Beyond Basic Skills

State Strategies to Connect Low-Skilled Students to an Employer-Valued Postsecondary Education

CLASP
policy solutions that work for low-income people

MARCH 2011 | MARCIE FOSTER, JULIE STRAWN & AMY ELLEN DUKE-BENFIELD

How much does college matter for getting ahead in America? Having a postsecondary education—broadly defined as a credential beyond a high school diploma—continues to be one of the most important factors in getting a good job and advancing in the workforce. By one estimate, 64 percent of jobs in 2018 will require more than a high school diploma, although not necessarily a four-year degree.[1] For each year of postsecondary education, an adult is more likely to be employed, earn family-sustaining wages, lead a healthier life, and have children who are better prepared to succeed in school.[2] The country, too, benefits from a more educated workforce. Studies of the return on government investments in education (at all levels, not just K-12) show that it is a sound use of public funds.

Critical federal programs, such as funding for student aid and job training, can help lower-skilled adults and youth *access* postsecondary education, but important policy choices that support their *success* and *completion* can be made at the state and local levels. State-level innovations can include: instructional strategies that provide a strong foundation in occupational skills required for jobs in the local economy; acceleration strategies that help students progress further and more quickly in education and training programs in a shorter period of time than traditional approaches, and funding formulas, assessment policies, and other administrative policies that support a statewide vision to provide adults and youth with pathways to better jobs through postsecondary education.

Striking commonalities exist across most of these promising innovations: they are based on best-practice findings from programs at the state and local levels; they can be connected with the needs of industries; and most importantly, they bridge the gap separating local silos from state education and training systems. *Beyond Basic Skills* describes strategies that state policymakers can use to strengthen connections between basic skills education and postsecondary education to help lower-skilled adults and out-of-school youth attain the postsecondary credentials they need to advance in the labor market.

The Basic Skills Crisis: A Growing Problem

Basic skills deficiencies persist among all age groups, and they loom ever larger as more youth fall out of the educational pipeline and immigrants without much schooling in their native countries join the workforce. Youth who drop out of school face serious challenges that threaten their long-term employability, health, and well-being. If they never return to school, they eventually become lower-skilled adults. Without further education, they are, in effect, signing up for a lifetime of, at best, low-wage, low-quality employment.

Less than 70 percent of students graduate from high school within four years and many drop out completely. The worst dropout rates are found in low-income areas (particularly in the South and Southwest) and among African-

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American and Hispanic young men.[3] While some dropouts eventually earn a GED, the number of GEDs awarded annually is substantially less than the number of new dropouts, so the pool of undereducated young adults constantly grows.[4] Fifteen percent of U.S. adults lack a high school diploma or GED, and another 30 percent have only a high school diploma or its equivalent.

These trends are dangerous in a time when the nation's need for a more educated workforce is greater than ever. Economists report that educating more adults and youth is essential to meeting our future workforce needs. For example, by 2018, nearly two-thirds of jobs will require a postsecondary education, but if current trends continue, we will fall short of this demand by three million postsecondary graduates.[5] This is the case even when postsecondary education is properly defined broadly to encompass a wide variety of credentials, including Associate's degrees, and traditional four-year degrees. A growing body of research supports this more inclusive definition—even suggesting that a sub-baccalaureate degree in a high-demand industry may yield higher wages for many students than a traditional four-year degree.[6]

To ensure that our nation rises to the task of developing a skilled workforce that meets the demands of employers, policymakers need to widen their focus to expanding education and training to lower-skilled adults and youth, including high school dropouts, adults who have a high school diploma or GED but are not college ready, and adults with low English proficiency. Without a targeted strategy to educate more low-skilled Americans, the U.S. will continue to lag behind in measures of educational attainment and hence in economic competitiveness.

Economic Consequences of a Low-Skilled Workforce

The consequences of persistently low educational attainment for adults and youth are dire for individuals, the states they live in, and the nation as a whole.

Educational attainment is one of the most important factors determining an individual's well-being and that of their children. For example, individuals with low levels of educational attainment are more likely to be unemployed: in January 2011, 14.2 percent of those without a high school diploma were unemployed compared with 8.0 percent of those with at least some college.[7] Moreover, since a parent's level of education is a major factor in determining whether a child achieves academic success, the children of low-skilled adults are also likely to bear the burden of their parents' low educational attainment.[8] An individual's level of education also has remarkably stark consequences for health and longevity. According to a 2005 study, a 65-year-old with a high school diploma typically enjoys better health than a 45-year-old who dropped out in the tenth grade and is also likely to have a longer life span by nine years.[9]

The U.S. and the states also have an economic interest in ensuring that more people succeed in education. Adults without a high school diploma can cost the federal government $671 each year in temporary cash assistance and in-kind benefits such as Medicaid, food stamps, and housing subsidies—but by supporting these individuals to obtain a high school diploma or GED, this negative revenue could turn into an *increase* of over $5,400 in net taxes collected per student (that is, total federal and state taxes less the value of cash and non-cash transfers). Over a lifetime, students with at least a high school diploma will contribute at least $300,000 more than high school dropouts. For students with a Bachelor's degree, the lifetime contribution balloons to nearly $900,000.[10]

In the current fiscal crisis, there is also evidence that low levels of educational attainment may slow the nation's economic recovery. Economists report that the increased demand for skilled workers combined with the dearth of workers with a postsecondary education may be a cause of lower productivity and high unemployment.[11]

Existing Basic Skills Services Are Not Effective Enough to Meet Demand

Two very important systems for delivering basic skills services—developmental education and adult education—are vital steps in the pathway for lower-skilled adults and youth to attain postsecondary education and succeed in the labor market (see page 4 for a description of these services). Yet these systems are plagued by system-level challenges and challenges that students face which impact their progress and completion.

System-Level Challenges

Federal adult education, funded by Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, allocates on average $560 million per year to provide basic skills instruction to undereducated adults and. Services reach about 2.4 million students[12] among a pool of an estimated 93 million adults with low basic skills who may be eligible for and need these services to upgrade their skills. The demand for services is growing nationwide, with waiting lists in at least 49 states. Both the numbers of students and the waiting times have doubled since 2008; in states with extremely high demand—Arizona, Texas, and New York, for example—students can wait for one year or longer.[13] In 2007-2008, per-student spending on these lower-educated adults and youth was between $700 – 900 annually.[14] By contrast, the average spending per student in elementary and secondary school systems in the same year was more than ten times as large—$10,041.

Not only are the current systems for basic skills instruction underfunded—and have been over many years—but they also are usually disconnected from a state's related education and training systems. For example, adult education is very often in the K-12 agency and disconnected administratively from the higher education system. And both adult education and developmental education are often disconnected from workforce education services. These disconnects can make it more difficult for students to progress to the next higher level of education or to transfer from one system to another.

Challenges Students Face

Reforming basic skills services to better prepare lower-skilled students for postsecondary education and careers requires an understanding of the major barriers and roadblocks that derail progress and make it challenging for students to complete their education and earn credentials. The most effective state strategies address the following challenges that students commonly face:

Sequential programs that span multiple years are costly to lower-skilled students in terms of lost wages, tuition costs, and foregone work experience. The most prevalent structure for basic skills services is sequential: a student masters one set of discrete skills before advancing to the next. This sequence of adult education courses leading up to the GED or of developmental education courses leading up to college-level work can take many months or years to complete, especially for those students who begin with very low basic skills. For lower-skilled students, who often have significant work and family responsibilities, each year of precollege instruction comes at

Developmental and Adult Education: Competing or Complementary Services?

The two types of basic skills services—developmental education and adult education—comprise a vital step in the pathway for lower-skilled adults and youth to gain a postsecondary education and succeed in the labor market. Yet students in these two programs, even those at the same skill levels, may face different content, standards of success, and costs depending on which of the two basic skills "doors" they enter. There can be considerable overlap in the students served by developmental and adult education, and sometimes even competition for those students.

In 95 percent of community colleges, students with lower basic skills can enroll without having a GED or high school diploma (a practice referred to as "open entry"); although such students may be shut out of specific certificate and degree programs until they can attain "cut scores" on college readiness assessments or complete a mandated sequence of developmental education courses. These cut scores typically vary by institution unless state policy mandates uniform cut scores across all state institutions.

Developmental education, which primarily serves high school graduates, includes pre-college reading, writing, math, and English language instruction. The structure of developmental education programs is similar to that of traditional college courses: programs typically move students through courses sequentially (e.g., Reading or Math 030, 060, 090), charge regular tuition, and are taught in the college setting. Often, developmental education courses do not carry credit toward a degree. While federal and state student aid can be used for a limited amount of developmental education coursework, students can use up a significant portion of their student aid eligibility while in these courses without progressing significantly toward a credential.

Adult education includes *adult basic education* for those at the lowest skill levels, *adult secondary education* and GED preparation for those at higher skill levels, and *English language services.* It primarily serves those without high school diplomas, high school graduates who are not college-ready, and students with limited English language proficiency. Adult education often focuses on the GED as the ultimate goal of services and is either offered free or at a very low cost to students. Services are supported by federal funding under Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act), as well as state and local funding. A variety of local providers offer adult education, including K-12 districts, community colleges, and community-based organizations. This brief refers to all of these services as *adult education*.

In many cases, students who take advantage of the open-entry model are also eligible for free or low-cost adult education courses if they seek to increase their basic skills. In fact, in some states, students who complete their adult education courses may be able to bypass developmental education if they can increase their basic skills enough to test out of remedial coursework offered at the college.

a financial cost in terms of potential tuition and fees (if they are enrolled in developmental education) and lost wages and foregone work experience if the student works less in order to study and attend classes.

These barriers can influence persistence: many students drop out before they progress even one level. A recent national study found that most adult education students stay in a program for 30 to 80 hours of instruction, yet

research generally finds that 100-150 hours are required for students to advance even one grade level.[15] According to analyses of enrollment and completion, one-third of developmental education students never enroll in a remedial course and only one-third of students referred to math courses ever complete their sequence of recommended developmental courses.[16] By supporting innovative instructional models that accelerate learning, integrate basic skills content with college-level work, and support student success, states can help more basic skills students progress to postsecondary education.

Students with low basic skills may lack the "social capital" to navigate the postsecondary system on their own or may not pursue further education because they do not believe they are "college material." One of the most significant roadblocks to increasing the number of low-skilled adults and out-of-school youth who earn a postsecondary credential—particularly those in adult education programs—is that these students may not see postsecondary education (or "college") as a viable economic or life option for them. Others may have a strong desire to attend college but no other family member has pursued postsecondary education; these individuals might need guidance or proactive advising to help them through the process. States can help provide students with exposure to postsecondary education, thereby increasing the likelihood that basic skills students increase their skills, build confidence, and begin to visualize themselves as college students.

Students in basic skills programs may feel they are not making progress toward their career goals. Basic skills courses—particularly in adult education—traditionally focus on basic reading, writing, math, and other basic life skills. These tasks, although essential building blocks for further education and training, may not seem immediately relevant to students who return to education with career goals. In addition, basic skills courses sometimes do not go far enough in preparing students for the rigor of postsecondary education. States have a role in making the path to postsecondary education both smoother and more transparent—whether the student comes from adult education, high school, or another education and training program.

Research on What Works

Although only a few rigorous research studies examine which types of intervention improve postsecondary attainment for those whose basic skills are low, we can learn from the tremendous amount of experimentation and informal evaluation of innovative programs on the state and local levels. Recent evaluations of innovative programs based at community colleges have also shed light on promising best practices.[17]

Research suggests that programs can improve outcomes by accelerating the pace of delivery of basic skills services, using more hours of instruction, and raising expectations for attendance and progress. For example, a Portland, Oregon, welfare-to-work project showed better labor market returns to participants than programs that only provided basic skills services. The Portland program, evaluated as part of the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies, provided short-term intensive basic skills instruction before encouraging participants to enroll in education or training in certificate programs.[18]

Similarly, a study showed that students in the Community College of Denver's FastStart program performed better than the college's general remedial education students. FastStart, an accelerated developmental education program, condensed two levels of developmental education into one semester by using contextualized instruction and

wraparound support services. A replication of this model for out-of-school youth through the Colorado SUN project showed similar results: even students who scored very low on basic skills assessments passed at least one level of developmental education within eight weeks, a remarkably short period for showing such results. In addition, more than 80 percent of the Colorado SUN students who met specific criteria for age and attendance enrolled in college-level courses during the program or after completing it.[19]

Programs may also be more effective if they use contextualization to closely link the content of basic skills services to postsecondary education and training or if they integrate basic skills content with that of the postsecondary program.[20] For example, several studies showed that the Center for Employment Training's blend of occupational and basic skills education led to increased employment and earnings for participants, even those who entered without a high school diploma. A study of Washington State's I-BEST program found that contextualizing basic skills education to a particular occupation (in conjunction with other key program elements) led to increased basic skills gains and a greater likelihood that a student would earn college credit and a credential. Several other studies of basic skills contextualization connected to high school or college career and technical education courses have also found that contextualizing remediation content improves retention, completion, and success in subsequent coursework.[21]

Student success services can also play a key role, according to findings from recent experimental and non-experimental studies of initiatives to increase postsecondary success for lower-skilled students.[22] An evaluation of bridge programs in Illinois as part of the Shifting Gears initiative found that programs that provided students with career orientation, admissions assistance, and advising were more likely to have higher student completion rates than those that did not.[23] In addition, an ongoing random-assignment study found that participants who received enhanced student support services (including intensive counseling) had better academic outcomes; while receiving these services, the students were more likely to persist to the following semester.[24] Yet another study found that graduates of ASAP, an accelerated learning program at the City University of New York, "overwhelmingly credit" enhanced supportive services—financial aid, free access to textbooks, a transportation card, and comprehensive academic, social, and interpersonal support—as the reason they were able to complete their educational program.[25]

Promising State Policy Strategies

Considering the projected demand for workers with higher levels of education and the known challenges for basic skills students, states should fundamentally rethink the goals, content, and delivery of developmental and adult education services. They should promote the creation of pathways that enable students to move into postsecondary education and training programs more quickly, complete credentials, and transition into careers or to four-year colleges. States should adopt policies to:

- Create "bridge" programs that ease the transition to postsecondary education by integrating basic skills instruction (or English language instruction) with higher-level academic content or technical skills training;
- Dually enroll basic skills students in occupational or academic coursework and their developmental or adult education courses;
- Contextualize basic skills instruction with occupational skills training or other college-level academic content;

- Require that college academic assessment be coupled with personalized academic and career guidance so that students can find the best fit for their skills and goals among developmental and adult education options connected to college and career pathways;
- Promote college-going aspirations for lower-skilled adults and youth by developing pathways, with achievable milestones, from adult education and GED to college enrollment; and
- Set goals and performance measures that give developmental education and adult education programs incentives to prepare students to enroll in and succeed in college.

These state policy strategies illustrate the diversity of approaches that states can take to better prepare low-skilled adults and youth for postsecondary education and career opportunities. The most successful state approaches will combine one or more of these strategies as part of a coordinated approach to the delivery of basic skills services (see Figure 1). This section and the text boxes throughout this brief provide details on each, along with relevant state examples.

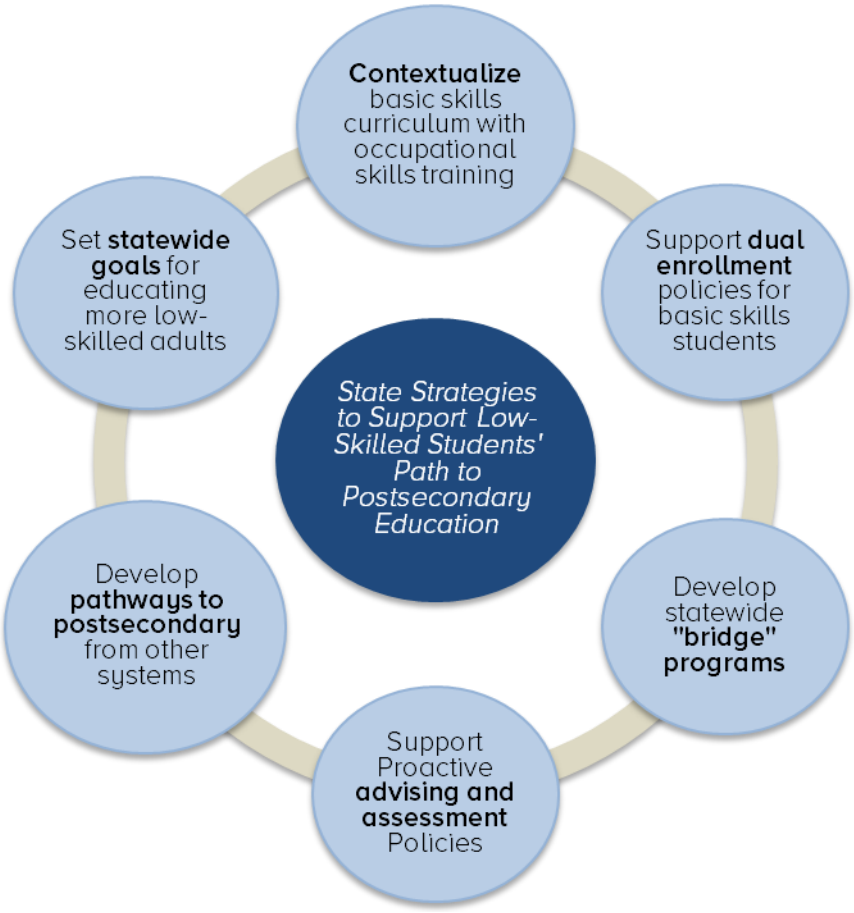

Figure 1. A comprehensive approach to connecting low-skilled students to an employer-valued postsecondary education will coordinate more than one strategy.

Create "bridge" programs that ease the transition to postsecondary education by integrating basic skills instruction (or English language instruction) with higher-level academic content or occupational skills training.

Bridge programs typically enroll learners who are unprepared for the rigor of postsecondary education, and have a specific occupational or academic focus. Common features of bridge programs include: contextualized instruction that integrates basic skills education with occupational skills or academic content (e.g., a health careers bridge might teach math concepts in that context, such as measurement for proper medication dosage); seamless articulation to the next higher level of education; career navigation and academic assistance; student support services (e.g., child care, financial aid, and transportation assistance); workplace readiness (for occupational bridges); and a curriculum aligned with industry needs and the requirements for industry-recognized credentials.[26]

By blending basic skills instruction or English language instruction with college academic or occupational skills content, bridge programs can help students develop a foundation to continue to postsecondary education—and the students often can make that transition more quickly. Well-crafted adult education and ESL bridge programs can reduce or even eliminate the need for developmental education because they are closely aligned with the needs of postsecondary education. Bridge programs can be developed for students at all levels, although students at the lowest skill levels may need to take several types of bridge programs (including "pre-bridges") before they are ready for postsecondary education.

A 2010 survey identified at least 515 bridge programs operating across 47 states and the District of Columbia.[27] One of these states, Minnesota, has embraced bridge programming for all types of basic skills students, even those at lower skill levels who have a potentially longer path to postsecondary education (see page 10 for more information on Minnesota's efforts).

Dually enroll basic skills students in occupational or college academic coursework together with their developmental or adult education courses.

Allowing basic skills students to enroll in occupational or academic courses at the same time they are enrolled in basic skills courses (a strategy known as dual enrollment) can both enhance and accelerate the learning process. Exposing them to postsecondary-level work concurrently with their basic skills courses enables them to improve their basic skills more quickly, and it prepares them to the academic rigor of college-level work. With this approach, students also can accumulate college-level credits or master job training competencies earlier, shortening their time to a postsecondary credential. Dual enrollment is commonly used to enable high-achieving high school students to earn postsecondary credits and to increase the rigor of their high school experience; for lower-skilled adults, it can increase students' interest in postsecondary education and help them become more confident they can succeed in college.[28]

Kentucky has supported local efforts to dually enroll students in adult education and college developmental education, enabling them to work toward a GED and complete college coursework at the same time. For example, the Jefferson County Public Schools Adult Education Program has partnered with Jefferson Community and Technical College since 2003 to jointly enroll over 7,000 students in reading, writing, math, and ESL. As a result,

88 percent of the students have bypassed at least one college developmental education course, saving them time and over $450,000 in developmental education tuition costs in 2009-2010 alone. The program boasts a completion rate of 93 percent.[29]

Require that college academic assessment be coupled with personalized academic and career guidance so that students can find the best fit for their skills and goals among developmental and adult education options connected to college and career pathways.

The most common way that community colleges determine college readiness is to give students a college readiness assessment such as COMPASS or ACUPLACER. As many as 60 percent of community college students are assessed as needing at least one year of non-credit developmental education coursework, yet few of them actually complete their recommended courses. Many local institutions do not communicate to students the importance of the assessments before administering the tests; in many cases, students assessed as needing substantial remediation are surprised and discouraged, and drop out of their basic skills coursework quickly or never even enroll in it.

A promising practice to increase the number of basic skills students who progress to postsecondary education after taking these assessments is to provide expanded academic and career guidance in conjunction with the tests. Students who understand their career options and how education will help them achieve their goals will be more likely to persist through an educational program. In addition, as part of the assessment process, colleges can help students who test far below college-level understand whether adult education might be a better choice for them than developmental education.[30] But without support at this essential intervention point, students who need significant remediation may be discouraged from pursuing further study.

The statewide Texas Success Initiative requires community colleges to assess students' reading, writing, and math skills before they enroll in college and to provide those who need developmental education with individualized advice based on the assessment.[31] The state has not dedicated resources to this follow-up counseling, but it has committed to improving the quality of academic advising and counseling services through funding for innovative pilot efforts and other effective strategies.[32]

Contextualize basic skills curricula to occupational or other college-level academic content.

Contextualized learning, often a core component of bridge programs (see page 8), can also be a strategy for helping low-skilled students progress along a postsecondary pathway. Traditional adult education courses typically focus on preparing for the GED test as the end goal, while developmental education courses teach math, reading, and writing divorced from the student's occupational or academic interests. Programs that contextualize instruction in these two services with occupational skills needed in particular industries can help accelerate student learning by allowing concurrent mastery of academic and occupational skills and easing the transition to higher-level coursework.[33] The same is true for courses contextualized to more academically oriented pathways.

Minnesota: A Vision of Adult Learning for Students at Every Level

Minnesota's vision for adult learning, based on a career pathways model, includes a full spectrum of education programs to serve every level of adult learner. Initiated in 2007, state's initiative, FastTRAC, is employing cross-system collaboration among workforce development, adult education, developmental education, and career and technical education to achieve the goal of making FastTRAC programming available at every Minnesota state college and university. FastTRAC was developed as part of the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative.

In 2010 in a fourth round of local funding, Minnesota awarded ten grants, totaling $1 million, to cross-system partnerships to implement local FastTRAC programming across the state. One of these grantees is a partnership among the Ramsey County Workforce Investment Board, HealthPartners, Presbyterian Homes, Saint Paul College, and Saint Paul Public Schools Adult Basic Education that offers a medical administration and coding career program. Students in this team-taught, integrated adult education and occupational skills program earn two technical certificates. The course includes computer literacy, career exploration, and intensive student support. Students are a diverse mix of adult basic education/ESL students, dislocated workers, and incumbent workers.

Next Steps for Minnesota include actions to:

- Use WIA discretionary and WIA Incentive funds to scale up FastTRAC statewide and make it the standard for doing business.
- Launch a complementary initiative—Next STEP (Statewide Transition Expansion Priority)—that will regionalize the delivery of adult career pathways, giving even small, rural ABE programs an important role in this statewide strategy.
- Align basic skills services and college assessment and referral policies through a state-level Alignment Advisory Team. This team will make recommendations for common use of adult education and college assessment and placement tests, as well as propose ways to better align curricula and referrals between adult basic education and development education within FastTRAC career pathways.

Figure 2. Minnestota FastTRAC Program Model

IvyTech Community College in Indiana has developed an "embedded skills" pilot for students earning automotive technology certificates in order to increase the number of students who would continue on the pathway to an Associate's degree. The program aims to improve the math skills of students as preparation for college-level courses. Program designers selected math competencies (fractions, decimals, ratios, proportions, and percentages) and contextualized them with existing lessons in three introductory automotive technology courses. Math and automotive technology faculty co-teach these "mini-lessons." As of spring 2010, eight instructors and 170 students were involved in the embedded skills courses. Two-thirds of students in the courses continued onto the Associate's degree program.

Promote college-going aspirations for lower-skilled adults and youth by developing pathways, with achievable milestones, from adult education and GED to college enrollment.

Lower-skilled students may have a long educational path ahead of them when they begin basic skills courses. Typically, the education and training systems serving these students are disconnected from each other, making it hard for students to navigate from one system to another (and sometimes back and forth between systems). For example, while adult education tends to focus on the GED as the ultimate goal, most adult education students do not earn a GED. Equally important is that while earning a GED increases a student's chances of entering college, few GED graduates actually do. A recent study that followed 1,000 randomly selected GED recipients found that only 31 percent ever enrolled in a postsecondary institution, and 77 percent of enrollees only did so for one semester.[34]

Several states are adopting a "career pathways" approach to providing education and training to smooth transitions between systems and create more opportunities for different types of student to attain postsecondary credentials. Career pathways are "carefully crafted programs that link education, training, and support services to enable students, often while they are working, to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in a given industry or occupational sector."[35] Developing a career pathways approach at the state level may include cross-walking assessments, aligning content between systems, and providing proactive academic and career advising to help students move along the pathway to postsecondary education and careers.[36]

Wisconsin has rolled out a statewide career pathways initiative, Regional Industry Skills Education (RISE), that includes new occupational certificates and diplomas embedded in Associate's degree programs (see Figure 3). The state is also creating basic skills bridge

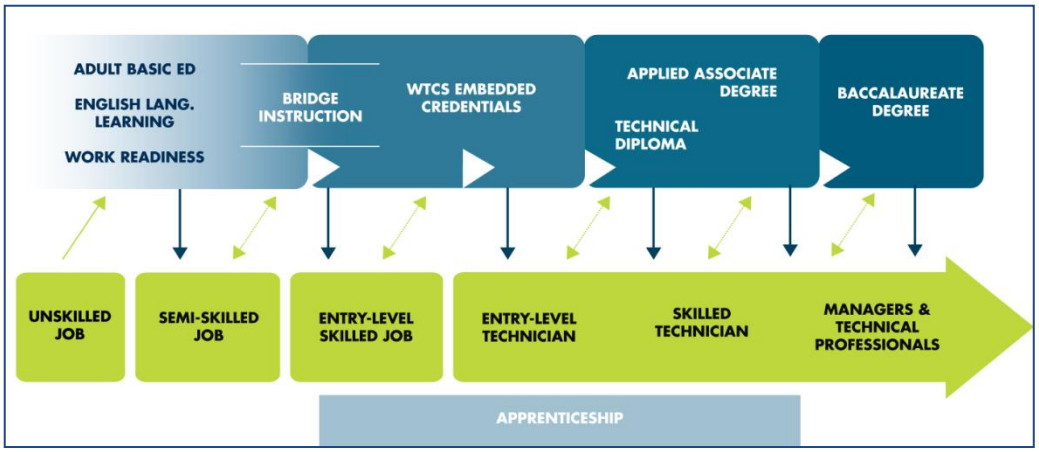

Figure 3. Wisconsin RISE Career Pathways Model

programs patterned after Washington State's I-BEST to create on-ramps to those pathways for lower skilled or limited English-proficient students (see below for more information on I-BEST).

Set goals and performance measures that give developmental education and adult education programs incentives to prepare students to enroll and succeed in college.

Federal performance measures for adult education (Title II of the Workforce Investment Act) do not effectively incent programs to focus on preparing students for postsecondary education and training; they only require states to track postsecondary enrollment for those students who enter adult education with that goal—a tiny fraction of all students.[37] However, given the flexibility offered to states to set their own program goals, each state can encourage local programs to prepare students for postsecondary education by setting high goals reflecting this priority. For example, such goals can include gains in computer literacy, the number of students bypassing developmental

Washington: Building Statewide Support for Integrated Education and Training

The Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program integrates the content of academic and career and technical education so that students can raise their basic skills while earning for-credit occupational credentials in pathways proven to place graduates in family-supporting jobs. Colleges receive 1.75 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) funding for basic skills students enrolled in I-BEST but must meet structured guidelines for the content and delivery of the programs. Two other state initiatives, Opportunity Grants and the Student Achievement Initiative, reinforce the direction of I-BEST and help support I-BEST student success.

Unique Program Design

I-BEST pairs two instructors—an ABE or ESL instructor with a professional-technical faculty member—who team teach at least half of the time and provide both contextualized basic skills education and technical job skills. The enhanced FTE that colleges receive (1.75) is designed to cover the cost of dual instruction and enhanced student supports. Each of the state's 34 community and technical colleges has at least one I-BEST program. This has resulted in a 55 percent overall increase (65 percent for ESL students and 50 percent for ABE/GED) in the number of students able to enroll in college-level coursework during the same year they enrolled in basic skills courses. Many colleges combine cohorts of I-BEST students with non-basic skills students in technical skills courses. Some of these colleges reported that including both types of students in these courses improved the integration of basic skills students into the college environment.[38]

Early Signs of Success

Recent data from the statewide program shows that I-BEST students are 56 percent more likely than regular adult education students to earn college credit, 26 more likely to earn a certificate or degree, and 19 percent more likely to achieve learning gains on basic skills tests. However, the effect on community and technical colleges may be far greater: a recent study showed that even non-I-BEST students who enrolled in colleges where I-BEST was offered experienced improved educational outcomes.[39]

education or placing in its highest level, increases in the number of lower-level learners who access postsecondary education, and longer-term retention in postsecondary education and training.

By definition, students in developmental education are preparing for college-level work, and states have a role to play in ensuring that they progress quickly and eventually enroll in and graduate from certificate or degree programs. States can increase the number of students who progress through developmental education by measuring intermediate milestones of student progress—such as the completion of one semester, one developmental education course, or one semester of for-credit coursework in the area in which the student needed remediation—and rewarding programs for achieving those milestones. Furthermore, setting statewide goals and making local programs accountable for meeting those goals can increase an institution's focus on ensuring students complete remedial education quickly and move to college-level work.[40]

Kentucky's "Stronger by Degrees: Building a More Competitive Commonwealth through Postsecondary Education" is an aligned strategic plan and accountability framework for adult and postsecondary education, with action plans at the level of school districts and campuses. It includes GED-to-postsecondary education transition goals that are significantly more ambitious than federal ones.[41] Washington State has also developed a strong performance funding system: the Student Achievement Initiative rewards community colleges for increasing student achievement by measuring interim progress rather than just enrollments. Examples of these interim measures include progress toward building college-level skills, first-year retention, completing college-level math, and credential completions. Louisiana, North Carolina, and several other states have made measures of adult education or developmental education transitions and subsequent course success part of their accountability frameworks for community colleges.

Other CLASP publications address a number of other strategies to consider, such as:

- Providing incentives to colleges and K-12 districts to partner in administering the college placement exam to high school students in order to identify those who may need additional help in becoming college ready;[42] and
- Linking alternative education and dropout recovery programs to pathways to college and career preparation.[43]

Setting State Policy Priorities

For states seeking to help lower-skilled adults and youth gain the education and training they need to obtain employment and become self-sufficient, policy reforms must be: backed by research-based best practices; designed to be sustained and scaled up beyond a specific pilot program; and supported by data that can be analyzed and used for ongoing continuous improvement.

States may decide to begin by analyzing the pipeline of low-skilled students into postsecondary education and employment to determine patterns that signal the particular points at which lower-skilled students most often drop out or have the most difficulty making progress. Such a longitudinal approach should follow student progress and outcomes from postsecondary education and training through the completion of postsecondary programs and,

Illinois: Building Bridge Programs through Shifting Gears

As part of its involvement in the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative, Illinois created ten local pilots to test bridge models that integrate adult and developmental education with occupational education. These "bridge" pilots focused on three industry sectors identified by the state as facing critical skill shortages: manufacturing, health care, and transportation/distribution/logistics.

Illinois is taking what it learned from the local pilots to identify policy changes necessary for sustaining successful approaches and taking them to scale. This includes, for example, creating a standard definition of the components of a bridge program that the state is now formally incorporating into program classification and other policies across the community college system, the adult education system, Workforce Investment Act programs, and Perkins career and technical education programs. It also has meant changing the state's WIA policies on how much each local area must spend on training and ensuring that bridge programs are included in the scope of what counts as training. Furthermore, the community college system is enhancing its data and measurement capacity so that it can include and track the transitions of bridge students and other education and economic outcomes. As of summer 2010, these efforts had resulted in 30 operating bridge programs that integrate adult and developmental education with occupational education, and 33 more are under development.

Program Design

- Three of the pilots focused on the transition from developmental education to for-credit occupational college courses; five focused on transitions from adult education/ESL to college occupational courses.
- Colleges modified their institutional practices to support these bridge programs, including enhanced student support services, faster course approval processes, enhanced communication between internal departments, and a better alignment of basic skills education and career and technical education.
- Several pilots have notably strong relationships with local employers, such as the College of DuPage's partnership with Bison Engineering and Oakton Community College's bridge to the LPN certificate for currently employed CNAs at Presbyterian Homes.
- Each of the pathways includes initial certificates that articulate to degree programs.

Early Evaluation Results

- The state's decision to dedicate resources to a robust evaluation of the new program models has enabled administrators to use lessons learned to inform the development and expansion of new and existing bridge efforts.
- An evaluation of the bridge programs by the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL) found that projects that provided career orientation, admissions assistance, and advising were more likely to have higher student completion rates than those that did not. OCCRL is in its second year of evaluation for these sites and soon will begin evaluating new developmental education demonstration projects.[44]

ideally, into the labor market. These data can help build consensus around the need for change and provide a baseline against which to measure future progress. Washington and Wisconsin have conducted these analyses and used them to develop programs and fill gaps where more targeted intervention strategies were needed to help keep adults and youth in the educational pipeline.[45]

States should also seed local innovations that include core program elements that research suggests are effective—and use the interest and energy generated by pilot programs to leverage more systematic change. From the outset, states should tie pilots explicitly to a state policy agenda for taking innovation to scale and sustaining it. Otherwise, momentum is lost when local pilot grants end, and change does not occur. States should also scan policies on postsecondary education, workforce development, dropout recovery, and adult education to identify levers for aligning funding and accountability and for developing systemic support for refining, scaling up, and sustaining new models.

Conclusion

As the economy recovers, the vast and growing pool of undereducated adults and youth will need a greater foundation in postsecondary education—broadly defined as a credential beyond a high school diploma—to compete in the labor market. States can significantly improve the postsecondary and labor market success of lower-skilled individuals by transforming the way education and training are delivered, drawing on strategies shown to succeed across multiple sites. States that develop a comprehensive plan addressing the unique needs of lower-level learners are likely to find that investing in these oft-overlooked students will reap rewards in the form of greater competitiveness, economic returns to the state, and higher quality of life.

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