

Where New York's jobs will be

By John Twomey AND F. Michael Tucker
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As New York readies itself to rise from the national recession, our state and federal leaders must look ahead to the next generation of industries -- and the jobs that are going to matter the most.

"New York's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs," a new report from the Skills2Compete-New York campaign led by the New York Association of Training and Employment Professionals and the New York City Department of Small Business Services, predicts that middle-skills jobs will account for nearly one million job openings by 2018. This represents some 40 percent of all job openings across the state.

Preparation for middle-skill jobs in New York has not kept up with growing demand. With an increasingly hostile federal funding environment, the state faces a "middle-skills gap" that could severely limit the potential for full economic recovery.

"Middle-skill" jobs account for the largest share of jobs in New York today. This category, which requires more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree, includes such well-paying professions as dental hygienists, aircraft mechanics and IT specialists.

These openings signal opportunities to boost the Empire State's economic competitiveness, but many New Yorkers do not have the proper education and skills to fill these positions.

Albany and the surrounding region are experiencing firsthand the impact of this shortage. The Greater Capital Region Workforce Investment Boards have been working throughout our 11-county region with more than 400 business, education and training partners to coordinate regional workforce needs.

These boards, a product of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act, were created as part of a network to connect employees and job seekers. They fund classroom and on-the-job training, youth programs and other services. The Center for Economic Growth has partnered with the boards to promote middle-skill job preparation.

However, given the graying of the region's workforce and the demand for these workers, more needs to be done.

The Skills2Compete-New York campaign is calling on state leaders to embrace a strong vision to prepare the state's workforce for the jobs of the future. Every New Yorker should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school -- leading to a vocational credential, industry certification or the first two years of college -- to be pursued at whatever point and pace makes sense for individual workers and industries.

This is a national goal, too. President Barack Obama has challenged every American to achieve some level of postsecondary education or job training to prepare America for a "21st-century global economy." He also has praised the work of community colleges in partnership with community organizations.

Yet, his proposed 2012 budget includes an 8 percent reduction in federal support for workforce training. The House voted last month to eliminate federal workforce training altogether.

Skills2Compete calls on state leaders to support partnerships among employers, education and workforce stakeholders that ensure postsecondary, technical and vocational programs are aligned with the needs of regional industries. This supports Gov. Andrew Cuomo's priority to focus training on "building the skills of employees for the types of jobs where employers need more workers."

Policies that provide pathways for adult workers to attain critical skills and training more quickly and inexpensively while balancing their work and family obligations are urgently needed.

By coordinating the needs of employers with the work of education and workforce development stakeholders, New York can maximize the return on its investments without putting additional strain on the state budget.

New York's federal policymakers need to take a stand in Washington.

As businesses, labor, educators, advocates and community-based organizations work together to see this through, our state and federal policymakers also must step in with strong leadership and commitment to ensure that the Empire State has the middle-skill workforce it

needs to recover and thrive.

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