Every Georgian has a stake in our state’s manufacturing sector. Not only is manufacturing one of the cornerstones of the U.S. economy, it also accounts for more than 90 percent of Georgia’s exports. Making things and getting them to the customer has a multiplier effect, directly and indirectly creating hundreds of thousands of jobs and impacting communities across the state.

Through the combined efforts of many, we have recently seen a streak of successes in Georgia. Just recently, Baxter International Inc. held a groundbreaking for a high-tech pharmaceutical facility near Covington, and Starbucks broke ground for a food processing facility in Augusta. Last spring, Caterpillar began construction on a manufacturing plant near Athens. In Elberton, Hailo USA is investing $10 million and is projected to create 200 jobs over the next four years, and in Dalton, Mohawk Industries has announced it will hire 500 workers for an expanded facility.

This isn’t your grandfather’s manufacturing we’re talking about.

Georgia is particularly strong in advanced manufacturing sectors such as aerospace and automotive, both part of the state’s strategic industry focus. Industry giants like Lockheed-Marietta, Boeing and Gulfstream are part of our corporate aerospace community. Georgia’s automotive industry began a century ago and has grown to include companies such as Kia, Toyota Industries, Pirelli Tire, Tenneco and Johnson Controls.

The state’s successes are reflected in one particular positive trend, noted by the recent 2012 Georgia Manufacturing Survey. For the first time since researchers have tracked this statistic, more Georgia companies have had work in-sourced to them from outside the state than have lost work to other states and countries.

This success is not happenstance, but occurred through a series of strategic, targeted initiatives to provide the best possible environment for industry. Recently the public-private Georgia Competitiveness Initiative, created by Gov. Nathan Deal to guide the state’s economic development strategy, identified even more ways to enhance the business climate for manufacturers.

One priority is leveraging partnerships and advancing strategy to create an innovation ecosystem that supports the existing manufacturing sector and attracts new operations. The Georgia Department of Economic Development is partnering with other state agencies, the Governor’s Office, business, research universities such as the Georgia Institute of Technology and the state’s technical college system to attract, equip and support manufacturers of all sizes. One such program is the Georgia Center of Innovation for Advanced Manufacturing, which provides expertise and connections to help the state’s companies and strategic industries solve problems, grow quickly and compete globally.

We’re also growing high-quality manufacturing by connecting companies to a talented work force; easing the process of commercialization for researchers, entrepreneurs and small businesses with high potential; and creating trade opportunities through an award-winning partnership between the state, the federal government and the private sector.

Especially key to our success in manufacturing now and in the future is our ability to provide a skilled and competent work force. Georgia Quick Start, the top-ranked program of its kind in the
nation, is a tremendous success story that gives Georgia a competitive advantage for manufacturing. Part of the Technical College System of Georgia, Quick Start provides customized work-force training and has provided a pipeline of 750,000 skilled workers over the past 45 years.

Our schools and academic institutions also play a major role in preparing expert scientists, engineers and other leaders to help our nation remain a leader in advanced manufacturing. Practically speaking, if we can engage students early on to enter science, technology, engineering and math, or STEM fields, they will catch a vision of the exciting career opportunities. Most young people do not know that two-thirds of scientists and engineers in the U.S. are employed in manufacturing, and that manufacturing contributes disproportionately to U.S. innovation.

Georgia Tech and other academic institutions will also leverage federal investments in research and other programs to keep Georgia on the leading edge of advanced manufacturing. It’s up to us to inspire the next generation of manufacturers through educational programs delivered to high school students. We also provide a statewide network to support industry through the Georgia Manufacturing Extension Partnership, part of a series of programs supported by the Georgia Tech Enterprise Innovation Institute.

Together, the economic development community and Georgia’s universities are partnering to equip the state’s advanced manufacturers with the competitive tools they need to thrive in the global marketplace. We are committed to accelerating business growth.

We will continue to build and strengthen our innovation ecosystem, partnering to grow manufacturing and other industries here in Georgia. This will ultimately translate into more and better jobs, economic strength and a better Georgia today and for generations to come.

*This editorial was jointly authored by Chris Cummiskey, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Economic Development, and G. P. "Bud" Peterson, president of Georgia Tech.*