

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

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GRADUATING TO COLLEGE: THREE STATES HELPING ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS GET A COLLEGE EDUCATION

Tom Hilliard¹

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

Strengthening State Policies for America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, nearly one in three American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Kresge foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their state policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:
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INTRODUCTION

The educational requirements of American employers are rising, but the educational attainment of the American workforce is stagnating. The competitive pressures of the global economy force companies to computerize, automate or offshore every task that can be reduced to rote work. As a result, the wage and employment rewards for earning a postsecondary credential have steadily climbed over the past half-century, and they climb faster after recessions. Conversely, jobs that pay family-supporting wages to high school dropouts or graduates who lack postsecondary credentials are drying up.

Unfortunately, the educational attainment of adults in the U.S. has remained at roughly the same level for the past two decades, even as other industrialized nations, notably Canada, Ireland, South Korea and Taiwan, have moved past us. Raising the graduation and college going rates of America's high school seniors will help, but they are too small a population to make a significant difference for employers.

The Working Poor Families Project (WFPF) supports state nonprofit organizations in strengthening state policies that can assist families striving to work their way into the middle class and achieve economic security. WFPF encourages its partners to work closely with state policymakers in building educational opportunities for low-skilled adults; it views preparing low-skill adults to access and succeed in postsecondary education as a critical state policy goal.

Helping low-skilled adults obtain postsecondary credentials would help a great deal, and perhaps the most powerful tool for accomplishing this goal is the American adult basic education system. Publicly-funded adult educators in the United States provide literacy, numeracy and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction to more than 2.3 million adults who lack

proficiency in reading, writing or English communication. These skills are essential for anyone who wishes to achieve college and career success. Historically, however, adult literacy providers have seen the endpoint of their services as the high school equivalency diploma, rather than a college credential. As a result, the majority of adult educators have not sought to establish partnerships with postsecondary institutions or to develop strategies for postsecondary transition.

Only a few adult education providers embrace the goal of supporting college transitions as federal and state funding tend to reward literacy gains and achievement of high school equivalency credentials rather than postsecondary enrollment. That's why the single biggest force for change could be a shift in state policy. If state adult education policymakers identify transition to postsecondary education as a top priority and revamp funding and performance outcomes to support it, providers are likely to respond enthusiastically and creatively.

Several states are leading the way in aligning their adult literacy and postsecondary education systems. This brief profiles three of those states and explores their common features, distinctive policy choices, achievements and remaining challenges. The brief makes specific policy recommendations for starting or continuing down the road to creating more effective postsecondary transition opportunities for adults lacking strong literacy and numeracy skills.

ADULT LITERACY AND THE TRANSITION TO POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION

Postsecondary education is increasingly central to America's ability to compete in a global marketplace, to the productivity of employers, and to the livelihood of individual adults who hope to earn family-supporting wages. When President Obama called for "every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training," he articulated a growing consensus among policymakers that high school graduation can no longer be the end point of the educational process. A next step beyond high school has become mandatory for Americans who want to escape or stay out of poverty.

The trends are unmistakable. The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce projects that by the year 2018, more than 60 percent of all jobs will require a postsecondary credential – not necessarily a college degree, but some form of education or training beyond high school.² While the United States once led the world in the share of adults with a postsecondary credential, other nations have invested heavily in catching up. By 2011, the U.S. had fallen to 15th place among industrialized nations in postsecondary attainment among adults ages 25 to 34.³

While the United States would benefit from a surge in postsecondary attainment, many obstacles loom. The largest such obstacle is the inadequate literacy of the adult population. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 14 percent of all Americans, 30 million adults, read at the "below basic" literacy level, and another 29 percent, or 63 million, read and write at only a basic prose level.⁴ When more than four in ten adults lack sufficient readiness to succeed in a college setting, major gains are difficult to envision.

Another way of looking at the overall population is to examine the deficits in educational credentials, English-language proficiency and income. According to one recent analysis based on population data, 45.6 million working-age adults are "most in need of adult education."⁵ These adults are characterized by three overlapping deficits:

- ◆ 25.7 million have no high school diploma
- ◆ 10.4 million lack a college education and speak little or no English
- ◆ 30.5 million lack a college education and earn less than a living wage

In fact, 3.9 million adults suffer from all three deficits. That is, they have no high school diploma, speak little or no English, and live in a family that earns less than a living wage. The aspirations and struggles of low-income adults can be glimpsed in annual data released on the General Education Development (GED) credential. Each year, roughly 65 percent of those who complete the GED say that their goal is to obtain further education beyond the GED level. Yet the GED Testing Service found that

only 12 percent of those who completed the GED test in 2004 earned a postsecondary credential by 2010.⁶ The distance between 12 percent and 65 percent represents a major gap between the goal to achieve a postsecondary credential and students' ability to achieve it.

The adult education field lacks anything near the resources needed to bring large numbers of adult learners to college classrooms. Only 5 percent of the 45.6 million adults most in need of adult education are actually enrolled at any given time. In 2007-08, 2.3 million adults were enrolled in programs funded by the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act or AEFLA (also known as the Workforce Investment Act, Title II), the main funding source for adult education in America.⁷ In 2008, the last year for which comprehensive state data is available, states contributed \$1.6 billion, while the federal government provided \$540 million.⁸ However, just four states accounted for almost two-thirds of all state spending on adult education: California, Florida, Michigan and New York.⁹ Since 2008, the recession has reportedly driven state contributions down even lower.¹⁰

Other obstacles to serving low-skilled adults who aspire to college include:

- ♦ **Student Characteristics:** Adult students face a number of barriers that undermine their ability to enter or succeed in college. They typically work full-time, often support families, and experience financial hardships that make affording college difficult or impossible. Policymakers and college administrators tend to focus on academic readiness, but that may not be the largest obstacle for adult learners seeking a postsecondary credential. One survey of adult college students who dropped out of college found that the most common reason (54 percent of respondents) was "I needed to go to work and make money." The next most common answer was "I just couldn't afford the tuition and fees."¹¹ These characteristics of adult students, so different from recent high school graduates, underline the importance of social, financial and academic supports specific to their needs.

- ♦ **Focus on Lowest-Literacy Adults:** Most adult education students are in the lower educational proficiency levels. Only 14 percent of AEFLA-funded adult education students are in adult secondary education, the launching pad for postsecondary education.¹² As a result, colleges are less likely to think of adult education providers as feeders for their own student population, and adult education providers are more likely to dismiss postsecondary education as a realistic goal for their students. Nationally, only 5 percent of all adult education students identify a goal of postsecondary education or training.¹³
- ♦ **Not Aligned with Postsecondary Institutions:** Adult education providers often have no relationship with postsecondary institutions in their communities. Perceived missions may vary dramatically, as well as funding sources and oversight bodies. Even for the 15 states in which higher education and other postsecondary institutions have primary responsibility for adult education, observers have noted a lack of continuity and integration.
- ♦ **Limited Instructional Support for Postsecondary or Career Readiness:** Adult education programs typically do not academically prepare students for a transition to postsecondary education, in part because their endpoint is typically high school equivalency attainment. While some adult education programs "contextualize" instruction to a particular occupation or economic sector, an approach that studies have found appeals to adult learners, such programs are few and far between. The mainstream of the adult education field has been criticized for lacking "work-related content, structures that accommodate working people, and modular credentials that link advances in learning to job payoffs."¹⁴

- ♦ **Lack of Familiarity with Technology:** Many adult students lack familiarity with computer technology, software programs and social networking, especially older dislocated workers who did not use technology in their previous jobs. These adults feel great anxiety about aspects of adult and postsecondary education that require working on a computer. Yet many postsecondary tasks now require computer familiarity, including the computer-adaptive placement tests that determine college readiness. In order to make a successful postsecondary transition, adult students often need some form of computer training prior to entering college.

All states struggle with some combination of these barriers. Yet the degree to which a few state leaders have fulfilled the promise of higher education for adult learners demonstrates that no barrier is entirely impassable.

TRENDS IN ADULT EDUCATION

For decades, state governments have sought to build the college going rate among high school graduates. Until the late 1990s, the notion of building the college going rate among adults was virtually unheard of. Changes in the labor market clearly made a difference in the thinking of policymakers. But what really brought the concept of adult college transition into the mainstream was a series of creative leaps forward by individual states. Policymakers in these states had the fundamental insight that adults go to college for different reasons than recent high school graduates, face different challenges, and need to be supported in different ways.

In Washington State, the Board of Community and Technical Colleges developed a model for integrating adult education and college-level vocational coursework into a single course. In Oregon, Arkansas and other states, policymakers explored the career pathways model, which offered a sectoral framework for fitting together the services provided by adult education, postsecondary education and workforce development providers. In Kentucky, the “Go Higher Kentucky” marketing

campaign encouraged adults, as well as high school students, to seek a college education.

Forward-thinking philanthropists have also put their resources and credibility toward this end.

- ♦ *The Joyce Foundation* sponsored the “Shifting Gears” initiative; it supported Midwestern states in developing new strategies to help adults – especially low-skilled adults affected by the rapidly shrinking manufacturing sector – learn new skills and obtain postsecondary credit-based credentials valued by employers. These strategies involve career pathways as well as integrated bridge programs that link adult education programs and postsecondary institutions.
- ♦ *The Ford Foundation* sponsored Bridges to Opportunity, which was a multi-year initiative in six states designed to bring about changes in state policy that improve education and employment outcomes for educationally and economically disadvantaged adults. The Bridges to Opportunity initiative helped drive the creation of Washington State’s I-BEST program and other innovative strategies.
- ♦ *The Nellie Mae Education Foundation* funded the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project; it is designed and managed by World Education in partnership with 25 adult education programs to prepare adult basic education graduates to enter and succeed in postsecondary education in order to improve their own and their families’ lives.
- ♦ Most recently, the *Gates Foundation*, in partnership with other national foundations such as Joyce and Kresge, have embarked on an effort called Accelerating Opportunity; it will replicate the I-BEST model in a handful of states where adult education is governed by the higher education system.

While this policy brief focuses on connectivity between the adult and postsecondary education sectors, connectivity with employer needs has also driven the past decade's innovative models, leading to extensive collaboration with workforce development providers. Adult learners, by and large, do not seek an open-ended liberal arts education as do many recent high school graduates. They want to retool their skills for in-demand occupations as quickly as possible, even though they might benefit from taking additional time to learn soft skills desired by employers like critical thinking and collaboration. For adult learners, postsecondary education is a perpetual balancing act.

The focus on transitioning adult learners to college has gathered steam at a national level under the Obama administration. When Brenda Dann-Messier, the highly regarded executive director of Dorcas Place, a Rhode Island-based provider of adult education, was appointed Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), she focused the nation's adult education oversight agency on building bridges to postsecondary and workforce opportunities.

Over the past three years, OVAE has developed a series of guidance memos and initiatives to support adult transitions to postsecondary education. Most significantly, OVAE collaborated with the federal Departments of Labor and Health and Human Services on an April 2012 letter endorsing the career pathways framework and identifying best practices within that field.¹⁵ The letter explicitly calls for adult education agencies to coordinate their activities with postsecondary and workforce agencies to facilitate adult college and career readiness.

This brief profiles three states that have taken an early lead in helping adult learners make the transition from adult to postsecondary education: Kentucky, Maine and Minnesota. As noted earlier, they are far from the only states exploring new approaches, but they are three of the most interesting and successful thus far.

These states were chosen not only because they are attempting to scale up structural reforms, but because each has many adult education providers

The states profiled here show how innovative models to bridge adult literacy and postsecondary education can evolve, how they can be structured and funded, and what they can accomplish.

outside the community college system. Most states delegate their federally funded adult education system to so-called "local education agencies," also known as public K-12 school systems. Such states need best practices to align or integrate these sectors with the postsecondary education system, where the institutional culture and mission are quite different.

In Maine and Minnesota, adult education providers are placed within the K-12 system. In Kentucky, adult education is a hybrid system, with some providers in community colleges and other postsecondary institutions, others in public K-12 school systems, and still others in community-based organizations. The states profiled here show how innovative models to bridge adult literacy and postsecondary education can evolve, how they can be structured and funded, and what they can accomplish.

KENTUCKY

The Kentucky Adult Education (KYAE) system, one of the nation's first to embrace postsecondary transition as a goal, works by fostering an environment supportive of college transition: first, by setting clear goals that span agencies and funding streams; second, by measuring progress toward those goals; third, by publishing outcome data at a county level and factoring them into competitive grant making.

Kentucky has far more experience than most states in strengthening adult access to postsecondary

education. As far back as 1997, Kentucky enacted the Postsecondary Education Improvement Act, which sought to increase postsecondary educational attainment. In 2000, the Adult Education Reform Act identified college and career readiness as the mission of adult education, and in 2003, Kentucky Adult Education joined the state's Council on Postsecondary Education, reinforcing its focus on postsecondary transition. In 2007, the Council on Postsecondary Education committed to double the number of Kentuckians with a bachelor's degree by the year 2020.¹⁶

Kentucky Adult Education's mission is to "prepare our students for college and career readiness by delivering a world-class education." The federal government has a performance measurement for transitioning to postsecondary education, which is to measure the rate at which adult literacy students who identify their goal as transitioning to postsecondary education achieve that goal in the year after exiting the program. KYAE leaders did not find that measurement sufficient because the rate at which students set a postsecondary goal is small, much smaller than the number who should enter postsecondary education.

So KYAE added a statewide goal for the share of all adults earning GEDs who transition to postsecondary education, irrespective of the goals they set when entering the program. In 2011-12, the goal was that 28 percent of GED graduates should transition to a Kentucky college or university within two years. Each year, the goal rises by one percentage point.¹⁷ It should be noted that the federal government only tracks transitions within one year.

The agency also sets county-level goals for postsecondary transitions and publishes the actual rate in each county. In this way, KYAE keeps pressure on local providers to continually improve their postsecondary transition performance. KYAE accountability policy permits the defunding of providers who consistently fail to meet state performance measures – of which postsecondary transition is one. At the same time, additional funding is available for meeting or exceeding performance expectations.

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KYAE's approach of setting a clear goal and holding providers accountable for meeting their share of that goal has yielded important gains. In 2010, 26 percent of all adult education graduates continued to college, compared to 19 percent in 2006.

college with its "Go Higher Kentucky" marketing campaign. This campaign, which ran from 2000 to 2003 and in a different form from 2006 to 2008, used sophisticated marketing tools to drive home the importance of postsecondary transition to adult and youth audiences. The Council on Postsecondary Education operates a website which provides valuable information to adult learners on postsecondary education opportunities and financial aid resources.¹⁸

KYAE's approach of setting a clear goal and holding providers accountable for meeting their share of that goal has yielded important gains. In 2010, 26 percent of all adult education graduates continued to college, compared to 19 percent in 2006.¹⁹ Information was not available on postsecondary persistence and graduation.

The agency is in the process of carrying out two new strategies to strengthen adult postsecondary transitions: implementing Common Core Standards in adult education described below, and participating in the aforementioned national Accelerating Opportunity initiative.

KYAE is an early adopter of the Common Core Standards developed by the National Governors Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers and adopted by 47 state public K-12 education systems. These standards enable elementary and secondary schools to retool their curricula to align with college entrance requirements. By bringing the Common Core

standards into adult education, Kentucky seeks to enable its adult learners to enter college ready to take credit-bearing courses and bypass the obstacles and delays of developmental education. Kentucky is ahead of almost all other states in building the Common Core Standards into its adult education system. KYAE is providing extensive professional development services to adult education teachers.

Kentucky has recently obtained a \$1.6 million grant from the Accelerating Opportunity initiative to improve postsecondary transitions from adult education providers located at community colleges. Eight community colleges that oversee adult education in their counties are using the grant to develop career pathways initiatives that focus specifically on integrating adult basic education instruction with postsecondary occupational instruction along the lines of Washington State's I-BEST model.²⁰

Funding constraints are slowing progress, however. General Fund appropriations dropped by more than 20 percent between 2008 and 2012, and more than one-third of adult education providers surveyed in 2009 reported having to impose waiting lists for service.²¹

MAINE

The state of Maine helps adult students enter college through a college preparation and advising program called "College Transitions." This program consists primarily of a course offered to adult education students who could become college-ready within a relatively short time. The courses are branded separately from adult education and in many cases located on college campuses.

In 2001, the Nellie Mae Education Foundation funded seven partnerships between community colleges and adult education providers as part of the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project designed and managed by World Education, Inc. In subsequent years, the Lumina and MELMAC foundations and the Maine Department of Education funded additional sites. The partnerships incubated a model designed to assist adults who have never attended college or have not

been successful in college, and can build skills to enter college within 12-18 months.

Policymakers often disparage pilot programs as dead-end initiatives that tend to remain isolated and eventually disappear. Yet College Transitions achieved statewide scale. In 2006, the Maine State Legislature agreed to invest state funds to expand the initiative to 22 adult education/community college partnerships around the state.

In College Transitions programs, the adult education provider creates a preparatory course to bring students up to college readiness. The course is funded through state adult education and federal WIA Title II dollars, but it is provided apart from other adult education programs so as not to stigmatize the course as "remedial" or "adult literacy" in nature. This strategy confronts a perennial obstacle to aligning adult education with college and career readiness – the association of adult education with dropping out of high school and therefore with academic failure. Courses are offered in a separate location, usually a college campus, staffed separately, and advertised by distinct flyers.

In 2010, College Transitions enrolled 5,301 adults, 4.4 percent of the state's total adult education population. Many students are referred from the college to College Transitions because they scored poorly on the college placement test, although the majority of referrals come from adult education.

In Maine, local school boards manage the adult education system. The Maine Department of Education issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for local education agencies to compete for 22 competitive grants; winning a grant necessitated building a partnership with a postsecondary institution.²² The Maine Department of Education expects certain key elements in the program at each site: academic skill building in reading, writing, math and computers, so that completers will need no more than one developmental education course in college; career and academic counseling; college survival skills; and mentoring and tutoring. Considerable innovation is also encouraged and supported at the provider level.

The Maine Department of Education commissioned an external evaluation of College Transitions in 2008. The evaluator conducted a number of interviews and

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returned a positive judgment, observing that 75 percent of the students increased their placement test scores in English and math. In addition, 85 percent of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution after completing the transition program.²³

Challenges noted by the evaluator and managers of College Transitions include difficulty recruiting and keeping motivated students, and in assisting their students in overcoming challenges such as childcare, transportation and health problems. The state is in the process of building a postsecondary student unit record database that will include adult education. That will enable the Department of Education to track the rate at which College Transitions completers enter and succeed in college. The Department is also exploring opportunities to build College Transitions into the core of a career pathways framework.

MINNESOTA

The Minnesota FastTRAC Adult Career Pathway initiative has gone further in transforming Minnesota's adult education system than almost any other state. Through Minnesota FastTRAC, Minnesota Adult Education has developed a partnership with the public higher education and workforce agencies to create a career pathways framework that begins with the lowest level of literacy and ESL instruction and extends upward to Associate degrees. Also, in the crucial transitional space between adult education and college, Minnesota FastTRAC features a creative "Integrated ABE" bridge program that brings together adult literacy and postsecondary career/technical programs of study in a format similar to the Washington State I-BEST program, but with innovative features original to Minnesota. Importantly, completion of the integrated bridge

program generates college credit that counts toward postsecondary credentials and degrees.

Minnesota FastTRAC was initiated in 2007 with support from the Joyce Foundation's Shifting Gears initiative. That initiative began with joint planning by three agencies: Minnesota Department of Education-Adult Basic Education (ABE), Minnesota State Colleges and Universities (MnSCU) and the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). The planning team devised a five-stage system that spanned agencies and funding streams.

An official Minnesota FastTRAC program is a career pathways program, and is therefore defined as a series of connected educational and training programs that allow low-skill students to advance to successively higher levels of education and employment in a given sector. Unlike career pathways programs in most other states, however, Minnesota's program begins with basic skills instruction within adult education.

Each Minnesota FastTRAC provider targets adults who meet at least one of the following conditions: lack a recognized high school credential; have a limited ability to speak, read or write English; lack sufficient mastery of core basic educational skills; or lack sufficient mastery of workplace employability skills. Roughly 2 million working-age adults meet these criteria in Minnesota.

Minnesota FastTRAC follows a set of five structured and connected educational stages, each stage building the student's basic skills, occupational grounding and career exploration to prepare for the next stage. Students who read/write below a middle-school proficiency level are enrolled in Bridge Prep, which embeds work skills into beginning adult basic education. Students who achieve middle school foundational skills (or test at level at entry) can enter the Bridge I stage, which teaches reading, writing, speaking and math skills in the context of a variety of occupational sectors, providing career guidance to adults with little work experience. When students reach a high intermediate level of foundational skills, they can enter Bridge II, which provides focused preparation for targeted postsecondary occupational courses, this time in the context of a specific occupational

sector. Bridge II prepares the student for Integrated ABE, the heart of the FastTRAC system, and introduces critical support from a career navigator.

Integrated ABE brings adult education and college occupational/vocational faculty together in the same classroom. The adult education instructor provides literacy and numeracy instruction carefully tailored (or “contextualized”) to the occupational curriculum, and the postsecondary instructor teaches coursework that illustrates and advances the basic education curriculum. Students who complete the “blended instruction” of Integrated ABE seek attainment of a sub-baccalaureate certificate of up to 17 credit hours.

Such certificates may not provide a large income boost, but the state expects Minnesota FastTRAC grantees to fit the certificates into a career pathway leading to degrees. Colleges in the most recent round of Minnesota FastTRAC grants count credit earned in obtaining a short-term certificate towards a longer-term certificate (called a diploma in Minnesota), and count that credit towards an Associate degree. This articulation of credits should serve both to accelerate degree completion and improve college persistence and retention.

There are now 34 Minnesota FastTRAC programs on 20 college campuses, half of which started operation in 2011.²⁴ As of May 2012, Minnesota FastTRAC has served more than 2,000 participants.

The state of Minnesota has begun implementing a longitudinal database that tracks students from adult education into college. The first report, known as a “pipeline analysis” because it follows students through the educational pipeline, was released in January 2012. The pipeline analysis makes a compelling case for FastTRAC by documenting the low college going rate among adult education students in Minnesota. Only 14 percent of students leaving adult education make the transition to college within two years after exit. Encouragingly, however, freshmen who enter from adult education programs seem to be survivors. The analysis found that they persisted to the second year at nearly the same rate as other freshmen (63 percent vs. 70 percent), despite their disadvantages.²⁵

The Minnesota FastTRAC Adult Career Pathway initiative has gone further in transforming Minnesota’s adult education system than almost any other state.

KEY COMPONENTS OF THE THREE TRANSITIONAL SYSTEMS

The experiences of Maine, Minnesota and Kentucky highlight key strategies that make a real difference in strengthening adult transitions to postsecondary education. They also reveal the choices that other states will have to make as they explore their own routes to effective transitional systems.

Setting the Program Goal

All three states have reoriented their adult education systems around the goal of increasing the number of low-literacy adults who enter and succeed in college. Setting the goal and obtaining support from high-level policymakers sends a clear message to agency staff, practitioners in the field and other stakeholders that they too should commit to helping adult learners access and succeed in college. Given the multiple priorities and missions that adult educators and community college leaders juggle on a daily basis, such a focused statement is essential to developing the momentum for an effective postsecondary transition initiative.

Planning the Paradigm Shift

After achieving broad consensus that the goal of postsecondary transition, or college and career readiness, must be a priority of the adult education system, officials should consider appointing a steering committee or task force to develop the strategy for executing this goal. The taskforce should include leaders from the community college and workforce sectors as well.

Transitional Model

Each state uses a somewhat distinct model of adult education.

- ♦ *Kentucky* drives programmatic change by rigorously tracking outcomes at the county and state level and holding providers accountable for achieving those outcomes, while educating low-literacy adults on the importance of striving for a postsecondary goal beyond GED attainment.
- ♦ *Maine* uses a model that the National College Transition Network (an advisor to Maine and other New England states) has dubbed “college prep,” in which participants obtain their GED and then enter a college preparation course aligned with college entrance standards.²⁶ The course is offered by adult education providers, but purposefully associated with college rather than adult education. An advantage of this system is a clear progression for students and a transitional framework that minimizes the stigma associated with the adult education system.
- ♦ *Minnesota’s* FastTRAC program is based on the career pathways framework, infusing career and occupational content into adult education courses at every level, and providing an integrated bridge program that leads directly to dual-instruction, credit-based courses.

Adult to Postsecondary Alignment

In Maine and Minnesota, program operators emphasize close relationships between adult education providers and postsecondary institutions. The relationship enables the adult education provider to tailor curricula to college-readiness standards at the institution, build familiarity with college culture and the physical experience of being on a college campus, and tap resources that may not ordinarily be available to the provider. The relationship benefits the institution by creating an option for low-skilled applicants to improve their foundational skills without cost to the institution or using up financial aid, and by expanding the pipeline of new students.

Role of High School Equivalency Credential

Before applying for college, low-literacy adults who lack a high school diploma are generally expected to obtain a high school equivalency diploma, almost always a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). But requiring adults to obtain the GED imposes an extra, time-consuming step for a credential that does not prepare students for college-level learning. Some states, notably Washington, de-emphasize the GED so that students will focus solely on their postsecondary transitions, but others require GED completion first. The case study states have taken markedly different paths. In Maine, participants lacking a high school equivalency must earn one before entering college. In Minnesota, students can enroll in an Integrated ABE course without a GED or high school diploma, although they should be close to completion. Kentucky lacks a statewide instructional policy, but tracks only postsecondary transition by students with a GED.

Two recent developments at the national level may affect the choices that particular states make. First, the GED Testing Service is preparing a new version of the GED for introduction in 2014. This version will be aligned to college readiness standards, but the cost, roughly twice that of the current test, may cause some states to seek alternatives. Second, the federal government has eliminated Pell Grant eligibility for prospective college students without a high school credential who qualify for college using the “Ability to Benefit” standard. This standard enables students to prove their ability to benefit from college by passing a federally-approved test or passing six credit hours of college instruction. This change hurts adult learners in states like Washington that accelerate college entry using the Ability to Benefit option to bypass the GED.

Data Tracking

For any state creating a transitional framework, a fundamental priority is to develop a database that can follow students across systems: from adult education to postsecondary education, and from credential to employment. That system should be capable of tracking individual students, not just summarizing aggregate numbers, so that the operator can understand which interventions and

providers are achieving the best results and direct resources to scale up or replicate their model.

The basis for such a system already exists: the longitudinal student unit record databases used to track students in the public K-12 system in each state. Many states are in the process of expanding these databases to include postsecondary education. Minnesota will use a newly available longitudinal data system to develop a pipeline analysis of its FastTRAC program, even tracking participants into the labor market through the wage matching system. Adding adult education and GED completion creates a powerful capacity to assess the effectiveness of transitional systems. (See WFPF's 2009 policy brief on P-20 database systems, *Building and Strengthening State Data Systems to Measure Community College and Workforce Outcomes*.)

Key Student Supports

Adult students face serious barriers to completing a college degree. They typically work full-time and may have family responsibilities. According to the 2000 census, one-quarter of the target population for adult education lives in households at or below the federal poverty line, and more than half were employed. Furthermore, a majority of college students entering from adult education courses are likely to be the first members of their family to enroll in college, and therefore lack prior experience of college expectations and culture. The three case-study states have developed supports to assist students who are transitioning to college.

- ♦ **College Success Skills:** Maine's College Transitions provides topic workshops on study skills, career planning, college success strategies, financial aid and the college application process.
- ♦ **Career and Academic Counseling:** Maine provides career and academic counseling to ensure that adult students choose a program of study as early as possible, identify career opportunities in high-demand fields, and take the appropriate courses so as not to waste credits and time.

- ♦ **Work-Related Supports:** The Minnesota workforce agency (DEED) has deepened FastTRAC's responsiveness to the labor market by creating opportunities for students to gain work experience through job shadowing, internships, apprenticeships and on-the-job training. However, the extent of these opportunities depends on the involvement of local Workforce Investment Boards, which are autonomous regional agencies.
- ♦ **Personal Supports:** Many adult students are forced to drop out of college because life gets in the way. Personal supports, such as access to child care, assistance in obtaining public benefits, referral for public health coverage, and referral to mental health agencies to deal with depression and other mental illnesses, can keep students on target for graduation.

In Minnesota, FastTRAC managers are implementing and testing a navigator model in some regions, with support from private funders. In this model, navigators are provided to every student to ensure that they have access to resources needed to stay in school and achieve long-term success.

They provide academic support (working with instructors to reduce absenteeism and other negative distractions, and identifying red flags for students before the class begins); non-academic support (case management or coordination of personal support services, financial literacy counseling, transportation assistance, assistance obtaining other public benefits); and post-graduation support in job search, industry-appropriate resume development and networking opportunities.²⁸

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

States have three overriding interests in paving the road from adult education to a college credential and/or degree: expanding opportunity for low-

skilled adults, expanding the skilled workforce available to employers, and strengthening economic development and the state/local tax base. They also have models to learn from.

This brief focuses on states that are confronting the challenge of transitioning adult education students from one educational entity to another. Kentucky, Maine and Minnesota show that despite the distinct cultures, funding streams, and institutional interests of adult education and postsecondary education, aligning the two is both achievable and desirable.

The work done by these three states also represents a promising strategic response to the severe underfunding that afflicts adult education programs in every state. Administrators of adult education programs typically believe that policymakers fail to understand the many contributions they make. But administrators in

these states have aggressively focused on an argument that policymakers find persuasive: their pivotal role in developing a better educated and skilled workforce. By focusing on college and career readiness, a policy priority with wide public support and influential collaborators, and developing metrics to show that they are achieving the goal of moving adults into (and hopefully through) college, the states are making the strongest possible case for stabilizing or increasing their public support.

The most successful states nonetheless face challenges. Kentucky's policymakers have excelled at developing a macro environment for postsecondary transition, but after many years they are only now building a framework for instructional support through the Accelerating Opportunity initiative and adaptation of the Common Core Standards to adult education. Maine

HOW OTHER STATES HELP STUDENTS ENTER AND SUCCEED IN COLLEGE

Quite a few other states are exploring strategies to help adult education students achieve college and career success. Some notable examples include:

- ♦ Washington has developed the I-BEST system, in which adult and career/technical instructors co-teach courses to provide integrated and accelerated instruction. Evaluations of I-BEST have found that such programs increase the rate at which adult students succeed in obtaining credits and postsecondary credentials.
- ♦ Rhode Island is implementing the Adult Secondary Education for College and Careers program. In 2010, the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education issued a \$10 million RFP to support “upward mobility through college and career readiness.” The initiative calls for the development of career pathways in nine industries and the use of dual and concurrent enrollment in adult education and postsecondary education or training/apprenticeship programs.
- ♦ New York has established 32 literacy zones based in low-income, low-literacy communities around the state to provide access to coordinated services in collaboration with a guiding coalition of stakeholders. Partnerships with local postsecondary institutions are considered key. Other relationships with community-based organizations, primary care clinics and social service agencies provide social supports that improve retention in both adult literacy and transitions to postsecondary institutions.
- ♦ Indiana recently moved its adult education program into the Department of Workforce Development, with the goal of aligning adult education and workforce development services to better prepare participants for higher levels of employment and education. One significant new effort is the GED+ Program, which provides additional training resources for GED aspirants to engage in pre-postsecondary occupational training that generates a valued credential and connects to key career-technical programs in the state's community college system.

has created an effective link between adult education and postsecondary education, but policymakers lag behind in measuring outcomes and spreading a postsecondary model to students at lower literacy levels. Minnesota has created a multi-dimensional system that encompasses three key systems – adult education, community colleges and workforce development – and establishes a clear pathway that starts with students at lower literacy levels, but focuses on achieving postsecondary credentials. The third wave of Minnesota FactTRAC grants, issued in 2011, gives certificate-earning students credit toward degree-seeking programs with more lasting market value.

Despite challenges, Kentucky, Maine and Minnesota have accomplished a great deal in a short time and their successes point the way for other states that seek to expand educational opportunities for low-skilled adults.²⁹

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening state adult basic education systems to emphasize transitions to postsecondary education is not an easy task. It requires an intentional strategy to expand and sometimes refocus the work of numerous providers and an overall system. The following offers a number of recommendations that should be considered in undertaking such an effort.

Plan the Adult Education Paradigm Shift

1. Formally Declare that a Central Mission of Adult Education is to Help Students Achieve College and Career Success

Setting a goal galvanizes support, sends a message to the provider community, and sparks valuable discussion about first principles that too often go unexamined.

2. Convene a High Level Working Group

A multi-agency working group should work in partnership to plan a strategy for improving the transition from adult education to college. The working group should at a minimum include the agencies responsible for adult and postsecondary education, but also workforce development, human services and economic development.

3. Develop a Strategic Plan

The task of the working group is to develop a step-by-step strategic plan that will guide policymakers and service providers.

Set Goals and Develop Data and Analysis Infrastructure

4. Set Goals and Benchmarks

A transitional system benefits immensely from setting and making progress toward a clear goal, as long as that goal is realistic and subject to adjustment. Goal setting is particularly valuable in documenting the value of postsecondary transition to the State Legislature and governor.

5. Align Data Systems to Measure Student Progress

The effectiveness of a transitional system can only be documented through data. The data should track all adult education students entering college, including those who enroll part-time and in non-degree programs. Key transition points deserving recognition include the rate at which adult education students enter college, the proportion who require developmental education after entry, transition from developmental education to a first credit-bearing collegiate course, attainment of the first 15 and 30 credit hours of collegiate instruction, and receipt of a credit-based degree or certificate. (See WPPF's Spring 2012 policy brief, *Making Performance Funding Work For All*, for a more detailed guide to designing postsecondary outcomes to better meet the goals of adult students.)

6. Use Data to Drive Innovation

Outcome data can show if an intervention is failing to meet the goal (such as placing too many adult education students in development education), or perhaps works for some subgroups but not others, thereby enabling the state to overhaul the intervention to work more effectively.

Implement and Scale a Transition Model

7. Identify and Implement a Tangible Transitional Model

The critical issue that each state must confront is how to align adult and postsecondary education providers in a way that is realistic for that state.

The states profiled here demonstrate concrete approaches that other states can adapt to their own needs. Maine uses a college preparation and advising model. Minnesota uses a set of bridge programs, structured within a career pathways framework. Kentucky's transitional strategy focuses on setting goals and holding providers accountable for transition outcomes, and it is now developing an instructional model through the Accelerating Opportunity Initiative.

Offer Comprehensive Student Supports

8. Provide Supports that Enable Adult Students to Stay in College and Graduate

Key supports that states have found valuable include:

- ♦ Educational advising and counseling
- ♦ Career awareness and planning
- ♦ Equal access to college supports, such as library and tutoring services, health and wellness services, and academic advising
- ♦ Personal services such as childcare and substance abuse counseling

Utilize Various Funding Sources

9. Leverage Federal Funding Sources

The main federal funding source for adult education, the Workforce Investment Act Title II, has declined over time. However, states are leveraging other federal funding sources, notably the Perkins Program, SNAP Education and Training, and various grant programs offered by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education and the U.S. Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration. Minnesota was effective in using significant stimulus and WIA incentive dollars early on to pilot efforts at the local level and also has been creative in coordinating federal Perkins postsecondary program funding.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ♦ Plan the adult education paradigm shift
- ♦ Set goals and develop data and analysis infrastructure
- ♦ Implement and scale a transition model
- ♦ Offer comprehensive student supports
- ♦ Utilize various funding sources

For questions about this policy brief or the Working Poor Families Project contact:

Brandon Roberts
robert3@starpower.net
(301) 657-1480

ENDNOTES

¹ Tom Hilliard is a human capital development professional with expertise in policy development, program design, assessment and communications. He is grateful to many staff, practitioners and experts who provided information for this report: Reecie Stagnolia and Jacqueline Korengel, Kentucky Adult Education; Gail Senese and Larinda Meade, Maine Department of Education; Barry Shaffer, Minnesota Department of Education; Judy Mortrude, Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development; Shirley Henderson, Pulaski County Adult Education (Kentucky); Val Landry, Kennebec Valley Community College (Maine); Patricia Theriault, Lawrence Adult Education (Maine); Karen Wolters, Mankato Area Adult Basic Education (Minnesota); Judith Alamprese, Abt Associates; and Cynthia Zafft, National College Transition Network. The author would also like to thank Silja Kallenbach, World Education; and Ashley Spalding and Jason Bailey, Kentucky Center for Economic Policy, for their help reviewing the report. Brandon Roberts and Deborah Rabia Povich also helped immeasurably in strengthening the content of the report.

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⁴ Mark Kutner et al, *A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century*, U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, December 2005.

⁵ Patrick J. Kelly, *Improving the Re-Entry Pipeline: Non-Traditional Aged Adults Enrolling and Succeeding in Postsecondary Education*, National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, January 19, 2010. Working-age adults are defined as those adults between the ages of 18 and 64.

⁶ Jizhi Zhang et al, *Crossing the Bridge: GED Credentials and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes, Year Two Report*, 2011.

⁷ *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998: Annual Report to Congress 2007-08*, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, January 2011.

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¹¹ Jean Johnson and Jon Rochkind, *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*, Public Agenda, 2010.

¹² *Ibid*.

¹³ Indicator 14, "Percent of Adult Education Students with a Goal of Postsecondary or Training," compiled by Working Poor Families Project from U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, National Reporting System, July 1, 2010 – June 30, 2011.

¹⁴ *ABE to Credentials: A Breaking Through Initiative*, Jobs For the Future, April 2011, p. 4.

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¹⁷ "Kentucky Adult Education: Council on Postsecondary Education Key Indicator," factsheet, Kentucky Adult Education, undated.

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²³ *Evaluation Report: Maine's Adult Education to College Transition Project*, Fiscal Year 2008.

²⁴ For more information on these programs, go to <http://mnfastrac.org/programs.html>. Site accessed June 1, 2012.

²⁵ *Minnesota FastTRAC – Preliminary Analysis: Enrollment, Persistence, Graduation and Employment of Adult Basic Education Participants at Minnesota State Colleges and Universities*, System Office Research, Planning and Effectiveness, Minnesota State Colleges and Universities, January 6, 2012.

²⁶ Cynthia Zafft et al, *Transitioning Adults to College: Adult Basic Education Program Models*, NCSALL Occasional Paper, National College Transition Network, December 2006.

²⁷ Beth Lasater and Barbara Elliott, *Profiles of the Adult Education Target Population*, RTI International, December 2005.

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²⁹ These recommendations borrow significantly from more knowledgeable experts on postsecondary transition, most notably *Postsecondary Success of Young Adults: System Impact Opportunities in Adult Education*, National College Transition Network, September 30, 2010.