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## Reform Adult Basic Education to Improve Completion and Transition Rates

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### Post-GED Schooling Key to Economic Success

Research shows that the payoff from completing post-secondary coursework and obtaining a post-GED credential such as an associate's degree is significant. In fact, those who gained an associate's degree in Wisconsin had median wages 32.5 percent higher than those who simply completed some post-secondary college coursework but did not earn a degree (\$12.22 vs. \$16.19 per hour) in 2005.

Research in other states has also indicated that this level of schooling – a post-GED credential that takes at least a year or so to complete – represents a “tipping point” for students, allowing them access to significantly higher quality jobs.

### ABE as Starting and Stopping Point for Many

Many working adults, however, are not prepared for this level of coursework, and must first complete Adult Basic Education (ABE) or remedial classes.

Retention and completion rates for those in basic education courses are often low, and transition rates (of those completing the basic skills offerings and then moving on to subsequent, for-credit and degree programs that carry such a payoff) are even lower.

Unfortunately, we don't have the most relevant state data because the technical college system currently only tracks completion and transition numbers for those students who upon entry listed college as a goal (as compared to the much larger population of students as a whole entering ABE courses).

### Design Changes can Improve ABE Outcomes

A number of other states have made efforts to improve the outcomes associated with their adult basic education offerings by redesigning how the

courses are offered and by focusing on what students do after ABE, and we can learn a great deal from their experiences. These efforts generally include four main characteristics, (1) a focus on acceleration, (2) contextualizing of coursework to specific industries and jobs, (3) fostering transitions, (4) and enhanced student supports.

*Acceleration.* For many working adults who have to take adult basic education offerings before moving on to the certificate or degree program that can pay off for them in the end, it simply is too long of a road. There are several points at which these students drop out and off the radar screen (leading to the workforce term “leaky pipeline”). Several states have tried to accelerate their offerings to meet this challenge, either by allowing students to simultaneously be enrolled in basic education and degree program coursework, or by simultaneously offering the basic courses with any remedial coursework that might also have to be completed, or by contextualizing the basic offerings themselves.

*Contextualizing.* This refers to actually designing the basic skill offerings – reading, writing, math, or language skills – into a work context instead of the traditional family and citizen context done in most basic courses. Washington State has been especially productive at doing this, with their I-BEST program (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training) becoming a model for states around the nation.<sup>1</sup> In that program, basic literacy and specific job skills training are integrated and taught in the classroom simultaneously. The results have been dramatic there, with students five times more likely to earn college credits and 15 times more likely to complete job skills training than those in the traditional setting. The work-focus appears to increase student motivation dramatically. On most campuses, including in

Wisconsin, vocational staff and basic education staff are highly siloed, with little interaction between or integration of the two.

*Fostering Transitions.* A focus on helping move more basic education students into subsequent programs is important given what is known about the labor market payoff, or lack thereof, for those students who do not advance to any training beyond their GED. One brief example here is Kentucky, which took on as a state goal, to increase the number of those transitioning beyond their GED. While they have not yet achieved their goal of 40 percent, they have improved dramatically, from 12 percent originally to 22 percent in 2004. Several other states have established this as a goal as well.

*Enhanced Student Supports.* Lastly, in order to move more low-skilled adults into and through post-secondary offerings, there must be enhanced student supports available to them (in the form of academic and career counseling, informing of the availability of other key social supports, mentoring, and so on.) Arkansas took the step of using TANF funds to place counselors at the eleven college campuses involved in their efforts to meet the unique needs of adult learners.<sup>ii</sup> And Illinois has implemented the Illinois Student Success Grant, which is targeted funding to provide the student services needed by economically disadvantaged and academically at-risk students at their community and technical colleges.<sup>iii</sup>

## Conclusion

These four elements should be mingled in a comprehensive strategy to reform ABE offerings and increase the numbers of low-skilled adults who get into and complete post-secondary programs. Doing so will help employers meet their workforce needs and will help our workers provide for themselves and their families for the long-term, as they move into higher-quality jobs. Below are three changes to current policy that could start us down this road.

1. Require the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) to track:

1. the numbers of students entering basic education programming
2. those that complete basic education programming and gain the GED

3. those that then transition to post-GED programming
4. what programs these students enter (ex. certificates, technical diplomas, associate degree programs, bachelors degree programs)
5. whether they complete any post-GED programming within a set number of years

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

Report back to the legislature annually on these numbers.

2. Legislature to set a 5-year goal with annual benchmarks for improving transition rates from adult basic education to post-GED programming.

3. Prohibit Wisconsin Technical Colleges from requiring prior completion of the GED before beginning certificate, technical diploma, and degree programs, allowing for “dual enrollment” as a way of accelerating completion of post-GED programs that have proven to bring the most significant employment and earnings payoff, as well as opening up more financial aid options.

The WTCS may establish exceptions to this rule in specific cases where requiring prior completion of the GED before beginning certain degree programs is appropriate (as determined by meeting reasoned criteria developed by the WTCS).

<sup>i</sup> *I-BEST: A Program Integrating Adult Basic Education and Workforce Training*, available at:

[http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/docs/data/research\\_reports/resh\\_05-2\\_i-best.pdf](http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/docs/data/research_reports/resh_05-2_i-best.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> A fuller discussion of the Arkansas Career Pathway program is available at:

[http://www.goodfaithfund.org/\\_pdf/pub\\_pp/pp\\_v27\\_6\\_06.pdf](http://www.goodfaithfund.org/_pdf/pub_pp/pp_v27_6_06.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup>

For a description of the Illinois Student Success Grant program, as well as other similar efforts, see *Investing in Success: Educational Support for Illinois Community College Students*, available at:

<http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/SupportServicesReport.pdf>