



# Reach Higher, AMERICA

## OVERCOMING CRISIS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

America's workforce is facing an education and skills crisis. Among the 30 member countries of the Organization 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.*

### Meeting America's 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge

America's current adult education and workforce skills training programs were designed for a different time and different challenges. They must be fundamentally transformed to meet the nation's pressing 21<sup>st</sup> Century adult education and workforce needs.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy calls for a new *Adult Education and Workforce Skills System* with the capacity to serve effectively and efficiently **20 million adults annually by the year 2020**. The mission of this new System is to move out-of-school adults *to readiness for postsecondary education and job training*.

The new System would be funded by *public expenditures of \$20 billion by 2020*—a fourfold increase over current public adult education and workforce training expenditures of Titles I and II of the Workforce Investment Act. Additional funding is needed from private philanthropy and corporations. The public expenditure to support this system will be more than offset by fiscal gains to local, state, and federal government.

### The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act

To accomplish this mission, Congress must:

- ~ Pass a comprehensive new *Adult Education and Economic Growth Act* to overhaul, connect, and expand adult education and workforce skills training. This Act—on the scale of the original GI Bill or National Interstate and Defense Highways Act—must incorporate adult education and workforce skills programs of the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor and of other federal departments and agencies, to achieve greater accountability, efficiency, and consistency of purpose in programs and outcomes.

- ~ Focus service on the needs of the unemployed, low-skilled incumbent workers, immigrants with limited or no English and poor literacy skills, parents or caregivers with low basic skills, incarcerated adults, high school dropouts, and high school graduates unprepared for college.
- ~ Redefine the fundamentals of adult education, set program goals, and offer incentives and strategies to increase program access and participation for learners.

- ~ 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.
- ~ Adults in need of instructional services are beyond the reach of the schools.
- ~ 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.

- ~ Provide leadership to develop the role of technology for instructional and program management purposes.
- ~ Provide new funding to states following federal review and approval of their adult education plans.

## State Leadership

The new System requires leadership from state government as well. States should:

- ~ Pass legislation to establish, link, and measure goals for adult education, workforce, and economic development—with involvement of governors and of new or existing planning and policy groups.
- ~ Invest in upgrading incumbent workers' skills, to improve their employability and productivity and help offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries.
- ~ Develop programs and goals geared to the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act.
- ~ Support awareness activities designed to improve public support of adult education as a lifelong need and to motivate adult learners to seek services and understand the benefit.

## Broad-Based Effort Essential

*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*—such as community colleges, adult education and literacy organizations, youth development groups, workforce development alliances, poverty and welfare agencies, corporate foundations and other entities—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 21<sup>st</sup> Century America, the difference it makes in their lives, and the need for strong policy, programs, and funding.