



Reach Higher, AMERICA

OVERCOMING CRISIS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

America's 21st Century Challenge

America's workforce is facing an education and skills crisis. Among the 30 member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States is *the only one in which younger adults are less educated than the previous generation. Unless we invest now to educate and train our workforce, America risks its economic viability and its ability to compete in a global marketplace where knowledge is the key to success.*

The Commission calls for fundamental transformation of adult education services in America to a comprehensive system that will produce work-ready adults able to earn family-sustaining wages, meet the needs of American business, and enable American workers to compete in the global economy.

High Dropout Rates. *More than 1.2 million young adults drop out of U.S. high schools every year.*

Too Little English Language Instruction. Low literacy levels, a lack of high school education, and poor English skills hinder up to *half of the 2 million immigrants* entering the United States each year.

Low Parent Education. Limited education of many parents hinders the ability of children to learn and succeed.

Uneducated Prison Populations. Of the 2.3 million incarcerated in 2006, 43 percent of 18- to 60-year-olds lacked a high school diploma or equivalent. Ninety-five percent of prisoners return to our communities. We currently invest only \$13 per incarcerated person.

Demographic Shift. As the current generation of American workers retires, the one that replaces it will be, on average, fewer in number, and, without educational intervention, less educated and more economically constrained.

Meeting the Challenge

To meet America's 21st Century adult education needs, the National Commission on Adult Literacy calls for creating a new *Adult Education and Workforce Skills System that will prepare out-of-school adults for postsecondary education and job training readiness and enable their success in the 21st Century workplace.*

~ The Commission recommends that this System be built up to enroll 20 million adults annually by the year 2020, about seven times present capacity. The public expenditure to support this system—\$20 billion plus by 2020—will be more than offset by fiscal gains to local, state, and federal government.

~ The U.S. is falling behind in educational attainment and workforce readiness in international comparisons.

~ 80 to 90 million U.S. adults today, about half of the adult workforce, do not have the basic education and communication skills required to get or advance in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage.

~ Adult education and workforce skills programs currently enroll about 3 million adults annually, leaving out the millions of Americans needed to fill the higher paying jobs that will drive our nation's economy.

~ The Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that between 2004 and 2014, 24 of the 30 fastest-growing occupations will require workers with postsecondary education or training. About 40 percent of job openings over the next decade will be "middle skill" jobs—requiring more than a high school diploma, but less than a four-year degree.

~ Investing in our adult workforce will yield huge returns. If even 4 million dropouts earn a high school diploma by 2020, the net fiscal benefit to federal, state, and local governments will exceed \$25 billion annually.

The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act

To achieve the goals the Commission recommends, Congress must pass a comprehensive new *Adult Education and Economic Growth Act* to **overhaul, connect, and expand federal adult education and workforce skills training.**

The Act must:

- ~ Be on the scale of other historic legislation that has enabled America to meet huge challenges—such as the original G.I. Bill or the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act.
- ~ Focus service on the needs of the unemployed, low-skilled incumbent workers, immigrants with limited or no English, parents or caregivers with low basic skills, incarcerated adults, high school dropouts, and high school graduates not adequately prepared for college.
- ~ Redefine the fundamentals of adult education, set program goals, and offer incentives and strategies to increase learner access, including adults already on the job.
- ~ Provide funding to states following federal review and approval of their comprehensive adult education plans geared to state economic development goals.
- ~ Build in requirements for System accountability and efficiency.

A Comprehensive and Broad-Based Effort

The System requires the involvement of state and federal government, business and labor, corporate and private philanthropy, nonprofit research and service groups of all kinds, and the general public. A much larger role is required for community colleges and for technology.

States must pass legislation to establish goals for adult education, workforce, and economic development—with involvement of appropriate planning and policy groups and governors—and they must link these goals in ways that can be measured. States also must invest in upgrading worker skills to improve their employability and productivity and help offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries.

Business and labor should join states to invest in training that enables workers to adapt to evolving needs, so that companies can remain productive and profitable, and workers can advance on the job and earn a family-sustaining wage.

Business must also give higher priority to low-skilled incumbent workers in their training programs and provide incentives to spur participation.

Philanthropic organizations, both corporate and private, must recognize the connection between adult education, workforce skills development, and state economic goals, and join by providing funding for technology, awareness activities, research, and other elements to achieve success in the new System.

Nonprofits—community colleges, adult education and literacy organizations, youth development groups, workforce development alliances, poverty and welfare agencies, corporate foundations, and others—also must support the new system: by delivering high quality education and workforce skills training, and helping raise awareness about program and service opportunities. *The Commission recommends establishing a new superagency membership organization to focus and strengthen these efforts.*

The Voice of Americans. The general public must communicate to their state legislatures and to Congress the importance of adult education in 21st Century America, the difference it makes in their lives, and the need for strong policy, programs, and funding.

Benefits for All

As more educated Americans enter and advance in the workplace, the new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System would generate many other economic, social, and civic benefits—which will more than pay for the costs of the System. Each of the following gains will produce economic benefits:

- ~ Better skilled workers with access to better and higher paying jobs.
- ~ Parents who can help their children with homework and promote the value of learning.
- ~ Increased voter participation, and higher rates of citizenship and civic engagement.
- ~ Lower incarceration and crime rates and safer communities.
- ~ Better health and healthcare.
- ~ Increased tax revenues for local, state, and federal government.