

The trend: More jobs take training. The advice: Don't stop at high school

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LOWELL -- Local jobs experts say a new report only confirms the advice they've been giving all along: Get an education.

"There's fewer and fewer jobs available for people with only a high-school diploma," said Michael McQuaid, director of the Career Center of Lowell.

A report released last week by the National Skills Coalition finds that the largest portion of job openings projected for Massachusetts by 2016 are at the "middle-skill" level. These jobs require more than a high-school diploma, but less than a four-year college degree.

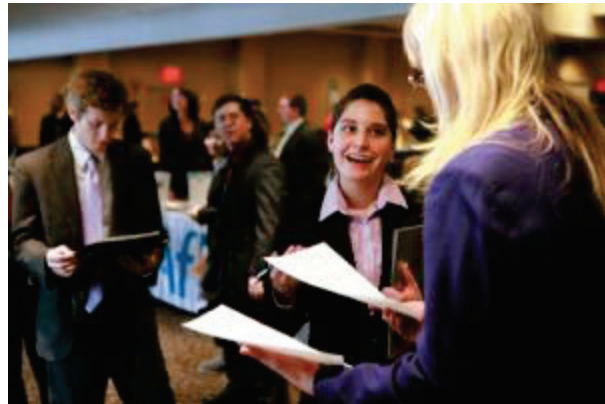
"Part of it is making people who only have high-school diplomas aware they should think about going back to school so they will be more job-ready when those positions open up," said McQuaid. "When the economy was stronger, there was a concern about a skills gap. There were job openings in those fields, but the people looking for work didn't have the skills for those jobs."

In 2007, about 45 percent of all jobs were classified as middle-skill, but only 32 percent of Massachusetts workers had the education and training required to fill those positions, according to the report.

Middle-skill workers include construction workers, high-tech manufacturing workers, nurses and health-care technicians, truckers, IT professionals, EMTs, paramedics, computer-support specialists and biotech workers.

McQuaid said advisers at the career center are constantly encouraging workers to go back to school and get more education.

"We always have people coming in and they just have a high-school diploma, so part of our advice to them is think about the future. Is it really in your best interest to keep taking an \$8- to \$9-an-hour job?" said McQuaid. "You could increase your skills and there will be more jobs available. Plus, they'll probably pay more."



But it's also a question of resources because education often costs money that prospective students do not have, according to McQuaid.

The report's authors urge Massachusetts to take advantage of the expected job growth -- more than 396,000 middle-skill openings are projected in the state by 2016 -- by making significant investments in programs to train more residents who are laid off or working in low-skill jobs and suggests all residents should have access to at least two years of education or training past high school.

"I think that's something everyone agrees on, but the problem is finding the money," said McQuaid.

Kathleen Sweeney, dean of Health Careers at Middlesex Community College, said the school is working to streamline training for entry-level health-care positions.

Sweeney oversees the newly opened Academy of Health Professions at the school, which hosts 27-week certificate programs for jobs as nursing assistants, medical receptionists, medical secretaries and phlebotomists, workers trained to draw blood from patients.

Sweeney said the programs are designed to help people not ready for college, those re-entering the work force or students who need to work a middle-skill job while continuing their education. The first class, which began in April, is expected to graduate in September, according to Sweeney.

"It's just really what a community college does -- help fill jobs in the work force and help students get into the work force," said Sweeney.