



The Republican.

Opportunity knocks for skilled workers

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Two news stories making headlines last week summarize the opportunities and challenges facing the state's economy - and the Western Massachusetts economy, in particular.

On the opportunity side: Just hours after signing a \$1 billion life sciences bill, Gov. Deval L. Patrick headed to California for an international biotechnology conference in an effort to encourage knowledge-based businesses to consider the Bay State as a base of operations.

Indeed, the promise of making Massachusetts a job center for the life sciences - from research to manufacturing - presents exciting opportunities.

The challenge the state faces in realizing those high-tech ambitions, however, is finding highly skilled workers to fill those jobs. Here in the Pioneer Valley that challenge is daunting, according to Paul E. Harrington of Northeastern University's center for Labor Market Studies.

Speaking at Western New England College, Harrington told 250 business leaders that the Springfield area workforce is aging and many of the young people entering the workforce aren't getting the education and training they need to take advantage of the new job opportunities.

In Springfield, for example, one in five residents ages 16 to 24 is idle, not in school, not working and not in the military. "Who would put a dollar into training a high school dropout? Not a business," Harrington said.

Businesses in the valley are already experiencing the skills gap. Douglas M. Hagopian, vice president of Hoppe Tool in Chicopee, a manufacturer of parts and assemblies for commercial aircraft and military equipment, said he has an immediate need for 10 highly qualified people.

Hoppe Tool's dilemma does not auger well for the region's economy.

It's time for the state to invest even more in worker training and development - from preschool through high school and beyond. If Massachusetts hopes to take advantage of the opportunities a field like life sciences offers, its workers must be ready.

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