

Middle-skill employees needed, Southern governors told

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Southern governors were told last weekend that the South lacks workers at the "middle-skill" level, such as electricians, tool and die makers and nursing aides.

The National Skills Coalition, formerly called Workforce Alliance, released its report Aug. 21 on the final day of the Southern Governors' Association 2011 Annual Meeting in Asheville, N.C. Top executives from 16 Southern states and two territories, including Florida Gov. Rick Scott, attended the three-day meeting at the Grove Park Inn.

Jobs creation was the major focus of the meeting. While the South leads the country in new businesses and has 73 of the nation's 200 research universities, it follows other regions of the country in business investment.

The National Skills Coalition report said middle-skill jobs, which require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree, featured prominently among the top 10 "hardest to fill" jobs of 2011. Skilled trades topped the list, according to a 2011 Manpower survey.

These middle-skill jobs account for 51 percent of the South's jobs today and will account for 44 percent of job openings in the next decade, making them the engine of the American South's economy.

Only 43 percent of the region's workers, however, are trained to the middle-skill level, creating a gap that threatens to undermine economic growth and innovation efforts.

One of the panelists presenting the report was Toyota Motors Group Vice President James Wiseman. He said that contrary to popular belief, manufacturing is not dying in this country and his company is struggling to find people with skills to build new types of machinery.

"How many people want their kids to grow up and be a tool and dye maker or a skilled electrician in a factory? Not many. But if you asked how many wanted their kids to be doctors, bankers or lawyers, of course everybody raises their hand," he said, according to the Asheville Citizen-Times.

Wiseman said many of the manufacturing jobs pay between \$50,000 and \$75,000, without requiring a four-year degree.

The answer, he said, is working more closely with employers and educators to make sure students have needed skills and that they are flexible enough to learn new ones.

According to the report, 50 percent of Florida workers are middle-skill employees. Between 1995 and 2010, the state saw an increase in residents with educational attainment at the high-skill level, while the number of residents with middle- and low-skill education levels decreased.

The state's projected education trends for the next 15 years suggest that while there will be a very slight up tick in middle-skill educational attainment, middle-skill worker shortages will continue. The shortage will uniquely affect innovative industries such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy and information technology.

The reason why, the report says, is that over two-thirds of the people who will be in the state's work force in the year 2025 were already working adults in 2010 — long past the traditional high school-to-

college pipeline.

To deal with the shortage, the NSC encourages Florida and other states to convene industry leaders in a partnership strategy targeting open middle-skill positions to make sure training dollars go toward in-demand credentials aligned with real jobs.

"Identify your state's top 10 demand industries. Convene industry leaders and ask them to identify the key middle-skill occupations for which they cannot find trained workers. Set specific targets for filling those priority occupations," the report says.

"Investments in an innovation economy will pay off only if a base of middle-skilled talent is in place to meet projected demand for skills in new innovation industries."

States should expand access to "career pathways" in work force education and training for all workers by better aligning adult basic education, job training and higher education systems to create pathways to postsecondary educational credentials for people while they continue to work and support their families.

The report says the South will rely on employers, community colleges, apprenticeship programs, nonprofit community-based training organizations and private career schools to provide the training.

"In the current fiscal climate it is more important than ever for states to allocate education and training resources to achieve better outcomes for workers, industries, and the economy as a whole," the report said.

The full report is available at the NSC website, <http://nationalskillscoalition.org>.