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A New Source for Qualified Employees

By Chris Braunlich

1/7/2014 – Language used in the “immigration wars” has been rough.

One American leader claimed that incoming immigrants were too stupid to learn English and represented a political threat to America, noting that the newcomers “will soon so outnumber us” that “even our Government will become precarious.” And he complained of the immigrants’ “swarthy complexion,” which, he said, was an affront to the “purely white people” of America.

Benjamin Franklin’s concerns about the Germans immigrating to Pennsylvania demonstrate that the debate over immigration is nothing new. Even the nation’s Founders have been among those using overheated language, whom history has proven wrong.

Since Congress passed the first law restricting immigration in 1875, subsequent laws have banned certain classes of people (anarchists, beggars, epileptics, Chinese), established quotas (freezing existing ethnic distributions, restricting annual immigration from each country), and more.

Yet, every time efforts were made to restrict immigration, immigrants found ways around the new rules. Like water meeting a barrier on a downhill run, waves of immigrants continued to move until they found a way around the wall – or a loophole through which they could flow. A broken “immigration system,” like the current system in which the pathway to citizenship can take more than a dozen years, only encourages further avoidance.

Through it all, people have continued to come to America’s shores seeking new opportunity for themselves and their children because, as Ronald Reagan once said “In America, our origins matter less than our destination.” Barriers have never worked.

Which bring us to today.

Immigration policy is a federal matter, beyond the scope of state lawmakers. But for states, it is also an economic development issue, and state policy should respond accordingly.

According to the Federation for American Immigration Reform, Virginia taxpayers pay \$305 million annually for the K-12 education of students who, as children, were brought illegally to America with their parents. The state has no choice: Supreme Court rulings declare that all children receive an education through 12th grade.

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But state law minimizes our ability to maximize the return on that required \$300 million expense. Although they have lived here most of their lives, played by the rules, and earned grades good enough to be accepted to college, those students pay a penalty. As “illegal immigrants,” they’re considered “out of state” students and charged up to \$22,000 a year extra to attend a Virginia college that their taxes and their parents’ taxes have been supporting.

At the University of Virginia, the difference between in-state and out-of-state tuition is \$22,175; at George Mason University, it’s \$18,898. At Northern Virginia Community College, “out of state” residents pay more than \$10,000 per year; in-state, the cost is only \$4,500.

These are clear disincentives for students whose only “crime” has been to be children living with their mother and father when those parents crossed the border seeking a better life. The result of those disincentives are equally clear: defer college (perhaps never to return to it), or even head somewhere else (such as North Carolina, where “out-of-state tuition” is less than Virginia), to build a future.

These disincentives have costs. The Virginia Chamber of Commerce projects that the state’s economy will need a total of 2.04 million new workers by 2022, most requiring advanced levels of education or skills training. Yet, only 1.5 million bodies are “in the pipeline” via children in school, newcomers or unemployed workers. Without tapping the resources of educated immigrants, Virginia’s robust economy will likely stagnate.

The income difference between having a high school diploma and a Bachelor’s degree averages \$23,291 per year. Increasing the number of college graduates living in Virginia certainly adds to the tax coffers and the Virginia economy, providing a better return on those millions on the same student’s K-12 education.

So why not encourage, rather than discourage, qualified students to pursue a better education, a higher-paying job, and stay in Virginia?

In the last General Assembly session, legislation was sponsored to grant in-state tuition to undocumented aliens who came to America as children, have graduated from high school, have been a resident of Virginia for at least five years, are pursuing permanent residency and whose parents have filed Virginia income tax returns – requirements more stringent than those imposed others.

Such legislation is worthy of passage. In no other endeavor does society penalize children for the “sins of the father.” The sons and daughters of bank robbers, drug dealers and murderers are not restricted from becoming bank tellers, pharmacists or gun owners. In the spirit of the American ideal, each is judged on his or her own merits.

For the sake of that ideal – not to mention the sake of Virginia’s economic growth – its time to offer the same opportunities to *all* the children who grew up in Virginia.