

# THE BAY CITY TIMES

## John Glenn Class of '86 starkly shows the task we have ahead of us

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Think of an economic model based on human talent, and Bay County is a world-class exporter.

Before anyone swells with pride at that distinction, let me put it another way: Young people are taking their brains and dreams elsewhere to make their wealth and contributions to society.

We are shipping out earning power like a river out to sea, and we're getting only a trickle in return. And it means that in a state in economic eclipse, Bay County is heading for the darkest corner.

That's an inescapable conclusion upon reading the comprehensive statistics and anecdotes in The Times' special report today on the John Glenn High School Class of 1986.

We spent the better part of a year tracking down more than half of the class of 318 students, then joined them at their 20-year reunion this summer to have them tell us why they stayed in Bay County, or why they left.

More stark was the story told by the education and income levels of the two groups.

Of the Bangor '86ers who moved away, 71 percent have college degrees and about 50 percent earn \$60,000 or more per year. Of those who stayed, 42 percent have college degrees and 22 percent earn \$60,000 or more.

That disparity must be confronted if we are to have any hope of sustaining the quality of life built upon generations of generous blue-collar wages.

In an economy moving almost violently away from the old manufacturing base, communities that prosper will succeed by attracting jobs based on knowledge skills and then adapting to changing high-tech markets.

The Class of '86 project in today's paper shows Bay County is nowhere close to being ready. We're just beginning to grasp the scope of the problem.

Add in some baseline Census Bureau data - five out of six Bay County adults do not have a bachelor's degree or higher from college; Bay County is one of only three counties in Michigan that lost population from 1990-2000 - and you have the recipe for a collapse in our standard of living.

It's not unusual - or a failure on our community's part - that many John Glenn graduates moved away to pursue careers. Every area exports young folks, and every thriving town is full of people from somewhere else.

But a healthy community needs to achieve a balance of trade in the commodities of brains and earning potential.

The John Glenn project, coupled with census data, illustrates that degrees and higher salaries are leaving, and lower-paying trade and service jobs are staying behind.

As that disparity widens, it becomes harder to attract high-tech employers because the work force, and business climate, are not suited to making a move here easy or sensible.

And if those cutting-edge employers are somewhere else, educated, ambitious workers will move to find them.

This is the frustrating "unified theory" of Michigan economics, a phenomenon everyone suspects exists but hasn't been able to solve.

But leaders in all camps in Bay County - labor, business, education, government - must begin to tackle it,

now.

The answer may not be clear, but the process begins by wiping clean the mindset of a bygone manufacturing model - and the class divisions it engendered - and focusing on how to beef up the education base in Bay County.

Success will be incremental, not sudden, but ultimately it will mark the difference between careers and jobs, creating wealth or sending it elsewhere, building on what we have or withering away.

The economic world was unchanged for generations, and so were we. The only difference between lumber and ships and cars was the name of the company on the paycheck.

The game has changed, from brawn to brain power. And no one is guaranteeing our paychecks anymore.

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