

Skill shortages undermine the state's economy

Is Washington ready to compete globally in the 21st century? On the surface, things here look promising, with prosperous, world-class companies such as The Boeing Co. and Microsoft Corp., and a rate of job creation that is currently twice the national average.

Scratch below the surface, however, and what is revealed is a dangerous trend that is eroding our future prosperity: Washington is not producing enough workers with the skills employers need to expand their businesses.

Skill and education shortages in our state run the gamut, from a lack of high school graduates with basic workplace skills to too few college-trained workers with advanced degrees in math and science. It may be surprising to learn, however, that among all education levels the most acute shortage is of workers with the middle range of education and skills.

According to recent state surveys, there is a shortfall of more than 4,000 trained workers annually for jobs requiring technical training and post-high school credentials but not a bachelor's degree. Skill shortages in turn slow employment growth.

According to surveys by the state's Workforce Training and Education Coordinating Board, hiring was so difficult for one in six employers that it harmed their

production and sales. There is another side to the equation. Not only are we failing to meet the needs of businesses, we are failing to meet the needs of a growing proportion of our fellow citizens. More than one-third of the adult population in Washington has a high school diploma or less. Low rates of high school completion, and proportionally high population growth among racial and ethnic minorities with the lowest average education levels, will mean lower average education and skill levels in our state without a new push to address barriers to educational access and achievement.

What is the solution? A "career pathways" approach, coupled with efforts to increase the affordability of education, is by far the most promising way to address both skill shortages faced by employers and educational access barriers faced by adult workers.

Career pathways are sequential training steps built around specific industries or occupations that culminate in a credential or associate degree. This flexible approach allows adult students to incre-

mentally advance their skills within an industry while remaining in the work force or avoiding long absences from it.

Adult students are particularly successful in career pathways when provided with such supports as child care and transportation. And employers are critical partners and beneficiaries of career pathways, which provide them a pipeline for new qualified workers and a way for their current employees to quickly upgrade their skills.

Washington has begun to lay the groundwork for such an approach, but much remains to be done. The state's current "I-BEST" program at community colleges provides remedial language and basic-skills instruction, together with the beginning step of technical instruction. This approach, which is radically increasing the rate at which basic skills students go on to get further technical skills, needs to be expanded to all the state's colleges. The Opportunity Grants program, a new source of financial aid covering tuition and support services, is beginning to solve some of the affordability problems faced by the lowest-income students.

Other new approaches — such as the state-sponsored "13th year" of education noted in the governor's Washington Learns report, or the governor's proposed budget calling for a freez-

ing of community college tuition for the next two years — hold promise for addressing the growing affordability gap in higher education. Such efforts are increasingly needed to reverse the trend of shifting more of the burden of educational costs to students, which is heightening barriers for families trying to work their way up the wage ladder through additional training.

The next stage — hardly begun — will be for colleges, with support from the state, to examine their technical education curricula to create career pathways approaches wherever possible. Tighter coordination among the different parts of the system that support training — including the community colleges, Worksource Centers, and the state's Workfirst and Vocational Rehabilitation programs — will also be necessary to develop a truly seamless system of referral and training.

While we face many challenges, we know that these approaches can work. We need to muster the attention and resources to make them happen if we want to support sustained prosperity for all our businesses and citizens.

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