



Bridges,



Pathways,

&



Leadership



Programs and Policies
to Move More Low-Skilled
Adults Into and Through
Postsecondary Education



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON
**children
& families**

Raising Voices to Make Every Kid Count

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About the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

The Wisconsin Council on Children and Families is a multi-issue, non-profit children's advocacy organization committed to ensuring that every child in Wisconsin grows up in a just and nurturing family and community. WCCF's efforts in workforce development are based on the fact that kids are more likely to thrive when their parents have access to jobs, training, and income supports that lead to family economic security. Through policy analysis and research, as well as aggressive advocacy, the Council seeks ways to bridge the growing skills gap in a manner that serves both the changing needs of employers and the continued struggle of many of Wisconsin's working poor and unemployed.

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Contact Information:

Wisconsin Council on Children and Families

555 West Washington Avenue, Suite 200

Madison, Wisconsin, 53703

Phone: 608.284.0580 • Fax: 608.284.0583

Web: www.wccf.org

The author can be reached directly at:

jkeckhaver@wccf.org

Executive Summary

A significant skilled worker shortage can already be felt in Wisconsin, with many employers unable to find enough workers with the skills needed to perform and succeed on the job. This is true at the national level as well, with 80 percent of employers responding to a recent National Association of Manufacturers survey saying they are experiencing a shortage of qualified workers overall, and more than 90 percent indicating a moderate or severe shortage of qualified skilled production employees (such as machinists, operators, and technicians).¹ Periodic Manpower, Inc. surveys of employer needs also indicate shortages across a range of positions, from salespeople to teachers to skilled trades.²

Employees, in turn, are seeing that in this rapidly changing and increasingly knowledge-based economy they need to possess new skills and higher educational credentials in order to earn a family-supporting wage. In fact, an estimated two-thirds of all new jobs created between 2000 and 2010 (and a higher portion of jobs that pay a family-supporting wage) will require at least some postsecondary training.³ Another indication of the growing value of higher education levels is the fact that wages for those without a high school degree have actually declined 19 percent in the last 30 years, while wages for those with a college degree increased 16 percent.⁴

But the maxim, *the more education the better*, is not by itself very helpful in shaping a state policy response to the shortage of skilled workers. Due to limited resources, the question becomes: what level of education pays off in the job market and is reasonably achievable by low-skilled adults?

A growing body of research suggests the answer is to

focus on moving more low-skilled workers into and through postsecondary educational programs such as technical diploma and associate degree programs of at least one year in length. When Wisconsin's workers are able to complete this level of schooling and training, as compared to stopping at high school or GED completion, they reap meaningful earnings gains and employers are able to remain productive and competitive.

Low-skilled adults face a number of unique challenges as they attempt to retool their skills and earn higher educational credentials, and states must design adult basic education (ABE) and postsecondary programs accordingly. Two promising approaches to doing just that are “career pathway” and “bridge” programs that:

- (1) focus on accelerating the time it takes to earn valuable credentials and skills,
- (2) contextualize courses and materials to actual in-demand jobs and industries,
- (3) foster more transitions between the basic coursework and postsecondary programming, and
- (4) provide enhanced student supports for low-income and other at-risk students.

These elements should be mingled in comprehensive career pathway and bridge programs at our technical colleges and 2-year universities – informed by local job markets and with input from employers on the skills they most need from workers. Existing programs in Arkansas and Washington State, to name just two, provide examples that should prove informative for Wisconsin's higher education leaders and legislators in this effort.

An estimated two-thirds of all new jobs created between 2000 and 2010 (and a higher portion of jobs that pay a family-supporting wage) will require at least some postsecondary training.

As policymakers and higher education officials respond to the need to increase the skills of all of the state's workers, legislators should examine existing state and local policies and practices in order to remove statutory, rule, or procedural barriers to program implementation and success. In Wisconsin that means taking the following steps:

1. Depart from a longstanding reliance on and focus on the GED by prohibiting the use of the GED as a prerequisite for occupational postsecondary programming. Allow widespread dual enrollment in both basic education courses and certificate and degree programs where appropriate.
2. Collect and disseminate data that is needed to gain a clear view of the impact of our investments in adult basic education programming, including tracking and reporting back to the legislature annually on:

- the numbers of students entering adult basic education programming;
- those that complete basic education programming and gain the GED or HSED;
- those ABE students that transition to postsecondary programming;
- what programs those students enter (e.g. certificates, technical diplomas, or associate degree programs), and

- whether they complete any postsecondary programming within 5 years years.

These data points must include the numbers of *all* students entering, then gaining the GED, transitioning and so on, not merely those who have stated a goal of college completion or obtaining that credential, as is currently done.

3. Require the Wisconsin Technical College System Board to set goals for transitions from adult basic education to post-secondary programming, as other states have done with much success.

Strides must be made now to improve how we educate and train our residents, and more specifically, how we can help move more working adults into and through postsecondary programs.

4. Examine and evaluate the sufficiency of the current level of state funding for adult basic education programming – funding that is currently significantly lower than neighboring states, against whom we are competing for skilled workers and businesses.

The demographic and economic changes that have led to the shortage in skilled workers are irreversible. Taking these steps would send a strong and clear signal to our colleges and universities, to other adult basic education providers, and to the administrators of existing state and local workforce programs that strides must be made now to improve how we educate and train our residents, and more specifically, how we can help move more working adults into and through post-secondary programs.