



Letters To The Editor May 8, 2012

My grandfather opened the doors to his body shop business over sixty years ago. Today, we're still in business, and it's incredible to think about how much the industry has changed since that time. We need workers who understand not only automobile construction, but the technology of complex computer and electronic systems.

But such workers are becoming harder to find. According to a report by the national business leaders' organization America's Edge, more than half of the fastest-growing occupations in Illinois over the next decade will require an education foundation in STEM skills (science, technology, engineering and math). But only 23 percent of last year's high school graduates in Illinois who took the ACT college admissions test met college readiness benchmarks in English, math, reading and science.

In occupations that are expected to have the highest deficits of skilled workers through 2021, 40 percent of positions require postsecondary education. In Madison and St. Clair counties, that number is more like 60 percent.

How can we prepare students for college and the challenges of the future? Give them a great start with early care and education programs. Research shows that high-quality early learning can strengthen students' later skills in math and reading. In addition to those "hard" skills, early care and education programs develop the "soft" skills of communication, collaboration and critical thinking — all attributes that I look for in a new employee.

Given what the research shows us, I hope the General Assembly will prioritize these programs as they finalize the budget. Preschool for All, the state-funded preschool program, has faced cuts the last two years. This has led to Madison County having 350 fewer kids enrolled in these crucial classes. State assistance for child care for working families is also on the chopping block with a proposed programmatic cut of \$85 million. As we recover from the recession, it makes no sense to roll back progress on programs vital to the future of our workforce.

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