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Education takes center stage at forum

By TINA HINZ, Courier Staff Writer

CEDAR FALLS --- In the midst of a struggling economy, area residents asked legislators not to skimp on educational programs.

Advocates made their voices known during a public legislative forum on Iowa's economy Saturday at Area Education Agency 267 in Cedar Falls.

Preceding audience questions, legislators discussed creating jobs to reduce a spike in unemployment.

Sen. Bill Dotzler said the jobless rate currently stands at just less than 5 percent. Positions are available, he added, but people out of work don't always possess the skills required.

"When people are laid off, there is no better time to upgrade their skills," Dotzler said. "We need to keep college affordable, develop more internship programs."

Rep. Doris Kelley echoed Dotzler's comments. She plans to focus on getting the biggest bang for the buck, investing in programs that put people back to work and getting more money pouring through the system.

This type of return on investment is what legislators will need to look at this session as they build next year's budget.

"What happens when you start isolating areas, it's going to make it more difficult in other areas," Dotzler said. "But I think there are some sacrifices that everybody's willing to make, and I think early childhood development ? is something that I will stand (up) for."

At the federal level, Sen. Jeff Danielson added that President Barack Obama's priorities include early childhood within his education package.

Ellen Neuhaus, who works at the University of Northern Iowa library, also emphasized the central role libraries play in Iowa's economic development. Nationally during hard economic times, usage in public libraries has a tendency to increase, she said.

"Libraries have traditionally played a role in leveling the field, so that people who are rich or poor, especially poor people, have access to information," she said.

Libraries go beyond books, Rep. Bob Kressig agreed. They're also places for people to meet and discuss issues.

But Ken Davenport, who works with small town libraries in northeast Iowa, is concerned that rural areas lack bandwidth, a data transmission rate that affects the speed of their Internet connection. This hampers economic development in those areas.

"We're using a horse and buggy on a superhighway," he said.

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