

October 16, 2009

## Training for the future

### Must meet need for middle-skill jobs

When it comes to education, much of the discussion is focused on two ends of the spectrum: Preventing teens from dropping out of high school and encouraging more people to earn college degrees.

Often ignored is the need to provide training for jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year degree.

Such "middle-skill" positions likely are the key to sustaining a strong middle class in the years ahead.

Michigan's economy was built largely on the proliferation of good-paying blue-collar jobs that required minimal education. But those jobs are disappearing.

Future job growth is expected to be greatest in areas such as medical technology, skilled trades, advanced manufacturing, environmental sciences and other areas that require training beyond high school but not necessarily a bachelor's or graduate degree.

A new study released this week by The Workforce Alliance and the Skills2Compete-Michigan campaign projects 650,000 "middle-skill" job openings in the state by 2016. That represents about 46 percent of all job openings in that period, whereas low-skill jobs will account for about 24 percent and high-skill jobs about 30 percent.

According to the study, Michigan was experiencing shortages of middle-skill workers in various industries prior to the current recession, with about 51 percent of all jobs classified as middle skill but only 46 percent of Michigan workers qualified to hold them.

Clearly we must provide the education necessary to fill these positions in the coming years. We are fortunate in the Battle Creek area to have institutions such as the Calhoun Area Career Center, Kellogg Community College and KCC's Regional Manufacturing Technology Center already focusing much of their attention on preparing students for the middle-skill work force. We must continue to support and expand such educational endeavors.

We don't dispute the need to boost high school graduation rates when nearly one in four students is dropping out of school before obtaining a diploma. Nor can anyone argue with the value of a college degree in helping enhance lifetime earnings.

But it is equally important that we devote resources to training people to fill middle-skill positions that can provide satisfying careers and comfortable lifestyles.

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