

The Berkshire Eagle



A student works on putting together pieces of an erector set last year in the information technology department at McCann Technical School in North Adams. The author says that there are thousands of jobs in the Berkshires going unfilled, and 45 percent are technical jobs and/or in trades.

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Heather Boulger | Inside the Job Market: Perspectives changing on career, technical training

Posted Friday, March 13, 2020 4:30 pm

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By Heather Boulger

It's time to remove the stigma once and for all. Attending college is not the only route to success.

It wasn't so long ago that young people and their parents perceived technical schools as a nonviable option — and only for students who were not attending a four-year college. But, a profoundly changing technical labor market, a workforce skills crisis and a series of investments on the part of the commonwealth are changing that.

The Berkshires, like the rest of the state, are experiencing great shortages in a number of industries, including health care, manufacturing, information technology, education and the trades. There are thousands of jobs in the Berkshires going unfilled, and 45 percent are technical and/or in trades.

Fifty-two percent of employers say they cannot find people with the skills they need. This is due, in part, to a low unemployment rate, a declining population, a disconnect between skills needed and existing job opportunities, and the retirement of the baby boomer generation, a trend that will accelerate as more members of that generation reach their mid- to late 60s.

Skilled-trades careers are those labor jobs that require specific training, such as carpenter, electrician or plumber. A high school diploma is the minimum educational requirement for most types of skilled trades, and technical schools have courses and provide certifications on many skilled-trades careers.

Numerous tradespeople receive their skills through apprenticeships and on-the-job training as they work for an experienced craftsman.

Skilled-trades jobs are expected to increase faster than the national average of all jobs, which is 11 percent, over the next 10 years. Population and business growth remodel and repair needs, and maintenance of older structures, are the reasons the Bureau of Labor Statistics give for a 20 percent average job growth rate in skilled-trades careers. The trades also provide a good wage, which is, on average, around \$55,000 annually.

Not second rate

Career and technical programs are not a second-rate alternative for kids who just can't cut it. Technical schools, and the vocations they train students for, require intelligence and skill. They help students hone their abilities, leading them to secure and satisfying careers.

Job opportunities and an alignment of the academic and vocational programs in our technical schools have made them schools of choice. Over the past several years, employers and parents have come to understand the importance of college and career, and they find that the vocational/technical schools offer a pretty robust academic program, but also prepare students with skills they either take to the labor market after graduation or to pursue two- or four-year degrees.

And with today's labor market, where supply is in relative short supply across most industries, the value of a vocational/technical high school education, which was always valuable, is now even more so.

There are several vocational programs and career/technical certificate programs provided at McCann Technical School (nine secondary and five postsecondary programs), Taconic High School (11 programs), and Pittsfield High School (two programs).

There are new programs expanding into comprehensive high schools like Monument Mountain Regional High School through the state's Career Pathways Initiative, and there are articulation agreements and bridge programs with Berkshire Community College and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts that help prepare students for the workforce and provide an industry-based certification.

Vocation education is seen as strategy that contributes to increased efficiency in education investment and can provide young people with the skills needed for employment in industry.

Career education is equally as important. The Berkshire Workforce Board has been leading Berkshire County's college and career readiness initiatives for decades. Although nearly 90 percent of all graduating seniors participate in the Berkshire Workforce Board's college/career readiness programming through career fairs, shadowing days, internships and STEM — science, technology, engineering and math — initiatives, much more needs to be done to educate parents and the community about career pathways and employment opportunities that exist in the Berkshires.

All Berkshire school districts have college/career programs that help to assist students, and hundreds of businesses are eager to engage with schools and showcase their companies. Visit MassHireBerkshire.com for ways to participate.

Hearing the please

Massachusetts recognizes the demographic patterns and is hearing employers' desperate pleas for qualified help, and has made significant investments to reverse those trends. The Workforce Skills Cabinet and the seven regional teams, including the Berkshire Skills Cabinet, led by the Berkshire Workforce Board, have worked together to design and implement a number of strategic initiatives that include:

- \$67 million in capital skills grants awarded to technical schools covering 230 training programs and supporting 12,500 students (including McCann, Taconic and Berkshire Community College);
- The Career Pathways Initiative, which aligns high school curriculum to priority industries; the program has created 170 new pathways and attracted \$4 million in philanthropic funding to complement state funding (including Monument Mountain High School);
- The Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, which has awarded \$12 million in the past two years to retrain more than 1,560 individuals for employment in careers prioritized in the Workforce Blueprints (including the Berkshire Workforce Board); and
- The Workforce Training Fund, which has awarded \$10.7 million to upskill nearly 7,000 workers at 119 companies in priority sectors (including General Dynamics).

These investments have helped create a number of new programs that were created to address workforce needs.

In reality, vocational programs are a practical, affordable, career-focused option for many graduating seniors. Today, career and technical schools increasingly are seen as schools of choice because of their blend of academic and vocational programs, and their students are certainly in demand. We should encourage students to consider all postsecondary options and pursue the paths that work best for their future plans!

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