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The Post-Standard

Job One

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It was only 9 a.m., and the phones were already ringing off the hook at the Syracuse Glass Co.

The calls came pouring in the day after The Post-Standard published a story about the company's exhaustive search to find local workers for entry-level jobs.

Like Syracuse Glass, several local companies have had difficulty finding both entry-level and high-skilled workers - apparently even when offering enticing benefits.

Syracuse Glass pays only \$9 an hour, but trains its employees, has flexible scheduling that includes day and evening hours, and proclaims a willingness to work around higher education schedules. Employees don't have to make long-term commitments. They can spend one or two years or their entire careers at the company, with opportunities to advance. "We had openings for everybody," Vice President Peg Kelley said.

The jobs remained unfilled until the company began reaching out to the immigrant community, a much sought-after group that is an essential component of the local work force.

But as Roger Evans, the regional state Labor Department economist, points out, the immigrant population isn't large enough to fill the area's current and future labor shortage.

It shouldn't have to be.

There are people born and raised in this community who need sustainable jobs - the unemployed or underemployed, older workers, high school dropouts and high school graduates lacking critical job skills. That the phones were ringing off the hook at Syracuse Glass confirms that many residents need work. But they have to be better connected with employers and, in many cases, better prepared to handle full-time employment.

Local business, government and education leaders have not been idle.

In March, the Journey to Jobs summit attracted 400 participants and unveiled an impressive action agenda to recruit and train workers of all ages and backgrounds. Last month, business and education leaders created the Partnership for a Work Ready Syracuse, an effort to help city school district students become employable.

Some strategies from the summit agenda and from representatives of Partners for Education and Business, the Manufacturers Association of Central New York and the state Labor Department particularly stand out:

• Ensuring that students are competent in reading, writing and math skills - the foundation of so many jobs, whether low- or high-skilled. And making sure young people understand how to

function in the work place.

Ö Educating guidance counselors and school officials about jobs in manufacturing and in the trades, many of which are relatively high-paying. Rejecting the myth that every student must go to college to succeed.

Ö Assessing the skills of job applicants to determine job-readiness - and then offering support in areas that need strengthening.

Ö Soliciting information from local employers about what kinds of skills are needed.

Ö Developing uniform standards for measuring workplace skills and offering a credentialing program for workers to show they are job-ready.

These are important steps, and they should be pursued with urgency. The community must adopt the mentality not only that people need quality jobs - but that jobs need qualified people.

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