

# Mich. governor puts renewed emphasis on blue-collar jobs

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**WATERTOWN TOWNSHIP** — Only a few short years ago, Michigan leaders talked excitedly about diversifying the state's economy beyond the auto industry, envisioning a Silicon Valley-style workforce that would be less dependent on manufacturing and more invested in technology and green energy.

It's the same dream shared by virtually every other governor whose state once relied on factory jobs. But it has collided with a stark reality: Car production is booming, Michigan's skilled tradesmen are getting older and there aren't enough qualified people to replace them in a labor pool that has started to shift away from industrial jobs.

So in a change of course, the state is going back to its roots and putting renewed emphasis on training welders, machinists, electricians and other blue-collar

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workers.

Gov. Rick Snyder says the pendulum has swung too far toward encouraging students to get a four-year degree when they should also consider an apprenticeship or a community college program.

“Big mistake,” he said. “We’re paying a price for that today. If you talk to companies around the country, they will tell you their greatest concern is making sure they get talented people with the right skill sets,” including people who “can make things, can build things.”

The Republican governor wants to re-establish vocational and technical schooling as an “equally honorable, equally important and equally well-compensated” career track.

To that end, his new budget proposes a \$36 million, or 75 percent, increase in spending on trades training, technical education and career planning.

He’s promoting an apprenticeship program in which companies pay workers and cover their tuition at community colleges in fields such as mechatronics, which combines skills in mechanical, electrical and computer disciplines. Other initiatives include a new \$50 million state fund – the country’s largest – to help the colleges buy new equipment and the proposed doubling of a \$10 million fund that par-

tially covers businesses’ training costs in the classroom or on the shop floor.

Snyder also recently reorganized state government to take a more unified approach to worker training and talent development.

Michigan lost nearly 860,000 jobs from 2000 to 2009, more than half of them in manufacturing. But since the end of the Great Recession, more than a third of those positions have been restored.

On the outskirts of Lansing, business has rebounded at Franchino Mold & Engineering, which now has 80 employees – nearly double the number from five years ago. Most of them are machinists and mold makers who build custom products for the automotive and other industries.

It’s “very, very difficult” to find skilled workers to replace those that will be retiring soon, said Brad Rusthoven, the company’s human resources manager. Other employees have left for out-of-state jobs, or they’re working at other plants, he said.

Franchino has used \$50,000 over two years from the state’s skilled trades training fund to pay for classes and even wages.

Chris Cook, 25, will make about \$20 an hour after finishing a four-year apprenticeship at Franchino while also earning two associate’s degrees at Lansing Community College. He expects to graduate with no debt.