

Testimony of

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Before the

Assembly Minority Task Force on Learning for Work

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Chairmen Blankenbush, Norris, Assemblywoman Walsh and members of the Taskforce, good evening and thank you for this opportunity to testify tonight. I am Tom O'Connor, Vice President, Government Relations for the Capital Region Chamber.

The Capital Region Chamber represents over 2,400 businesses and organizations from throughout the region that employ more than 150,000 area residents. Our Chamber's membership is diverse. We represent for-profits and not-for-profits; large corporations and small family-owned businesses.

The Chamber is aware that the Assembly Minority Conference has introduced legislation to create the "Learning for Work Program" in an effort to generate ideas to address the "middle-skills gap".

The Chamber recognizes how important talent is to economic development, and we work to:

- Assist local employers in recruiting bright, new talent to our region;
- Retain graduates from our local higher-education institutions;
- Increase awareness of our community assets among young professionals;
- Provide professional development programs to enrich the employees of our businesses.

We make several resources available to both employers and job seekers including:

- Job and Volunteer Openings
- Young Professionals Network
- Executive Mentorship Program
- Leadership Tech Valley
- Campus Connect
- BusinessU

The Chamber knows all too well that the economic prosperity throughout the state is hindered by the current and continuing employment gap. The middle-skills gap impacts both employees and employers. Currently, there are over 13,000 available jobs in the Capital Region alone. Sadly, too many of these vacancies go unfilled because employers are unable to find employees with the skills required for these jobs. Too be sure, it is disheartening for job seekers to see thousands of job openings yet not have the required skills to be hired. It is also frustrating for employers who are in desperate need of mid-skilled employees to see their job vacancies go unfilled. Without these mid-skilled employees, employers are finding it difficult, if not impossible, to successfully meet their demands, maintain productivity and, in short, conduct business.

Unless we develop practical solutions to address the employment gap, we will continue to see thousands of unfilled mid-level skilled jobs. Clearly, as government, education and business leaders, as partners with a common goal, we must encourage and support those programs that have been successful in reducing the employment gap. Additionally, we must look towards new and creative means in which to provide our state's job seekers with the skill sets that are required by today's and tomorrow's jobs. Matching employees with skills to employers with available jobs is not just a goal, it is an absolute economic necessity. In order for this state, and from my perspective the Capital Region, to remain competitive, retain current businesses, attract new businesses, and ultimately ensure the economic prosperity of all New Yorkers, we must have a larger pool of middle-skilled employees. Given the ever widening gap between skills and jobs, there can be no doubt that we must provide job seekers with both the pathways to skills and the actual skills necessary to get hired.

Today, I want to share with you the Chamber's perspective on how we believe the current employment gap can be bridged. I'll highlight what we believe can work, what we currently see out there as successful programs and what we recommend for consideration.

The Chamber strongly supports education models that better prepare students for entry into careers and/or college. Career and college ready students are critical to regional job growth and prosperity.

The Chamber is an advocate of innovative education models and multiple pathways. We believe that not every student will succeed by following the traditional education pathway and consequently should be given every opportunity to pursue other avenues to graduation. Multiple pathways will improve New York State's graduation rate and will ensure that our students are college and/or career ready upon graduation.

The Chamber also encourages efforts to improve science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education. The current and future jobs in our science and high-tech industries, those jobs that are so important to Tech Valley, require workers with skills and knowledge that only STEM education can provide. Likewise, our local colleges and university, particularly our engineering and polytechnic schools, will expect their potential candidates for admission to have received a rigorous STEM education.

In addition to multiple pathways and STEM education, the Chamber is fully supportive high P-12 learning standards. Today's businesses require employees that are critical thinkers, complex problem solvers and effective communicators. High learning standards prepare today's students to effectively fulfill each of these roles. We must continue to change the focus of our curriculum from low-level skills like rote memorization to higher-level skills like critical thinking.

The Chamber is a strong advocate for increased funding for community colleges for the purpose of customized industry training. Community colleges have been a great business partner. They have and should continue to play a vital role in addressing the employment gap.

The Task Force should look to the New York State Pathways in Technology College High School (NYS P-TECH) as a successful program. This program is a public-private partnership. The Chamber is pleased to serve as the liaison between Capital Region P-TECH schools and business partners to help create an education-business ecosystem that benefits students and employers throughout the region. The Capital Region P-TECH is a four to six-year program (grades 9-14) focused on engaging students in hands-on, project-based learning to be successful in careers in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). The program is being led by Capital Region BOCES, with partners from business and industry, higher education and K-12 education.

Students who successfully complete the program earn a high school diploma and an associate degree at no cost in a high-tech field. Graduates are first in line for a job with industry partners in the growing field of information technology. The Chamber and Capital Region BOCES see the Capital Region P-TECH schools as an opportunity to provide connections for Chamber members who are in need of developing their workforce pipeline in computer science, computer information systems and cybersecurity to students that are specifically seeking an education in these fields of study.

The middle-skills gap is a real and troubling dilemma facing employees and employers alike. Unless it is addressed now, the gap will steadily widen. It is incumbent upon all stakeholders to develop new solutions and support existing programs that will bridge the gap between skills and jobs. I am encouraged to see the many partnerships between business, education and government leaders that have formed to tackle this gap. And I truly believe that the best, most effective and innovative solutions will be produced by these partnerships. The Taskforce would be well served to encourage and assist these efforts. The Chamber, along with our many partners, have a vested interest in bridging the skills gap. In short, the Capital Region, its businesses and our community can only thrive if our workforce is equipped with the skills required for today's and tomorrow's jobs.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide the Chamber's perspective and I would welcome your questions.