



## Facing an underqualified workforce, leaders calling for early education focus

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QUINCY, Ill. (WGEM) -- Local community and business leaders are sending a warning that funding cuts in public education are hurting the local workforce.

Leaders say the cuts are leading to an underqualified local workforce.

When jobs open up at Blessing Hospital, the people who are hired often come from outside the area. It's something leaders, including Blessing Health System CEO Brad Billings, said needs to be changed.

Whether it's nurses or technicians, Blessing Hospital has hundreds of positions that require a degree beyond high school. But, Billings said finding qualified workers is challenging, since only 4 out of every 10 Illinois residents have an Associates Degree or higher.

"We, oftentimes, have to recruit outside the community for many of those technical based or highly skill-based positions," he said.

Billings says it would be better if the hospital, the area's largest employer, could hire locally.

"Not only is it less costly, but you're dealing with people who know the community, who have established ties in the community, are more likely to stay here and be a

contributing member of our community," said Billings.

Thursday, community and business leaders gathered to stress the importance of having a strong educational system to prepare a strong workforce. They say the key to all of that is giving every child the chance to attend preschool.

"If we're going to have a successful educational system, it has to be seamless, from beginning to end, and education really starts at the very beginning," said Robert Gervasi, President of Quincy University.

Business leaders on Thursday said preschools lay a strong educational foundation, so students are more likely to excel later on, in school and in the workforce.

"The earlier we can touch a child's life through education and learning opportunities, developing that value of wanting to be a lifetime learner, particularly in areas that we haven't been so strong in like STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics," said Billings.

The leaders that gathered Thursday said they hope that legislators will take note of the importance of education, especially at a young age, and provide funding for preschools and other programs that give kids a solid educational foundation.