



**2021**

**STATEWIDE EDUCATION  
& WORKFORCE POLICY  
TOUR REPORT**





In September of 2021, the IMA Education Foundation embarked on a six-week, ten-stop tour across Illinois. Throughout the tour, the IMA Education Foundation and IMA staff met with educators, business advocacy groups, and local manufacturers to explore regional workforce challenges, strategies, and successes being faced by IMA members. Through these discussions, we connected with over 150 people to identify education and policy solutions to combat the growing workforce crisis.

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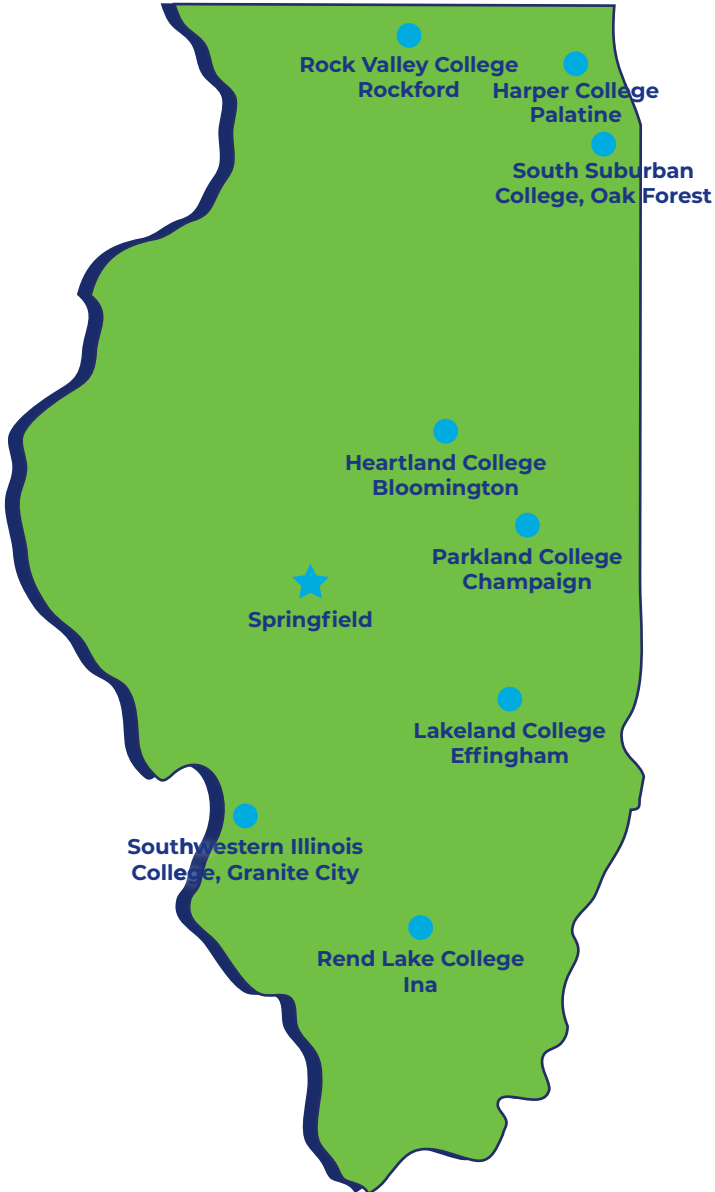
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# SUMMARY OF REPORTED FINDINGS

## TOUR STOPS



# COMMON THEMES

*While each region had their own unique challenges and ideas around solutions, several items rose to the top at each meeting. The common themes identified across the State are listed below:*

- (1) There is a lack of interest in careers in manufacturing across demographics from students to parents to adult learners, etc.
- (2) Employers face unprecedented challenges in both identifying and recruiting potential employees.
- (3) Employers also face significant challenges in retention and in planning for retirements. Several regions across the state will be experiencing an above-average percentage of retirements in the coming 5-10 years.
- (4) There is an overlap and/or silo of services and programs targeted to support and address workforce needs that unfortunately create gaps in services for both employers and employees.
- (5) The current skills gap goes deeper than the skills needed for the manufacturing industry to transition to Industry 4.0. Today's skills gap leads to significant remediation needs in the subjects of basic math, reading/literacy, and essential/soft skills.
- (6) There are limitations on our public education institutions at all levels that prevent schools from being able to respond to employer workforce and training needs quickly.

# EDUCATION

*Manufacturers and workforce development folks are exploring and implementing creative strategies, and, throughout the tour, employers shared some of their own best practices. What came up first was the point that education can play a significant role in solving long-term workforce needs:*

**(1)** It is absolutely necessary to contextualize education at all grade levels in a way that integrates and coordinates efforts around career exploration. Contextualizing education means connecting career pathways and career opportunities at a young age and making what students are currently learning relevant to their future career goals.

*Examples of this include providing students with career exploration opportunities (i.e., field trips) that lead to job shadowing opportunities while using what they are learning in the classroom, even as early as the elementary grades. Those opportunities start by building relationships between employers and local K-12 school districts.*

**(2)** It is possible to remove barriers that have led to the essential skills gap by incorporating additional skills into curriculum and coursework at all grade levels. “Essential skills” or “soft skills” are one of the largest categories of skills that employers say are lacking in today’s applicants. Educators have examples of how to incorporate teaching to the essential skills gap within current curriculum or even offering training on these essential skills.

*An example of how this is currently being done successfully within Illinois started with a conversation between an employer and the local school district to examine where specific skills are currently being taught and where essential skills can be incorporated into current courses. Materials already exist that would help structure and support teaching sections on the essential skills to various ages of students.*

# EDUCATION CONTINUED

**(3)** It is a recommended best practice that talent pipeline management systems be established in regions across the state to streamline the K-12 education system into a career continuum that leads to work-based learning opportunities in high school. The important component is that this continuum aligns with a student's preferred career pathway. This system must be built around the future workforce needs of local employers. The student's high school experience should directly lead to credit-bearing post-secondary education opportunities either through community college and/or 4-year institutions based on the credentialing, certification, and course/degree requirements necessary for local employment.

*Examples of this work include streamlining career pathways that allow employers to interact with students throughout their educational careers. Best practices can include employer outreach to local school districts to organize field trips to local manufacturing plants in the early grades. These experiences should evolve into job shadowing opportunities in middle school, and then internships and pre-apprenticeships in high school. Throughout these experiences, the student should continue to take courses to earn credentialing and college credit so that they are ready for job placement or ready to earn additional credentialing post high school.*

**(4)** One of the biggest challenges is educating the school community and education stakeholders about the benefits of careers in manufacturing. Manufacturing floors today are no longer the dark, dirty, or dangerous spaces that past generations experienced. Manufacturing today is clean, diverse, increasingly high tech, and sustainable, and it is important to share this message to educate school counselors, teachers, administrators, and parents in addition to students.

*Examples to address this challenge include employers involving those community and education stakeholders in events that are designed toward students. Connecting with parents, school counselors, staff, and teachers during manufacturing plant tours, at job fairs, and even during job shadowing experiences and internship opportunities will help educate some of the biggest influencers in students' lives about the benefits of careers in today's manufacturing industry.*

# RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES

*Second, innovative and effective recruitment strategies help to ensure that the applicant pool for open positions is large, has the necessary skills, and will result in long-term commitment to the employer:*

(1) Employers can design marketing tools and branding efforts that focus on the impact of the company's mission/product in a way that speaks to the newest generation of workers (i.e., Gen Z). It is being anecdotally reported that the younger generations have different priorities when considering potential career paths and often are found placing significant weight on the impact that a company is making in the world. Designing marketing efforts that highlight the impact of a company's product through its mission and branding will appeal to those generations, who will then likely become passionate and committed employees.

*Examples of this strategy were discussed throughout the tour and included brainstorming efforts around pivoting the way a company described its product into an impactful mission statement. A medical device manufacturer, for example, can instead be described as a company that helps people to walk again or get their life back as it incorporates the IMPACT of the product.*

(2) Several employers throughout the tour shared that they have reexamined the job descriptions and requirements for vacant positions to determine if the skills listed accurately reflect the necessary skills of the position itself. Employers shared that past practice was to "default" job postings to require college degrees along with a preference for 2-5 years of experience. Upon further examination, employers uncovered that those requirements were not necessary for many entry-level positions and ultimately had an unintended impact that often discouraged many individuals from applying, specifically individuals from underrepresented groups.

*Examples of success on this strategy came from IMA members across the tour where employers removed the 4-year degree and experience requirement from entry-level positions and saw an uptick in applications, particularly from underrepresented groups.*



# RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES CONT.

(3) Other perceived barriers exist in hiring non-traditional employees including adult learners (career changers), individuals with disabilities, veterans, and second chance citizens (individuals who were previously incarcerated). Often there are local community organizations that are designed to support these individuals and serve as a great place for employers to tap into for recruitment efforts. Community organizations often also have career centers or individuals helping their members find jobs and are therefore always looking for employers to connect with.

*Examples and types of community-based organizations that support non-traditional employees include local churches, veteran support groups, group homes, and other types of support groups. These groups and organizations often receive state and federal funding to support additional wrap-around services that would help the individual be a successful employee. It is important to connect with those organizations to identify the individual that meets your workforce needs.*

(4) Many employers are exploring implementing changes to hiring policies that may be discouraging potential applicants from applying. The policies that were most discussed throughout the tour as the top priorities to be considered included shortening the interview processes, changes to the onboarding processes, policy changes regarding drug testing, and changes to the benefits offered like offering low-cost benefits such as flexible scheduling and parental leave.

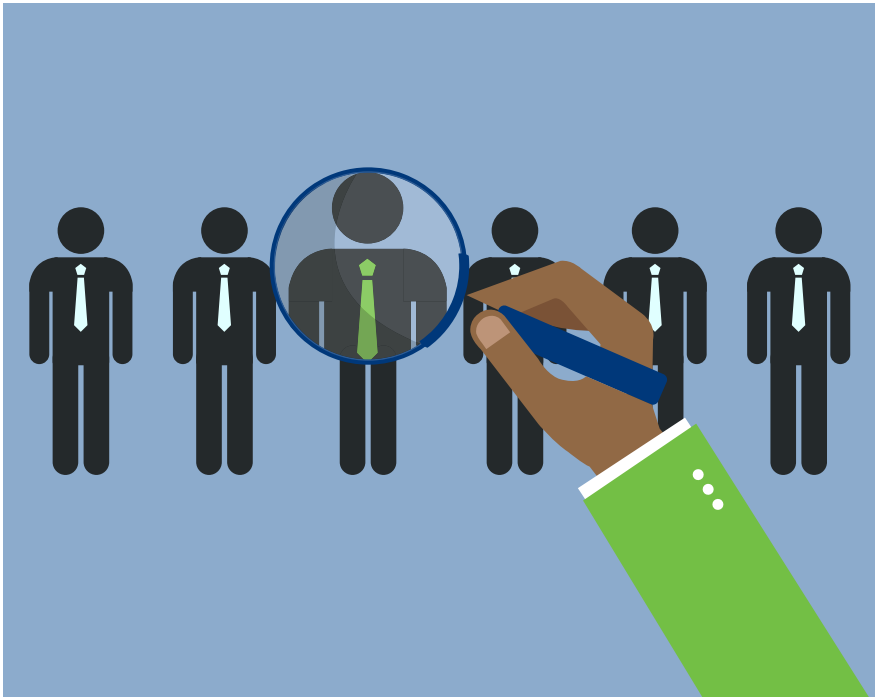
*Examples of hiring process policy changes that are being implemented by Illinois employers include shortening and focusing the interview timeline so that a job offer can be extended as quickly as possible and integrating whatever was removed from the interview process into the onboarding process. Items that are removed from the interview process can be incorporated in an intensive one-day onboarding training that also allows the individual to begin working as soon as possible.*

*Examples of changes to drug testing policies were shared throughout the tour where employers made changes to these policies for specific job types, but not all jobs, depending on risk and safety factors. The tour discussed examples of IMA members removing drug testing policies to an “incident-based” model with marijuana similar to how alcohol is treated in the workplace.*

# RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES CONT.

*Examples of low-cost changes to benefits that applicants are looking to offer are listed below:*

- Provide for parental leave. Most instances have shown that the parent is going to take time off regardless of a policy allowing them to do so.*
- Front loading vacation time.*
- Allowing for flexible scheduling when possible. While difficult to implement flexible scheduling on manufacturing floors, examples included making flexible scheduling available to then analyze at what time of day will the highest number of employees will be present and making changes to ensure that that period of time is also correlated with the highest production of the day.*



# RETENTION

*Third, retention remains an issue as COVID has led to a period of “The Great Resignation” but what are employers in Illinois doing to retain employees? A positive company culture that incorporates the viewpoints of both management and employees can be built using a couple of tools that have been shown to be beneficial:*

(1) Employers are using “stay interviews” in place of “exit interviews” as a way to check in with current employees to discuss what motivates them to come to work. Positive feedback like inclusive work culture, well-paying jobs, access to management, etc. can inform employers of the benefits that lead to a positive workplace culture and that feedback can be used to recruit new employees. Negative feedback of what someone would like to be changed is helpful because making those changes may also help improve retention rates.

*Examples of tools that currently exist to help employers to utilize the concept of “stay interviews” focus on the positive aspects of the workplace environment but also provide an opportunity for honest employee feedback on where things can be improved. This concept provides first-hand knowledge of changes employers ought to consider when making policy and management decisions that could potentially keep an employee from leaving the company which therefore helps improve retention rates.*

(2) It is important that opportunities for advancement within the company are clearly and regularly communicated to all levels of employees. It became apparent throughout the tour that oftentimes employees are leaving for better-paying jobs or better titles. Many employers use mentorship models that utilize mentors to identify and encourage employees with “potential” to continue to pursue additional opportunities within the company. Oftentimes this can also lead to a handful of employees falling through the cracks and leaving before such opportunities are made clear. It is therefore important to ensure those opportunities are made clear to ALL employees.

*Examples of successful mentorship models exist and often involve establishing team leaders that are then used to identify and recruit employees that have the potential for success within the company. There are also easy methods like job boards and other employee communication methods to effectively communicate that career advancement opportunities are available along with the supports/benefits that the company offers to assist employees in pursuing those advancement opportunities like tuition reimbursement or training for upskilling of current employees.*

# RETIREMENTS

*Lastly, retirements continue to challenge employers that are already struggling to find new workers. More individuals are expected to retire in the coming years and the baby boomers will have completely exited the workforce. One solution stood out as an effective way to plan for upcoming retirements:*

(1) The apprenticeship model is an effective retirement planning tool for employers that helps to preserve the institutional knowledge that would otherwise be lost when an employee retires.

*Examples of successful apprenticeship models can be found with the German American Chamber of Commerce's ICATT Apprenticeship program. The ICATT program offers off-the-shelf apprenticeship models that align with local community colleges to develop a program that meets the employer's needs and prevents what would otherwise be a loss of institutional knowledge when the employee retires.*



# CONCLUSION

**The discussion of creative strategies to help employers solve their current workforce barriers throughout the tour also identified themes around solutions that would assist both businesses and educators in ensuring a highly skilled workforce of tomorrow. The themes identified fell into two categories of legislative solutions: state-funded financial incentives and changes in public education policy. The IMA and the IMA Education Foundation are committed to pursuing solutions to the barriers that are impacting employers' ability to hire employees with the skills necessary to be successful.**



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# RECOMMENDED LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS

*The IMA Education Foundation strongly encourages that the primary focus of any changes to education and workforce policy must center around a systemic approach to improving both the current and the future workforce that involves all levels of education with intentional outreach and input from employers across Illinois.*

**(1) The State must provide for financial incentives to support the long-term stability of Illinois' manufacturing workforce.**

- The IMA must work to advocate and provide support for the Governor to develop and implement a campaign with the IMA to “increase the number of people entering high-demand manufacturing occupations,” as cited in the Governor’s 5-Year Economic Plan released in October of 2019.
- The State of Illinois must find ways to provide student loan forgiveness for students that stay in or return to their communities post high school graduation and work in the manufacturing sector.
- There should be opportunities for flexible grant funding to support regions that are already utilizing effective workforce tools through well-established regional networks that include educational institutions, employers, and local economic development organizations.
- The State must continue to prioritize and release funds for the Employer Training Investment Program (ETIP).
- The State of Illinois must fund additional advanced manufacturing academy grant opportunities in addition to the two sites funded in 2021.

# RECOMMENDED LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS CONTINUED

**(2) The education system in Illinois often struggles to meet the needs of the ever-changing workforce while also wading through hundreds of burdensome mandates on schools. The State has the ability to provide for flexibility that will allow public education to meet those needs for a variety of professions through changes to the state policy:**

- The State must establish a state-wide career development experience continuum that incorporates career exploration in the early grades and evolves into work-based learning opportunities in middle school and high school. The continuum must include working with a local community college and providing opportunities for students to graduate from high school with either an industry recognized credential/certificate or an associate degree in the student's preferred field of study.
- The legislature must provide for flexibility within the high school graduation requirements for students who elect into approved programs of study through career pathway models including the "Model Program of Study for Manufacturing and Engineering."
- The legislature must provide for flexibility within the school day that would allow students to participate in various work-based learning experiences like job shadowing, internships, and pre-apprenticeship opportunities.
- The State of Illinois must prioritize the expansion of the competency-based pilot programs that select school districts across the State are currently utilizing so that it can be modeled in other high school programs. The competency-based pilot programs allow students to demonstrate knowledge and skill of required courses and serve as a tool that can be used to demonstrate a student's level of skill and knowledge to employers that is often not captured through current standardized assessments.



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