

STEM education deemed essential to build ‘viable talent pipeline’



Phil G. Busey Sr., founder, chairman and CEO, of Delaware Resource Group. [PROVIDED]

By Jim Stafford
For The Oklahoman

There is urgency in the voice of Phil Busey Sr., founder and CEO of Oklahoma City-based Delaware Resource Group, as he talks about Oklahoma’s workforce development challenges.

Delaware Resource Group, or DRG, is a minority-owned aerospace industry federal defense contractor. It employs upwards of 700 people — including software engineers — worldwide who support contracts with the U.S. Department of Defense,

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as well as major aerospace companies such as Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

But thousands of aerospace positions in the state remain unfilled because there aren’t enough Oklahomans

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equipped with STEM skills — science, technology, engineering and mathematics, Busey said.

“Our challenges really come back to the issues of workforce development,” he said during a recent interview with the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST).

“Public education is the No. 1 challenging issue we see here in Oklahoma.”

Building a deeper pool of young Oklahomans equipped with STEM skills is critical to sustainability of the state’s aerospace industry, he said.

“We’re a simulator-based company, and we train over 50,000 pilots and air crews for the United States military annually,” Busey said. “We do it through flight simulators. We provide all the operational capabilities for those simulators — the maintenance, the operations, classroom instruction and other things related to that.”

Those are high-paying positions — starting at about \$85,000 annually — that require a substantial educational background in STEM skills. However, there are currently 1,500 unfilled aerospace job openings in the state.

A Native American and member of both the Cherokee Nation and Delaware Tribe, Busey co-founded DRG with his wife, Cathy, in 2002, after a 27-year career as a corporate attorney. The company employs about 45 people at its headquarters in far north Oklahoma City.

Aerospace is Oklahoma’s second largest industry, generating \$44 billion in economic activity and 120,000 jobs statewide. Tinker Air Force Base alone provides 26,000 jobs, while Boeing employs more than 3,500 people in Oklahoma.

But there are not enough homegrown software professionals to meet the industry demand, Busey said. Recruiting from out of state has been difficult, as well.

“We grew up here and love Oklahoma City,” he said. “Our employees love it here, but most of them grew up here. The

challenge to bringing more people into the state is to overcome this issue of public education.”

Where to start? Internship programs provide students as young as high school age a chance to experience the challenges of a real-world environment, Busey said.

“That’s what Boeing is relying on now to try to build part of their workforce, and fill these positions they have through their intern program,” he said. “They had over 120 interns this summer at Boeing.”

OCAST’s Intern Partnerships program, through which college students work at Oklahoma businesses on a cost-share basis, can play a significant role in building that workforce, Busey said.

“Through partners and programs like OCAST, we can enhance and expand internships,” Busey said. “That’s huge because of the challenges we have here in Oklahoma.”

He also cited awareness programs like STEM centers being developed in Oklahoma City public schools.

“Beginning STEM programs in public school

is a great start,” Busey said. “However, we need stronger initiatives. We are being outpaced by many states. Wisconsin has focused on K-12 career awareness for 20 years. They have funded a workforce development department and are bringing universities and K-12 together for STEM and workforce expansion.”

Busey also has organized a working group of community, education and business leaders to brainstorm ways to enhance Oklahoma’s workforce development.

“It’s starting from the first grade and building awareness of what career and job opportunities are like in Oklahoma so we can develop a really constructive, viable talent pipeline,” he said. “We’re sitting on a huge opportunity as Oklahomans to develop Oklahoma as a national center for aerospace and defense.”

Jim Stafford writes about Oklahoma innovation and research and development topics on behalf of the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science & Technology (OCAST).