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Sacramento workers lack critical skills, study says

By Darrell Smith

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The region's jobless rate stands just shy of 12 percent, but a new report released Wednesday says Sacramento businesses are struggling to find qualified hires in sectors that business leaders say are key to the region's economic recovery.

The reason, according to a survey by national nonprofit business group America's Edge, is an ever-widening "skills gap" in Sacramento and statewide. Fewer and fewer workers have the technical and "soft" skills needed to compete in the marketplace, the group concludes.

Titled "Can California Compete?" the report's answer appears to be "No."

To close the gap, America's Edge proposes an approach it calls Linked Learning, which combines high school classroom instruction with hands-on job experience and face time with local employers.

America's Edge released the report in Sacramento ahead of an Assembly Appropriations Committee hearing Friday on Assembly Bill 1304. The legislation, by Assemblyman Marty Block, D-San Diego, is aimed at creating standards for the credentialing of Linked Learning teachers.

The study's Sacramento findings rely on information collected by the Center of Excellence at Los Rios Community College District during April and July 2009.

"The main message is that California businesses are not getting employees with a proper skill set – the technical skills, the soft skills – and that spells trouble for our economy," Jennifer Ortega, state director at America's Edge, said Wednesday.

Some local business leaders, employers and educators presented the report in Sacramento Wednesday and called for change.

"From a business perspective, what we want to see is if the employee has the soft skills of communication and critical thinking," said Ryan Loofbourrow, a director at the Sacramento Downtown Partnership.

California has a shortage of workers in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math.

Meanwhile, nearly half of the state's available jobs require "middle skills" – a high school education, but not a four-year college degree. Less than 40 percent of workers have the training needed to fill the positions.

Among the report's Sacramento findings:

- More than half of health care employers said they had difficulty finding entry-level registered nurses.
- Forty percent of companies surveyed reported difficulty recruiting information and communications technology workers.
- More than 60 percent struggled to find project managers for construction and design work.

Loofbourrow said changing attitudes early about students' career choices can also help to narrow the gap. "We're told that anything less than college is a failure, but we need to tell them that these jobs are valuable," Loofbourrow said.