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Department of Education Leads Effort for More Skilled Workers

By Wilford Shamlin | December 13, 2013

Young adults who left school without mastering basic reading, writing and math skills are destined to work in lower-paying jobs requiring minimal skills or risk not working at all because they lack the necessary skills, according to panelists who addressed adult literacy and workforce readiness.

Judith Renyi, executive director of the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on Literacy, said 82 percent of job seekers in Philadelphia tested at the same level in reading, writing and math as students in fourth to sixth grade.

"That's typical nationwide. This is not a Philadelphia phenomenon," Renyi said.

Renyi, who is working to address the issue of a low-skilled workforce in Philadelphia, moderated a panel discussion that was part of a daylong regional engagement session held Tuesday at CCP's Center for Business and Industry. The event was sponsored jointly by the U.S. Department of Education and the Philadelphia Mayor's Commission on Literacy.

The Mid-Atlantic engagement session on adult literacy and workforce readiness comes on the heels of a November report identified 36 million adults ages 16 to 65 who lack literacy and math skills and the ability to solve problems using technology.

Educators play a key role in preparing students for the workforce. Companies must be more diligent not only in training employees for roles with greater responsibility within the company but also in helping them understand how specific skills advance the company's mission.

Cheryl Feldman, executive director of District 1199C Training & Upgrading Fund, talked about helping adult workers see how to create synergy by merging career and education goals. She said research shows productivity goes up when an employee can connect learning with enhanced skills.



Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier, assistant secretary of U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education and acting assistant secretary for the Office of Postsecondary Education, applauds Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter for addressing the issue of low-skilled workers through a commission on literacy. — PHOTO BY TRIBUNE CHIEF PHOTOGRAPHER ABDUL R. SULAYMAN

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Dr. Paul Harrington, director of Drexel University's Center for Labor Markets and Policy, said the panel also linked school attendance, tardiness and disciplinary actions to likelihood for success in mastering basic skills, college attendance or completing a college degree program.

Significant numbers of young people who have not held a job in five years and are part of a growing number of young adults who are disconnected.

"We don't have the resources to service everybody. It's a job market of consequences and educators need to be aware of that," Harrington said.

William Strahan, executive vice president of human resources for Comcast Cable, said the incentive for businesses should focus on investing in capital rather than spending money on a particular service. "Business will fix its own problem by investing in capital" and "find other ways to complete the task rather than lower productivity," Strahan said.

For example, businesses would rather invest more in automated-teller machines than keep bank tellers who are unable to count on payroll. Retailers will look to online, self-help solutions rather than pay employees who provide poor customer service.

Meg Shope Koppel, senior vice president of research, policy and innovation for Philadelphia Works, Inc., said exposure to opportunities can go a long way toward keeping people engaged. Businesses can communicate the importance of technology to the public by posting videos about a typical day at their company. She also suggested that school facilities be opened to the public for evening programs rather than sit idle.

The panelists also explained the financial impact of a better educated workforce on businesses. While the statistics were cause for concern, it should be a call to action.

"It's a wake up call, and it's big," said Brenda Dann-Messier, acting assistant secretary for the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education.

Consumers who have the necessary skills to qualify for higher paying jobs can also afford higher-end products. Businesses who promote talent internally can reduce the time needed for employees to learn their jobs, open positions for new employees, and spend less time recruiting.

The findings of an international survey of adult skills, released in October, showed the average performance of U.S. adults was "significantly lower than the international average" in literacy and math skills, and using technology for problem-solving.