

Chamber speaker says America needs more scientists

Written by Rebecca Nuttall - Courier Staff Writer

Wednesday, 08 December 2010 10:10

From 1994 to 2003, the number of jobs in science, technology, engineering and math fields increased by 23 percent. However, during that same period, degrees awarded in STEM fields increased by only 8 percent.

Several years later, there continues to be a disparity between the number of STEM jobs and the number of workers qualified to do them. Coupled with an increase in STEM jobs being shipped overseas, building a larger qualified workforce is considered by some as the solution to America's current economic crisis.



This year's annual African American Chamber of Commerce of Western Pennsylvania business luncheon on Dec. 2, addressed the ever-growing need for a qualified workforce in STEM careers. Keynote speaker Gregory Babe, president and CEO of Bayer Corp. and Bayer MaterialScience LLC, explained the key role these jobs play in the economy and how the business economy can help to ensure Americans are ready for them.

"Our nation has to develop scientists, engineers and researchers. Economic progress depends on scientific ideas," Babe said. "If we really want to get our economy moving again, we must work together."

KEYNOTE

ADDRESS—Doris Carson Williams welcomes Gregory Babe to the podium. (Photos by Erin Perry)

While Americans have fallen behind in the STEM field, African-Americans in particular continue to be underrepresented in STEM careers. A recent study published by the National Academies found that African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans hold 9 percent of American jobs in STEM-related fields, despite comprising about 29 percent of the population.

For this reason Bayer created the Making Science Make Sense Program in an effort to increase interest in STEM fields. The program is a company-wide initiative that advances science literacy through hands-on, inquiry-based science learning, employee volunteerism and public education.

"Despite this program and others like it, our most recent survey showed that women and minorities were discouraged from an interest in stem science," Babe said. "So we know that children have an innate interest in science, but for many of them, that interest hits roadblocks in an academic system that is not blind to gender and race."

Recently, President Barack Obama supported a \$250 million public-private partnership, which will train 10,000 new math and science teachers and more than 100,000 existing teachers in STEM subjects.



GREGORY BABE

"Our country needs more scientists and engineers. America's students continue to fall behind in science education at a time when they need it to succeed in a highly competitive, worldwide economy," Babe said. "We need teachers who spur scientific certainty in our students."

In 2004, China graduated 500,000 engineers, India 200,000, and America 70,000. In comparison, African-Americans comprised, on average, about 5.2 percent of national engineering students between 2000 and 2008. These statistics make it hard for America to compete in the global manufacturing market.

"There are many who believe manufacturing is becoming a lost cause in America," Babe said. "More than 96 percent of all our manufacturing is based on chemical manufacturing. As chemical production has moved to other countries so have those high paying jobs."

Babe's remarks echoed the theme of this year's luncheon: "Changing of the Guard."

"Change overall is good. In this economy adaptability is key," said Doris Carson Williams, president and CEO of the Chamber. "Part of staying nimble is staying informed."