

Guest Editorial: Wisconsin Commemorates October as Manufacturing Month

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MADISON – When it comes to Wisconsin's economy, the state's 9,500 manufacturing employers are home run kings. They employ some 450,000 men and women in communities across the state. They account for one-fifth of the state's domestic product. They pay a wage that's approximately 20 percent higher than the state average.

Just as October gives the best teams in Major League Baseball a chance to rally fans in their race for the pennant, the proclamation of Manufacturing Month by Governor Walker gives employers, educators and workforce partners an opportunity to build support for Wisconsin's major league players in the manufacturing sector.

While this is a time to recognize and appreciate manufacturing as an economic MVP for our state, this is also a call for action – not just for current job seekers who may be considering a new career path, but also to teachers, guidance counselors and parents who can send a powerful message to youths that manufacturing has much to offer as a career choice.

Indeed, famous sluggers like Ryan Braun didn't develop their expertise overnight, but started along their paths with the guidance of coaches, parents and others who recognized their talents and encouraged them to focus on their strengths and interests. The need for encouragement holds true for students whose interests and skills may translate to careers in manufacturing as well.

The value of strong "farm teams" is not exclusive to Major League Baseball. Wisconsin's manufacturing employers also need strong programs at local high schools, technical colleges and locations that open students' eyes to manufacturing and help students build the requisite skills for success in the workplace.

Youth and adult apprenticeship, career and technical education programs, and the Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE) Initiative – a joint initiative with the Wisconsin Technical College System and other partners – are great examples of programs that assist students of all ages.

We know that today's manufacturing jobs are highly technical, requiring math and engineering courses in high school and post-secondary training. We also know manufacturing jobs will continue to be in demand as workers retire and leave the workforce, with nearly half of all manufacturing jobs by 2018 requiring at least some post-secondary training.

The Department of Public Instruction continues to work with the Department of Workforce Development and other partners to bolster career and technical education in schools. And, as members of Governor Walker's College and Workforce Readiness Council, both agencies are working with other partners to enhance our state's system to prepare the next generation of workers for careers in manufacturing and other sectors.

In Wisconsin, our middle and high school students are fortunate to have the opportunity to participate in the career and technical student organization called SkillsUSA, a partnership of educators, parents, and businesses ensuring Wisconsin has a highly skilled workforce. SkillsUSA sponsors competitive events and leadership opportunities that engage young people in manufacturing career pathways.

In the meantime, Manufacturing Month offers all of us the opportunity to showcase this sector across the state not just to communities in general, but to existing and potential manufacturing workers who can be part of this winning team.