

Opinion

Minnesota manufacturers need more workers with more skills

By Erick Ajax

Updated: 01/14/2009 07:19:23 PM CST

Gov. Tim Pawlenty and Minnesota legislators face urgent challenges this legislative session. Precision manufacturing companies and other Minnesota industries are deeply concerned about the lack of workers with the skills we need for continued growth. We need government action that addresses Minnesota's unemployment problem and its skills problem.

Education is the key to economic security: Manufacturing is the state's largest industry. It accounts for 13 percent of all Minnesota jobs and 11 percent of job vacancies, second only to health care. Today's marketplace places a premium on what have traditionally been Minnesota's competitive advantages: innovation, automation, customization and customer service.

Minnesota manufacturing companies like mine and other businesses and industries in our state benefited from the "Minnesota Miracle" of 1971, which created a system of public education second to none. That system produced the vast majority of Minnesota's current manufacturing workers, many of whom are now in their third and fourth decades of steady employment with good wages and benefits.

Over the next decade, those workers will retire. Demographically, there are fewer workers available to replace them. And far too few are prepared for middle-skill jobs, which require more than high school but less than a four-year degree.

Graduation and work-readiness are unacceptably low: In 2007, 1.2 million teens in this country failed to graduate from high school.

Unemployment rates for men and women who were not in school and did not have a high school diploma were 15.7 percent and 19 percent, respectively. Remember, those statistics are for a period when overall unemployment was less than 5 percent.

Today's 18-year-old dropout will earn \$260,000 less over a lifetime and contribute \$60,000 less in federal and state income taxes — wages and tax revenue that are desperately needed to rebuild our economy.

Innovative programs need continued support: While the problem is severe, there is good news to report. Minnesota's educators and employers have been partnering to create innovative and cost-effective programs.

The Dunwoody Academy, a charter high school, is providing several hundred inner-city youths with rigorous academic preparation plus work skills in manufacturing, automotive re-pair, health care and construction trades.

The M-Powered program has graduated more than 300 entry-level manufacturing workers, who received both classroom and paid on-the-job training. The M-Powered program won a Department of Labor collaboration award for workforce development.

At the University of Minnesota, Ramp-up to Readiness is developing a new paradigm for helping high-school students focus on the coursework, experience and finances needed to get into college and the skills needed to succeed once they're there.

21st-century skills guarantee: These programs are an excellent beginning, but there is much more to be done to enhance the competitiveness of the manufacturing workforce.

We need to expand programs such as those listed above that develop skills in under-represented students. The M-Powered program, which began at Hennepin Technical College, is highly portable, and it could expand to each of six Minnesota regions to reach a total of 600 students by 2012. The Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system needs continued funding for its two Centers of Excellence in Manufacturing and Engineering, which provide a continuum of skills from entry-level to advanced engineering and research.

We need to increase customized skills development for small manufacturing and engineering firms. Two-thirds of the U.S. workers for the year 2020 are already in the workforce today. Employers need workers with specific, often technical skills,

Leading Minnesota in students studying abroad.

MINNESOTA'S PRIVATE COLLEGES

More Facts ▶

and those skills are constantly evolving.

I hope that everyone who reads this will become familiar with Minnesota's innovative workforce development programs. I hope that many of my manufacturing colleagues will contact Pawlenty and their own elected officials to urge support for middle-skills development.

Implementation of workforce development strategies must not be delayed while our state deals with the current economic challenges. Our state will need workers who are freshly qualified to fill the skill gaps that existed before the downturn. Without them, we cannot get back on track.

Erick Ajax is a third-generation metalworker and co-owner of E.J. Ajax in Fridley.