



Bill Ward says that one of the goals of REB's new plan is to have the organization become known as the leading source of regional labor market information and innovative ideas.

The days when a college degree or training certificate combined with years of experience were enough to ensure job security and a steady path toward advancement have all but disappeared.

Today, rapid advances in technology and outsourcing have made job competition fierce. In fact, one of the key findings in the recently released Regional Employment Board of Hampden County Strategic Workforce Development Plan for Hampden County 2011-2013 is that life-long learning is essential to job creation, retention, and the economic health of the region.

The report, which took nine months to produce and involved partnerships, collaborations, a retreat, and data compiled over a six-year period, paints a clear picture of the state of the region's economy, workforce trends, challenges, and opportunities for growth.

REB Executive Director William Ward says the plan also creates a framework for solutions to the identified challenges and covers a broad continuum, which begins at the pre-school level and runs into the future, addressing gaps that local businesses anticipate over the next decade.

"The REB is embarking upon a new and more expansive strategic direction, and we're looking at workforce development in a more comprehensive way, because we want to build a more prosperous community," Ward explained. "One of the essential components of a high quality of life is safe,

secure employment with adequate pay.”

Meanwhile, he continued, there is a direct relationship between the number of people with the requisite skills to fill open positions and the strength of the economy in Western Mass.

“When a company inquires about moving to a new location, one of its top three questions is, ‘what is your workforce like?’ he told BusinessWest, adding, “people call it ‘talent management.’ So, the REB looks at jobs and their connection to human capital and views it in terms of supply and demand. We ask what employers are looking for and then look to see whether we are producing sufficient numbers of people to meet their needs, or overproducing them.”

Ward said many jobs have moved to Boston, which has an economy based largely on higher education, health care, and financial services, due to the abundance of qualified talent there.



REP staffers Kelly Aiken and David Cruise are focusing on training in health care and precision manufacturing, respectively, to meet the needs of businesses today and in the future.

Still, health care is the largest employer in Western Mass., and the area boasts a large number of precision manufacturing companies not found in the Boston region, he said. These two sectors play prominently in the report, along with the need for more education for people along the continuum. Ward said that last year, more than 20,000 area residents sought employment assistance at the REB’s one-stop career centers in Springfield and Holyoke (FutureWorks and Career Point, respectively), but fewer than half were able to secure jobs. At the same time, many good-paying positions went unfilled, especially in health care, precision manufacturing, human services, and financial services. The reason? A lack of qualified candidates. Kelly Aiken, the REB’s project director of Health Care Initiatives, said it’s critical that the curriculum at local schools and training centers is in line with both the needs of industry and job seekers. “Education doesn’t move as fast as industry, so we had to figure out a way to ensure a continuum for learners and career pathways. These are main threads that run through the report,” she said.

The REB doesn’t train people, but it is the “go-to place” for companies to find out how they can find qualified workers or obtain grants or other assistance to help them train their workforce or hire new people,” said Ward, adding that the organization uses federal dollars to set up training programs and facilitates the infrastructure between education and local companies.

“This is a business-led organization, and our role is to ensure that state and federal investments in workforce development are wisely spent and have a good return on investment,” he continued. “The REB’s new strategic plan is data driven and we aim to be the leading source of regional labor market information and innovative ideas for advancing workforce development.”

The REB develops, plans, and contracts with providers to hold workshops for people in the job market through its one-stop career centers, and also community colleges and training schools. It also works hand-in-hand with businesses to create internships and increase work-based learning opportunities that align closely with the needs of industry.

“The jobs that have left this region are not coming back,” Ward explained. “And if new jobs emerge, people will need new skills, so workforce training is integral to our mission.”

Learning Curves

Springfield and Holyoke have been earmarked as Gateway Cities with high levels of poverty and comparatively high dropout rates within their school districts, and those figures play a significant role in the REB’s report.

Ward said recent research shows that 74% of students who don’t read well in third grade will continue to have difficulty, which can lead to dropping out of school and lost opportunities. And local MCAS scores show gaps in the areas of reading, science, and technology — areas directly related to the types of jobs that will be available to graduates in the future. The picture doesn’t get better at the community college level, where one of every three students drops out because their schooling is too costly or they need too much remediation.

“Although Massachusetts ranks number-one in public education and the use of technology, the problem is that we have pockets and gaps within the community with very low achievement,” Ward explained. “Springfield and Holyoke are two of those pockets, so we need to make an above-average investment to close the educational skill gap. That’s why a strategic plan for our area is very different than one for Boston or Cambridge would be.”

The REB has several initiatives in place to expand family literacy. One is a pilot program called “Talk, Read, Succeed,” which is a collaboration between Springfield Public Schools, the United Way, Springfield Housing Authority, and the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. The goal of this early-literacy project is to help ensure that children from 200 families in two Springfield public housing developments are proficient readers by the end of third grade.

Ward said studies show that the vocabulary of first-grade students is directly related to their environment. Children from poor neighborhoods and homes are deficient in this area, and once they start school, they usually experience learning setbacks every summer.

The staff members in “Talk, Read, Succeed” will work with families to help them increase their children’s vocabularies, and will also provide programs to help improve the odds that students will retain what they learned in school. In addition to helping children, “we’re also going to set up literacy programs for parents who want to learn English or get a GED,” Ward said.

The Hasbro Summer Learning Initiative is another program with a similar goal. In its third year, it serves about 2,000 children up to age 12 during the summer. Ward said the data is very clear that students in the program are making gains every summer instead of losing what they learned.

Making Connections

The new workforce plan also reinforces the REB’s commitment to partnerships. Ward said government cannot pay the entire bill for ongoing education, and that local businesses need to make investments in workforce development to remain competitive.

“They need to see it as an investment, not as a cost. Although we focus on adults, youth is the pipeline of the future and that begins at the pre-kindergarten level and goes up to age 21,” he explained. “We have to find ways to prepare our youth, stem the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate. It’s not simple, but we need to manage our human capital because it is the only way to ensure that the supply will meet the demand.” Precision manufacturing is one of the areas targeted in the new plan, and David Cruise, director of Business and Employer Services, has been working with the Western Mass. Chapter of the National Tooling and Machining Assoc. (WMNTMA) to make gains in this arena using data collected from 33 local employers over a period of six years.

Last year these employers added 103 new jobs, which represents a 8.6% increase over the previous year. In addition, their sales increased 9.5% over the previous year to about \$21 million.

“The sector is growing, and the REB has targeted it as having significant long-term potential for the area,” Cruise said. “The work they are doing is not going offshore, so we are trying to have the Pioneer Valley become ‘Precision Valley.’ We have companies here with the technology, leadership, and the skilled workforce to become what can be known as a precision manufacturing hot spot.”

WMNTMA and REB have joined forces, and are offering 34 evening courses for incumbent workers. They are also working diligently to encourage junior high school students and even elementary school students to consider manufacturing — a sector that has taken some public relations hits over the years as plants have shut down and jobs have moved overseas — as a viable career option.

In addition, local employers are donating equipment to schools, staging workshops and conducting tours of their facilities to showcase the types of jobs and environments they offer, and attract young people.

“The continuum is important, so we have put together a training network that utilizes the resources at several local companies along with local vocational technical high schools and Springfield Technical Community College, which is a major venue because it has a mechanical engineering technology program,” Cruise said. “Incumbent employees are volunteering for this training, and classes are held at these sites four nights a week.” The new workplace plan also recognizes the industry’s concerns over its graying workforce. “The owners of precision machining companies are very concerned about how they will replace those individuals. They expect to lose 25% to 27% of their employees over the next decade,” Cruise said.

Health care is also a major focal point of the new strategic report. “The plan highlights the fact that we are actively engaged in convening and building partnerships to ensure the region has a quality health care workforce,” Aiken said, adding that there is a major focus on jobs in elder care that will open up due to the fact that Baby Boomers are aging.

In fact, the face of the medical field is changing, and Aiken said health care workers of the future will need to plan to work in long-term care, home health, and community based venues instead of setting their sights only on acute care facilities or hospitals.

“It is our job to consistently stay in front of industry needs, which we do through partnerships, data collection, changing curriculums, and matching people with jobs,” she told BusinessWest. “One of the key themes of the strategic plan is how to do a better job defining and promoting seamless career pathways. Health care is changing dramatically, and it is a challenge to marry sector initiatives with federal funds to build a system that will support people on their continuous lifelong journey.”

In short, cooperation and investment in education is critical, and strategic workforce collaborations are more important than ever before.

The Bottom Line

Officials at the REB recognize that their goals are ambitious, but they plan to measure their progress, and are guardedly optimistic about the future. “What is new about our sector initiatives is the realization that people need to learn outside of their silos,” Aiken explained. “Ongoing, sustained partnerships are required to ensure that we are always ahead of the game.”

Ward agreed. “The report is a call to action,” he said. “Everyone in the community needs to work more closely so the size and preparedness of our current and future workforce will make us more competitive as a region.”

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