Education said key to economy

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LAFAYETTE — Tennessee Gov. Lamar Alexander said here Monday that improvements in education were the key to boosting the economy in his state.

Alexander told approximately 600 delegates of the Southern Industrial Development Council that teachers' pay has been increased 77 percent in recent years. A merit pay plan and keeping schools open year-round also have led to advances in Tennessee's educational system, he said.

Teacher organizations fought the merit pay plan, but the program has been used successfully in Tennessee for three years, and 27 other states have been in the Volunteer State.

The state also has attracted domestic companies. The largest private investment in U.S. history, General Motors Saturn Auto Plant near Nashville, will require 400 suppliers of goods and services, Alexander said.

He said Tennessee's central location helped attract new industry.

Tennessee is building 150 miles of interstate highway without federal aid, he said, and the state has the lowest per capita tax rate in the South.

He also said a right-to-work law has helped make Tennessee attractive to business.

The state also has been successful at marketing its attributes and setting goals, he said.

"If you want better schools, you can have them. If you want more jobs, you can have them."

He said the state has had to grapple with its inferiority complex.

"There's always somebody in Washington putting out a report saying we're worse in something," he said. "We're not, or we wouldn't still be living here."

Alexander said Tennessee loses 200,000 jobs a year, and new industry must be found to replace those jobs.

He also said a high value should be placed on the environment.

"We need to protect our natural beauty."