

# The BeaconNews

## Work force panel: Valley workers need training

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What do you get when you put a dozen employers, politicians, analysts and educators in a room to discuss problems in the Aurora-area job market?

A lot of different answers.

But the focus at Friday's panel discussion at Aurora's Prisco Community Center was on what employers describe as a growing shortage of workers with the skills needed for the 21st century economy.

"We have a problem of people not entering the work force with basic skills," in math, science and communication, said Felix Martinez, plant manager at Sealmaster Bearing.

That might not have been such a problem decades ago when factories needed simple, manual labor, Martinez said, but a modern factory requires workers who can handle complex, computerized machinery.

Equally alarming, said Painter and Allied Trades union coordinator Gary Von Behren, is that many young adults are graduating from high school without a sense of how handle the discipline and responsibility of the workplace.

"We lose people because they don't show up for work or don't show up on time," Von Behren said.

The phenomenon becomes something of a chicken-and-egg problem, panelists said, with the drag on the local economy reinforcing itself over time.

In other words, Kane County Board member Bill Wyatt said, "The marketplace is defining us as a low-income, low-language-skill area," which draws even more low-wage jobs to the area.

Meanwhile, companies that need a highly skilled work force tend to stay away, luring the area's best students with them, Wyatt said. "Too many times, I see our highest achievers going to college and never coming back," he said.

The resulting no-win situation is the pattern of depressed incomes and heightened unemployment that dogs Aurora today, and by some measures, might be getting worse.

The obvious solution, panelists agreed, is to make sure the necessary education is available to -- maybe even imposed upon -- high school students as well as low-skilled adults who are getting squeezed by the global economy.

More vocational training in particular is needed, panelists said, pointing out that federal funds for non-academic schooling are actually decreasing.

State funds for education are also decreasing, said Ralph Martire, of the Center on Tax and Budget Accountability, which argues that Illinois short-changes its public school system by \$2 billion per year.

Aurora Mayor Tom Weisner said school funding reform that shifts the burden from unequal local property taxes to equal statewide income taxes is critical for many Fox Valley schools, which are below average in their per-pupil spending.

In terms of immediate improvements, panelists said local companies and schools need to work closer together to address the mismatch between workplace needs and standard curricula.