

Essay #2: Employment Structure Effects

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Our area's employment structure inhibits us from fully tapping the community's potential. It adversely affects parents' ability to participate in the development of their children. It narrows educational debates. It influences how economic growth affects neighborhoods, and it constrains many employers' human resource practices.

Our job structure forces many parents to choose work over providing parental investments. The characteristics of many jobs make it difficult for parents to volunteer at school, attend conferences and programs, attend PTA meetings and be at home to supervise homework. In reality, many lower-wage jobs, in which women and minorities are concentrated, have less flexibility in their hours and scheduling.

Although concentrated disproportionately in lower-wage industries and occupations, James City's faster job and population growth has led to a shift in political power from the City to the County. To date, this power shift has stalled the third high school debate.

If today's enrollment forecasts were as large and rapid as in the past, they would provide the rationale needed for building the school. However, since solid and steady growth is forecast, it is important that we remember the method used generate the forecast is an extremely conservative approach. Further, we should base the decision to build a moderate-sized high school on a calculation that includes the short and long-term nonmonetary benefits of smaller classes, greater opportunities for participation in extracurricular activities, and fewer disciplinary problems. Our calculation must also

include the impact of creating more productive citizens, a necessity given the future decline in the working age population.

The experienced members of City Council must play a stronger role in the debate. Their members, several of whom served on the school board, can help to create a positive tone, enhance the level of trust, and focus the discussion on doing what's best for the long-run competitiveness of the Williamsburg area.

They too, can help guide the discussion on the type of high school to build. Some argue the need for a traditional high school with the current array of advance placement and honor options, plus a career-technical curriculum. Others advocate utilizing existing funds to create a new IB program. Both proposals have merit and are consistent with the school's mission. However, a benefit-cost calculation would help the School Board make its decision.

Along with influencing education debates, our area's employment structure continues to have disparate neighborhood impacts. *Daily Press* reporter Matthew Paust wrote a provocative set of articles that illustrated how economic growth continues to affect predominately African American neighborhoods. Vibrant African American neighborhoods were relocated to create Duke of Gloucester Street and Camp Peary. Today, economic pressures are being felt in neighborhoods adjacent to New Town and the Grove.

Finally, our job structure leads some employers to take the "low road" to human resource management. For today, that approach may yield dividends; however, as the working-age population shrinks, creating skills shortages, only employers who currently pay competitive wages, provide benefits, provide educational and training opportunities,

and enable employees to balance work and family obligations will be positioned to attract and retain the best employees. An additional consequence of continuing this human resource strategy will be an increase in our reliance on labor from outside our community, one that will create anxiety among some residents.

The next essay presents a framework that can be used to identify and develop initiatives that address the persistent needs of our residents.

