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PARTNERSHIPS PREPARE TODAY'S STUDENTS FOR TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE

EDWARDSVILLE, ILL, OCTOBER 26, 2005 . . . Cultivating and maintaining a highly-skilled workforce is playing an increasingly pivotal role in the economic vitality of Southwestern Illinois. Location and infrastructure are no longer the only main selling points for businesses looking to build, expand or relocate. The focus has been shifted to workforce availability. As a result, representatives of the Labor Management Committee of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois continue to seek out and support opportunities that promote the importance of education and training for those seeking to become part of the construction workforce of the future.

The intensified need for education and training is impacted by changing workforce demographics. Baby Boomers are exiting the marketplace at a far more rapid pace than those entering it, resulting in what is known as worker dearth. "The issue of worker dearth is one that is being talked about across the country," commented Jim Pennekamp, executive director of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, the broad-based, economic development corporation representing Madison and St. Clair counties. "The modern workforce is very diverse and pulls from a broad spectrum of society. It is critical that we give all future workers the best possible chance to be successful."

Pennekamp added that it is vital that business and industry continue to strengthen partnerships with educational institutions in an effort to prepare future workers. Special emphasis needs to be placed on career counseling, mentoring programs and creating opportunities for students to identify their skill sets from early on.

Belleville West High School's new facility, which was recognized last year by the Labor Management Committee for being a positive example of labor and management cooperation, embraces this concept by allowing the students to take advantage of a wider range of hands-on classes.

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TOMORROW'S WORKFORCE FIRST AND FINAL ADD

“We are in our second year of Construction Trades. This is a program wherein our students actually construct a house per school year and we work in conjunction with the various construction unions on said project,” stated Dr. Brent Clark, superintendent of Belleville Township High School District 201 and member of the Labor Management Committee. “This program is a real life experience for our students and it prepares them for the construction industry in the Greater St. Louis Metropolitan area.

The Southern Illinois Builders Career Fair, which is taking place, this week is another such example. “Our committee plans to tour this Career Fair so we can see first-hand examples of how the various building trades are seeking to equip tomorrow’s workforce,” stated Marv Finkelstein, executive director of the Labor Management Committee of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois. “Students are able to familiarize themselves with the opportunities that exist in our region, learn about the qualifications needed to pursue those opportunities, analyze their skill sets and begin to explore careers of interest.”

Those students represent one sector of the population that will become the future tradesmen, but they are not alone. While many entering apprenticeship programs right out of high school, others are graduating college, entering their chosen field and then choosing to make the switch. “Developing a trade provides you with a life-long skill. And, unionized trade jobs are highly sought after as they offer good pay, good health and welfare benefits, a pension plan, and safe and favorable working conditions,” stated William Thurston, president of the Southwestern Illinois Central Labor Council and member of the Labor Management Committee.

“Southwestern Illinois has become a development hotspot and we believe it will continue to be, which means there will be tremendous opportunities for people with the right skills and training,” notes Finkelstein. “The issue of education and training expands much wider than the realm of construction, however this is one of the key areas that needs to be addressed promptly because of the future labor shortage in this arena. It’s probably never been more important that people understand what is needed to excel and have access to programs that can prepare them to carve out their spot as part of the workforce.”

The Labor-Management Committee was formed in 1983 by the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois and exists to serve employers and unions in Madison and St. Clair counties in Illinois. For more information about the Labor-Management Committee of the Leadership Council Southwestern Illinois, please call (618) 650-2681 or visit the Labor-Management Committee new Web site at www.gatewaylabormanagement.org.

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