

Top Story

Skilled labor jobs needed in the south

By Ray Whiteside
Paxton News Bureau

Published: Friday, December 2, 2011 12:07 PM CST

There are more skilled-labor jobs available in the American South than other jobs requiring a traditional 4-year college degree, a 2011 study says.

The National Skills Coalition (NKS) found that 51 percent of all jobs in the South fall into the "middle-skills" category, requiring education and training beyond high school but less than a 4-year degree. Highly skilled jobs make up 29 percent of the job market; low-skill occupations make up 20 percent.

NKS released the study in August during the Southern Governors Association (SGA) meeting in Asheville, N.C. The report went so far as to say the South has a shortage of workers to fill middle-skills jobs such as medical technicians and computer support workers.

SGA Speaker James Wiseman of Toyota Motors Corp. told governors his company struggles to find qualified electricians, maintenance workers and tool and die technicians — jobs that often pay \$50,000-75,000 a year. The South's average among all jobs for annual full-time pay is \$38,900, the report says.

Area technical centers including Black River Technical College (BRTC) with campuses in Pocahontas and Paragould and the Northeast Arkansas Career and Technical Center (NEACTC) in Jonesboro are reporting increased participation in their programs. Representatives said some students choose trade schools because they do not want to incur a large amount of debt in the form of student loans by attending 4-year colleges.

"Enrollment is and has been high for us in recent years," Angie Caldwell, vice president of technical education at BRTC, said. "And our graduates are not having trouble finding jobs. A lot of employers contact us and say 'when will you have someone trained in some type of skill' — that they need to hire someone."

Forty-eight percent of BRTC students are enrolled in one of its technical programs. The school offers an associate of applied science degree in aviation maintenance, fire science, general technology and industrial maintenance technology; and technical certificates in auto collision repair, automotive services technology (electrical engine), aviation maintenance technology, fire science, welding, automotive service technology (powertrain systems), industrial electricity and machine shop.

The NKS study looked at 16 southern states plus Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands. It shows that 52 percent of employers in 2011 reported difficulty filling specific jobs within their operations, compared with 14 percent just a year earlier.

Among those rising fastest were heating and air conditioning technicians, dental assistants, environmental engineering technicians, firefighters and medical technologists.

NEACTC is for high school students and is in the back of Jonesboro High School. It serves students from Craighead, Greene, Lawrence and Poinsett counties.

"We provide training programs for students who wish to use their acquired skills and knowledge for entry into the labor market immediately upon graduation, or to enhance the education of those students choosing to pursue a post-secondary education," the school's mission statement says.

The center offers the following courses: Advertising and Graphic Design, Auto Collision, Auto Service, Culinary Arts, Precision Manufacturing and Machining, Drafting and Design, Electronics, Horticulture, Internship and HVACR.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.