

Tech giants want boost in schools

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TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. - The heads of two of America's titans of the high-tech economy, Google and AT&T, had a simple message when they met with the nation's governors Saturday: Get us a skilled workforce. And get out of the way.

As things stand, they say government regulations often hamper business investment. Qualified workers are in short supply.

Case in point: AT&T Chief Executive Randall Stephenson said his company is hard-pressed to find the 50,000 new hires it's seeking each year, including 4,000 positions that are returning to the United States from India. Part of the blame, he and Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt agreed, lies with an underperforming education system.

"They're graduating the same number of engineers in India that we are in the U.S., and their economy is 7 percent the size," Stephenson said. "In my opinion, our education system has fallen flat. We've gotten fat and lazy."

Their sobering assessment of the problem came before a panel of roughly three dozen governors gathered in this lakeside community for the 99th annual conference of the National Governors Association. Gov. Janet Napolitano, chairwoman of the association, is pitching her Innovation America initiative as part of the cure.

It includes a call for more rigorous K-12 education standards with a focus on math and science education. State universities are to be not only educational institutions, but also economic engines with the products of their research and development hitting the marketplace and spinning off companies.

It's no small undertaking, and Napolitano urged her gubernatorial colleagues to fend off inertia by using their office "as a bully pulpit to create a sense of urgency about this."

The watchword: Innovation.

It was on the lips of governors from Minnesota to Maine as they discussed how their states are trying to use what Napolitano calls "mental capital" to adapt to an increasingly competitive global economy and buffer against collapse in any single industry.

Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm, a Democrat, offered her state as an example of the need: "Because of the challenges in our auto sector, we know the advantages of investing in the diversity of the economy."

'A real revolution'

That's the "why." The "how" is where it gets trickier.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Pawlenty, a Republican and the incoming NGA chairman, suggested that classrooms leverage new technology and get away from the traditional blackboards-and-textbooks focus.

In Maine, high school students must now complete four years of math and science, up from two, and the state is working with its neighbors to become a hub for information technology.

"We are very much at the beginning of a real revolution in innovation, information and governing," Schmidt said.

In much of Arizona, of course, wireless-telephone service remains a pipe dream - let alone high-speed broadband with streaming video and the like. That's changing.

Just weeks ago, even the tiny central-Arizona town of Superior went digital by launching its own wireless fidelity (Wi-Fi) network. Largely funded by a \$270,000 federal grant, it's hoped that the high-speed Internet will create economic opportunities in the mining town. There are plans to allow local residents to access online business courses through Central Arizona College.

Expanding wireless and broadband reach across Arizona is key, Napolitano said, adding, "Ultimately, everybody needs to be linked."

Catching up

Arizona is pushing other efforts as well - raising academic rigor, increasing math and science requirements, reforming higher education. The state has pledged \$100 million during the next four years to Science Foundation Arizona, an incubator for new biotechnology and research firms.

Just as important as reducing regulation and improving education is ensuring that Arizona's tax burden remains competitive, said Steve Voeller, president of the Arizona Free Enterprise Club. Arizona has cut hundreds of millions of dollars from its property- and income-tax rates in the past couple of years.

For now, though, the state struggles to churn out quality graduates in numbers that lure the highest-paying employers. Arizona State University President Michael Crow conceded that and said it's evident in struggles that he knows Google is having to secure a workforce for its new facility in Tempe.

"We're going to catch up," said Crow, who was at the conference. With the necessary reforms,

he said, ASU and the state can begin to reach their new innovation economy within 10 years.

How will we know? "When we are one of the places that are consistently looked at by leading-edge industries."