



PATRICK TESTIN STATE SENATOR

Op-Ed: A Multi-faceted Approach to Growing Wisconsin's Workforce

In January of 2010, Wisconsin's unemployment rate was 9.2%. Today, we are sitting at a historically low 3.0%. Over the last eight years, Wisconsin has made "Open for Business" more than a slogan – it's a priority. Wisconsin is on the right track, but with success comes new challenges and new opportunities.

Over the next 7 years, Wisconsin will need 45,000 new workers to meet the needs of our growing economy. Developing a 21st century workforce will take a multi-faceted approach. We need to invest in Wisconsin's workers, break down barriers to the workforce, and attract new residents through increased opportunity and new incentives.

The 2017 budget was a step in the right direction. Because of it, Wisconsin is investing nearly \$40 million in workforce training programs over the next two years. That's an approximate 50% increase over the last biennium. This investment includes funding for the Fast Forward grant program, technical education incentive grants, and the nurse training program. These are solid investments in our home grown talent – but we can do more.

One step is further developing partnerships between our schools and local businesses. When communities come together and break down barriers between schools, businesses, and higher education – great things can happen. I've authored a bill with Rep. Romaine Quinn as part of the Rural Wisconsin Initiative (RWI) that will enable high school seniors to simultaneously earn academic credit and credit toward completion of their apprenticeship.

In fact, several Rural Wisconsin Initiative bills have focused on growing our workforce. This year's budget included a bill from the RWI that provides \$23 million for broadband expansion – which helps rural businesses. We also created two \$1 million matching grant programs for rural health care worker training – one for advanced practice clinicians such as advanced practice nurses, and another for allied health professionals.

In addition to making these investments, I am also committed to breaking down invisible barriers. For too long there has been a stigma attached to jobs in the trades and technical education. That needs to end. There is dignity in all work – that's why once a month, I spend a day working at a local business in the 24th Senate District. Opportunities are out there if we look for them and keep an open mind. Jobs in manufacturing or the trades are not "dirty jobs." In many cases, they are family-supporting jobs, and they need to be done. One size doesn't fit all, and we want to ensure that young people have the chance to explore different opportunities.

We need to start in high school by giving students an incentive to broaden their approach to include more technical education. Rep. Kulp and I have authored a bill that would create a revenue cap exemption for public schools that invest in capital infrastructure equipment, such as a welding unit. We must encourage the development of skills that are in high demand but short supply in the current economic climate.

Finally, we need to work on attracting new talent to our state. I've worked with Representatives Murphy and Petryk to introduce a bill which would enable out of state UW and tech college students to earn back a portion of their tuition by remaining in Wisconsin and putting down roots after graduation. Wisconsin ought to be a magnet for talent, and my colleagues and I are working to make sure that we are.

By addressing our workforce challenges and opportunities from multiple angles, we can – and we will build a better Wisconsin.