

# GUEST COLUMN: New state laws encourage big businesses to support work-based learning programs

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Typically, our sessions of the Georgia General Assembly are dominated by high-profile issues and bills that produce impassioned debates and sensational headlines. That's always been the case, and it's not likely to change anytime soon.

But every once in a while, important legislation that has the potential to make a powerful, positive difference works its way quietly through the legislature without really being noticed.

That's what happened with a couple of career and technical education bills over the past few legislative sessions. The issue actually got its start several years ago when a group of Career, Technical and Agricultural Education teachers in Northwest Georgia began talking among themselves about how to create more Work Based Learning and Youth Apprenticeship Program opportunities for their students.

Georgia already has one of the strongest WBL and YAP programs in the country. Statewide, more than 16,000 students are involved in the two programs. But most of those internships and apprenticeships are with smaller, locally-owned businesses. Big national companies have generally been hesitant to participate because of complex labor regulations and questions about the workplace status of interns or apprentices who are under the age of 18.

Those teachers in Northwest Georgia were trying to figure out a way to overcome that reluctance on the part of big companies and create more opportunities for their students. But the truth is, nothing much grew out of the discussions — until Eddie Lumsden, a retired Georgia state trooper from Armuchee, ran for and won a seat in the House of Representatives in 2012. As it happened, one of the teachers involved in those earlier talks was a friend of Lumsden and began talking to him about the issue.

Rep. Lumsden thought the issue was important and decided to take it on. In 2014, his second year in



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the General Assembly, he sponsored House Bill 766, the “Work Based Learning Act,” which created a framework aimed at defining how the business and CTAE communities could work together to create more workplace opportunities for CTAE students. Among the cosponsors he recruited was State Rep. Brooks Coleman, R-Duluth, who chaired the House Education Committee, and his bill passed with only a handful of dissenting votes and was signed into law by Governor Nathan Deal.

But Rep. Lumsden’s work wasn’t done. In 2015, the beginning of his second term, he introduced HB 402, which was aimed at making it clear, as a matter of state law, that companies could provide WBL and YAP opportunities to high school students as young as age 16, and at creating financial incentives for them to do so. Specifically, HB 402 spelled out a process by which companies that win certification from the State Board of Education as Work Based Learning Employers can be eligible for discounts of up to 5 percent in their workman’s compensation insurance.

That part of the bill was modeled on the state’s drug-free workplace law, which grants employers who maintain drug-free workplaces a 7.5 percent reduction in their workman’s comp premiums. The underlying theory is that drug-free employee bodies will be more stable and result in lower workman’s compensation payouts by the insurers. The theory behind the potential discount written into HB 402 is much the same: a workforce built, over time, on highly qualified and trained employees groomed through the state’s CTAE system will be more stable and less costly to insurers, and therefore worth the lowered premiums.

Beyond the mechanics of HB 402, the new law (like HB 766 before it) is aimed at responding to ongoing pleas from the business community for ever more qualified employees. As the bill itself stated: “By opening their doors to work based learning opportunities, employers can play an active role in shaping the quality of their future work force, by preparing potential leaders for their company and their community, and by helping shape future curriculum to create an educated work force for their industry as a whole.”

Because HB 402 dealt with the state’s workman’s compensation laws, it was assigned to the legislative insurance committees, which took the summer of 2015 to study and refine the bill. When the General Assembly reconvened this past January, HB 402 began a steady march through the legislative process. It passed the House 166-0 and the Senate 49-0, and was signed into law by Governor Deal on April 26, to utterly no fanfare.

It’ll be a while, of course, before we know what kind of impact the new law will have, but there’s already evidence it’s having a positive effect. As it was moving through the General Assembly, HB 402 attracted important support from businesses, including the **Associated General Contractors of Georgia**, and the organization I manage, the Georgia Association for Career and Technical Education.

The State Department of Education reports it’s already hearing from local school systems that want to expand their capacity to manage their WBL and YAP programs, at least partly in response to HB 402.

This July, my organization, GACTE, will devote a major part of its upcoming summer conference to educating our members about the new law. One of our presenters will be a representative from State Farm Insurance.

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