

Our View: Prepare young workers



John Shishmanian/ NorwichBulletin.com

Anthony Green of Norwich watches his robot maneuver Wednesday in the Technology Learning Community class at Three Rivers Community College's Thames campus.

Posted Aug 31, 2008 @ 12:00 AM

With a new school year beginning, and industry taking an extended weekend vacation to celebrate Labor Day, it seems appropriate to consider the future of Eastern Connecticut's economy. Appropriate because there is a direct link between education and industry.

Consider this: In 2002, one-third of the jobs in Connecticut required significant post-secondary training. By 2012, it is estimated 53 percent of new jobs in the state will require post-secondary education.

In Eastern Connecticut, only 25.5 percent of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher.

That begs the question: With all the external pressures businesses face from rising costs, how long can a business continue to operate when it reaches a point that it can no longer fill jobs with the trained workers it needs? Where, then, is the future of the region's economy?

The answer to the second question is, in the classrooms of Eastern Connecticut — from elementary schools to high schools to colleges.

Representatives of the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board outlined an ambitious new strategy to address these issues in a meeting with the Norwich Bulletin Editorial Board last week. It is a simple solution, but one that will require a combined effort on the part of students and teachers, industry employers and employees, municipal and state governments.

First, we must begin training the younger work force so they have the skills to advance. Our work force is growing older, and the new jobs being created are not the high paying jobs of yesterday. Wages in the area are flat and decreasing, making it harder to make ends meet. We must provide workers with the additional training they need to advance to higher-paying positions and to fill the void of those soon to reach retirement.

Secondly, we must make a more concerted effort in showcasing to students the many economic opportunities that already exist within our region. And we need to begin that sooner, starting in the lower grades and continuing that effort throughout their education. Too many of our young people continue to migrate out of state in search of better paying jobs, unaware that there is a future right here. We must stop that exodus in order to ensure a skilled work force is available for the future.

Thirdly, we must rethink the way we provide the training and skills. Advancements in technology have dramatically changed the way we do business. We can no longer think only of today's needs. Nor can we assume we know what might be needed tomorrow.

As former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley said, "The top 10 jobs that will be in demand in 2010 didn't exist in 2004. We are currently preparing students for jobs that don't yet exist using technologies that haven't yet been invented in order to solve problems we don't even know are problems yet."

If we succeed in growing a highly skilled work force of the future, it will be the best economic development strategy available in attracting the better paying jobs of the future to Connecticut. Or simply, if we build it, they will come.

Many of these steps are already being taken — but in small steps. We need to pick up the pace.

The issue: Higher paying jobs are being replaced with lower wage jobs. The work force is growing older with fewer younger workers trained to replace them. The future of the region's economy is at a critical stage.

Our view: A strategy developed by the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board linking industry and education is a model that can provide a secure economic future.