

A welcome effort toward 'middle skills'

By | The New Mexican

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For years, clear-thinking policy-setters in public education have issued a simple demand: Every student graduating from high school does so with a job skill. College-bound or not, went their sensible argument, our schools should have them ready for the work force with a specific skill.

The benefits, besides being able to apply their learning to practical situations, include better understanding of at least some of the big world out there — and a fallback position in case college doesn't work out.

Some states were successful in that dual-education effort; New Mexico's record is mixed, at best.

But the times have overtaken that philosophy, even though it remains pretty much the same: The big needs in today's work force are what the experts are calling "middle skills" — abilities calling for more than a high-school diploma, but less than a four-year degree.

According to a group called the National Skills Coalition, the jobs involved include health care technicians, truck drivers, police officers, firefighters and, in today's demanding world, construction workers.

The coalition recently released a report on "New Mexico's Forgotten Middle Skills Jobs." It's an eye-opener.

Middle skills are the biggest share of jobs in our state: 48 percent. They're also where jobs are going to be: an estimated 130,000 openings during the next six years, based on labor statistics and, perhaps, high hopes as the country claws its way out of recession.

So the pressure is on our community colleges and technical institutes — many of which, according to the report, are responding well: Our state has made significant investments in education and training of the work force, yet demand was outrunning the supply of well-trained workers before the economic crisis. Now what's needed are new skills for laid-off workers as well as those in low-paying jobs.

The goal of the skills coalition, operating in half the country so far, is to make two years' worth of education or training past high school for every New Mexican. That would lead to a skilled-job credential, work certification and, in many cases, completion of the first two years of college.

The idea is to boost our people's skills so they're ready to fill jobs that the coalition is sure will open when the economy recovers. New Mexicans leading this campaign include the Association of Commerce and Industry, the Associated General Contractors, the New Mexico Business Roundtable and community colleges around the state.

Much of their work is common-sense stuff on which businesspeople and educators have been cooperating for years. But this fresh emphasis on "middle skills" — which implies business-community efforts to create, or bring back, better-paying jobs with potential for promotion, is especially encouraging.

We wish the leaders of this effort well in pinning down the skills most likely to lead the state and national recovery, and in attracting New Mexicans young and not-so-young into their training programs.