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Editorial: Report by Michigan Future deserves study

by The Ann Arbor News

Sunday April 19, 2009, 6:50 AM

Michigan sure has some work to do.

That's one theme of the latest progress report from Michigan Future, the Ann Arbor-based think tank focused on helping the state succeed in the Information Age.

The report - available online at www.michiganfuture.org - makes compelling reading for anyone concerned about the state. Its contents, predictably, are grim in many respects - more alarming statistics about how our state is losing population, income and brainpower.

Yet the report does lay out what it calls "A path to a high-prosperity Michigan." And those points deserve serious attention from the leadership in this state, although we're not convinced they constitute the entire answer.

These are the elements of Michigan Future's suggested path:

- Valuing learning and entrepreneurship.
- Creating places where talent wants to live, including vibrant central cities.
- Strong public investment in higher education.
- Transforming teaching, including better and more widespread college preparation.
- Focusing public and private leadership on attracting talent.

The report's central argument is that prosperity follows concentrations of brainpower - that training, attracting and retaining educated, creative people is the most important thing the state can do. Where that happens, the report says, the highly valued, knowledge-based economic activity tends to follow. The report offers some interesting evidence, comparing Michigan with more successful areas around the country.

The report is very persuasive that economic success and concentrations of educated talent go together. But it's somewhat less convincing that the success follows the talent - it seems just as possible that the talent follows the success, or at least that the two things happen together.

Michigan Future President Lou Glazer put it this way: "State governments and local communities can create communities where people want to live ... There's no evidence they can create new industries."

That may be true, but they can certainly be more or less welcoming to those industries. And along with attracting talent - which is certainly important - Michigan still needs to continue working on becoming a place that's welcoming to business. First on the list should be revisiting the Michigan Business Tax, a well intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring simplicity and fairness to the state tax structure.

A combination strategy - improving the business climate, a favorite talking point of many leaders, as well as improving the talent pool, as Michigan Future argues - will likely be the only way the state can improve its long-term fortunes.

The Michigan Future study may not offer the entire answer to what ails our state. But it makes some strong points our leaders ought to heed.