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Guest column: Proposed program would train, place workers in high-tech jobs

By the Dayton Daily News | Friday, September 24, 2010, 05:51 PM

This commentary was written by Sherrod Brown, Ohio's junior U.S. senator, and James A. Leftwich, president of the Dayton Development Coalition.

From the legendary Wright brothers to General Motors to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, the Dayton area has been at the center of Ohio's manufacturing heritage and long history of innovation.

This innovation has been fueled by the region's skilled workforce. Lately, though, a disturbing trend has emerged.

While our state's unemployment rate decreased slightly in August, an unemployment rate of 10.1 percent still means that there are far too many Ohioans who are looking for work, but can't find it. Meanwhile, many Ohio employers are posting job notices, but are unable to find workers with the right training.

A 2006 study by the Wright State Center for Urban and Public Affairs identified 21,000 vacant private-sector jobs in a 10-county region, even as more than 26,000 people were unemployed. Since then, the workforce landscape has changed dramatically, but the skills mismatch remains a critical and growing problem.

Jobs in information technology, electrical and systems engineering, financial services and clinical lab science are

ABOUT A MATTER OF OPINION

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Ellen Belcher is the Dayton Daily News opinion pages editor. She writes about state

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going unfilled, and that has to be addressed.

The region gained several insights through the Wright State study. Among the most important is that our educational and training system must respond to the needs of business; increasing the number of graduates in high-tech fields fills — and also creates — jobs.

If we're going to attract the high-tech jobs of the 21st century, we need to ensure that our regional workforce has the right skills to fill them. That means doing a better job at aligning our workforce development programs with the needs of emerging industries.

Keeping Ohio on the road to economic recovery requires an innovative approach that engages all of our state's stakeholders: colleges and teachers, workers and unions and workforce development agencies. A one-size-fits-all strategy simply doesn't fit when it comes to solving Ohio's unemployment crisis.

That's why we're working to pass the "Strengthening Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success" (SECTORS) Act. This bipartisan piece of legislation supports the development of targeted workforce training programs to meet the specialized needs of regional emerging industries.

These training programs would be based at two-year colleges whose importance to our state's higher education system is growing by the day.

Under the SECTORS Act, local stakeholders— business and industry partners, unions, education and training providers, and workforce and development administrators — would partner to develop a targeted plan for that industry.

Such targeted plans would help ensure that local workers have access to critical training and workforce development programs to give them the new skills they need.

Already, our region is home to several SECTORS-style partnerships. Wright State University, for example, has responded to the region's logistics and supply-chain management needs by creating a master's program, and the Advanced Technical Intelligence Center (ATIC) has partnered with universities and the defense industry to meet the growing need for intelligence analysts and cybersecurity programs.

Other local organizations targeting plans for specific sectors include the Center of UAV Exploitation and the National Center for Medical Readiness in the fields of unmanned aerial vehicle research and development, and emergency preparedness.

Many regions across the country have experienced economic growth thanks to clusters of like-minded businesses that collaborate with local institutions.

Ohio has literally hundreds of thousands of smart, industrious workers looking for good-paying jobs. We have businesses in emerging industries across the state searching for skilled workers. The SECTORS Act will bring them together.



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