

Investing in adult education is an economic catalyst

Many solutions to the United States' workforce, economic and societal issues lie within one of our nation's greatest untapped resources – adult education.



How do we address America's skill gap? Whether you are an educator, economic or workforce developer or employer, all conversational roads lead to this common, challenging destination. While there are no quick or easy solutions, it is incumbent upon those of us who work in these arenas to accelerate our progress.

As chairman of the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE), I may be a little biased, but I believe that many solutions to the United States' workforce, economic and societal issues lie within one of our nation's greatest untapped resources – adult education. Everything from health issues to incarceration rates to poverty is impacted by individuals' educational attainment levels. In fact, there may be no better 'return on investment' than that which is made in adult education, particularly when it comes to addressing America's competitive skills crisis.

According to Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, "By 2020, 65 percent of all jobs in the economy will require postsecondary education and training beyond high school." In *The Coming Jobs War*, author Jim Clifton, chairman of the Gallup Organization, noted that, by 2025, the United States will need 23 million more degree holders than our colleges and universities will have produced. So, where will these degree holders come from?

Because we don't produce enough high school graduates to meet this demand, non-traditional adult students entering and staying in the educational pipeline are the solution – in other words, high school equivalency (HSE) graduates produced through our adult education system. However, there are 24 million working-age Americans – representing 12% of the United States workforce – without this diploma. This is a key public policy issue. Without a high school diploma or its equivalency, these individuals are unable to fully participate in the workforce.

And, while the number of working-age adults without a high school or equivalent credential is startling, it doesn't even address the millions of individuals who possess a high school diploma yet lack

the foundational educational skills required to succeed in today's workforce. As shared in *America's Skill Challenge*, an Educational Testing Service report, while U.S. millennials (ages 16-34) may be on track to be our most educated generation ever, they consistently score below many of their international peers in literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments. Adult education is poised to help those high school graduates who require remediation in academic and essential skills to be successful in college and career.

Our nation's adult education system is working toward preparing our students to be college- and career-ready, to prepare them not just for a job, but a good job, then a better job and, ultimately a career. We are responding to the growing demand from employers for employees with strong essential (soft) skills, as well as strong foundational academic skills. Adult educators are aware of the urgency for students to move further faster in their attainment of skills and educational credentials, to enable them to meet both their own and employers' needs in a timely manner.

However, to transform our nation's workforce, it is essential that employers become engaged as our partners. Engaged employers are those that invest in their prospective and incumbent employees through tuition assistance and paid release time to participate in education and training programs; that encourage those without a high school diploma to persist in obtaining an equivalency diploma by offering incentives; and who offer hope and employment opportunities to unemployed individuals who succeed in pursuing, persisting and passing a high school equivalency (HSE) test. If employers in key sectors were to offer advanced job opportunities that often double or triple the wage of entry-level jobs for those who persist and earn an HSE diploma (or even just required an HSE diploma for employment), I strongly believe the educational attainment levels of our nation's working-age population would soar.

Another significant solution to solving this competitive skills crisis rests with our public policymakers, most notably our health and human services administrators. We must consider entitlement reform as a key strategy. Our nation's safety net was intended to serve as a trampoline, equipping individuals with the skills and supports needed to propel them to college and/or careers, rather than a hammock, allowing individuals to rely solely upon government aid. There is a disincentive created by the dollar value of doing nothing. Studies indicate that an individual who stays home and receives the full gamut of public benefits is estimated to "earn" the equivalent of roughly \$15 an hour. As a result, prospective students (and employees) without high school diplomas (or equivalencies) fall prey to a cultural apathy fueled by the pervasive and not-poorly-founded attitude of, "Why bother getting a HSE and going to work for minimum wage when I can stay home and receive benefits nearly twice that amount?" Furthermore, single parents face this same dilemma, while adding the substantial expense of childcare into consideration when weighing the benefits of increased educational attainment. Thus,

the generational cycles of under-education, underemployment, poverty and reliance upon government assistance continue.

It is crucial that policymakers consider entitlement reform that doesn't force individuals to walk off the benefits cliff when they do the right thing by increasing their educational attainment and going to work. We know that with skills progression there is, more often than not, wage progression. Thus, as an individual's education level increases and job advancement occurs, the individual's wages trend upwards. As this occurs, the individual's benefits should scale down until a point of equilibrium is reached, rather than end.

Across the nation, state directors of adult education stand ready to boldly transform our system. However, we need policy levers, employer incentives and engaged partners to help us move the ball down the field faster. The Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) has been a key partner with NASDAE in launching a national awareness campaign – "Educate & Elevate, Adult Education: An Investment in America's Future."

As stated before and as we advocate through this campaign, there may be no better 'return on investment' than that which is made in adult education. Quite frankly, though, the investment of federal resources in adult education is sorely lacking. Financial investment in K-12 far exceeds that which is invested in adult education. We should expect no less support for adults – our neighbors, friends and family members who were impelled to drop out of school by difficult life issues or a youthful bad decision. As we all need a second chance or 'do-over' in some facet of our lives, so do they. An investment in adult education is an investment in positive, transformative change in America and Americans' lives, including: helping break cycles of educational apathy and intergenerational poverty, significantly reducing public social service costs, reducing unemployment and lowering incarceration rates and costs. Additionally, it helps solve America's skill gap by equipping our nation's employers with a well-educated and highly-skilled workforce, thereby increasing our nation's productivity and global competitiveness. Simply put, investing in adult education is an economic catalyst.

For the sake of our nation's global competitiveness, our adult education system must take our students further faster, but we can't do it alone. We as a nation are falling behind educationally, which, in turn, threatens our economic security. We have to be flexible, nimble, responsive and innovative risk-takers who approach the aforementioned challenges with a laser focus and a sense of urgency.

If not us, then who? If not now, then when?

Reecie D. Stagnolia
Vice President for Adult Education
Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education