



When I think about economic growth and potential, I think about people — not just population numbers (which economists often fret over) but the contribution each individual person can bring to the economy if they have the right opportunities and guidance. Research has shown that a strong educational system is critical for economic development.

Last week, Connecticut state Senate leaders unveiled their education policy agenda for this year's legislative session, and higher education was a key component. Fields like nursing and technology face growing demand for skilled professionals with postsecondary degrees, they said, but enrollment in the state's universities — particularly for students from low-income backgrounds — has been declining.

Senate Democrats want to boost financial support to public universities, expand debt-free community college programs and funnel more money into scholarships at Connecticut's private colleges and universities (the Roberta Willis Scholarship Program). Reducing financial barriers to in-state higher education could keep Connecticut students from leaving the state while driving more of them into highly skilled fields — two big potential wins for the economy, proponents say.

But there's one part of the plan that doesn't always go smoothly: getting employers and higher ed institutions to work together. Businesses' labor needs and universities' areas of expertise don't always align. In some instances, companies can be more nimble and act quickly in response to a changing business environment. In others, academic research is advancing more quickly than traditional business practices.

I remember John Beauregard, former president of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, telling me about the work it took to get that region's successful "Manufacturing Pipeline Initiative" up and running. He said EWIB convened groups from academia and the private sector, "and we put them in one room and said, 'Look, we're going to break some glass in this conversation, but we're going to walk out of it, and we're going to be able to fly in formation.'"

Inspired by EWIB's success, Gov. Ned Lamont's administration has been working to establish "regional sector partnerships," aiming to ignite those conversations between business groups and postsecondary leaders. The ultimate goal of the RSPs is to design educational programs that will help Connecticut students — and the state's economy — to achieve their full potential. But first, they have to get in formation.