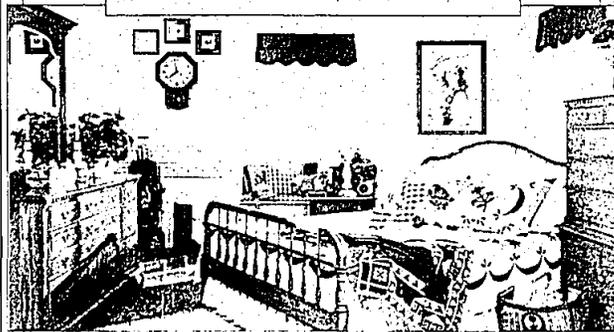
the classroom and offering students apprentice-type experiences," Power said.

Power emphasized the redefined employer-school relationship must be cooperative. "We cannot afford to have either party on the sidelines complaining about the other."

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'Something about her was familiar.'

Talk about deja vu: Michael Balian of Rochester couldn't figure out why one of the speakers at Wednesday's Leadership Oakland conference seemed so familiar.

"The voice was familiar," said the lawyer. "So were some of the mannerisms. But I didn't know why."

Balian was one of about 40 Leadership Oakland participants at the day-long conference on education.

The speaker who seemed so familiar was Carol Schraeger, principal of Penbrooke School in Birmingham, who spoke about successful beginning environments.

"Then it dawned on me," said Balian. "She was Miss Moore at Meadow Lake Elementary — she was my second grade teacher."

"Then I panicked," he added with a chuckle. "Schraeger was taken aback as well."

"I didn't recognize his face," she said. "But when I saw the name tag, I knew it was Michael."

He was part of her class in 1966, Schraeger said. "That was her first year with Birmingham Schools and her second year in teaching."

Seeing former students is a major benefit from teaching, she said. "Teachers love it . . . we love to think we might have made a difference."



Philip H. Power

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