

NY education, business leaders tackling skills gap

CAROLYN THOMPSON - Associated Press - Associated Press

The confounding problem of unfilled jobs amid high unemployment has New York education and business leaders brainstorming for solutions.

"I think what we've got is a skills crisis and not a jobs crisis," said Stanley Litow, a vice president at IBM, which has been pursuing collaborations with high schools and colleges to create pipelines of potential employees.

The Pathways in Technology Early College High School in New York City, for example, blends high school and college in a six-year program that produces graduates with an associate degree in applied science, workplace experience and a crack at a job at IBM Corp. or an industry partner. The school, a joint effort of the Armonk-based IBM and the City University of New York, opened its doors in September 2011.

It's the kind of collaboration that will be held up as a model during a state Education Department conference in Albany on Friday that's co-sponsored by the Business Council of New York State and IBM. Innovative career and technology initiatives under way in high school Board of Cooperative Education Services, or BOCES, programs also will be showcased with an eye toward being replicated, organizers said.

"We see these partnerships as not only a way to tackle our state's economic development challenges but also to tackle the achievement gap and some of the challenges we see in student performance," Education Commissioner John King said.

The conference comes as New York is moving toward adopting two alternative high school diplomas, one focused on science, technology, engineering and math, collectively known as STEM, and the other on career and technology education, or CTE, with the idea of giving students more career-specific pathways toward graduation and the working world.

"We're always surveying our members. What we're hearing is that there is a lack of skilled workers for positions that don't necessarily require a four-year degree," said Heather Briccetti, president and chief executive of the Business Council, whose members employ more than 1.2 million people in New York.

The state Labor Department has projected a 135 percent increase in STEM-related computer and electronic product manufacturing jobs in the Albany area alone from 2008 to 2018, driven by the growing nanotechnology sector. STEM employees earn a median annual salary of \$76,740, according to the Labor Department.

The state's unemployment rate, meanwhile, was 8.7 percent in October, compared

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to 7.9 percent nationally, or more than 12 million people. About 3 million U.S. jobs are unfilled, according to the U.S. Labor Department.

"We really feel that the data compels us to create much deeper and more effective partnerships between business and education," Litow, IBM's vice president of corporate citizenship and corporate affairs, said.

"We are very interested, and we believe others are as well, in creating these new innovative collaborations to prepare larger and larger numbers of young people for the kinds of jobs that exist," he said, "and that create the kind of growth opportunities to make the U.S. economy much more competitive."

Friday's conference takes place from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the State Museum.

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