For almost a decade, the Working Poor Families Project (WPFP) has provided ongoing training, data analysis and policy expertise to its state partners to strengthen state policies that improve the lives of low-income working families. In today’s economic climate, with budget shortfalls at the state and federal level, this task is more difficult than ever, making WPFP accomplishments that much more significant.

In 2011, WPFP state partners moved the ball forward on a number of critical issues, including boosting and protecting financial aid for community colleges, increasing access to occupational and technical skills training, expanding child care funding, and strengthening income support programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit. As unemployment numbers continue to stagnate, these programs provide critical resources to families that are barely making ends meet.

This first-in-a-series update will highlight the state policy accomplishments that WPFP state partners have achieved in postsecondary education, focusing on financial aid, increased accountability and performance, developmental education, and adult education and bridge programs. Future briefs will look at accomplishments in the areas of workforce and skills development programs and work support systems. While the state of the nation’s economy remains fragile, the work of the WPFP state partners moves strongly forward and remains essential to ensuring that state postsecondary policies effectively serve low-income working families.

How WPFP Assists State Partners:

Since its inception, the WPFP has brought together nonprofit organizations concerned about state policies affecting low-income working families. Currently, organizations in 21 states and the District of Columbia are WPFP partners.

WPFP supports state partners to develop policy expertise in specific areas that can increase the economic opportunities for low-income adults.

We do this by:
- Designing and sponsoring state policy academies lead by national experts;
- Researching and developing issue-specific policy briefs with specific recommendations for action;
- Hosting annual learning exchanges with workshops and networking opportunities;
- Convening periodic conference calls on emerging and timely issues;
- Providing annually-updated data, policy and program information that helps shed light on the size and characteristics of low-income working families in each state.
Each year state-based financial aid enables thousands of low-income students to attend college and gain the education and skills they need for good jobs. WPFP encourages state groups to address the issue of college affordability for working adults, in order to ensure low-skilled workers have access to the education and skills needed for good jobs.

**Georgia:** The Georgia Budget and Policy Institute educated policy makers about the need to protect key elements of the HOPE Grant program by maintaining financial aid for students needing development education classes in preparation for occupational training programs. In 2012, the HOPE Grant of $131 million will serve thousands of technical college students; in 2011 over 45,000 technical college students were enrolled in remedial education courses.

**North Carolina:** The North Carolina Budget and Tax Center advocated against a proposal that would have allowed community college campuses to opt out of the federal loan program. The Center educated policymakers about the need to retain state need-based financial aid and minimized a proposed 22 percent cut to aid for community college students. $20 million was restored to the Scholarship for Needy Students.

**Texas:** The Center for Public Policy Priorities successfully advocated for preserving funding levels for the state’s financial aid programs, including the TEXAS grants program for low-income students. Although the final budget reduced state financial aid programs by 15 percent, from approximately $1 billion to $879 million, it was much less than the 41 percent reduction proposed in the initial state budget. The final budget for the TEXAS grants program was $560 million, preserving assistance for an additional 33,000 Texans. TEXAS grants serve both recent high school graduates, and community college transfer students who have obtained and Associate’s degree. In addition, CPPP supported the establishment of a uniform deadline for students to apply for financial assistance at public universities, reducing confusion by establishing one priority deadline for the state and helping streamline outreach efforts.

**Washington:** The Statewide Poverty Action Network supported efforts to secure $124.4 million in additional funding for the state’s need-based financial aid program for postsecondary education.

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As more states move community college and adult basic education systems to set goals, reward progress, and use data measurement systems to assess progress and measure performance, WPFP state partners work to ensure that such policies and actions include a focus on nontraditional students.

**Arkansas:** Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges helped establish a performance funding model for community colleges, ensuring that colleges are rewarded for student progress and success (not simply attendance), and that attention is given to the progress and success of hard-to-serve students, particularly those needing remediation.

**Colorado:** The Bell Policy Center worked with policymakers, legislators and officials at the state Department of Higher Education, to ensure that performance goals for higher education institutions included access and success in degree completion for working adult students and other underrepresented populations as an important goal for measurement.

**Mississippi:** The Mississippi Economic Policy Center supported enabling legislation to establish the State Longitudinal Data System that will provide stakeholders and policymakers access to data on state residents from pre-kindergarten through the workforce to drive accountability and inform investment decisions. The new system enables Mississippi to evaluate adult employment and wage outcomes associated with the state’s investments in workforce training and education, a particular priority for MEPC.

**Texas:** Similar to Arkansas, The Center for Public Policy Priorities, promoted a performance funding model for community colleges. Through this model, colleges receive incentive funds for student progress and success measures, not enrollments alone. Additional student success measures will be established to provide incentive funds above base funding. The model also emphasizes low-income students’ progress and success, including those in developmental education.
Community colleges address the low academic skills of students by offering developmental education—courses below college level in basic academic skill areas such as English and math. As states take action to improve the poor performance of these programs, WPFP state partners are working to ensure that policies and program practices that promote innovation and support the success of non-traditional and adult students are taken into account.

Arkansas: Arkansas Association of Two-Year Colleges helped establish a new policy that encourages colleges to enroll students with the most developmental education needs in programs that can better serve their needs, including adult basic education, and that increase their chances of completing a postsecondary credential.

Colorado: For the first time, the Commission on Higher Education’s annual developmental education report to the legislature included demographic information on adult students age 20 and above. In the past, the report focused exclusively on recent high school graduates. This change had long been advocated by the state’s WPFP partner, the Bell Policy Center. The Bell praised the Commission and its staff for including this important data (47% of developmental education students are 20 years of age or older), and encouraged more detailed analyses of adult developmental education student outcomes in future reports.

North Carolina: Despite a 12 percent budget cut in adult basic education funding ($10 million in each year of the biennium), the North Carolina Budget and Tax Center supported additional flexibility in use of these funds. Policy changes included allowing community colleges to use up to 20 percent of the state literacy funds to implement Basic Skills Plus programs. These programs provide job-specific occupational and technical skills and developmental education instruction to students concurrently enrolled in a community college course leading to a high school diploma or equivalent certificate. Colleges can now waive tuition and registration fees associated with this instruction.

Texas: The Center for Public Policy Priorities helped establish new policies to improve the assessment and delivery of developmental education within community colleges and succeeded in assuring $4 million in state funds are available over the biennium to identify best practices for course delivery, assessment, and placement policies for incoming students. The Center advocated for funding non-course-based developmental education, which includes important student supports such as academic advising, tutoring, and individualized degree plans for students needing remedial work, increasing the likelihood that they will advance to college-level coursework more quickly. These policies also promote new methods for preparing faculty to meet the needs of under-prepared students.
Postsecondary experience is now the key to a family-sustaining job. WPFP state partners work to ensure that adult basic skills programs are designed and operate so that these education systems see a degree or credential as the goal and that clear pathways move participants into postsecondary education.

**Michigan:** The Michigan League for Human Services helped preserve $22 million in state funding for adult basic education by defeating a proposal that would have eliminated all state funding for this program.

**New York:** The Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy and the Center for an Urban Future were instrumental in the adoption by the Board of Regents of recommendations to:

a) mandate the Official Practice Test or a similar exam prior to taking the GED, and

b) repeal the law prohibiting the state from charging a fee for admission to the GED.

New York has the lowest GED pass rate; these policy changes would improve preparation and increase the number of GED test-takers who pass.

**Ohio:** Community Research Partners educated state leaders and community partners about the importance of investments in low-skill workers. Despite a financially difficult year, a proposed cut of $2 million over the biennium was restored for the state match for Adult Basic Literacy Education services.

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

For more information:
www.workingpoorfamilies.org