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Opinion: Training our Workers to Succeed – Today and Tomorrow

Sen. Katherine Clark on "middle-skills" job training.

Massachusetts has lost one third of its manufacturing jobs since 1990, and yet it has become conventional wisdom that the key to our competitive growth is increasing highly paid jobs performed by college graduates. But as the 2010 report "Massachusetts Forgotten Middle Skill Jobs" demonstrates, it is actually "middle skills" occupations, jobs that require more than a high school diploma but not a four-year degree, that make up the largest segment of job growth nationally and here in Massachusetts.

Middle skill jobs represent 44 percent of all jobs in the Commonwealth and are predicted to grow with demand in sectors like healthcare, biotechnology, renewable energy, information technology and high-tech manufacturing. As the "Middle Skills" report shows, Massachusetts has underinvested in vocational and technical education and public education. Home to some of the world's leading colleges and universities, Massachusetts ranks only 47th in investment in public education.

In Governor Patrick's state of the state address, he emphasized the importance of preparing our workforce for middle skill jobs and using our community college system to better train and educate people to meet the growing demand. The Governor stated that currently there are 120,000 unfilled middle skills positions in Massachusetts that, if filled, would halve our unemployment rate.

I have co-sponsored legislation aimed at increasing the number of workers in the Commonwealth with middle-skills credentials through job training and education. This legislation acknowledges that we must focus both on the next generation of workers coming out of high school and those adults currently in the workforce or looking for work who need new skills now.

This bill would establish five to seven Regional Skills Academies, geographic clusters of community colleges, vocational-technical high schools, community-based organizations and employers that are aligned to the Commonwealth's economic development strategy. This focus on increasing the number of Massachusetts residents ready to work in the fastest-growing sectors of our economy will be a critical part of our recovery and economic strength in the decades to come.

In addition, it would establish a middle-skills council to assess the existing skills gaps and make recommendations to address them with programs that support the success of working adults and other non-traditional students through education, training and job placement.

I look forward to working with my colleagues, the Governor, our educational institutions, and our businesses to advance comprehensive legislation that effectively prepares our students and our workforce to succeed in the high-quality, well-paying jobs of today and the future.