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Skills gap affects thousands of local jobs, says workforce study

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Only four in 10 Sangamon County residents are prepared for the high-skill jobs of the future, according to a workforce analysis released Tuesday by The Greater Springfield Chamber of Commerce.

The study for the chamber by America's Edge predicted more than 10,300 jobs requiring post-secondary education would open over the next decade in the county in fields ranging from diesel mechanics to accounting.

America's Edge, a national not-for-profit that promotes investment in early childhood programs, based the figures on census and federal labor-market data of existing and long-term employment.

"One of the messages for sure, when you come out of high school, you're not done," chamber president and CEO Steward Sandstrom said after release of the report at the chamber office.

"You need to get additional training, additional education," said Sandstrom.

Only 79 percent of Sangamon County high school students graduate on time, according to figures released with the report. An official with Lincoln Land Community College in Springfield said about 60 percent of entering students need help with basic math, reading and composition.

"It really, really slows them down," said Judy Jozaitis, LLCC vice president of workforce development and community education. "It can be very discouraging for a student who comes to school and hopes to get out fairly quick and go to work."

Jozaitis said LLCC has a variety of programs to identify and help at-risk students, including through cooperative agreements with employers.

The shortage of skilled applicants also means existing employees are working longer hours, said Kayla Edwards, director of client services for Express Employment Professionals, a job-placement firm in Springfield.

"We're having to go outside of Sangamon County. In some instances, we're having to go out of the state to recruit the talent," said Edwards. "Sometimes we're having to go outside the country. That's happening more and more in the technology area."

Sandstrom said short-term steps could be taken to prepare local students for the 84 percent of jobs expected to require post-secondary education in the next decade.

"To work on a combine today, you need not be nearly as worried about getting grease on your elbow," said Sandstrom, "as how to deal with the mother board."

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