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Secretary Gassman Says Governor's Youth Apprenticeship, Covenant Proposals Crucial to Meeting Future Workforce Needs

State Labor Secretary Cites Both as Vital to Sustaining Healthy Economy, Urges Legislature to Make Key Investments, Finish Budget, Keep Wisconsin Moving Forward

EAU CLAIRE – Department of Workforce Development (DWD) Secretary Roberta Gassman said today Governor Doyle's proposals to double Youth Apprenticeship opportunities and make college more accessible with the new Wisconsin Covenant program are crucial to ensuring a skilled workforce and sustaining economic growth.

"Under Governor Doyle's leadership, our economy is growing strong, creating jobs, and these two proposals will help us sustain our economic momentum and provide many opportunities for our youth to pursue rewarding careers," Secretary Gassman said. "In doubling Youth Apprenticeship funding, as many as 4,000 high school students will have school-to-career opportunities each year, helping us meet the need for skilled workers in all sectors of our economy. His visionary Wisconsin Covenant lets all eighth graders know they have an opportunity to attend a college or technical school, if they apply themselves in high school."

Secretary Gassman described both proposals as crucial investments in our future workforce, as she visited Xcel Energy and met with Eau Claire high school students in the Youth Apprenticeship program. She noted the state budget is now two months late and urged lawmakers to pass a budget with the Youth Apprenticeship funding and Wisconsin Covenant as part of the workforce development package the Governor offered in February.

"As Governor Doyle has said, the states that will do well five, 10, 15 years from now are the states that are making the key investments now," Secretary Gassman said. "These two proposals, along with other investments the Governor has urged in the education and training of people, will help us meet the need for skilled workers. We face labor shortages as members of the baby boomers approach retirement. We also need more skilled workers as our economy expands and adds jobs."

Secretary Gassman said Youth Apprenticeship (YA) has been an extremely successful and popular program with both students and employers since it began 15 years ago with bipartisan support from lawmakers. The Governor's budget would double funding to \$2.2 million, allowing 4,000 high school students the chance to explore career opportunities while earning a wage and gaining work experience.

Nearly nine out of 10 YA graduates get permanent job offers from their employers when they graduate from high school. Apprenticeship graduates who go on to college or technical school generally do better than their peers. The program is also very popular with employers; virtually every one of them highly recommends the program.

The Governor's Wisconsin Covenant program is also crucial to ensuring a skilled workforce, Secretary Gassman said. The Wisconsin Covenant is a promise to students that if they work hard in high school and make the grade, they will be assured a place in higher education and a financial aid package based on their family's financial need. Students entering ninth grade have until September 14, 2007 to sign the Covenant. Students starting eighth grade will begin signing the Covenant later this fall. More on the Wisconsin Covenant can be found online at www.wisconsin covenant.wi.gov.

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“For those who want to continue their education after high school, particularly students from hardworking families of limited means, the Wisconsin Covenant offers a real incentive,” Secretary Gassman said. “College isn’t just for children of wealthy parents. College is a reality for anyone who is willing to work hard and invest in their future. The Wisconsin Covenant says if you sign a pledge and live up to your end of the bargain, there is an opportunity for you to get a college education.”

At Xcel Energy, Secretary Gassman met students Seth Soley, a senior at Eau Claire Memorial High School, and Marquessa Pichette, a junior at Eau Claire North High School. They are two of three students in drafting and design engineering who are employed at Xcel Energy. The students are among 42 in the Chippewa Valley Youth Apprenticeship Consortium, funded by a state grant of \$40,500.

Both Joy Lancour, Xcel Energy Human Resources Director, and Candyce Lund, Youth Apprenticeship Coordinator for CESA 10, said they welcomed Governor Doyle’s proposal to double funding for the program. Lancour said she wanted to expand Xcel Energy’s participation to other positions within the company.

“The program is extremely valuable,” Lancour said. “While the students are learning something new, they’re determining whether this is a career they want to pursue. And, their employment at Xcel Energy is a plus because the students are assisting us with real projects.”

“The Eau Claire School District has more students that want to be involved in these types of programs,” Lund said. “We really need to encourage more of our employers to come to the table and work with the school districts, as Xcel Energy has done.”