

Baliles, Chichester and Harrell: New partnership prioritizes rural Virginia

BY GERALD BALILES, JOHN CHICHESTER AND ROBERT HARRELL | Posted: Sunday, February 24, 2013 12:00 am

The Rural Horseshoe of Virginia starts on the Eastern Shore, sweeps down and across Southside and Southwest and stretches up the western mountain ranges to the northern tip of the commonwealth. This area of our state is home to some of the most breathtaking scenery found anywhere on earth. Unfortunately, that beauty masks alarming economic and educational trends that must be addressed before the economic vitality we fondly recall can be restored.

Let's start with one unalterable fact: An education will not guarantee a good job. But without an education, a person seeking that proverbial good job is virtually guaranteed that he or she won't find one. This is where our Horseshoe area is most at risk of not reaching its economic potential. We are lagging the rest of Virginia, and frankly much of the country, in producing an educated, trained workforce.

If the Rural Virginia Horseshoe was its own state, separate from the rest of the commonwealth, our population would be about 2.1 million people. In parts of the Horseshoe, one in four of our residents do not have a high school education. Additionally, we would be tied for 50th in the nation between Mississippi and West Virginia with only 19 percent of our population having a bachelor's degree or higher.

But let's be clear. A four-year degree is not the only key to finding a good job or securing economic security for the Rural Horseshoe. However, by 2020, 60 percent of all jobs in America will require some training and education beyond high school. Less than 30 percent of the Horseshoe population meets that requirement today. It is no wonder, despite rural Virginia's higher unemployment rate than the rest of the state, many employers across the region bemoan their lack of ability to find and attract well-motivated, educated and trained employees. With state funding for public education actually declining over the past four years, other tools must be employed to address this challenge or the Rural Horseshoe's economic decline will continue and may accelerate.

The Virginia Foundation for Community College Education has launched the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative to tackle this challenge. The 14 community colleges within the Horseshoe have a

VIRGINIA'S RURAL HORSESHOE

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| 1 Blue Ridge Community College | 8 Patrick Henry Community College |
| 2 Dabney S. Lancaster Community College | 9 Paul D. Camp Community College |
| 3 Danville Community College | 10 Rappahannock Community College |
| 4 Eastern Shore Community College | 11 Southside Virginia Community College |
| 5 Lord Fairfax Community College | 12 Southern Virginia Community College |
| 6 Mountain Empire Community College | 13 Virginia Highlands Community College |
| 7 New River Community College | 14 Wytheville Community College |



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long and successful track record of preparing our citizens for the jobs of the future. Programs and resources are being deployed based on the very successful work of the Patrick County Education Foundation. Ten years ago, nearly 30 percent of Patrick County's graduating high school seniors had no plans of any kind past high school. Last year, every single graduating senior had a plan past high school with more than 83 percent pursuing a college degree, technical training or workforce certifications.

We are proud to be natives of rural Virginia and have accepted the responsibility of guiding the Rural Virginia Horseshoe Initiative as its co-chairs. During the coming months, there will be additional columns from other natives of the Horseshoe who describe what getting a good education has meant to them and what it can mean to our citizens and communities.

The real message is quite simple. The Rural Horseshoe Region of Virginia has challenges on many fronts. Improving the educational and training level of our citizens, though, is truly the cornerstone to meeting those challenges. Please join your community colleges in urging those in high school to pursue training and education after they graduate — and urge any who have dropped out to obtain their GED and keep going.

Former Gov. Gerald Baliles, former state Sen. John Chichester and Robert Harrell are co-chairs of the Virginia Rural Horseshoe Initiative. Questions about the program should be sent to Dr. Jennifer Gentry, executive director of the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, at (804) 819-4661 or

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