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Businesses lobby for education reform

By Andrew Kitchenman

When Norm Alworth describes why New Jersey corporations should care about the Opportunity Scholarship Act, he points to the need for a better-educated work force.

"If you don't have a well-trained work force to handle the high-tech jobs that could be coming to the state, you're at that much more of a disadvantage," said Alworth, president and CEO of Excellent Education for Everyone, or E3.

The bill would allow businesses to receive tax credits if they fund nonprofits providing scholarships to low-income children attending persistently underperforming schools. The scholarships, or vouchers, would pay for the students to attend participating private schools.

E3 has been advocating vouchers since it was founded by Peter Denton in 1998. While at one time it was a lonely voice, the organization is now at the center of a discussion in which both Gov. Chris Christie and members of both parties in the Legislature support some version of the bill. Critics say the vouchers would hurt cash-strapped public schools.

"It does nothing to improve the quality of education, and is a great threat to the quality of education in the targeted districts," said Steve Baker, spokesman for the New Jersey Education Association, who said the lost funding would hurt districts that still face many fixed costs that can't be reduced with fewer students.

Alworth served as an E3 board

member for eight years before becoming the interim president and CEO in December, as Denton decided to reduce his role to board chairman. Alworth has applied to hold the positions permanently.

Alworth became interested in the organization as the president of Materials Processing Technology Inc., a Paterson pharmaceutical manufacturer.

"Applicants couldn't fill out applications," showing the need for improvements in the work force, Alworth said.

The final shape of the Opportunity Scholarship Act - including the number of cities, children and funding involved in the pilot program - hasn't been resolved. But Alworth said the measure won't cost taxpayers anything and would benefit public schools, since the students' home districts would still receive the difference between the scholarship amount and the current level of state aid.

Alworth said one of the biggest benefits of the scholarships would stem from a force that business owners know well: competition. "I'm a strong believer in free-market competition, and competition being a driver of our economy," Alworth said.

Alworth said public schools improve when faced with competition from private schools.

A model for how businesses could participate in the New Jersey program can be found in Florida, which has had a similar program since January 2002.

"The reception was wonderful, and has been ever since" the program started, according to John Kirtley,

chairman of Step Up for Students, the nonprofit that administers Florida's \$140 million program.

Marriott International is one of the companies that participates in the Florida program, both as a donor and with 83 children of employees who receive scholarships.

"I think that work force readiness is an aspect that many major employers are dealing with, as kids are coming out of high school or out of college" unprepared, said Melissa Flood, Marriott's vice president of government affairs. She said the corporation - which operates 70 hotels in New Jersey - would consider participating here, also.

Apparel company VF Corp. has found participation in the Florida program easy.

"I'm a big fan, and I wasn't at first," said Benjamin Bright, VF Corp.'s director of state taxes. "I thought it would take too much time and effort."

Bright said administering the scholarship money takes perhaps an hour per year, since the money is paid on a quarterly basis, like taxes. Since the company pledges funding four times per year, rather than once, it can make adjustments each quarter.

VF Corp. also has some retail operations in New Jersey, and would consider participating if its state tax liability made it attractive, Bright said.

"It allows kids to go to a school that they might not otherwise be able to attend," Bright said, adding that the program has provided positive publicity, as well.