

Our City

The line at times just keeps getting blurrier and blurrier. The two hats seem to fit separately most of the time, but there are occasions where I can't separate the hats or distinguish where the line is. Am I a teacher or a mayor? Or am I both, all the time? Blurry most often.

As an Agricultural Education teacher I have always included experiential learning for nearly every student as part of the program, last year just over 95% of the students in the program experienced some type of extended out of class learning. To be honest, most of that learning was not targeted towards a specific career, but more generally teaching students how to work in situations as close to the real-world as we can make them and wherever we could find them. Generally speaking, my records and those of other Ag teachers I confer with often, about 20% of our students actually are engaged in experiential learning in areas they intend to work in when they graduate from high school and or complete some type of postsecondary education. Last year between the three teachers in the program we had 282 students, 42 of which were seniors. Using the 20% average, eight students actually went into a field they prepared for.

As mayor I see and hear the need for employees who are interested in filling many of the voids that exist not only within our community, but regionally and throughout the State. Further compounding the problem is that kids for the last 50 years have been raised by parents, teachers and counselors to believe they have to get a four-year college education to be successful. NO! Not true. It is true; however, that 80% of the jobs and careers currently available require some additional training or education after high school, but not a four year degree. These careers are the ones in dire need of a skilled workforce. Truth be told most of tomorrow's careers haven't even been imagined yet. The paradigm has to shift. And, soon!

As both a teacher and mayor I have always believed that we make our own future; that being proactive is always better than being reactive, that lines or hats are often just things that get in the way when the issue is far greater than what can fit under one or on either side of a line. We, the community of American Falls and Power County, are doing wonderful things. But, we must do better.

I received a text a month or so ago from a local farmer who needs employees. Not laborers per se; but, people interested in a career in agriculture. More recently, I had a phone call asking if I knew of anyone that has interest in a very specific skillset and employment. Again, the answer was no. My service on the "Our kids-Our Future" education task force has been reaffirming to the extent that Idaho's business and industry leaders get it. They realize all too well that a workforce crisis is looming and that it all goes back to the myth that every student needs a four-year college degree.

Taking all the above as preface, we can do better. Beyond the much needed new learning environment provided by the JR Simplot Elementary school perhaps the best thing to come from its construction was what was left behind. The building that I started teaching in here in 1990 still remains and will now become a community learning center that will be geared to helping displaced workers and the underemployed rebuild their future here in American Falls. If you read Superintendent Jensen's column in this slot last week you are up to speed in this retasked building and the opportunities it will provide. In that same vein Jensen and I will be

working with ISU, CSI and multiple local businesses to provide internships and apprenticeships for high-paying in-demand careers right here at home. As an Ag program we have done this on a small scale already, but clearly more scope is needed if we are to meet our local, regional and state-wide labor market needs. A pipeline has to be built from our schools to careers with a future as more and more Baby Boomers retire. We have to grow our own. As a teacher and mayor I will be asking many of you to participate in this effort. I look forward to those conversations without the need to be on one side of a line or under one hat.

Finally, three Baby Boomers retired a week ago last Friday. And, while two of the three positions have been filled by very capable individuals, we are still trying to hire three police officers. It will be impossible to replace the 100 plus years of experience and knowledge possessed by these three. You know the lines have never been blurry for any of them, their hearts and souls have always been dedicated to making American Falls the very best place to live! Larry Jones, Pete Williams and Robyn Herndon for your years of selfless service we all owe you a huge debt of gratitude. Thanks for making all of our lives better.

Until next week...