

Workforce and Education Strategies for Achieving National Economic Priorities – Recommendations for the U.S. Department of Education

“In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite. Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation. And half of the students who begin college never finish. ***This is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow.***

“And so tonight, ***I ask every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training.*** This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”

~ Remarks of President Barack Obama, Address to
Joint Session of Congress, Tuesday, February 24, 2009

As America begins 2009 facing the worst economic crisis in decades, it is clear that the response must be as bold as the crisis is immense. President Obama clearly sees the links between a country’s investment in human capital and its global economic competitiveness. He made job creation and investments in workforce development critical elements of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. He also has challenged every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training.

Building the workforce needed for global economic success and the long-term well-being of our people will take more than an expanded Pell Grant program and new educational tax credits. It also will require that we focus on the needs of our lowest skilled adults and workers and transform our current adult education and workforce activities into a coherent system that is effective, efficient, and responsive to the needs of employers, workers, and future workers.

As leading adult education and workforce development organizations (see box), we offer strategies and specific action steps to meet our national economic challenges and achieve our priorities.

National Economic Priorities

- Help those hit hardest by the economic recession
- Restore and grow a strong national economy
- Rebuild the American middle class
- Reinvest in shared prosperity
- Provide opportunity for every American to gain at least one year or more of higher education or career training

Presented by:

American Association of Community Colleges
Center for American Progress
Center for Law and Social Policy
Corporation for a Skilled Workforce
Council for Adult and Experiential Learning
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
International Association of Jewish Vocational Services
Jobs for the Future
National Center for Business Champions
National Center on Education and the Economy
The Workforce Alliance
Workforce Learning Strategies
Workforce Strategy Center

Strategies

The following overarching strategies have begun to emerge in the adult education and workforce fields as essential to help us achieve our national economic priorities. Above all, these strategies must: provide equal access for low-skilled and disadvantaged individuals, including the “hardest to serve,” so that they may achieve economic prosperity.

- 1. Invest in education, training, and workforce development at a level proportionate to the need.** Current programs are severely under-funded and therefore unable to meet the critical and growing need for middle and highly skilled workers. We must increase our investments in adult education and workforce learning programs and find ways to ensure that those who most need education and training can afford access, including those with limited English proficiency. In addition, dedicated funding is needed to align programs, foster community partnerships, and enhance the capacity of education providers to carry out changes which accelerate student learning and strengthen connections to employers and local labor market requirements.
- 2. Build longer-term career advancement opportunities for all of America’s workers.** Lower-skilled adults need more than just an assortment of reading, math, and English language courses disconnected from employment, postsecondary education, and career advancement. Adult education programs should be recast as the starting point on career pathways programs that will help adults enter growing fields and secure jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage. This will require redesigning adult education and employment and training programs, such as those authorized under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), as pathways to valued postsecondary credentials, employment, and career advancement. Federal adult education policy will need to support state and local efforts to build “bridges” from adult education and college developmental education to credit-bearing postsecondary courses and attainment of marketable credentials. Redirected income support programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) can provide the incentives and supports to help people transition to family-supporting employment. Finally, federal higher education policies can be improved so that they provide not only greater access to low-income adults and youth but also support student success.
- 3. Leverage regional and state partnerships of key system stakeholders, to maximize innovation, cooperation, and resources around regional and state economic growth strategies.** The adult learning and workforce challenges confronting America are too massive, too complex, and too urgent for any one public or private entity to solve alone. Regional and state partnerships have shown great promise in meeting these challenges. Key community leaders – including civic, business, labor, education, workforce, economic development, and philanthropic leaders – can convene to identify the strengths, challenges, resources, and needs of their regions and to identify, build support, and leverage resources for a shared strategic vision for building a highly skilled workforce and a competitive regional economy. These partnerships tend to be highly innovative, have flexible funding, and have high levels of clout. And they are generally more reflective of needs specific to each region and state.
- 4. Align key agencies and resources at the federal, state, and local levels, including workforce development, higher education, adult education, and economic development.** The fragmented, underfunded and, at times, conflicting nature of our current policies makes it difficult to craft holistic solutions customized to the needs and circumstances of “hard-to-employ” individuals. Creating seamless pathways to good jobs that pay family-sustaining wages requires bringing together different levels and types of education, training, and economic

development programs with the shared mission of individual advancement (for both current and future workers) and economic growth. It requires aligning program content across programs with industry requirements, and aligning policies regarding assessment, entry and exit standards, and educational credit and transfer to ease transitions among programs. This is particularly important at this time of economic crisis and severe budgetary constraints.

5. **Establish a robust professional development and staff capacity-building system.** These strategies will require workforce development, adult education, and postsecondary education practitioners to do business differently. To ensure that the field is prepared to meet the challenges of a new education and workforce system, the federal and state governments will need to invest in professional development systems.
6. **Align accountability measures with these strategies and the realities of longer-term services and training for lower-skilled workers and establish a vigorous program of research and development to support innovation.** While results-oriented accountability has been built into federal workforce programs for more than 20 years, a focus on outcome measurement is largely absent from adult learning programs. We need an accountability system that crosses programs and agencies, and which supports not only the goal of stable employment but also skill building and attainment of postsecondary credentials. Better data collection and a targeted research strategy is also essential to help the Administration and the states transform how adult education and workforce development programs are designed and implemented.
7. **Allow flexible services that can be customized to individual circumstances and needs.** No one program model works for everyone. Programs need to tailor services to client and employer needs without artificial restrictions on service delivery modes or what can be counted toward federal requirements. While some job seekers may only need a little career guidance and short-term training to get a good job, others such as returning veterans, ex-offenders, and those leaving welfare for work are likely to have greater employment barriers requiring a more extensive set of interventions, including resources to meet the real cost of participating in training and to achieving family-sustaining employment.
8. **Focus solutions on employers' workforce needs as well as workers' career development needs.** Focusing on the education and skills demanded by regional and state economies and employers helps to target education and training investments on high demand jobs of the future and produce a workforce that meets state, regional, and national economic needs. When appropriate, sector-based approaches to workforce development show great promise for supporting economic growth and creating lasting change in regional labor markets. These and other employer-based initiatives help workers gain the skills and industry-recognized credentials needed to advance; and they develop shared workforce solutions to meet employers' immediate and longer-term needs for a more skilled and productive workforce in industries or clusters of occupations that provide advancement opportunities. Additionally, partnering with high-road employers that pay good wages, provide benefits, and otherwise employ good human resource practices can also help to transform low-wage labor markets and promote more inclusive economic growth.

Recommended Actions by the U.S. Department of Education

The U.S. Department of Education is uniquely positioned to assist the president in his goals for educating our workforce, particularly individuals with inadequate basic skills. First, however, the entire adult

education system must be transformed to reflect the critical role it plays in our nation's economic future. This will require additional changes in how success is defined and measured, how the agency works with the U.S. Department of Labor and other entities, and what kinds of messages need to be advanced in the larger policymaking and public arenas.

1. Transform adult education culture, funding and structure to address the needs of the global economy. Currently, the adult education system is without a clear mission and purpose. At a time when the skills of our workforce are essential to our nation's economic recovery, a contemporary direction is needed. Adult education must be transformed so that it is seen by all as an important entry-point for low-skilled workers to longer-term education and training for 21st Century credentials and careers and so that it has a shared purpose with workforce development groups toward higher educational outcome goals. Clear links and pathways to both postsecondary education and workforce development need to be established. Increased funding is needed to transform the system so that it, and more students, can reach these goals. The adult education system must have the incentives, competency, flexibility and responsiveness that are needed to address the rapidly-changing needs of the global economy. Innovation cannot be limited to programs funded through the national leadership funds, but must be seeded through the entire program. Recommended action includes the following:

- a. Develop a new mission statement for adult education that casts it as the entry point for lower-skilled individuals to access broader education, particularly education and job training opportunities that lead to postsecondary credentials and career pathways programs (as set forth in the final report of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher America*.)
- b. Develop new regulations and policies (or clarify existing ones) to 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 from adult education programs to postsecondary credential programs.
- c. Encourage state innovation by clarifying that existing legislation and applicable regulation allow for partnerships with adult education, postsecondary, and workforce programs, as well as the integration of basic and occupational skills services (e.g., ESL, reading, writing, math, and the soft skills essential for success in college and on the job) and linkages to career pathways programs.
- d. Identify model programs for dissemination, and provide support for replication and development of similarly innovative approaches.
- e. Develop a real-time system of collecting and disseminating information on adult learner needs and the labor market, so that such information can inform program policy and practice at the state and national levels.
- f. Develop and deploy technology on a large scale to help expand adult education and workforce skills services.
- g. Provide incentives for states to establish the professional qualifications required by adult education and workforce skills instructors and counselors, and to implement high-quality professional development programs.

2. Measuring Success: Performance and Reporting. Current performance measures and reporting requirements for adult education and English literacy programs do not give sufficient weight to skill and credential attainment—on par with measures such as educational and employment status gains. Given the critical skill needs of our economy and the importance of all adult education students achieving marketable skills that pay off in the labor market, performance measures need to

reflect these priorities. We recommend that the Department of Education carry out the following activities:

- a. Conduct a thorough analysis of current National Reporting System performance measures and reporting requirements. This analysis should review the effectiveness of the National Reporting System in incenting and documenting continuous program improvement, especially toward more effective practices for helping students achieve postsecondary and career goals quickly. It should identify how success in an adult education and workforce skills system should be measured, what problems exist in the current performance measures, and how the existing performance measures and structures can be changed to promote greater educational and skills attainment and their certification. Since we recommend that career and postsecondary success be the new goal of the program, outcomes to that effect should be measured for all students. The analysis should also identify a set of common performance measures that could be used across different agencies (e.g., Labor, Energy) to address workforce and adult learning in all of its various forms.
- b. In partnership with the Department of Labor, conduct research to identify empirically-based benchmarks of progress toward family-supporting employment that go beyond current benchmarks of GED, entry into postsecondary education and training, and entry into employment. The expanded set of benchmarks would include intermediate goals – perhaps combining both credentials and work experience – that are shown to help move people along a pathway to employment at family-sustaining wages.
- c. Establish a nationally-anchored data system in which states are expected to track program enrollments and student progress toward specified outcome goals over a period of several years.

3. System alignment. The current adult education and workforce systems operate independently and within their own “silos,” which contributes to inefficiencies. Greater alignment is needed, not just among programs funded and administered by ED, but also across different agencies, particularly the U.S. Department of Labor and also the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services, Commerce, Housing and Urban Development, Justice and Veterans Affairs. Recommended actions include:

- a. Establish an interagency entity for meaningful integration and planning across a variety of programs and silos, but especially Titles I and II of WIA, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, postsecondary education, Perkins career and technical education and economic development.
- b. Work closely with the U.S. Department of Labor on the alignment of Titles I and II of WIA in ways that 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.
- c. Forge closer ties between OVAE and the Department’s Office of Postsecondary Education, recognizing that an increasing number of students entering postsecondary education are coming through routes other than high school, including adult education and English literacy programs.
- d. Identify barriers to system integration – including funding integration – and provide solutions on how to overcome them. Where barriers cannot be addressed through administrative changes, develop recommendations to policymakers.
- e. Provide advice and technical assistance to regions, adult education programs, WIBs, and other providers on how to navigate existing funding streams and integrate these streams to support innovative programs.
- f. Create incentives for companies to invest in basic skills training and further education of their low-skilled workers.

4. Reframing the value and promoting the importance of adult education and workforce skills development. Although many new resources were committed for workforce development in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, none were directly allocated for adult education. In addition, adult education funding at the federal level has remained largely flat over the past several years, with several states cutting funding even before the recession hit. Adult education and related education and training providers need to educate our leaders about the importance of basic and soft skills development in helping low-skilled and limited English proficient individuals gain marketable credentials that lead to family-supporting jobs. In addition, we need to encourage more low-skill adults to gain the necessary literacy, English language, and workforce skills to succeed in the labor market. We encourage the Department of Education to focus on a new kind of messaging campaign that can change how public officials view the importance of adult learning and a skilled workforce. Additional messaging campaigns addressed to the American public could describe how the public workforce and adult education systems can help them achieve President Obama's goal of at least one year of postsecondary learning. Such messaging campaigns are not enough to help us see the results we are looking for – the other courses of action recommended above must also be implemented. Recommended actions include the following:

- a. Develop a 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 and in the White House. 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.
- b. Work closely with the U.S. Department of Labor, the Department of Education's Offices of Postsecondary Education and Vocational and Adult Education, and the National Institute for Literacy, on a joint message campaign to encourage more adults to pursue postsecondary learning (echoing the president's charge for every American to get one year of postsecondary education); this campaign can borrow strategies, tactics and messages from similar state campaigns (e.g., Kentucky's GoHigher, Oklahoma's Reach Higher).
- c. Emphasize to Congress that when parents are educated and skilled, their children are far more likely to succeed in school.
- d. Emphasize to Congress that when nonviolent offenders are provided with marketable job skills, the potential for reducing future crime and increasing safety at the community level is enormous.

Conclusion

It would be our pleasure to work with the Department to build out these recommendations and continue the discussion regarding how to improve the broader workforce development system to meet our national economic priorities and the educational challenge the president has cast.