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Indicators of the Metroscape: Right Jobs? Right Skills?

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Right Jobs? Right Skills?

by Shelley Holly and Arianne Sperry

Projections by the State of Oregon Employment Department show that highly skilled, higher wage technical jobs including computer support specialists and engineers along with other technical and professional positions will be the fastest growing employment opportunities in the next eight years. Following these occupations are lower skilled jobs such as food preparation and retail sales positions that often offer only hourly wages and few if any benefits. Although 2001 and early 2002 have been recessionary years, high demand for skilled labor in high technology industries likely will resume upon recovery. Additionally, as technological developments integrate further into our economy, demand for computer support specialists and engineers will increase in other segments not typically viewed as advanced technology. Chart 1 captures these projections.

Will the metroscope be able to produce the quality of labor needed for projected demands? No one can safely predict exact matches between future job and labor mix; however, indicators such

as basic skill sets in our future work force may provide a forward glimpse. Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) Assessment tests introduced by the Oregon Department of Education in 1996 are a tool intended to raise baseline competency among our students. Scores have been improving since they were first administered. Despite a positive trend, approximately half of the students in our region who participated in the tests are not meeting minimum standards (Chart 2).

Many of the fastest growing occupations require high skill levels, especially in mathematics. Who will fill these jobs? Who will be limited by their skill set to competing for lower wage jobs? Is the metroscope really prepared for a 21st century economy? In recent years, the metroscope has been a favored site selection for many companies, both domestic and international. Can we continue to reap these economic development benefits if the region fails to provide access to a quality labor force with basic skills? What kind of jobs will we attract?

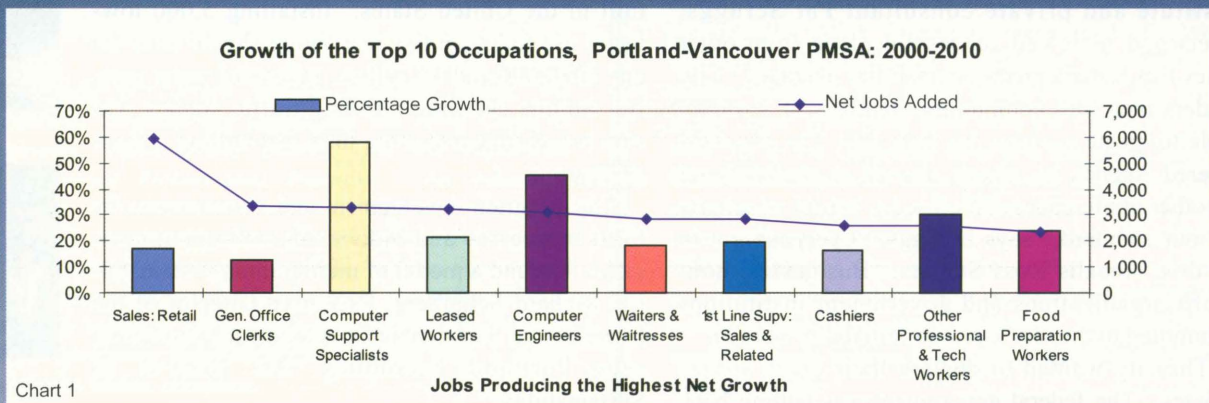


Chart 1

Source: 2002 Regional Economic Profile: Portland Metropolitan Area; Oregon Employment Department, December 2001.

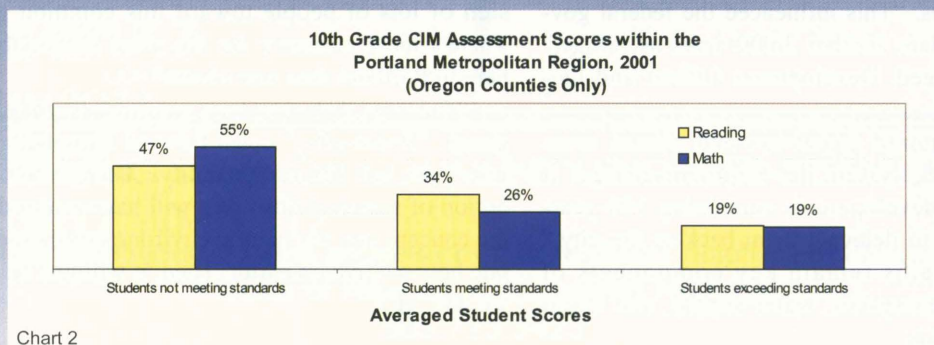


Chart 2

Source: Oregon Department of Education, Office of Assessments and Evaluation.