The Key Ingredient:
Data is Crucial to Building Michigan's Workforce System

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Times have changed in Michigan. A high school diploma alone is no longer enough to help a worker get secure and gainful employment. The emerging labor market will demand specialized skills acquired only through some form of postsecondary occupational training and signified by a recognized credential.

However, as many as 1.7 million working-age adults in Michigan lack the basic mathematics, reading and writing skills needed to enter occupational training leading to gainful employment. This basic skills deficit is bad not only for individual workers, but for the state economy; businesses prefer to start and grow in areas with a skilled workforce, and unskilled workers have a higher unemployment rate than skilled workers.

Michigan needs to double its commitment to developing a comprehensive strategy for preparing its workforce for the future job market. Doing so requires the ability to set benchmarks and measure success of adult learner programs. As it stands now, Michigan does not have the tools or information it needs to undertake such a strategy.

The state is currently in the planning process of connecting its comprehensive K-12 data system with higher education and workforce systems. It is important to keep in mind that adult learners take many different paths. A linear system that assumes most people go from K-12 into postsecondary education and then into the workforce will not be able to measure important indicators such as the relationship between adult education and college success, or whether people who enter college after being in the workforce do better in certain programs than those who enter immediately after high school.

It is also important that the data system "drill down" to aggregate important information that is often overlooked in educational data gathering, such as whether community college students with developmental (remedial) education requirements drop out of college at a higher rate than those who do not, or whether part-time students have a success rate comparable to full-time students.

A well-designed P-20 educational data system provides many benefits. In addition to enabling evaluation of existing programs and the design of new ones, it will enable researchers to pinpoint the circumstances and causes of student dropout and failure, will enable students to better plan their occupational education sequences, and will provide the state with figures that it can use for reports and for federal and philanthropic grant requests.

The success of today's adult learners will impact the strength of tomorrow's workforce and, by extension, tomorrow's economy. As Michigan formulates its plans for expanding and improving educational and workforce data collection, it is crucial that it include plans to collect data pertaining to adult learning success.