

## Editorials

### **Tell the candidates: don't forget to aim for the middle**

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The U.S. economy is producing only two kinds of jobs, say the headlines: on the one end, high-skilled jobs paying good wages, and on the other, low-skilled jobs, often low-paying and dead-end; with nothing in the middle. But that view of an absent middle tier just got turned on its head – and candidates in Illinois' Feb. 5 primary need to take note.

The national Skills2Compete campaign recently released a report showing that there is, in fact, a very robust tier of middle-skill jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree - with nearly half of all job openings between 2004 and 2014 in these occupations. The report found that many of these jobs pay family-supporting wages and could be the foundation of a revitalized economy, but they are going unfilled because there are not enough people trained with the right skills.

These observations aren't just seen nationally but also in Illinois; according to one analysis, half of all Illinois jobs in 2004 were middle-skill jobs. These are critical jobs in healthcare as well as skilled crafts jobs and technician jobs in emerging high-growth industries like clean energy. It's great news to hear Illinois can still be a state where people can find good-paying jobs in the future. But our public leaders also need to hear the other part of the message: we may not have enough workers with the right kinds of skills to sustain this growth in mid-skill jobs. We will not see a growing and thriving Illinois economy without a strong and skilled workforce, and that means helping more people - including youth, current workers, and the unemployed - access education and training. The Skills2Compete campaign believe that all of America's workers should be able to access up to two years of education or training beyond high school.

The leaders we are nominating for office need to find a way to support innovative strategies to put this goal within reach. One important step will be to reverse the disturbing trend of dis-investment in the education and training of our workforce. Proposed 2008 federal funding to train the Illinois workforce is almost \$30 million less than 2002 levels, and funding for programs that help lower-income adults access college are under threat.

Another important step will be to expand our nation's education policy discussion to include investments in preparing Illinoisans for middle-skill jobs that can grow a vibrant labor force.

Illinois' future depends on our response to these challenges. Candidates talking about short-term economic fixes need to take note.

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