

JOB ONE: THE WORKFORCE

AMID DOWNTURN, TASK OF CREATING BEST AND BRIGHTEST WORKERS FACES CHALLENGES

By THOMAS L. PHILLIPS and RICHARD COHEN

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Capital Workforce Partners is a workforce investment board serving 37 municipalities in north central Connecticut. The group's mission is to take advantage of public and private resources to provide skilled workers to join a competitive regional economy. It also tracks key indicators of the region's economic and workforce health in an effort to pinpoint areas where resources, money and expertise will have the greatest effect.

Our year-to-year indicators were collected before the economy dramatically worsened but, even so, the region's economic indicators were flat at best and showed that there already were emerging challenges.

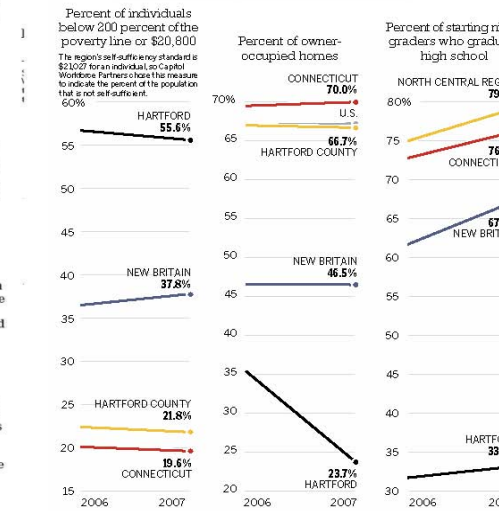
A forecast shows that 48.6 percent of the jobs available in the North Central Region by 2014 will pay less than \$40,000 a year, which is considered a self-sufficient wage. A single mother with two children, for example, can make it without assistance on \$44,000 a year in the Hartford region.

In 2007, 55.6 percent of Hartford individuals had earnings below 200 percent of the poverty level or \$20,800 in annual income. This was an improvement of 1.1 percent, but the three-year trend is still flat. In Hartford County 21.8 percent of individuals made less than 200 percent of the poverty level, virtually unchanged over the last year. In New Britain, 37.8 percent were below the 200 percent mark, which was an increase of 1.3 percent.

Another indicator of individual affluence, owner-occupied homes, was down 0.3 percent in Hartford County to 66.7 percent of all homes in 2007. In Hartford 23.7 percent of homes were owner-occupied, a 1.5 percent decrease. In New Britain, 67.4 percent of the homes are owner-occupied, unchanged from 2006.

Although the state's elected leaders and residents are understandably worried about surviving the current downturn, they must be committed to continuing our investment in education. The employment forecast for 2014 applies to students in junior high and high schools today, if they go right to work or get some kind of further education. These students need to be prepared for the changing demands of jobs that may require the ability to think and write clearly and to be proficient in math or science.

The Connecticut Academic Performance Test, which is given to Connecticut 10th-graders, showed 4.9 percent improvement in math from 2007 to 2008, with 50.2 percent of all students



achieving the goal. In the North Central Region, 63.1 percent met the goal, an improvement of 4.8 percent. In Hartford and New Britain combined, 14.2 percent of the students met the goal, which was up 0.3 percent.

In reading, the CAPT test results also rose, with 45.5 percent of students meeting the goal statewide. In the North Central Region, 56.9 percent were at the math goal, while in New Britain and Hartford combined, 14 percent were at the goal.

Moving more students toward the CAPT goals is critical if Connecticut hopes to sustain its reputation as a state with an educated and skilled workforce. The region's cities are showing progress toward closing the cavernous divide between their students and those from suburban schools. Hartford is the fastest-improving district in the state, but, as Superintendent Steven J. Adamowski recently noted, the system may have turned a corner but there remain years of hard work ahead.

Projections show that within the next 10 to 15 years, 40 percent of the state's workforce will come from cities, putting added emphasis on the importance of investing in education today.

In the class of 2007 statewide, 76.3 percent of the students who entered the ninth grade graduated. In the North Central Region, the graduation rate was 79.3 percent of the entering ninth-graders, which was up 4.3 percent. In Hartford, the graduation rate was 83.2 percent and in New Britain it was 67.4, which were increases of 1.5 percent and 5.7 percent respectively.

Completing high school is the minimum requirement for seeking work. Postgraduate higher education or further vocational training is more often a prerequisite for good-paying jobs that lead to a sustainable career path.

Students who fail to graduate are looking for work without the tools to compete. They will struggle to get by and will affect the state's ability to keep employers and return to a strong economy. They will also most likely end up in low-wage jobs resulting in their reliance on support such as food stamps and HUDSEY medical coverage.

Continuing to invest in students now is critical to the state's future economic competitiveness.

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