

## **Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act**

The American economy faces great challenges as it continues to evolve in the 21st century. While there is tremendous pressure to end the current economic recession and get dislocated workers back in productive, family-supporting employment, policymakers must also look ahead to the looming shortage of skilled workers that could impact the long-term economic health of American businesses and industries. The **Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE)** and the **National Association for State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium (NASDCTEe)** recommend strengthening the country's education and job training systems as a way to meet these critical challenges and the needs of both individuals and the economy as a whole.

As Congress considers the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), more must be done to ensure strategic investments in educational institutions and programs that will create lifelong learners, and in the diverse populations that need training across a wide array of areas.

### **Increase Access to High-quality Training**

The primary focus of the Workforce Investment Act should be to provide training services linked to business and industry needs so that individuals are prepared for lifelong careers. Many studies have shown that as the 1998 Workforce Investment Act was implemented, attention was shifted toward core and intensive services and away from training. A greater focus must be placed throughout the workforce system on increasing skills training to ensure individuals are prepared to succeed in the workforce on a long-term basis. Community and technical colleges and area career and technical centers have a critical role to play in this system and should be preferred training providers due to their established quality, wide reach and low cost. Strategies to accomplish this goal include:

1. ***Allow direct contracting with education providers:*** The provision in the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act that allows local workforce investment boards (WIBs) to contract directly with training providers to facilitate the training of multiple individuals in high-demand occupations is an important innovation that will increase access to programs for larger groups of individuals, especially dislocated workers. Such contracted training would build capacity for institutions such as community colleges and CTE centers by allowing WIBs to pay for the entire cost of a training program upfront, and help institutions to quickly design training to fit the needs of the job seekers and employers. Direct contracting also allows institutions to better plan course offerings during the year based on anticipated need, ensuring that individuals have access to appropriate programs in times of high demand.

2. ***Remove disincentives for training providers:*** Many community and technical colleges and area CTE centers find the eligibility and performance reporting requirements overly burdensome, and thus a disincentive to participate in the WIA program.
  - The performance system is structured in a way that makes long-term investments in an individual's training unlikely, instead promoting short-term activities that can be offered to larger numbers of people. In order to truly prepare low-skill workers for lifelong careers, this emphasis should be shifted and incentives must be built into the performance system for training that leads to a postsecondary technical certificate or degree.
  - The eligibility requirements for community and technical colleges and public, nonprofit area CTE centers must be streamlined to encourage their participation, opening up more options to those seeking training. These institutions must currently report on the performance of all students that enroll in a program, even those not seeking WIA services. These institutions are already subject to rigorous state, federal and accreditation quality-control standards, and this requirement should be lifted, allowing automatic approval of these institutions.
3. ***Eliminate "sequence of services" provision:*** The sequence of services provision forces participants to go through a prescribed sequence of core and intensive services before gaining access to training. Instead, participants should be able to access immediately the services most suitable for their needs.
4. ***Further increase capacity for training:*** In addition to direct contracting mentioned above, more must be done to increase the capacity of postsecondary institutions to provide training under the WIA system. Enrollments in workforce development-related programs are at all-time highs, and resources are scarce. In a growing number of places, individuals are not able to enroll in needed courses or are placed on waiting lists for programs in high-demand career areas. Competitive grant programs can help create the necessary capacity to serve more individuals who need access to training. Specific strategies to accomplish capacity building should be authorized and funded under the new WIA.

### **Strengthen Connections Between Education and Workforce Development Systems**

In order for a reauthorized Workforce Investment Act to create a true national workforce development system, it must inspire coordination and collaboration among stakeholders at all levels. To lead the effort, the law should require a systemic state-level approach involving departments responsible for labor, education, and economic development or commerce. This collaboration can strengthen connections at the local level and create a shared vision across often disconnected agencies. Other steps to strengthen connections include:

1. ***Use common measures & share data:*** Uncoordinated federal reporting requirements among programs result in an undue burden on WIA and other workforce-related programs.
  - Data sharing across programs would ease the burden that programs and providers face in collecting accountability information, and foster an environment of collaboration and efficiency in the workforce and education systems. More effort

must be made to align data systems at the state and local levels and to address barriers to data sharing, such as FERPA interpretations and the inability of Unemployment Insurance wage data to be shared across states. The Carl D. Perkins Act Section 113(b)(2)(F) allows for flexibility for programs to use “substantially similar information gathered for other state and federal programs” to measure performance, but this language is rarely utilized. Similar language and more practical mechanisms for its enactment should be included in WIA.

- Taking this sharing a step further, the use of common measures would provide even more interconnectivity in the workforce system as programs collaborate and work together to ensure alignment of goals. Increased efficiency in workforce programs such as WIA, Perkins, Trade Adjustment Assistance, and Adult Education and Family Literacy can benefit participants by better coordinating and targeting services. Common measures should not attempt to measure everything important to each program, but concentrate on outcomes important across workforce development programs and leave room for additional measures to be added as required.

2. ***Strengthen the role of CTE on state and local boards:*** While it is important to keep WIBs to a manageable size to ensure effectiveness, strengthening connections between the education and workforce systems requires a true partnership. Membership of education stakeholders on the boards is crucial to a well-functioning local workforce system. Those who are being asked to carry out workforce development functions should retain their seat at the table in order to be part of important decisions about funding and local priorities. At the state level, the state director of CTE should be a mandatory member of the state workforce investment board. At the local level, community and technical colleges, area CTE centers (where they exist) and local school districts should be represented, with a priority on those dealing with CTE programs, and should be able to serve in leadership roles.
3. ***Incorporate sector strategies:*** Regional industry partnerships allow businesses, unions, educators and the public workforce system to establish or expand industry or sector partnerships that help workers train for and advance in high-demand and emerging industries. Sector strategies would identify skilled workforce needs within the targeted industry or sector, and develop training and educational strategies using career pathways to ensure employers have the skilled workers to meet their needs. These coordinated decisions help more individuals access the education and training they need for successful careers.
4. ***Utilize youth services to create strong pathways for students:*** The needs of disconnected youth in the workforce development system are unique from those of most adults and dislocated workers. This should continue to be recognized through a separate youth system funding stream that includes activities and accountability provisions unique to the youth populations. Provisions should be made, however, to better coordinate programs across federal funding streams, especially for individuals that can be served across WIA

programs. Both the education and workforce systems have a unique role to play in serving this youth population.

- The current funding allocation between in-school and out-of-school youth allows local WIBs to make spending decisions based on the unique needs of their communities and should be maintained. Programs provided to in-school youth during the summer and after the school day are critical to keeping those students engaged and progressing toward high school graduation, and often provide needed income that can prevent dropping out of high school and skills training to prepare students to become productive members of the community. Changing the funding allocation would cut services to many of these at risk students and reduce the ability for systems connections.
- After the last reauthorization of the WIA, a 2002 Government Accountability Office survey found that building a comprehensive youth development system, as envisioned in the new law, required “strong working relationships between the workforce development and education systems at all levels of government.” Unfortunately, this coordination has not occurred at a systemic level across the country. There need to be clearly defined roles for each system at the local level. Often, community and technical colleges, area CTE centers and secondary schools are best at educating and training through their CTE programs; while WIA-funded programs can help link students with work-based learning opportunities or offer additional opportunities that are not available in local schools.

5. ***Increase linkages between adult education and job training programs:*** Programmatic components of workforce development, adult education, and career and technical postsecondary education must be better aligned. As a start, entrance into credit-bearing postsecondary education should be a clear goal of the adult education system, and should be incorporated into performance measures. In addition:

- A focus should be placed on adult career pathways to tackle barriers adult learners face in the workforce system. Many adults are limited in their career opportunities because they lack some postsecondary education, such as an associate degree or an industry-recognized credential, which is increasingly required in the workforce. Adult career pathways will prepare unemployed, underemployed and dislocated workers for jobs by offering flexible services provided by education institutions, community-based organizations, government agencies and business and industry. The curriculum should be geared towards specific industries and adequately prepare adults for employment, and should be based on a multi-step career ladder that participants can move up as they progress, beginning with basic skills and concluding with advanced technical skills.
- In order to get adults employed more quickly, WIA should incentivize combining CTE with adult basic education instruction. Adults, especially those who speak English as a second language, sometimes get “bogged-down” in learning basic skills, which prevents them from moving through and out of the skills training system. For example, the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training initiative (I-BEST) in Washington State utilizes basic skills training instructors who teach English skills to students at the

same time they are learning occupational CTE skills from other instructors. I-BEST students are more likely to acquire college credits in technical areas and to complete certificate programs applicable to the workforce.

### **Address Administrative and Infrastructure Challenges**

1. ***Establish a separate line-item to fund the infrastructure needs of the One-Stop System:*** The current framework is unclear and has led to troubling proposals to siphon off administrative funding from partner programs, like those supported by the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, which will hinder the ability of these already under-funded programs to meet education and training needs both inside and outside the WIA system. Career technical education's strength as a One-Stop partner is in the postsecondary education and training services that it provides. A clear, designated funding mechanism and administration responsibility should be outlined in the law.
2. ***Structure incentive grants to reward coordination:*** Under the current incentive grant program, states may apply for funds set aside from WIA Title I and Title II to use to further the purposes of those titles. States are eligible for funds if they exceed performance targets for WIA Title I and Title II. States that receive the grants are encouraged to use the funds for activities that promote coordination and collaboration among the agencies administering WIA Title I and Title II programs, are innovative, and are targeted to improve performance. This grant program should be continued as a way to foster coordination between the titles. Additionally, incentives should be considered for states that take concrete steps toward data sharing and the use of concrete measures.

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