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Time to break cycle of no skills, no jobs

Low level of literacy adds fuel to employment crisis

*BY ROCHELLE RILEY
FREE PRESS COLUMNIST*

One out of three working-age adults in Michigan — 1.7 million people — cannot read well enough to be hired for a job that will support a family. More than 40% of those potential workers, who all read below a sixth-grade level, also lack a high school diploma or GED.

The stunning statistics come from a report done for the state Council for Labor and Economic Growth, which since December has been quietly formulating a plan of attack against what may be Michigan's greatest economic challenge: transforming adult education from a system for enhancing job skills into one that prepares undereducated, unemployed people for work.

"It's incredible," said Dianne Duthie, division director of lifelong learning for the Bureau of Workforce Transformation in the state Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth. "It would take billions of dollars to remediate them. ... We're serving 48,000 people with \$33 million."

'People didn't have the skills'

When Electrolux closed its refrigerator plant in Greenville in 2006, 2,700 workers lost their jobs. Many saw a chance to return to work when United Solar Ovonic LLC built a new solar factory in the west Michigan town later the same year.

But a lot of the workers weren't ready.

"People didn't have the skills necessary to go into Montcalm Community College to take the class that was required to do the work" at the new-technology company, said Dianne Duthie, division director of lifelong learning for the Bureau of Workforce Transformation in the state Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth.

Few wanted to go back to school. Others just "wanted their same job back at the same wage," Duthie said.

The situation in Greenville exposed Michigan's dirty little workplace secret, one that's not so secret to state officials, adult-reading instructors and employers who want to hire

Michigan workers. Many of the state's working-age adults are not prepared for 21st-Century jobs, including modern manufacturing that requires higher levels of reading and math than the factory work of old.

A 52-page analysis adopted by state officials in December shows that a stunning one out of three working-age Michigan adults -- 1.7 million people -- lack the basic skills to get a family-sustaining job. It also shows that 44% of all Michigan's adults read below a sixth-grade level and that 60% of the students entering community colleges require remedial classes before they can start taking the postsecondary courses that lead to jobs.

The analysis was compiled by a work group that included more than 30 representatives of literacy centers, adult education programs, community colleges, universities, employers, Michigan Workforce agencies and liaisons from several state departments.

Armed with the report, state adult education officials have begun transforming the system to tackle a problem that Duthie said could cost billions to solve.

Workforce crisis

Michigan's ill-equipped workforce contributes to a perfect storm in employment in Michigan, one fueled also by factory workers laid off by the thousands who share space on the jobless rolls with high numbers of high school dropouts and graduates who were socially promoted through Michigan public schools without adequate education.

The result is an enormous population that is not educated enough to enter job-training programs that require reading at a sixth-grade level. The crisis also is fueling the run on Michigan's unemployment system, which provides benefits to 450,000 people and has received nearly 600,000 new claims since December.

It also has forced some Michigan cities to forgo federal- and state- funded programs because potential participants didn't meet minimum reading requirements.

"We're talking about people who read below a sixth-grade reading level and in some cases lower," Duthie said. "They may recognize a stop sign or work their cell phone, but they certainly couldn't read directions."

Margaret Williamson, executive director of ProLiteracy Detroit, the city's largest adult-reading program, has seen the problem building for years.

"It's tragic," she said. "You see them, they come in to us after they've been to Work First and they're so dejected because they cannot even get into a job-training program."

She said Detroit has about 365,000 residents age 16 and older who read below sixth-grade level. That's more than a third of a city that is losing residents every year.

"Think about this," Williamson said. "If you open up every closed school and ran them 24/7, you don't have enough buildings or ... staff to remediate that level of people."

No quick fix

The state aims to develop a remediation plan for half the 1.7 million who need it, or 850,000 people. The state just received a \$300,000 Joyce Foundation grant toward that end.

ProLiteracy is among several providers forming partnerships with employers to simultaneously teach basic skills and job skills. Such partnerships will be the core of the state's plan.

State Rep. Mike (Huck) Huckleberry, D-Greenville, said he had not seen the analysis of Michigan's poor literacy level, but lived through the Electrolux loss.

"Everything they're saying, I have witnessed it firsthand," he said. "Some people had a false vision that the jobs would come back. They'd made a living all their lives doing manufacturing work. They didn't perhaps have the highest education to begin with and they were absolutely scared. How do you tell somebody 55 years old you got to go back to college for two years, and they didn't have a high school education to begin with?"

Gary DiDio, plant manager for United Solar in Greenville, said about half the 350-person production force are former Electrolux workers, and he's happy with the team.

"But," he said, "I can tell you that in the screening process two years ago, I was astounded, shocked really, that some people would come in with no résumé and say their best skill was 'reliable' ... Today, you must be able to learn. Our responsibility is to create not just a work environment but a learning environment."

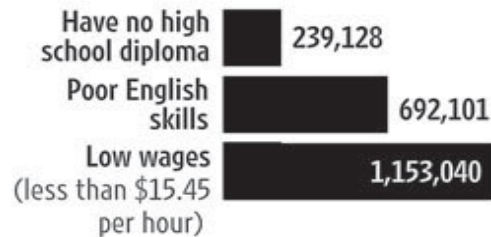
Greenville offers a lesson to every undereducated, unemployed worker.

"That's the way it is. That's the world we live in," Huckleberry said. "Anything we spend on training will come back as an investment, not an expense."

Lacking skills

One out of three working-age Michigan adults — 1.7 million people — lack the basic skills or credentials to attain family-sustaining jobs and contribute to the state's economy.

Of those working-age adults:



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey (Public Use Microdata Samples)

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Lifetime earnings and education (ages 18 to 64)



■ 44% of Michigan adults read below a sixth-grade level.

■ 1 in 3 working-age Michigan adults lack the basic skills to hold a family-sustaining job.

■ 60% of new students at the state's community colleges need remedial education before they can take postsecondary courses.

■ The state now spends \$33 million for adult education programs that reach 48,000 people; the cost to reach 850,000 or half those in need? Billions, officials say.

Sources: The Council for Adult and Experimental Learning (CAEL); the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS) (2008) Adult Learning in Focus: National and State-by-State Data; U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey; 2006 Public Use Microdata Samples

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Here are some ideas for attacking the lack of reading skills in the Michigan workforce:

Target potential dropouts before high school

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Mike Flanagan has asked schools across Michigan each to identify 15 fifth- through ninth-graders showing signs that they may drop out: acting out, academic trouble, poor attendance. If principals and teachers can put together action plans for each child, the state could gain 60,000 high school graduates a year.

End social promotions

Use clear and consistent grade-level expectations so students who do graduate have the skills necessary to get jobs or into college. "All these kids need real diplomas, meaningful diplomas," Flanagan said

Join and support partnerships

State efforts to provide remedial education to 850,000 people in the workforce will succeed only if employers are partners with educators through two levels of training: basic education and job skills.

Maximize use of technology

ProLiteracy, which has operated adult literacy programs for 20 years in the Detroit area, uses computers to allow people to learn in their homes at their own pace, eliminating classroom sessions that can be embarrassing for slow readers.

Wake up and smell the Depression

Recognize the seriousness of this issue and how failing to address it can hold Michigan back. Factory jobs in the auto industry masked Michigan's high rates of illiteracy for generations. Those days are gone.

Even assembly-line work in modern factories requires postsecondary education or training -- and that means reading skills are essential.

Reading is the key to lifelong learning.