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To the editor:

Replace Boomers and Fill Skilled Labor Gap through College Readiness

Your article "As boomers retire, growth may slow" (2/17/16) warns that a shrinking labor force depleted by massive retirements will cut our economic growth rate in half. The key sentence, "A dwindling labor force can mean flagging growth...fewer jobs, lower incomes, and less tax revenue..." threatens that even those who are still working will feel the bite of economic contraction. What is the solution for "a state and region whose main competitive advantage is a skilled and educated workforce?"

The solution is to stop wasting our homegrown talent in remedial college courses. 7500 high school graduates get placed in remedial courses in our public colleges each year. The courses cost full freight but don't count toward a degree. 6000 of those students drop out before earning even a two-year degree. These are students who seek out higher education to build their employment skills. If they graduate from our public community colleges and universities they tend to stay in Massachusetts. They constitute the state's largest untapped pool of prospective new "skilled and educated" workers. But unless they get on the degree track to graduation we will lose them from the skilled workforce.

These students are not deficient in intelligence: they have met high school graduation standards. But high school standards fall short of "college readiness." High school graduates falter on the "Accuplacer" college placement tests and end up in remediation followed by dropping out because the high school curriculum is not aligned to college standards-- even though the "Accuplacer" has been used in Massachusetts for 20 years.

This college readiness gap can be closed. High schools can offer college preparation courses focused on Accuplacer content to build the skills needed to do college-level work, finish a degree, and join the "skilled and educated" workforce. JFYNetWorks has demonstrated that 50% of remedial courses can be eliminated by preparation in high school.

The Department of Higher Education quantifies the gap between labor market demand for college graduates and the state's supply of those graduates at 6000 per year. That is exactly the number of students we lose to remedial courses. We can take a giant step toward closing our skilled labor gap by closing our college readiness gap.

--David Driscoll and Gary Kaplan

David Driscoll is the former Massachusetts commissioner of education. Gary Kaplan is executive director of JFYNetWorks, a Boston-based nonprofit provider of college readiness programs to high schools.

