

Welcome

Education Crossroads Preface

As the world economy transforms itself, it has become increasingly apparent that education is the most essential ingredient to our future economic security. We cannot affect in any meaningful way the external forces that bear down upon us here in Tennessee. Globalization, exchange rates, outsourcing, interest rates, and so on are simply beyond our control. Like the weather, we can complain; but it is to no avail. We do, however, have the power to influence our future through the investments in education that we make as individuals, parents and members of our community. These investments represent the best insurance policy we could possibly buy to protect us from the risks of the marketplace. The state makes investments as well; the budget for the 2007–08 fiscal year includes a \$290 million increase in funding that will flow through a revised version of the basic education program. When fully implemented in the years ahead, this influx will mean \$524 million in new education money each year.

So what is this book about? As you can tell from the title, it is about education. More to the point, it is about how education affects our lives and the lives of those around us. As individuals, we tend to earn more income and have greater economic security when we have a better education. We also choose healthier lifestyles. Children in families with well-educated parents benefit from their parents' income and lifestyle choices. Society at large bears many of the costs associated with a poorly educated population. For example, lifestyle choices like smoking are closely linked to educational attainment. Yet all of us bear the consequences of cancer through the loss of friends and loved ones and through the costs to the health care system.

Our state and our home communities don't stack up well in terms of adult educational attainment. In fact, we lag the nation in most measures of attainment as well as in investment in education. As a result, our income lags the nation, and many Tennessee communities experience sluggish growth, if not outright economic contraction. Finally, education affects the state budget and the budgets of cities and counties across Tennessee. Poorly educated individuals dominate the Families First and TennCare rolls as well as our prison system. These are examples of some of the issues we explore and document with data in this book.

Why is the book entitled *Education Crossroads*? Because it is about taking one more step down the education path. For each of us as individuals, and for each of our schools and communities, this path may be very different. We will likely take different turns along the way. But the key is to take one more step. Instead of dropping out and bearing the lifetime consequences of this choice, take another step toward graduating. Instead of being satisfied with a high school diploma, go to a technical school and get a certificate in the trades or pursue a college degree, either of which can provide greater economic security than simply a high school degree alone.

A note about data and numbers. We have tried to rely on data that are easily accessed and verified through online and other sources. As this book moved closer to completion, we quit updating data, a process that could go on forever. Some of the data we used will look old. A good example is educational attainment data linked to income for 2000. More recent data are simply not available. There are also apple and orange problems with data, in particular data in dollar denominations for different years. We decided to live with apples and oranges, because we think this enhances the transparency of this report by allowing you to verify facts and figures directly with the source. Despite these decisions, it is important to understand that even as more recent data become available, it is unlikely that these relationships will change in any appreciable way.

Some will take exception to the content of this book — here are some reasons why. First, we make no effort to offer solutions to the many problems confronting our education system. It would be presumptuous for us to do so. But we do need to work together and talk among ourselves to address these problems, building on a common understanding of the important role education plays in our society. *If we cannot articulate and document how education matters, we cannot develop the momentum for change.* This book is about documenting how education matters in order to empower stakeholders.

Second, some will view this book as simply a prop to support public education in Tennessee. This is not our intent. This book is about education, including public and private education, home schooling, formal and informal education, and so on. An important goal of this book is to motivate people to embrace education — and **take one more step** — regardless of its form.

Third is our heavy reliance on measures of educational attainment rather than measures of achievement and knowledge acquisition. This is simply a matter of practicality. We know there are kids who graduate from high school who are functionally illiterate. And we know there are people who have little or no formal education who have become learned and prosperous. Even so, attainment still says something significant about who we are and what we aspire to.

A fourth issue is the question of correlation versus causation. Can we say with certainty that education causes us to make lifestyle choices that affect ourselves, our children and others? How confident can we be that low levels of attainment are the causal influence on welfare participation and incarceration rates? Of course we cannot make such statements with certainty — so we don't. But how could education affect, for example, lifestyle choices and thus our health status? There are two mechanisms. One argument is that those who are better educated will enjoy a higher stream of lifetime earnings, and in order to protect these returns on the education investment, people choose healthier lifestyles. Another argument is that better educated people have access to better information on how lifestyle choices may affect personal well-being and that they adjust their behavior accordingly. There is evidence that education exerts an independent influence on many of the choices we make, even the propensity to donate blood. The evidence goes beyond simple correlations; in the end, you will have to make up your own mind on how important a role education plays in affecting your life and all of our lives.

Finally, you will see a form of repetition take place as you move from chapter to chapter, something that is especially true of chapters 3 through 6. This is intentional. One of our goals is to look at the differing ways education affects us and present this information to different stakeholder groups. So in one instance, we speak to the role of education in enhancing a worker's income, but in another instance we look at how communities with a better educated population enjoy higher per capita income. In the first instance, our interest is in the well-being of the individual and the family; in the second, our focus is the economy and the well-being of our communities. As another example, we look in one place at parental educational attainment and the likelihood of a child being on welfare, but another chapter considers the relatively low level of educational attainment of the entire welfare population. These are different but also complementary perspectives on the influences of education.

Now it's time to take *one step forward* and turn the page.