

A regional job market caught in the middle

Labor officials fret about a shortage of workers with mid-level skills

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ALBANY -- Even as the number of jobs in the region declines, labor officials worry there won't be enough people qualified to fill so-called "middle-skills" jobs in fields such as health care and technology.

A new study, "New York's Forgotten Middle-Skills Jobs," projects the state will create by 2018 one million new jobs requiring more than a high-school diploma but less than a four-year degree.

Middle-skills jobs will make up 39 percent of all job openings through 2018, the report finds.

The majority of so-called green energy jobs are considered middle-skill, the report says, as are jobs ranging from mechanic to air traffic controller.

The study found that 38 percent of New York's workers are considered high-skill, while only 33 percent of jobs are, and 23 percent of workers are low-skill, compared with 21 percent of jobs. But 39 percent of workers are middle-skill, compared to 46 percent of jobs.

Capital Region job training officials and local community colleges have been working on programs to prepare students for the increased demand for middle-skill workers.

"What we're finding is kids can be just as or more successful pursuing these middle-skill jobs," said Dan Gentile, who heads the Capital Region Workforce Investment Board, which oversees job training programs. A student who enters a four-year school and drops out after one or two years likely won't have the skills of a student who completes two years at a community college.

"A route that's often overlooked is the two-year community college route for students," Gentile said.

Among the companies locally that will be hiring middle-skill workers are Regeneron Pharmaceuticals in East Greenbush, GlobalFoundries in Malta and General Electric Co. at its new battery plant in Schenectady, Gentile said.

"Regeneron just listed a bunch of job openings," he said. And he said lab technicians and X-ray technicians are other examples of middle-skills jobs that are growing in number.

Gentile said he and his colleagues at the region's other Workforce Investment Boards have been planning for the new tech jobs for the past five years.

"It certainly is an issue but we're doing something about it as a region," said F. Michael Tucker, president and CEO of the Center for Economic Growth, a regional economic development organization with its office in Albany.

"We want to get ahead of the curve so that when GlobalFoundries and its suppliers are operational we're not going to adversely affect other companies in the region."