

Policy Change to Strengthen our Workforce

Policy Topic: Important Changes that are Possible Without Legislation

Presented to the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor
By Leading Workforce Development and Adult Learning Organizations

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Background

President Obama has asked individual Americans to complete at least one year of postsecondary education, a goal that recognizes the importance of a skilled workforce to a strong economy. Besides additional funding – which is critically needed after years of declining federal investments – achieving this goal will require bold leadership from administrative agencies, capacity building across the education and workforce delivery systems, policy change, and more effective uses of existing resources.

An alliance of 15 national workforce development and adult learning organizations is working together to propose key policy changes for the Obama Administration to consider. *See box for the list of organizations endorsing the recommendations in this paper.*

The recommendations are in this paper are endorsed by:

American Association of Community Colleges
Center for American Progress
Center for Law and Social Policy
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce
Corporation for Enterprise Development
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
International Association of Jewish Vocational Services
National Center for Business Champions
Seedco
The Workforce Alliance
Workforce Learning Strategies
Workforce Strategy Center

In this paper we present a set of actions which do not require legislation. These actions can be taken by the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor individually and together to facilitate the skill development of our workforce. Our suggestions include clarification of how to interpret existing legislation; a new message emphasizing the importance of education and training; new research, dissemination of best practice models; and development and replication of outstanding models already in operation. We begin with suggestions for actions that can be taken by the individual agencies related to programs under their jurisdiction and conclude with suggestions for what the two agencies can do together to provide leadership in this important area.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education

We believe in the American Dream – that a person of modest means can learn well, work hard, and be successful. However, it can be difficult under the current system, especially for a person in adult basic skills courses (including ESL), to make a successful transition to occupational

training or postsecondary education. The Department of Education can facilitate these transitions and promote greater access in many ways.

1. Support state and local efforts to link basic skills instruction with postsecondary education and workforce development programs through concurrent, integrated, sequential, and/or dual enrollment activities.
 - a. Encourage the development of bridge programs using Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education funds. This may require clarification that such funding can be used for postsecondary courses that combine basic skills, English language, and career and technical education instruction to increase access and completion for lower-skilled students in career pathways.
 - b. Develop alternatives for measuring the outcomes of programs supported by Title II, since current National Reporting System (NRS) measures both over- and under-count these outcomes.
2. Support greater use of counseling/career navigation and support services for adult education students:
 - a. Clarify that WIA Title II funds can be used to provide counseling/career navigation and support services for students enrolled in programs that link basic skills instruction with postsecondary education and occupational instruction and that form partnerships with organizations (such as Title I agencies, including community based organizations) that do so.
 - b. Pilot new programs or support expansion of successful existing programs under Title II that provide comprehensive services to adult education students, such as intensive education and career counseling, work-study jobs, and assistance with child care and transportation. Evaluate pilots for effects on outcomes and propose options for scaling up successful approaches.
3. Encourage greater competition among providers for adult education funding in order to encourage innovation and better alignment with community needs. For example, review the implementation status of WIA Title II's "direct and equitable" provision regarding access to state Title II funding by the full range of adult education and English language service providers, and identify additional administrative or legislative steps needed to carry out the intent of this provision.
4. Encourage the development of adult education programs whose educational goals are aligned with the entrance requirements of community college degree and certificate programs, and which have established clear pathways and referral procedures to postsecondary programs.

Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration

Given the rapidly changing economic environment, our employment and training system needs to be highly flexible and adaptive to the fluctuating needs of the labor market. States and localities need to have programs and funding that allow them to respond with job placement and high quality training, as needed. Changes to WIA will be important for making that possible, but there are also many actions that the Department of Labor can take to begin to move the system toward greater responsiveness.

Workforce Investment Act

1. Encourage high-quality, long-term education and training for individuals and in communities where it is needed, using either individual training accounts or direct contracts.
2. Encourage training that integrates occupational training with basic skills and English language instruction, where needed.
3. Support the development of state level plans for workforce, education and economic development that leverage effective engagement from business, labor and other key stakeholders to help communities build on their combined assets, and to ensure responsiveness to labor market demands, workforce demographics, and economic development opportunities.
4. Support local workforce areas in using a designated percentage of their formula allocations to provide services to incumbent workers, as a layoff aversion strategy or where skills training would help low-income workers advance to family-sustaining employment. Require that local areas establish standards for employer contributions to worker services (e.g., paid release time, matching contributions) and job quality standards for employers whose incumbent workers are receiving WIA-funded services.
5. Use H-1B Visa fees made available to the Department under section 414(c) of the American Competitiveness and Workforce Improvement Act of 1998 to award grants to industry or sector partnerships with a focus on full stakeholder involvement, serving a diversity of workers across skill levels, and rigorous performance requirements. (The SECTORS Act of 2009 (S.777/H.R. 1855) introduced by Senators Brown (D-OH) and Snowe (R-ME) in the Senate and Representatives Loeb sack (D-IA) and Platts (R-PA) in the House offers an example of how to develop and administer such partnerships.)
6. Convene experts on performance management and representatives of key stakeholders in the workforce system to a) analyze experiences with the current performance management system and b) revise the system to promote continuous quality improvement and increased provision of training and related services leading to employment in jobs that provide family sustaining wages and long-term career advancement.

7. Offer states and localities “fast-tracked” renegotiation of performance standards on placement and earnings gains while local economies are in recession. Encourage local areas to maintain or increase outcome standards for credential attainment during the same period, in order to better prepare workers for the recovery.
8. Phase in a system of shared accountability among federal workforce education and training programs to promote greater transparency and closer linkages among these programs. This system should be based on common performance measures, consistent definitions and standards of data quality. In addition, there should be commonly agreed-upon, accurate, and unbiased cost-allocation methods for services funded by multiple sources.

For Both Agencies: Alignment and Other Joint Efforts

In addition to the above actions, both agencies can improve the effectiveness of existing resources by coordinating and aligning activities between agencies.

1. Link adult education and workforce development at the mission level of both the Education and Labor Departments. Both agencies need to treat adult education as the entry point for lower-skilled adults to education and job training opportunities that lead to postsecondary credentials and family-sustaining employment.
2. Together, work with states to identify empirically-based, predictive and quantifiable milestones of participant/student progress toward entry into stable, family-supporting employment and career advancement. These milestones might go beyond current benchmarks of GED, associate’s degree, vocational certificate, etc. and include intermediate steps such as earning educational credit toward a marketable postsecondary credential or entry into and persistence in unsubsidized entry-level employment. The milestones might also include indicators of overcoming barriers to employment. The milestones, determined from an analysis of data from the various programs, could eventually be used as the basis for a system of shared accountability across workforce and other education and training programs – a system that provides incentives to multiple agencies working together to achieve improved outcomes for individuals and employers served by these programs or, more broadly, for targeted populations in a given geographic area.
3. Promote high-impact employer engagement strategies. Examine policies to ensure employer investments that benefit low-skilled workers are leveraged and invited. Identify exemplary models in communities and firms where employers have made significant, sustained, and productive investments in retention, education and advancement of low-skilled workers. Engage leaders of successful models to provide technical assistance.
4. Evaluate the effect of adult education activities on workforce development, employment, and earnings.

5. Continue efforts already underway to ensure that adult education, workforce skill development, and workforce/employment data systems are integral partners in the newly-funded state longitudinal data systems.
6. Support or establish an interagency entity or process to facilitate meaningful integration and planning across a variety of programs and agencies, but especially Titles I and II of WIA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), postsecondary education, Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education and economic development. This alignment would help facilitate the development of career pathways, including an initial emphasis on postsecondary transitions for adult education participants at all skill levels, and incumbent worker education programs. (One example of a joint initiative that could result from this interagency effort would be an project that pilots training in contextualized basic skills that links to sector strategies, engages employers, trains for skills needed in the workplace, and results in job placement.)
7. Provide advice and technical assistance to regions, adult education programs, WIBs, and other providers on how to navigate existing funding streams and use these streams in combination to support innovative programs that integrate education, training and support services.

Raising Awareness

Both departments should build upon the President's statements on the importance of workforce education and training to encourage more adults to engage in learning:

1. Develop a joint messaging campaign that clearly shows the link between adult education, workforce development and economic competitiveness and elevates the visibility of adult education and workforce skills development in Congress. This campaign might borrow strategies, tactics and messages from initiatives such as The Workforce Alliance's Skills2Compete or *Reach Higher, America* from the National Commission on Adult Literacy.
2. Work with other organizations on a joint message campaign to encourage more adults to pursue postsecondary learning. This campaign can borrow strategies, tactics and messages from similar state campaigns (e.g., Kentucky's GoHigher, Oklahoma's Reach Higher, Graduate! Philadelphia).
3. Promote awareness of public/private sector solutions and encourage innovation. Highlight achievements of workers who have advanced as a result of public/private sector partnerships that build workforce skills and address employer needs. Establish a national award that spotlights high-impact practices of employers who invest in retention, training and advancement of low-skilled adults.