Ask employers what their biggest challenges are, and one of the first responses will often be the difficulty in filling jobs with qualified workers. Ask policymakers what the biggest challenges facing their state’s economy are, and it won’t be long before they mention the need to build a trained workforce — one that can fill good-paying jobs and enable individual economic mobility.

This policy challenge is particularly acute in regard to middle-skill jobs — those requiring more than a high school diploma, such as an associate’s degree, certificate or other postsecondary credential, but not necessarily a bachelor’s degree. Last year, in fact, none of the 10 fastest-growing occupations required bachelor’s degrees, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Workers could instead qualify for these jobs through such means as skills certificates, on-the-job training or apprenticeships.

In an effort to match state policy with these labor-market realities, new legislation is being introduced and innovative programs are being implemented across the Midwest that target middle-skill jobs and workers.

In Wisconsin, Gov. Scott Walker has proposed a $10.4 million increase in grant funding for his state’s Fast Forward program, which was begun in 2013 to better train people for high-demand jobs. Program grants go to employer-led skills training — of workers and students — in high-demand fields and to K-12 programs that graduate students with industry-recognized credentials.

Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton, meanwhile, has proposed expanding eligibility for the state’s Dislocated Worker Program. Currently, only unemployed workers can receive the career planning and training that the program offers. Dayton wants it to also serve people who are employed but could benefit from additional training.

In his State of the State address and in his budget proposal this year, Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder has also emphasized the importance of investing in the state’s workers. It is a policy priority that resonates with Sen. Ken Horn, chair of the Economic Development and International Investment Committee.

“In skilled trades are in high demand and engineers are at a premium,” he says. “We need to fill all those jobs.”

Snyder has proposed spending close to $18 million to expand career and technical education programs. This also wants to double the state’s investment into Skilled Trades Training Fund, which helps employers pay for demand-driven training that addresses talent shortages hampering growth privately all over the state. Colleges and universities are growing some strong programs, and industry is getting involved. I think it needs to be ‘all hands on deck’ to solve this talent gap.
Part of that approach, he adds, should be an increased emphasis on public-private partnerships — for example, between community colleges and employers. Horn would also like to see more training options for Michigan’s high school students.

“Every student should have access to a shop class or technical class as well as college prep,” he says. “If schools don’t have the resources [for this], then we should seek strong partnerships with industry for internships or apprenticeship programs.”