

## Op-ed: Work-based learning is all about opportunity

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With more Hoosiers working than at any time in Indiana's history, and with an unemployment rate of just 3.5 percent, the state continues to create more jobs than its Midwestern counterparts.

But while that may bode well for jobseekers, it can present real challenges for employers who can't find enough qualified candidates to fill open positions.

The state's new Office of Work-Based Learning & Apprenticeship is a viable solution to fill the much-needed pipelines in most sectors. These targeted programs, most of which offer on-the-job-training opportunities while receiving a paycheck, are gaining in prominence nationally as more employers struggle to fill jobs at a time when unemployment is at or near historic lows.

Work-based learning received a big boost in July, when President Trump announced the formation of the National Council for the American Worker. But Indiana already has a similar program in place.

Governor Eric Holcomb in March signed an Executive Order creating Indiana's Office of Work-Based Learning & Apprenticeship, which is housed within the Department of Workforce Development. The new order specifically states that "Apprenticeships and work-based learning provide people with experiences and opportunities to develop skills that employers value."

The new office works with businesses, education providers and regional and sector partnerships across the state, sharing best practices and helping to break down barriers, while striving to double the number of Indiana residents in various types of work-based learning programs, from 12,500 to 25,000 by the end of 2019.

I was honored to be selected by the governor and DWD Commissioner Fred Payne as the office's first executive director, and started my duties in June. And while it has been a challenging few months since our inception, it has become quite clear that the opportunities are endless, both for Indiana employers and employees.

The office is tasked with improving and creating state initiatives to increase "earn and learn" and other work-based learning opportunities throughout the state. That's a big challenge considering Indiana graduates roughly 80,000 high school seniors annually.

There are about 85,000 jobs waiting to be filled right now in Indiana, and that number will only grow over the next decade. That's due to more Baby Boomers retiring, and the many new jobs being created that require some sort of training beyond high school.

Work-based learning programs, however, extend beyond the traditional students and also serve unemployed and under-employed adults. Think of work-based learning as the umbrella under which many different career pathways and programs fall, from job shadowing to State Earn and Learn and federal-registered apprenticeship programs.

Though federal apprenticeships have existed since 1937, they often are only associated

with the trades, and that's simply not the case.

Apprenticeships are found in many occupations.

We're fortunate to be one of the leaders in this initiative thanks to strong support at the highest level. There is good work going on in certain parts of the state, and I have seen several examples of best practices and great collaboration. Now is the time for our leaders in workforce, education and industry to come together, to build upon this momentum and

create the most robust and vibrant workforce in the U.S.

My time with Stark Industries in Terre Haute and Ivy Tech has provided me the expertise to help companies identify the human capital challenges facing them. Coming from a deep background in education, the office's senior director, Carrie Lively, is well-versed in career development and identifying ways to improve high school and post-high school opportunities. And overseeing it all is Commissioner Payne, who

arrived at DWD from Honda Manufacturing of Indiana LLC in

Greensburg. Together, this team is well-poised to offer real-world, practical workforce solutions for companies of all sizes.

The pieces are now being put in place and we are already starting to see what is all possible through increased partnerships. With plenty of interest to help develop a 21st century skilled and ready workforce, I remain confident and steadfast that the best days are indeed yet to come.