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## Educators, employers lament 'skills gap' hampering R.I. job-seekers

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By **Alex Kuffner**

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Brenda Dann-Messier, left, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Education, talks with Vanessa Cooley, Statewide CTE Administrator for the R.I. Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, at the Rhode Island Pathways to Prosperity Summit Monday at CCRI, Warwick. CCRI President Ray DiPasquale is in the background.

*The Providence Journal / Frieda Squires*

WARWICK — Since 2000, Lifespan has expanded its work force by 40 percent to more than 12,000 employees. And, even as the recession drags on, the Providence-based hospital group, the largest employer in the state, is continuing to add jobs.

Lifespan currently has 450 openings, said Brandon Melton, senior vice president of human resources at the company. But of that number, only nine do not require some sort of higher degree or post-secondary training. Lifespan has received tens of thousands of applications but is still struggling to find qualified workers.

"We have difficulty filling these positions with the kind of talented people that we look for here," Melton said.

Lifespan's situation is symptomatic of a skills gap that has developed over many years in Rhode Island and the rest of the country but has come into focus during the economic hard times. On Monday morning, about 70 people — educators, government bureaucrats, elected officials and business representatives — gathered at the Community College of Rhode Island to discuss a problem that is only expected to worsen unless deep changes are made to the national system of education.

In the keynote speech at the Rhode Island Pathways to Prosperity Summit, Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education Brenda Dann-Messier said that the technological revolution over the last generation has transformed the employment environment.

"Gone are the days of the well-paying job requiring low levels of

education," she said.

Dann-Messier, former president of the Dorcas Place adult-education center in Providence, told the room that the business sector, government and education system must work together to implement better training programs to prepare students for careers after they graduate. Addressing the challenge is not up to any one of those groups, she emphasized.

"Instead, it is a shared responsibility for all these sectors," she said. "We must break down our current silos and work collaboratively."

The catalyst for the summit was the release in February of a report from the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University that found a failure on a national level to adequately prepare teenagers and young adults for careers after high school. U.S. Rep. James R. Langevin, co-chairman of the Career and Technical Education Caucus in Congress, organized the event after being contacted by the authors of the report.

The report, titled "Pathways to Prosperity: Meeting the Challenge of Preparing Young Americans for the 21st Century," identified a gap between what is taught in school and the skills demanded by employers. Students are not prepared for good-paying jobs after high school, it says.

The problem is especially dire when it comes to so called "middle-skill" jobs that don't require a college degree, but do require some sort of post-secondary education, whether it be through a certificate program, an apprenticeship or coursework that leads to an associate's degree.

The recession has exacerbated the problem, with more and more jobs now requiring post-secondary training. They include jobs as teaching assistants or medical technicians, and positions in technical and computer support.

By 2019, 31 percent of the jobs in New England will require advanced training, while only 27 percent of the work force will be qualified to fill them, according to projections cited by Alicia Sasser Modestino, senior economist at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston's New England Public Policy Center.

"If firms can't find workers with the right mix of skills, then it's hard to grow the economy," she said. "If they can't find those workers here, then they are likely to move out of state."

State leaders have long known of a skills gap in Rhode Island and have been working to find solutions, said Ray Di Pasquale, CCRI president and state commissioner of higher education. But, he acknowledged, the state needs to do more to cater to student needs to keep them in school.

"We're not there, yet," he said. "We're figuring out how to do it."

He cited figures that demonstrate how only a small proportion of Rhode Island students earn higher degrees. For every 100 students who start high school, 73 graduate. Of those 73, 40 enroll in a college or community college. And of those 40, only 21 earn bachelor's or associate's degrees.

It's a pattern that must be reversed by giving students different options or pathways, he and others said.

"For far too long, our nation has been on a college-or-nothing path," said Andrew Cortes, director of Building Futures, a Providence program that trains workers for apprenticeships in the construction trades.

Lifespan is not the only Rhode Island company feeling the effects of the skills gap. Langevin said that he has heard similar complaints from other employers.

"It is so frustrating when we hear, 'Yes, we have jobs that we want to fill, but we can't find qualified people,' " the congressman said.

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