

HEATHER BOULGER | INSIDE THE JOB MARKET

Back-to-school season is the time for students to sharpen their pencils — and adults to sharpen their skills



Back-to-school season is a great time for students to sharpen their pencils. But it's also a good time for adults to sharpen their skills, notes Heather Boulger, executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board.

GILLIAN HECK -- THE BERKSHIRE EAGLE

It's mid-August and back-to-school season is approaching! Here are some fun back-to-school statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Retail Federation.

- Did you know that 2 billion pencils are made each year and the average pencil can write 70 miles!
- Berkshire County employs 7,860 people in education (12.9 percent of the workforce — the third-largest sector)
- Berkshire County has 46 public schools and serves 16,215 students
- The average household back-to-school shopping is \$858 for K-12 and \$1,325 for back-to-college.

- 40 percent is spent on clothing; 28 percent on electronics, 23 percent on school supplies and 20 percent on shoes.
- 55 percent shop online, 48 percent in department stores, 47 percent in discount stores, and 41 percent in clothing stores.
- There are 4,688 colleges in the U.S. (Three in Berkshire County)
- 52.1 percent of college students work while in school (20 percent work full time)
- Education pays off: \$87,000 average salary of a person with a bachelor's degree compared to \$47,000 with a high school diploma or equivalent compared to \$38,000 with someone with less than a ninth grade education. Earn more than an extra \$250,000 in your lifetime just by staying in high school and graduating. You can double that by getting an associate's degree.
- Blue was voted the favorite crayon color. What's your favorite color?

Don't worry, summer isn't over yet. August is the perfect time to plan how you will transition with the season ahead. It's not just our high school graduates heading off to college or joining the workforce for the first time.

Adults, too, can make the most of the new academic year by setting goals and enhancing their employability through various adult education programs available in Berkshire County. From improving basic skills to exploring new career paths, there are numerous resources to empower individuals in their pursuit of personal and professional growth.

There are hundreds of courses, workshops and classes designed to help you succeed. Visit MCLA.edu; BerkshireCC.edu; and Williams.edu for a list

of endless possibilities! Not sure where to begin? The MassHireBerkshire Career Center can connect you to a career counselor, help provide job search strategies, build a resume, help you explore career pathways, and provide you with workshops to help land your new career opportunity.

If you need to obtain your high school credential or HiSet/GED or need to improve your proficiency in the English language, there are several organizations that are available to help. The Pittsfield Adult Learning Center, Berkshire Community College's ESOL program, Northern Berkshire Adult Education, Literacy Volunteers of Berkshire County, and the Berkshire County Sheriff's Office foster supportive learning environments to help empower residents to thrive and succeed.

Numerous programs in Berkshire County are dedicated to career advancement and promoting lifelong learning. Several grant-funded training programs are available to start career pathways in health care, advanced manufacturing, the trades, education, technology and hospitality. Visit MassHireBerkshire.com for a list of opportunities.

College-bound students and potential career changers often ask us what occupations are most in demand. According to the state's Job Quest job postings, there are 2,456 job opportunities in Berkshire County. About 45 percent are technical and highly skilled opportunities while the remaining 55 percent are entry level, part time or seasonal.

Based on conversations with employers, we know that there are openings in the health care field, sales, administration, STEM, management, transportation and education. Visit JobQuest.dcs.eol.mass.gov for a list of opportunities and to help get you on a path to success.

Adult education in Berkshire County offers many opportunities for personal and professional growth. Whether you want to improve your basic skills, explore a new career or enhance your literacy, various organizations and programs are ready to support your lifelong learning and opportunity journey.

So sharpen your pencils, and embrace the fall season as a time of renewal, self-improvement and empowerment. Take advantage of the resources available and unlock your potential for a brighter future.

Heather Boulger is executive director of the MassHire Berkshire Workforce Board in Pittsfield.