

CREATION OF a council to coordinate public education with the needs of the business community could provide the leadership needed to ramp up the quality of schools in Alabama.

The Alabama Commission on Higher Education has floated the idea, pointing out that state councils of the sort have gained traction throughout the country.

Representatives in Alabama from government, industry and education have shown an interest in establishing a PK-20 (pre-kindergarten through college) council.

Gregory Fitch, executive director of the Commission on Higher Education, is a strong supporter of such councils, having worked with one when he was commissioner of education in Idaho.

"Combining the strengths of our educational system with industry's needs will pay huge dividends in the future," he said in a news release from the commission. The potential is surely there.

The object would be to help the state reach consensus on how to improve education and to work to establish a seamless coordination from pre-school to higher education. The council would promote programs and curriculum improvements that could better prepare students for the workforce needs of industry.

Alabama has been fortunate in recent years to attract manufacturing and service industry investments that are shoring up

the state's economy. Last year alone, Alabama saw more than 24,000 new jobs. Mobile and Baldwin County's future includes the massive ThyssenKrupp steel plant, the huge Northrop Grumman-EADS aircraft assembly facility, a motorsports complex in Prichard and Saraland, new tourism development and more.

Yet one of the state's biggest challenges will be to provide the educated, trained workforce sought for the thousands of new jobs being created.

Forty-one other states have responded to the need for improved education by creating PK-20 councils or similar organizations. Some are official state entities; others are independent operations. Plans for such a council in Alabama are in their infancy. Consequently, much is still unknown about how the council would be structured, who would have a seat on it, and what responsibilities and authority it would have. Councils in other states, though, include representatives from the business community, educators, legislators, and parents. Most state councils have advisory roles.

The idea holds promise, though much will depend on how it is structured and what role it is given. Alabama doesn't need a council that churns out reports and recommendations that are never listened to. It needs a credible, nonpartisan council that can help Alabama reach consensus about how best to improve our schools, colleges and universities.