



OPINION COLUMN

Employment: It's all about education

BY MARK GARBER

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In this economy, it's no surprise that people are being thrown out of work. But one puzzle requiring further examination is why residents of Gresham, in particular, have the highest rate of joblessness of just about any population in the Portland area.

As reported in *The Outlook* last week, Gresham's unemployment rate is running higher than most other large cities in the metro area. As of December 2008, the jobless rate in Gresham had reached 8.1 percent, which compares unfavorably with Beaverton (6.6 percent), Hillsboro (6.8 percent) and Portland (7.8 percent).

In fact, Oregon City (8.8 percent) was the only municipality in the Portland area that had a higher percentage of unemployed people than Gresham.

Education levels are the key

Part of Gresham's joblessness could be attributed to the mix of industries here. As Gresham Economic Development Director Janet Young points out, this city has a relatively high proportion of manufacturing companies – and the manufacturing sector has been hit hard in this recession.

But the majority of Gresham residents commute outside the city limits for work – with many employed in Portland, Clackamas County and even Washington County. So the higher unemployment rate isn't explained entirely by the fact that manufacturing is hurting.

Nor is Gresham's comparatively high unemployment rate a result solely of this recession. Ever since 1999 – through boom times and bad – Gresham's jobless rate has remained stubbornly higher than its neighboring cities.

Malcolm Boswell, work force analyst for WorkSource Oregon, has a possible explanation – and it's all about education.

As you can see from the accompanying chart, Gresham residents, on average, have a lower rate of educational attainment than people in other parts of the metropolitan area. And in the economy of today, the link between education and the ability to find a job is undeniable.

As Boswell puts it: "Research tells us that, in general terms, the more education the lower the possibility of being unemployed."

When compared with its metro counterparts, he notes, "Gresham has the highest proportion of population 18 years or older with less than a high school diploma."

At the other end of the scale, Gresham residents lag behind Beaverton, Hillsboro and Portland in obtaining college diplomas.

Get kids thinking about college

I doubt anyone is shocked there is a direct connection between educational achievement and finding work. Having the right education doesn't just make it easier to obtain work – it also increases an employee's value and his or her pay. So the real question is: What, if anything, can we do to push more Gresham residents toward a two- or four-year degree?

Mt. Hood Community College President John "Ski" Sygielski says one answer is to get children whose parents didn't attend college to begin thinking early – as in middle school – about their post-high school opportunities.

There's a cyclical nature to educational attainment within families. If parents go to college, their children already have a leg up, because they are more likely to attend college. The opposite is true in families where the parents didn't have the chance for a higher education.

Sygielski knows this from his own biography.

"No one in my family ever went to college," he says. But Sygielski didn't want to work in his hometown's steel mills, and he had teachers who encouraged him to keep learning beyond high school.

And that, perhaps, is the most important step to be taken: Introducing students while they are still in middle school to the very concept of education beyond high school.

"We need to expose earlier, we need to reinforce earlier," Sygielski says.

But such outreach into middle schools doesn't have to extol only the glories of a bachelor's degree.

"We need to expose kids and families to all different types of occupations," Sygielski says. "They don't have to have a four-year degree, but they need at least a high school diploma."

And once students are successful in high school, they also need further training, which could include a two-year degree.

Point students where the jobs are

One aim, Sygielski says, would be to guide students toward that sector of the economy where most jobs can be found – and that's not at the highest or lowest ends of employment. As you might suspect, it's right smack in the middle.

Sygielski points to a recent report – called "Oregon's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs" – that was produced with the help of community colleges. The term "middle skill" is somewhat controversial because it implies that these employees are less valuable than so-called "high-skilled" workers.

But the report makes two things clear: First, most jobs in Oregon – 52 percent, to be exact – fall into this middle category. Secondly, this state could not survive without the workers who perform these functions and without the training that gets them ready to do so.

"Middle-skill workers are the police officers and firefighters who keep us safe in our homes," the report states. "They are the nurses, therapists and other medical technicians who keep us healthy. They are the air traffic controllers, electricians, and mechanics who keep our infrastructure up and running."

Those occupations also happen to be the types of jobs that many Gresham-area residents already perform. As such, concentrating our educational efforts toward that vast middle-ground of employment – while not ignoring those who want even higher academic degrees – makes perfect sense for this community.