

Lack of the right skills prevents full employment (editorial)

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By Press-Register Editorial Board



IN HIS campaign to grow jobs in Alabama and reduce 10 percent unemployment, Gov. Robert Bentley could use all the help he can get.

The latest food for thought comes from a report by the National Skills Coalition, released during the Southern Governors Association meeting in Asheville, N.C. The report reveals a surprising gap between the skills that Southern employers need compared with the skills that Southern workers have.

A whopping 51 percent of all jobs in the South, the report says, fall into the "middle-skills" category — that is, requiring training beyond high school but short of a four-year degree. Yet only 43 percent of the region's workers are trained to that particular level, it said.

In Alabama, specifically, the gap is similar. Middle-skill jobs accounted for 56 percent of all jobs, while middle-skill workers made up only 49 percent of the labor market.

The lesson for states like Alabama is that failing to provide the workforce to fill these jobs can hinder economic growth and stymie innovation — exactly what we don't want to happen when the economy is struggling.

The remedy may be to promote training and education programs at the two-year college level to fill the gap. This will have to include re-training of those already working because, according to the report, they will still make up two-thirds of the workforce in 2025.

Among the hardest-to-fill jobs in the region, for instance, are heating and air conditioning technicians, dental hygienists, environmental engineering technicians, firefighters and medical technologists. Others include electricians and tool-and-die technicians, positions that can bring salaries of \$50,000 to \$75,000 a year in some parts of the region.

Naturally, there will continue to be jobs for the higher skilled and lower skilled, just not to the extent previously believed.

The report may pose a paradigm shift for some Southern families who assume that the best route to employment is through a four-year degree. As a result of that line of thinking, many students take on large loans to cover their education and spend

years struggling to repay the debt.

Is the borrowing going to be worth the cost in the future? Maybe, but not for everyone.

Gov. Bentley, when he ran for office, pledged not to take a salary until the state reaches full employment, defined as 5.2 percent recorded unemployment. His plan to accomplish this feat includes, among other things, giving new and existing industries a portion of income taxes paid by new workers for capital improvements.

In the meantime, why not also ensure that companies have the kind of skilled workers that they want to hire, right here in Alabama? It would make a perfect topic for his next "Road to Economic Recovery" tour.

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