Texas skills gap is stressing the South's economy, report finds

By Mark Collette | June 12, 2018

A welder works on a steel structure at sundown. A new report finds Texas and other southern states must create more opportunities, especially for people of color, to train for middle-skill jobs - those that require more training after high school, but not a college degree.
Texas and other southern states are at risk of being left behind in an accelerating economy if they don't create more ways to educate and train people of color, especially for jobs that require "middle skill" sets, a new report finds.

The Southern economy, once built on low-skill industries, now has a majority of job openings that require education and training beyond high school, but not a college degree, according to the report by the National Skills Coalition and the federal reserve banks of Atlanta and St. Louis.

But the region has limited training opportunities for those jobs, including burdensome transportation and child care costs, high incarceration rates, persistent poverty, and lack of infrastructure in rural areas.

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"Texas must have a skilled workforce to compete in today's economy," said Garrett Groves, vice president for business and industry partnerships at Austin Community College. "The state has made positive steps in supporting industry partnerships, career pathways, and winning federal apprenticeship grants. However, to truly take advantage of the benefits of these practices, the state should consider policies that expand this opportunity to more Texans."

State leaders must create a more inclusive workforce, the report concludes.

"They must provide opportunities for all adults - including people of color - to increase their access to education and training. More than four in ten Southerners are people of color. And people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population by 2044," it states.

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The report offers a road map for strengthening the South's economy:

- Using workforce development strategies, such as sector partnerships with industries like biotech and work-based learning, as economic development tools capable of meeting industry needs.
• Investing in communities to implement high-quality workforce development strategies at the local level.

• Establishing job-driven financial aid programs that are available to a wide range of students.

• Forming middle-skill career pathways that include comprehensive supportive services to help ensure program completion.

• Creating state data systems that provide accountability on how training programs are helping residents with diverse needs get skilled jobs.

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