

Closing the skills gap

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As children all over Illinois go back to school, we cannot help but wonder how many of them will be fully prepared to compete and excel in the workforce once they finish school. Based on the latest research, we can safely say that many of these students will be unprepared, even with many well-paying jobs needing to be filled.

The problem: we have a skills gap. And it's been with us for years.

Even now, as we struggle to recover from the worst recession most of us have ever seen, companies report difficulties filling some open positions because they cannot find individuals with the necessary skills.

Illinois employers not only see deficiencies among new employees in reading, writing and math, they also see deficiencies in the increasingly important soft skills — collaboration, communication and critical thinking. Just last year, nine in ten executives surveyed nationwide said these enhanced soft skills are important to support business expansion, but less than half of them rated their employees as above average in those skills.

This lack of skills could cause the U.S. to lose its competitive edge in a global marketplace. Sixty percent of all new jobs in the 21st century will require skills that only 20 percent of the current workforce has. And the problem is growing. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that, between 2008 and 2018, half of all new jobs will require some form of formal education beyond high school. Meanwhile, the U.S. has fallen from the number one spot in college completion rates to 14th out of 26 countries. Being in the middle of the pack is not how America's economy stays on top.

So how do we close the skills gap and ensure a strong future workforce that will protect our competitive edge?

The answer: High-quality early care and education

is essential to lay the foundation for today's kids to enter tomorrow's job market with the skills they need to succeed.

Why start early? Because research confirms that the basic architecture of the brain is developed during the first five years of life — a process that is critical to developing fundamental skills that later translate into higher brain function and academic skills.

According to one long-term study, children enrolled in a high-quality early education program were 44 percent more likely to graduate from high school than similar children who did not participate. They also had a 36 percent increase in earnings as adults — which means greater spending power and contribution to our tax base that Illinois can use.

Congress has the opportunity in the coming months to help strengthen early learning programs in Illinois. Federal lawmakers are taking up the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act — known as the No Child Left Behind Act in its last renewal. Congress needs to understand that quality early learning is a critical component of our education system, and it should encourage states to expand the traditional K through 12 approach towards an early learning through graduation model.

We hope Sen. Mark Kirk, who serves on the committee that will kick off the reauthorization, will support this opportunity to strengthen Illinois businesses by improving our education infrastructure. A pipeline of skilled workers must be part of the foundation we lay for sustained economic growth and security in our future.

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