



Photos by Don Campbell / HP staff

Akeem Warren of Benton Harbor preps headlamp reflectors for finishing Friday at Regal Finishing in Coloma. Jim Kodis, the shop's owner, has partnered with Kinexus, the workforce development agency, to hire employees while they are completing and advancing their educations. Over the past 10 years, Michigan has drastically reduced funding for adult education, limiting opportunities for many residents.

Learners & earners getting left behind

Michigan falls short in funding adult education

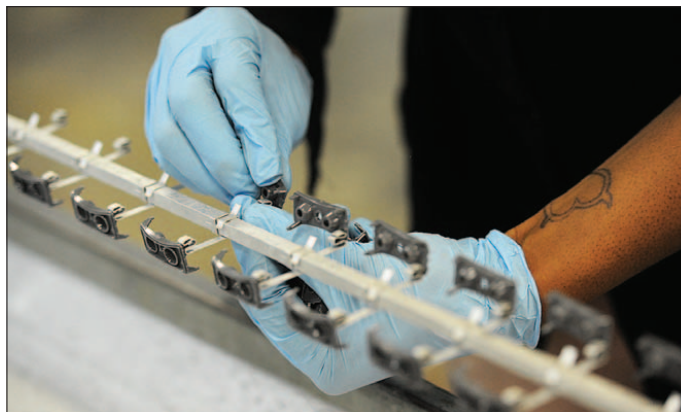
By JOHN MATUSZAK
HP Staff Writer

A business can run short of a lot of resources and survive, but the one thing it can't do without is people.

That's what Jim Kodis, owner of Regal Finishing in Coloma, realized as he has watched his employees approach retirement age, while young people shied away from careers in manufacturing.

To counter the trend, Kodis works with Kinexus, the work force and economic development agency, to hire employees ready to complete their educations and advance their job skills at the same time.

"These folks are a huge untapped resource in this area," Kodis said of the employees who are enrolled in adult education courses while working for him. "It hit me as an employer that I better begin to tap into this group of people or pretty soon I would have nobody left to hire. When you



Emisha Parker of Benton Harbor prepares headlamp reflectors for finishing Friday at Regal Finishing in Coloma. "I love this job. It's a great experience," Parker says.

give these forgotten people exposure to the workplace, they want to improve their skills, and you create more talent. It's essential for a business to survive."

The gaps

The Michigan League for Public Policy said much more needs to be

done to reclaim the "forgotten talent" of those who haven't completed high school or earned an equivalency degree.

A report from the League, "Willing to Work and Ready to Learn," shows that the state has drastically reduced

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its financial support for adult education over the last decade.

In 1996, funding for adult education stood at \$185 million. It took a sharp drop in 2004 and now is at \$22 million a year.

As a result, enrollment in adult education programs has been cut in half. After 2004, enrollment went from 70,000 to less than 30,000.

More than 221,500 Michigan adults between the ages of 25-44 lack a high school diploma or a GED. But fewer than 7 percent are enrolled in adult education classes.

In Berrien County, 8.3 percent of adults lack a high school education, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Of those without a high school diploma, 31 percent live in poverty, compared to 4 percent of residents with a bachelor's degree.

State leaders are emphasizing the importance of career training, with Gov. Rick Snyder creating the Department of Talent and Economic Development.

But for those without a high school diploma or its equivalent, the doors to economic prosperity are slamming shut.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor reported in February that only 14 percent of jobs in Southwest Michigan were available to those with less than a high school education. Another 39 percent of jobs require a high school diploma and some post-secondary education.

In the future, jobs will require an increasingly higher level of schooling.

According to a study by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 70 percent of jobs in Michigan by 2020 will require some post-secondary education.

Rolling up sleeves

To provide employment experience and educational assistance, Kinexus launched a pilot program with Kodis, a Kinexus board member, that made completing an education a condition of employment for new hires.

Emisha Parker, 23, and Corey Huston, 25, have worked at Regal Finishing since last fall. "I love this job. It's a great experience," Parker said. Both employees had completed high school, and received instruction through YouthBuild, which provides paid training in construction and health care.

Huston has completed training as a phlebotomist and plans to study to become an MRI technician. Parker wants to become a business manager working in the spa industry.

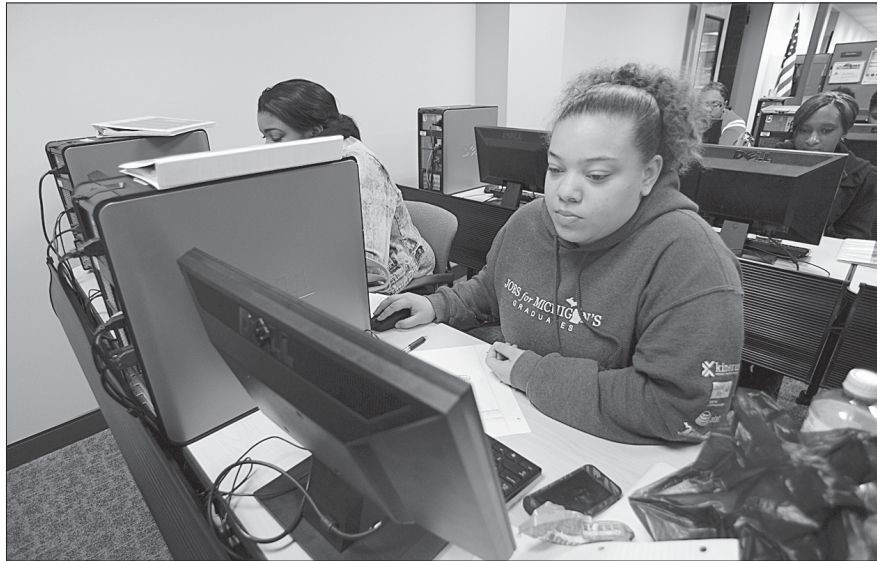
In addition, Kodis has hired employees through Jobs for America's Graduates, which targets students at risk of not completing high school.

He said he has had "real good success" with JAG graduates from Benton Harbor and Coloma, as well as the adult education students from the Bridge Academy.

The workers are reliable and ready to function as part of a team, he said. Kodis has watched them gain confidence and financial independence.

"They're very good employees. It gives them a sense of self-assurance that carries over into any workplace. It's nice to see them develop that self-confidence."

Being around high-skilled workers make them want to advance from entry-level positions to the env who



Photos by Dan Campbell /HP staff

Nadia Bridwell, right, and Brandi Abrams, focus on assignments during a certified nurse's assistant course Wednesday at Kinexus in downtown Benton Harbor. The women were able to complete their high school educations and continue their training through the Bridge Academy, Kinexus, the workforce development agency, works with several partners to remove barriers to residents completing their schooling and finding good jobs. The Michigan League for Public Policy has recommended that state leaders provide more funding for adult education, which has been greatly reduced over the last decade.



Instructor Angie Baldwin leads a pre-vocational class Wednesday at Kinexus in downtown Benton Harbor. In Michigan, more than 221,000 adults ages 25-44 lack a high school education, but because of funding cuts, fewer than 7 percent are enrolled in adult education classes.

makes \$20 or \$40 an hour, he said.

Overcoming obstacles

Major barriers to starting and completing adult education include obtaining child care, housing and transportation, said Charity Garcia, curriculum and instruction manager at the Bridge Academy, which provides training for students ages 16-24.

"Without those three, it is very difficult to succeed," said Kristin Harrington, senior director of talent resources at Kinexus.

Overcoming those obstacles is where a lot of the expense of adult education comes in, Harrington said. She said that, in today's environment, it is almost impossible for an adult education center to exist by itself, and partnerships are indispensable.

Kinexus works with Heartland Alliance, an anti-poverty organization, to provide additional assistance to its clients. Other partnerships include Michigan Rehabilitative Services, the Michigan Career and Technical Institute, and the Department of Human Services.

To help students, Kinexus provides rental opportunities and transportation at

no cost.

For those students who are working, often as part of their welfare requirements, it can be difficult to schedule classes and complete the program, Garcia said.

That's why Kinexus offers the Career Online High School, which allows students to study at home or in the classroom on their own schedule.

The program provides 24-hour academic coaching as participants complete their high school equivalency and earn a career certificate in a number of fields.

Back to school

Studying online was a lifeline for Nadia Bridwell and Brandi Abrams, who completed the program and are now enrolled in the certified nurse's assistant training course.

Bridwell's high school education was interrupted in 2013 when she became pregnant. After giving birth, her daughter spent 4 1/2 months in the hospital, putting her further behind.

Abrams left school during a family crisis, just three credits shy of fulfilling her graduation requirements.

Both saw advertisements for the Bridge Academy and decided to give it a try.

"It's more of a better fit for me," Abrams said. "In high school I did not get the one-on-one attention I get here."

The online component allowed Bridwell to progress at her own pace, and the program helped her with child care.

Abrams said she was the first person on her mother's side of the family to complete a high school education.

"When I graduated I was so happy," Bridwell said. "It convinced me I could do anything I put my mind to."

Both plan to continue their educations once they complete the CNA program.

"There is so much more I can do now," Abrams said. "There are a lot more job options."

Funding flunks out

The Michigan League for Public Policy recommends a significant boost in state funding for adult education.

The average state and federal funding level for adult education in Michigan has been \$36 million between 2010 and 2014.

The League calculates that if funding for adult education were increased by \$10 million, an additional 8,000 students could be served, bringing the total to 36,000 statewide. If it were increased by \$30 million, another 40,000 students could be enrolled.

Gov. Snyder's 2015-16 budget recommendation includes \$22 million for adult education. A House Appropriations subcommittee in March proposed eliminating all funding for adult education from the governor's budget.

At the same time, the Senate's K-12 School Aid and Education Appropriations subcommittee proposed adding \$7 million to Snyder's recommendation, bringing the total to \$29 million.

Funding for adult education comes through local school districts.

Peter Ruark, with the Michigan League, writes that "The House subcommittee's rationale for eliminating adult education funding is that school districts should get more overall funding and then choose how much to devote to adult education."

But that just pits the two entities, K-12 and adult educators, against each other, Ruark said.

Senators also backed Snyder's plan to extend child care eligibility for more adult education students who are working.

The League recommends that Michigan remove the 20-hour work requirement for welfare recipients who are enrolled in education and training courses.

Along with more funding, the League recommends that child care be provided at adult education sites, and

that adult education be offered at locations such as Head Start as part of a two-generation approach to enhancing job opportunities and alleviating poverty.

Harrington said Kinexus is not focused on the issue of funding, but instead looks at what employers need.

"Education is only meaningful with employment," Harrington said. "We can train people all day long, but if positions aren't filled, and we don't provide people with meaningful, sustainable jobs" it's a wasted effort, she offered. "We believe it starts with the employer, and what does the employer need, and how do we train the most highly skilled workers we can."

Kodis said that Michigan is putting a greater emphasis on training people for high-tech jobs, but businesses need entry-level employees, as well.

And the employees need the jobs. Workers at Regal Finishing start at about \$11 an hour, have access to health care coverage and participate in a profit-sharing plan. Kodis even helps pay tuition for those enrolled at Lake Michigan College.

He hopes that the leaders in Lansing make more of an effort to help those like Huston and Parker. "It's worth the investment," Kodis said.

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