At a time when the nation’s unemployment rate is stuck at 9 percent, Microsoft is having a jobs problem of its own.

About 3,000 positions are not being filled nationwide due to a lack of qualified applicants, according to Jane Broom, director of Puget Sound Community Affairs at Microsoft Corp.

She said the state of Washington’s other largest employer, Boeing, has even more openings.

This skills gap is a problem for companies and states alike, and during a policy session of the CSG Education Policy Task Force at Microsoft headquarters, Broom and other speakers said this common concern can be addressed partly through new public-private partnerships.

Perhaps most notable this year in Washington was creation of the Opportunity Scholarship program, the goal of which is to expand financial assistance for low- and middle-income students. Public investment in the new scholarship fund will be matched dollar for dollar with contributions from the private sector. The goal is to create a billion dollar endowment by the end of the decade.

Broom said the scholarship fund also will provide incentives for individuals to enter high-demand areas such as math and science—by providing more scholarship dollars for students to pursue these career paths.

“We don’t have enough students in the state graduating in these fields,” she said.

Don Bennett, executive director of the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, highlighted some of the numbers behind the current skills gap.

In Washington, for example, the state appears to becoming less educated: 25- to 34-year-olds are less likely to have a postsecondary education than 45- to 55-year-olds. Nationwide, levels of postsecondary attainment have stagnated; as a result, the U.S. rate of 42 percent now puts the country behind global competitors such as Korea, Japan, Ireland and Canada.

In the past, Bennett said, the response to this concern about college access may have been to increase state funding in order to keep tuition low.

These aren’t ordinary fiscal times for states, however.

As a result, there is much more of a concerted effort to demand performance in higher education and to provide incentives for postsecondary schools to not only improve graduation rates, but to have more people leave college with degrees in high-demand fields.

“We can no longer rely on a steady influx of people from other places” to fill the skills gap, Bennett said.
States, too, are increasingly relying on partnerships with the private sector to map out the high-demand fields of the future, as well as to create new pathways for students.