

# Morning Sentinel

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## Middle-skill jobs still compose half of all Maine work

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The conventional wisdom regarding post-secondary education and career preparation has emphasized high-skills/degree-specific programs rather than technical skills development leading to a post-secondary degree, or certification.

This has created a perception that the labor market is composed of only low-skilled and very highly skilled jobs, with a hollowing out of the middle.

In November 2007, a national, non-partisan campaign sponsored by The Workforce Alliance, and endorsed by business partners like the National Association of Manufacturers, issued a report titled "America's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs." The report clearly refutes that very narrow characterization of the workforce.

Authored by economists Harry Holzer and Robert Lerman, the report argues that middle-skill jobs -- those that require more than high school but less than a four-year degree -- continue to make up nearly half of all jobs today. Yet most policymakers and politicians at both the state and national levels continue to overlook these jobs, and the investments in workforce education and training required to fill them in the coming decade.

Sadly, Maine, like many other New England states, appears to be following the conventional wisdom on this issue. Changing that conventional wisdom is a matter of vital importance regarding the future prosperity of Maine. It's of crucial importance to workforce development and consequently, the economic growth of our state.

Organizations in Maine, like the Manufacturers Association of Maine, recognize that abundant opportunities exist in the state for those pursuing a career in the skilled trades. Cianbro Corp. will require about 400 skilled workers for their new module facility in Brewer, for example.

Current world economic conditions seem to indicate that demands for American exports will be on the increase, as pressure from cheap foreign imports has begun to decrease. Maine and other regional economies throughout the United States could benefit from this.

Will we be able to take advantage of these possible opportunities? Pre-serving (much less growing) Maine's infrastructure depends on these jobs.

Currently, America's workforce education priority is targeted toward filling one in four American jobs that require four-year or advanced college degrees. According to Holzer and Lerman, a more comprehensive approach is required, one that addresses the demands of nearly 50 percent of U.S. jobs, jobs that are classified as middle-skill jobs that require more than high school, but less than a four-year degree.

Middle-skill jobs currently experiencing shortages include construction workers and inspectors, medical technicians, nurses, firefighter/EMTs, and other positions that are crucial to Maine's, as well as the nation's infrastructure, health and quality of life.

In central and western Maine, our strategic workforce plan for the next two years is clearly focused on these middle-skill jobs that the report discusses. Our board is concerned that Maine's education/training seems to focus only on the attainment of a four-year degree. Continuing this policy will result in lost jobs and productivity shortfalls for the foreseeable future. It also affects Maine's ability to support expansion of the kind of business crucial to its economic prosperity.

Jim Baumer is director of business services for the Central/Western ME Workforce Investment Board, a non-profit organization involved in developing public/private partnerships, focused on promoting workforce opportunities and furthering Maine's economic prosperity.