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Demand outstrips supply for middle-skill workers



Angela Peterson

Joseph Villarrea, 14, an eighth-grader from Trowbridge Street Elementary School, works on an electrical practice board Wednesday as part of the Construction Career Academy Recruitment Fair at Bay View High School.

Report warns of shortages of trained workers

By Joel Dresang of the Journal Sentinel

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Angela Peterson

Xena Gutierrez, 13, tests a light bulb with the help of Peter Schutten, 17, a Building, Architecture and Technology Leadership Academy student from

The scene at Bay View High School Wednesday provided a backdrop to research showing a growing need in Wisconsin for middle-skill workers with more than a high school diploma and less than a bachelor's degree.

A report being released Thursday by The Workforce Alliance and the Skills2Compete-Wisconsin campaign says 54% of Wisconsin's current jobs and 46% of the projected needs are in middle-skill occupations such as registered nurses, customer service representatives and truck drivers.

However, only 46% of Wisconsin's workers have middle-skill training. And while the recession has thrown a wrench in short-term hiring outlooks, expectations of worker shortages are raising concerns - even in the beleaguered manufacturing and construction industries.

"Right now we're seeing a lot of people on the bench. But in five years, those industries are going to be empty, and we're going to have lots of jobs and not enough people to do them," said Sarah White, a senior associate at the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, part of the multi-agency campaign to raise awareness of middle-skill training.

Bay View High School. The career fair was held by Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee.

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At Bay View High School, the [Associated General Contractors of Greater Milwaukee](#) sponsored a recruitment fair for about 200 [Milwaukee Public Schools](#) students, mostly fifth- and eighth-graders, to expose them to such middle-skill careers as carpentry and welding.

"The middle skills are really underappreciated," said Mike Fabishak, chief executive officer of the contractors association. "So many people, characteristically driven by their parents, have been sort of college-oriented without the appreciation that one out of two kids don't even graduate."

In one classroom, Douglas Canady, from the [Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/BIG STEP](#) program, was pantomiming a painter and explaining how apprenticeship programs combine education, hands-on training and work.

"We're going to pay you to go to school and do this," Canady said, pretending he was guiding a brush up and down, his tongue stuck out in mock concentration.

"We're talking about careers," Canady told the students. "Get your chicken jobs in high school."

But even if more young people enter building trades and other technical occupations requiring postsecondary training short of a four-year degree, it wouldn't be enough to fill the gap between the demand and supply of middle skills in Wisconsin, according to the report. About two-thirds of Wisconsin's workforce in 2020 will be workers who already were working in 2005.

More training for adults

Because of that, more middle-skill training needs to be directed to working adults, the report says, which is happening increasingly at Wisconsin's technical colleges.

For instance, the U.S. Department of Education recently announced a grant to help fund a Center for Dislocated Workers and Adult Learning at [Madison Area Technical College](#). The center is developing graduated career programs through which low-income and unemployed workers can attain occupational certificates and then one- and two-year degrees, advancing their opportunities while working in their fields.

Ed Clarke, director for grants and special projects at the Madison campus, called the program "career change, in a doable way."

The [Wisconsin Technical College System](#) and the state [Department of Workforce Development](#) are collaborating on similar "career pathways" throughout the state's education and training system.

Dan Clancy, president of the technical college system, applauded the timing of the report.

Because of the economy, he said, many Wisconsin residents already are increasing investments in education and training that's expected to have high demand in years to come.

"Our enrollments are up tremendously because people are worried about the future," Clancy said, "and they understand that they need more training to be employed in the jobs of the future."