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Owens: Manufacturers need educated work force

By KAREN OWENS
Guest Columnist

There was a time when dropping out of school wasn't such a big deal, when drop-outs could always fall back on a job in manufacturing. That's no longer the case.

South Carolina's advanced manufacturing companies require people equipped with strong academic and technical skills, able to develop and use sophisticated manufacturing processes. Creating that highly skilled, properly educated work force is essential to our ability to compete in the global marketplace.

In those areas of the state where we have difficulty recruiting new industry, it's often due to high drop-out rates and adult literacy problems. And even when they stay in school, few of our state's young people are choosing to pursue their studies in engineering, science, technology and math — all areas vital to manufacturing's continued success.

Many plant managers won't even talk to applicants who don't have a high school diploma or GED. Many teachers I talk to don't make the connection between a technical education and a high-paying job in manufacturing. And quite a few parents have a bias for four-year college degrees. It is critical that we begin to change the conversations we are having about what it takes to be successful.

Despite these uncertain times, manufacturing still packs a powerful economic punch, paying wages that are typically 25 percent higher than non-manufacturing jobs. Every \$1 in manufactured goods generates an additional \$1.37 in economic activity. And manufacturing drives innovation, supporting 70 percent of all private research and development in the United States.

We must encourage more students to explore career opportunities in manufacturing. If we're serious about closing the per-capita income gap with our neighbors, we must engage educators, parents and students to see the benefits manufacturing provides and stress the urgency of future work force needs. We must also expose young people to the creativity and innovation required for these jobs and tap into their desire to make the world a better place.

The Silver Crescent Foundation works to help people of all ages and backgrounds discover manufacturing and understand how to use their aptitude in science and math to make the world better. In this way, we help to fill our state's future work force pipeline with the creative and educated workers our existing companies and newly recruited ones require to thrive and prosper.

The U.S. Department of Labor projects that South Carolina's employment demand will increase by 16 percent by 2030, while our labor pool is expected to grow by only 7 percent.

We must take steps now to make sure those numbers change, or we will continue to fall further behind in the global economy.

Ms. Owens is president of the Silver Crescent Foundation, which promotes manufacturing vitality and career opportunities in South Carolina.