

Worker shortage looming

Alliance highlights middle-skill jobs

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Washington will be short 417,000 nurses, machinists, construction specialists and other skilled workers within a decade if training programs are not stepped up, says a new report from the Workforce Alliance, which includes labor, industry and educator groups.

Middle-skill jobs that require more than a high school diploma but less than a four-year college degree have been neglected even though they constitute half of all jobs and pay well, alliance members said.

Beth Thew, secretary-treasurer of the Spokane Regional Labor Council, said students drop out of high school because they do not see the benefits of graduating without any hope of going to college, yet with as little as six months of additional training they could earn much higher incomes in jobs less vulnerable to outsourcing.

"There's more security," she said, saying it's a myth that college offers the only path to a good job.

Mark Mattke, work force strategy and planning director for the Spokane Area Workforce Development Council, said many trades pay between \$30,000 and \$40,000 a year to start, plus good benefits.

He said the alliance is bringing attention to what the study calls "forgotten" jobs because, as Washington community colleges and other work force training centers strain to meet demand for classes, potential budget cuts might shut out more students.

Meanwhile, Mattke said, the council and other organizations are reaching out to middle and high school students with programs like "Pizza, Pop and Power Tools" to get them interested in skilled trades. "This is definitely not the place to look for cost savings," he said.

The report notes Gov. Chris Gregoire added \$6.5 million to the budget earlier this year to expand training programs, but it says more money will be needed. All workers should have access to two years of post-high school training, the report says.

General Plastics Vice President Eric Hahn said employees are the Tacoma company's most valuable asset. With profit-sharing, he said, they can double their base salary.

But too many potential job candidates cannot pass a basic math test, he said. Growth at his company and many others will be constrained if the pool of educated employees cannot be expanded, he said.

"Skilled workers are always going to be in demand," Hahn said. "Where are these worker•

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