Gov. Hassan talks economy, employment with local leaders

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New Hampshire Gov. Maggie Hassan, right, was in Claremont yesterday where she met with local business leaders, as well as school and city officials to discuss the state of the economy and employment. The group met at River Valley Community College. Hassan is shown here during the discussion sitting next to RVCC President Alicia Harvey-Smith. PAUL HOWE PHOTO

CLAREMONT — Gov. Maggie Hassan got an earful from business leaders frustrated with the lack of qualified employees in the state.

Hassan went to River Valley Community College Tuesday morning to meet with city and regional business leaders, as well as school and city officials to discuss the economy and employment. Hassan heard about too few employees ready to join the work force, and no way to keep the qualified employees in the state.

“I believe in my heart that our secondary school system is a complete failure,” said John Olson with Whelen Engineering.

Olson, along with other manufacturing executives, said students are graduating from high school not only without basic employment skills such as the ability to read, write, and do basic arithmetic, they are also coming out without essential life skills.

“They can’t reliably get up at 5:30 in the morning,” said Thomas Sullivan, with Sturm Ruger.

Hassan said that while the state has made strides in education, she knows that there needs to be more done to help students be ready to meet the world.

“I’m hoping for the day when we have no 18-year-olds without life skills,” she said.

The average manufacturing job in New Hampshire pays $68,000 a year, she said, and can provide a good job to support families in the state. The problem is there are not enough students ready to enter this work force, according to the executives.

These potential employees do not know who to put in an acceptable job application, and they do not understand the need to show up for work, Sullivan said. He would be happy to teach them what they need to know to operate manufacturing machinery, but he cannot teach them how to essentially be adults.

Roelof Versteeg, with Subsurface Insights Inc., said that too many of the employees he is getting, even from college, have a theoretical education, meaning that they have never built anything.
“I’m looking for people who can actually put things together,” he said.

Olson said the school system, since the passage of the No Child Left Behind law, has given too much attention to sending students to college.

“Not every kid should be going to college,” Olson said. “Unfortunately the egg-head educators don’t see that because they don’t know anything.”

Whelen Engineering has done its part to introduce manufacturing and job skills to high school students. The company has been partnering with the Claremont School District to bring students into the facility to teach work skills and also basic employment skills.

This type of partnership is just what is needed, said executive Val Zanchuk with Graphicast. While the school systems cannot afford the manufacturing equipment to train students, the companies can get into the schools and help teach and train future employees.

“We have to step up to the plate,” he said.

River Valley President Alicia Harvey-Smith said the college is doing what it can to help turn the tide. River Valley is in the process of hiring the faculty needed to create a pre-engineering course that will be offered in the next academic year. She wants to have the manufacturing companies partner with her students so they will be the best employees around.

“As we map our path together, our students will be better for it,” she said.