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EDITORIAL

Area employers, educators work to meet job needs

Jobs. For most people, it's a one-word answer to Michigan's problems. We've watched the state's unemployment rate climb to the highest in the nation as Detroit's automakers fell from world dominance. We bemoan our state's loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs and wonder what the future holds.

But the key to renewed economic health is not simply more jobs. Rather, it's more people with the skills that employers need. It's an educated work force that can adapt to change and thrive on innovation. That's the message Jim Hettinger, president and CEO of Battle Creek Unlimited, delivered at a meeting Tuesday on Battle Creek's work readiness initiatives.

The meeting, sponsored by BCU and the Adult Team of the Community Literacy Collaborative, brought together employers, educators and others with a stake in helping ensure that area residents get the education and training they need to succeed in the job market.

Hettinger pointed to fields such as nursing and engineering where there are not enough qualified people to fill available jobs. Skilled trades such as plumbing and welding also are in demand, and even areas that once required little education, such as manufacturing jobs, now require significant training.

That is why Hettinger said it is essential that the education sector - from K-12 schools to colleges and universities - work to meet the needs of today's work force. Education, like business, must emphasize ideas and innovation and reward results, he said.

Such a huge challenge is being addressed locally in a variety of ways, as was illustrated by others at the work-readiness meeting. Mary Brandimore of Battle Creek Public Schools' Adult Education spoke of her program's participation in a pilot study for "Preparing Workers for 21st Century Employment," which aims to improve reading skills and help participants develop an understanding of what it takes to succeed in the work force.

Marshall Washington of Kellogg Community College described how KCC is using an adult education enhancement grant from the Battle Creek Community Foundation to help students develop self-sufficiency skills and utilize available resources to succeed. Jerry Mainstone, owner of Mainstone and Associates, talked about BC CAREERS, an employer-backed initiative that helps people move from public assistance to employment by overcoming personal barriers.

All of these efforts also underscore the need for people to take personal responsibility for gaining the education and skills they need to become part of the work force. Opportunities are worthless without the individual initiative required to take advantage of them.

The National Career Readiness Certificate was discussed by Rachael Jungblut of Grand Rapids Community College, who described efforts elsewhere in Michigan to develop a uniform way for employers to evaluate prospective employees' skills.

"Employers and educators need a common language in evaluating the knowledge and readiness of

potential employees," Jungblut said.

Tuesday's meeting showed how Battle Creek is working to create that common language.

Educators and employers need to continue efforts to create a work force that is knowledgeable and can adapt to ever-changing job requirements. Businesses will thrive and grow when they have the skilled workers they need to successfully compete in the marketplace.

Developing an educated work force is an ongoing effort that requires the support of all sectors of our community. Its success will benefit all of Battle Creek as well.
