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Archive | Feedback | 

Smart path to economic recovery - invest in skills

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The authors, members of the California EDGE (Education, Diversity and Growth in the Economy) Campaign, collaborated on a report, "California's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs." To read the report, go to links.sfgate.com/ZIQL.

Despite recent good news on Wall Street, economic recovery might not end the trouble on the employment front. Unemployment remains higher than 12 percent statewide (it is nearly three times that in some rural counties), and even when employers return to robust hiring, too many Californians still will not be able to secure a job that pays a family-supporting wage.

That is in large part because many good jobs in California require skills beyond a high school diploma, and too few Californians have the skills employers will need. If we are to build a truly sustained and sustainable economic recovery that strengthens our businesses, workers and communities, we must understand employers' future demands for skills and invest in effective training that will prepare more workers to meet them.

Without access to education and training opportunities, California's workers and our communities could be cut off from a strong economic recovery. Investments we make now - in training laid-off workers, workers in low-wage jobs, and young adults just entering the labor market, re-skilling the workforce for a changing economy - mean more Californians earning high wages, supporting their families and contributing to our state's long-term growth. We are calling for a new vision for how we invest our resources in California's workforce.

We call on all Californians, their businesses, their educational institutions and their elected representatives to protect career education and training from further spending cuts, boost investment in high-quality training and partnerships and ensure every California worker has access to the equivalent of up to two years of education or training past high school.

Not all workers need to enroll in a bachelor's degree program to gain good employment. In fact, the largest share of jobs in California today - about 49 percent - and the largest share of future job openings require more than a high school diploma but not necessarily a bachelor's degree. These are high-wage, high-skill jobs like operating engineers, electricians, laborers, plumbers, other construction craftspeople, firefighters, truck drivers, nurses, medical and laboratory technicians, machinists and mechanics - to name just a few. Jobs like these are the backbone of our economy, are

the foundation of the new green economy, are difficult to export and are the on-ramp to the middle class for many Californians.

We call these "middle-skill" jobs because of the level of education required. But we are talking about highly skilled occupations that offer good wages and require high-quality, intensive, longer-term training. Workers can prepare for these jobs at community colleges, through union apprenticeship programs and through labor-management training partnerships that combine learning with earning. Bridge programs through community colleges, local workforce investment boards and one-stop career centers, adult schools and community-based institutions can help those who lack basic skills or face significant barriers to employment prepare to enter these career paths to the middle class.

Though not a silver bullet, training for skilled jobs is arguably the most effective and important way to strengthen and stabilize California's communities, which have been undermined by recent loss of jobs and growing opportunity gaps. Education is the biggest determinant of employment prospects in times of economic stress; unemployment for those with less than a high school diploma was 15.5 percent in September, compared to 9 percent for those with a some college.

Given demographic change and historic patterns of exclusion, it is critical that we focus on inclusion and equity: Unemployment rates for the state's Latinos and African Americans were 3.4 and 4.6 percentage points higher than that of whites in August, and increasing educational attainment among these populations is essential to building stronger communities all around the state. However, recent state budget cuts are crippling community colleges, adult schools and high school career technical programs. Classes are being cut and career technical programs scaled back or eliminated. And the situation is expected to get worse over the next couple of years as more state cuts are expected and federal stimulus support is exhausted.

Even before the recession, many employers reported that Baby Boomer retirements would intensify already existing shortages of skills in crucial industries like health care, construction and advanced manufacturing. These shortages will return when the recession has ended, and the state will miss its chance to prepare younger workers for these well-paying careers unless we act now to invest in Californians' skills.

Our coalition of leaders in labor, business, community colleges, workforce development and the community collaborated on a report, "California's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs." The report calls for every California worker to have access to the equivalent of up to two years of education or training past high school leading to a career technical credential, industry certification, an associate degree or transfer to a baccalaureate program. Achieving this ambitious goal in an era of budget reductions will not be easy. It will require Californians to tell their local colleges and public officials how important it is to preserve career training programs despite extremely challenging fiscal situations. We must also push the Legislature and the governor to step up to this challenge by prioritizing funding for education and training and increasing our investment in the future.




At the same time, aligning program goals and linking funding streams at the state and local levels can make our spending more effective. We should encourage more innovative state partnerships - like the \$27 million California Clean Energy Workforce Training Program - that merge funding from different sources and connect workers directly to good jobs through union apprenticeship and other industry training programs. There are also many examples of successful regional workforce education partnerships, such as the Career Advancement Academies in our community colleges.

This is a challenging time to make new investments, but the investments we make now in California's workers will help shape our state's long-term prosperity.

This article has been changed since it appeared in the print edition.

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