



# **Strengthening Foundational Skills**

A Strategy for Restoring  
Good Jobs and Economic  
Security in Michigan

Recommendations of the  
Workforce Development Coalition

August 2012

The Michigan League for Human Services convened a new **Workforce Development Coalition** in December 2011 for the purpose of formulating recommendations for public policy to help bring marginal workers fully into Michigan's talent pool, which will in turn strengthen the state's economic development. The coalition brought together a diverse representation of Michigan and national stakeholders in workforce development, including those in business, adult education, community-based organizations, postsecondary education, literacy, and occupation training and placement. What follows are the recommendations of the supporters listed below.

- ▶ Adult Learning Partners of West Michigan
- ▶ Corporation for a Skilled Workforce
- ▶ Detroit LISC
- ▶ Focus: HOPE
- ▶ Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit
- ▶ Jackson Area Manufacturers Association
- ▶ Jewish Family Services of Washtenaw County
- ▶ Literacy Center of West Michigan
- ▶ Michigan Association of United Ways
- ▶ Michigan League for Human Services
- ▶ National Skills Coalition
- ▶ PHI Michigan
- ▶ Reading Works
- ▶ SEMCOG, the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments
- ▶ TALENT 2025
- ▶ The SOURCE
- ▶ United Way for Southeastern Michigan
- ▶ West Michigan TEAM

*This report was written by Peter Ruark, senior policy analyst for the Michigan League for Human Services, with assistance from Tameshia Bridges, Karyn Goven, Naheed Huq, Jeannine LaPrad, Holly Parker, Hollis Turnham, James Vander Hulst and Lori Visser.*

## Introduction

---

**E**mployers choose to start up in, remain in, and move to states that can offer a pool of workers who are able to acquire in-demand occupational skills. Such an environment helps businesses thrive and grow and encourages them to stay in the state. Workers with in-demand skills have greater job security and mobility, more disposable income with which to support other businesses and, in some cases, they choose to start their own businesses. Investment in building the skills of the workforce to align it with the demands of current and future jobs is an important component of turning Michigan's economy around.

The Workforce Development Coalition wishes to bring to the forefront of the discussion an important but sometimes overlooked population key to Michigan's economic development: the large number of Michigan adult workers with a willingness to work hard and an eagerness to learn, who not only lack the occupational skills demanded by the job market but the foundational skills needed to learn those occupational skills or to succeed in the workplace. Such workers fall generally into one or both of two groups:

- 1) **Workers needing to strengthen basic (academic) skills.** Many workers who wish to acquire new occupational skills are unable to do so because they are deficient in one or more basic skills (such as reading, writing, mathematics or English as a second language) that are necessary for success in a training program and in most in-demand jobs.
- 2) **Workers needing to strengthen soft skills.** Employers report that it is difficult to know an applicant's competencies in problem solving, interacting with the public or resolving workplace disputes. Many workers, with some intervention, can improve in these areas and be an asset to their employer. While these traditionally have been called "soft skills" to distinguish them from academic skills, it is important that these competencies not be underestimated in their importance to workplace success. (Many believe a stronger and more accurate term would be "foundational skills" or "team skills.")

A career pathways system, defined by the Center for Law and Social Policy and the Oregon Career Pathways initiative as a framework for weaving together adult education, training, and college programs and connecting those services to employers' workforce needs, is one way to approach the challenge of building up the skills of Michigan's low-skilled workers. Such a system enables students, often while working, to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in a given industry or occupational sector. Each step on a career pathway is designed explicitly to prepare students to progress to the next level of employment and education.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the recommendations that come later in this paper use a career pathways approach to the challenge of equipping workers with soft skills, basic skills and occupational skills that lead to gainful employment.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy, *Funding Career Pathways and Career Pathway Bridges: A Federal Policy Toolkit for States*, October 2010. ([http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/FundingCareerPathways\\_Introduction.pdf](http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/documents/files/FundingCareerPathways_Introduction.pdf), accessed on May 20, 2012.)

<sup>2</sup> Clagett, Mary Gardner and Ray Uhalde, *The Promise of Career Pathways Change*, December 2011. ([http://www.iff.org/sites/default/files/CareerPathways\\_JFF\\_Paper\\_Dec30final\\_050812.pdf](http://www.iff.org/sites/default/files/CareerPathways_JFF_Paper_Dec30final_050812.pdf), accessed on May 20, 2012.)

## A Needed Shift in Thinking

As the demands of the workforce and the realities of domestic and international trade have changed, the way we think about workforce development must also change. In order for Michigan to prepare its workforce for the 21st century, at least three traditional pieces of “common wisdom” need to be swept into the dustbin of history and replaced with thinking that matches the new realities:

**Old Reality:** Manufacturing is the mainstay of the Michigan economy.

**New Reality:** While manufacturing continues to be one of the largest sectors in Michigan, the demand for service sector skills is increasing.

Michigan built its reputation on the automobile and furniture manufacturing industries, which provided solid jobs with middle-class wages to many generations of workers. Manufacturing remains the largest sector in terms of the state’s Gross Domestic Product (20% in 2010), but in terms of the number of jobs provided, it has fallen from 19% in 2000 to 13% in 2011, while the education/health services sector has increased from 11% to 16%.

The Michigan Bureau of Labor Market Information projects that “production occupations” will decrease by 6.7% between 2008 and 2018 (the only sector to have a decrease), while “health-care support occupations” will increase by 25% and “healthcare practitioners occupations” by 17%.<sup>3</sup> Other service sectors are predicted to have significant increases, though not as large as those related to health. Michigan must continue to develop strategies to strengthen the manufacturing sector, which will continue to be a major source of employment in Michigan, but not to the exclusion of service sectors that will constitute a much larger part of the job market than they have in the past.

**Old Reality:** A worker does not need postsecondary training if he/she can get a job in the automobile or another manufacturing industry.

**New Reality:** Manufacturing jobs will increasingly require some level of postsecondary training.

Manufacturing has long been seen as a provider of middle-class wages to individuals who graduate from high school and are prepared to develop their skills on the job over time. This is no longer the case, as many manufacturing jobs now require a postsecondary credential upon entry. Robotics and other advanced technologies both reduce the number of workers needed to produce goods and require a higher level of occupational skill on the part of the workers. To meet the demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, the state has been making an effort to strengthen its traditional industrial base of automobile and furniture manufacturing as well as to grow and attract other emerging industries. There has been an investment in training centers and in research and development for the emerging needs of the manufacturing sector.

**Old Reality:** Most postsecondary students are 18-22 years old and enter college right after high school graduation.

**New Reality:** An increasing number of postsecondary students are older, in the workforce and/or supporting families.

<sup>3</sup> Michigan Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth Bureau of Labor Market Information and Strategic Initiatives ([http://www.milmi.org/admin/uploadedPublications/1440\\_occ\\_2016.htm](http://www.milmi.org/admin/uploadedPublications/1440_occ_2016.htm), accessed on May 20, 2012)

A final, necessary shift in thinking is how to think about who attains occupational skills and at what point in their life. The term postsecondary education still tends to bring to mind a “traditional” college student: someone who graduates from high school at age 18, goes directly into a college or university and attends full time, and graduates in his/her early 20s with a two-year or four-year degree in two or four years, respectively. However, an increasing number of postsecondary students are older, “nontraditional” students who have spent considerable time in the workforce and are participating in postsecondary training for the first time. Some enroll in training due to a layoff from a job in which they were established, while others do so because their opportunities have been limited to low-wage jobs. In many community colleges, the majority of students are nontraditional.

The National Skills Coalition (formerly The Workforce Alliance) predicts that 64% of Michigan’s workforce in the year 2020 will have been working for 15 years or more—long past the traditional high school-to-college pipeline.<sup>4</sup> The large number of older workers, combined with the rapid changes in the in-demand occupational skills, means Michigan must develop strategies for training workers who need to maintain their jobs and support families.

## Challenges and Responses

The reality is that workers in Michigan and elsewhere will increasingly need to possess occupational skills beyond the high school level and that in many industries some kind of postsecondary credential will be required. The challenge is that many workers lack either the necessary basic skills or the necessary soft skills (or both) to succeed in the occupational training needed to acquire such skills. Following is a discussion of the two foundational skills challenges and the policy responses recommended by the Workforce Development Coalition.

### CHALLENGE #1

#### ▶ TOO MANY WORKERS LACK BASIC SKILLS NEEDED TO SUCCEED IN OCCUPATIONAL TRAINING OR EMPLOYMENT

In the coming decade, most skilled jobs will require at least one year of postsecondary training. With the higher level of skills needed in such areas as healthcare, getting a job with only a high school diploma or equivalent will no longer be an option. Older and younger workers alike will need to have training beyond high school, with occupational skills acquisition signified by a recognized credential. Although many such credentials can be obtained from postsecondary institutions such as community colleges, workers can also get them from on-the-job training, apprenticeships, ex-offender programs or community training programs.

In a weak economy in which skilled workers are more in supply than demand, employers often choose to try to hire workers who already possess the occupational skills needed. When the economy is strong and demand for skilled workers exceeds the supply, employers often look for workers who can be taught those skills and may be willing to draw from a pool of unskilled workers to train them. This might be feasible in a strong economy for unskilled workers who

<sup>4</sup> National Skills Coalition (formerly The Workforce Alliance), *Michigan’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs: Meeting the Demands of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Economy*, October 2009

possess the basic skills needed to learn occupational skills. However, workers who lack one or more basic skills will have difficulty succeeding in occupational training.

It is estimated that up to 1.7 million Michigan workers are below high school graduation level in at least one basic skill area such as literacy, writing, mathematics, or English as a second language.<sup>5</sup> Such workers are often employed in low-wage jobs, unemployed or underemployed (employed but unable to find full-time and/or permanent work). Their wages often do not pay enough to lift them and their families above the poverty line. Because of their low value in the job market and their resulting low level of compensation, they are likely to experience financial hardship.

Low-skilled, low-wage workers who want to improve their skills and job marketability often experience tremendous barriers. Child care, transportation and workplace inflexibility pose enormous challenges for adult learners who are trying to increase their skills while raising a family and working full time. Costs, including forgone wages when a student must cut work hours, can also be a significant challenge, particularly as financial aid often does not cover part-time learners or those receiving training outside a two- or four-year college.

Time itself is a barrier. The longer a working parent must be in a training program, the higher the likelihood that he or she will need to drop out before completion. Adult learners needing to acquire basic skills prior to occupational skills often face developmental (remedial) education requirements in community college programs. Sometimes they must complete their developmental education requirements before they can be admitted to an occupational program or take for-credit classes leading to a credential. Preparing low-skilled workers for basic skills credentials that are workplace relevant and directly correlate with employer demands will help them reduce the amount of time in training or education, get into employment and then continue additional education as needed.

Michigan needs to develop a set of statewide strategies to assure that all adults acquire the basic reading, writing, math and English language skills crucial to successful completion of occupational skills training and acquisition of recognized credentials, which in turn will lead to better employment. Increasing the percentage of workers with good reading, writing, math and language skills will pay off for Michigan in the following ways:

- 1) It will facilitate employment growth, as employers will not face a skills gap and will be able to hire workers with the skills they need, when they need them.
- 2) It will add to the tax base, as workers with higher incomes and secure employment pay more in state and local taxes.
- 3) It will help businesses, as workers secure in their employment will spend more money in their communities.
- 4) It will reduce some of the need for public assistance.
- 5) During times of economic growth, it will reduce the likelihood of foreclosures on personal property and homes.
- 6) It will attract businesses and investment, leading to more jobs and wealth.

---

<sup>5</sup> Michigan Department of Energy, Labor and Economic Growth, *Transforming Michigan's Adult Learning Infrastructure: A Report to the Council for Labor and Economic Growth from the CLEG Low-Wage Worker Advancement Committee's Adult Learning Work Group*, 2009. ([http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcd/MI\\_Adult\\_Learning\\_Report\\_288772\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcd/MI_Adult_Learning_Report_288772_7.pdf), accessed on May 20, 2012.)

## **Recommended Public Policy Responses to Challenge #1**

### **1) Expand the current P-20 data system so that the demands of the job market and the needs of the workforce can be more clearly identified**

- ▶ **Create a P-20 data system, maintained by the state, that will provide a clear picture of the basic skills needs of the workforce population and what programs or approaches are most successful in addressing those needs.** Gov. Rick Snyder has championed the development of a comprehensive and longitudinal P-20 data system that will track and aggregate individual data from preschool, K-12, higher education and the workforce. The Center for Educational Performance and Information, housed in the Michigan Department of Education, is setting up this system, but to get a more complete understanding of workforce needs and program success, the P-20 system must also collect and aggregate data on adult education, developmental education, unemployment and wages.<sup>6</sup> No state yet has a system in place that is ideal. Florida has generally been seen as the leader in developing an integrated P-20 longitudinal data system, but many other states (including Michigan) have made progress in recent years.<sup>7</sup>
- ▶ **Make data from Michigan Works! Agencies available.** Unlike data from the Department of Human Services, Michigan Works! data on worker training, placement and success are not posted online or otherwise made publicly available. Because Michigan Works! receives federal and state funds and exists for the purpose of workforce development, and because it serves (among other populations) those on public assistance who are trying to become employed, the state can reasonably require that the Michigan Works! system make data available on all job training, placements and success. At a minimum, it is recommended that the state require the Michigan Works! Association or individual Michigan Works! Agencies to post:
  - a) The number and percent of cash assistance recipients participating in occupational training as a fulfillment of their work requirements
  - b) The highest level of education completed when enrolling in a Michigan Works! program
  - c) The number and percent of Michigan Works! customers enrolling in training by sector and occupation, and by type of training (i.e., community college classes, on-site occupational training, adult education)
  - d) Persistence and completion rates of all training participants
  - e) Number of job placements of all Michigan Works! customers

Making such information available would help policymakers, employers, workers and advocates have a better understanding of where needs exist.

### **2) Reduce barriers for workers seeking to acquire marketable skills**

- ▶ **Incentivize and facilitate participation in regional partnerships.** State and federal dollars for workforce development could be maximized through a statewide network of regional partnerships. An ideal partnership would include at least one Michigan Works! Agency, at

---

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see Michigan League for Human Services, *The Key Ingredient: Data is Crucial to Building Michigan's Workforce System*, July 2011.

<sup>7</sup> The Data Quality Campaign is a good resource for information on the data collected and aggregated in each state: [www.dataqualitycampaign.org](http://www.dataqualitycampaign.org)

least one community college, local school districts, community-based organizations and businesses. (Examples of regional partnerships include the partnership housed in the Northwest Michigan Council of Governments, Detroit's Reading Works, and the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund.) Such partnerships encourage and facilitate the formation of bridge and career pathways programs that combine basic skills training, occupational training and on-the-job training. Such programs, which already exist at some community colleges, help adult learners acquire specific in-demand postsecondary credentials within a relatively short time. We recommend that Michigan encourage formulation of partnerships in other areas of the state by mandating that recipients of federal or state workforce training funds participate at some level in a regional collaborative system. We also recommend that the state provide technological support and website space for each regional collaborative so that partners and potential partners can be better informed of the services provided in their (and other) regions. (An example of state technical support can be found in the Workforce Intelligence Network, based in southeastern Michigan.)

- ▶ **Seek ways to reduce the time needed for adult learners to fulfill developmental education requirements.** Many adult learners in community colleges fall short in basic reading, writing, math and/or English as a second language, and must enroll in developmental education classes. Due to the independent structure of Michigan's community college system, there is currently no statewide policy on developmental education. As a result, there is much variance among community colleges (and even among programs within community colleges) with regard to cut scores, placement tests and whether developmental education classes and classes leading to a degree can be taken concurrently. Nationally, there is a growing interest in best practices for delivering developmental education to adult learners, so such variance among Michigan's community colleges is not necessarily negative. A group of staff from several community colleges meet regularly as the Breaking Through Learning Network to discuss how to better serve adults with basic skills needs. A large part of the discussion is around how to reduce the time and cost needed to fulfill remediation requirements to better enable adult learners to persist and graduate, through strategies such as contextualized learning and bridge programs. We recommend that the state work with its community colleges to develop a set of developmental education practices and standards. (The Michigan Community College Association's Center for Student Success would be the ideal venue by which this would take place). Such standards should maintain flexibility for individual college needs, while facilitating the strengthening of developmental education delivery.
- ▶ **Invest in programs and infrastructure that can ease child care and transportation barriers.** Transportation from home to community college, a child care provider, or a job is a challenge for many low-income workers in rural areas and urban centers alike. In Detroit, for example, many people need a car to drive from their home in the city to a job in the suburbs because there is not a regional transportation system. Child care also provides a challenge for low-income workers, and the cuts in subsidies for child care make it even more difficult. The Legislature should restore and strengthen the child care subsidy for low-income working parents. It should also consider transportation innovations such as light rail, regional transit systems and subsidized employer-sponsored transportation programs.
- ▶ **Encourage or mandate employer flexibility for family and personal leave.** When workers are not provided the flexibility to take care of family needs, success in their jobs suffers. Many low-wage employees do not receive personal or sick time that allows them to attend to their children's health or school needs without losing pay. In addition to health,



social or family consequences, such inflexibility discourages or prevents workers from seeking skill-building opportunities. Three states and the District of Columbia have laws requiring employers to give paid family leave in the event of childbirth, serious medical issues or other important family needs.<sup>8</sup>

- ▶ **Seek ways to reduce the extra barriers to skills training and employment faced by individuals leaving the corrections system.** Those with criminal records often have deficiencies in reading, writing, mathematics and/or English as a second language. These compound the challenges they face in finding employment after incarceration, such as employers' concerns about recidivism, legal prohibitions against being hired in certain occupations and, in some cases, difficulty finding housing. Employment in a skilled job decreases the likelihood of recidivism or needing public assistance, and as such the state should continue to seek ways to match motivated ex-offenders with appropriate training (including basic skills training) and employment. The Michigan Prisoner ReEntry Initiative provides some models for good practices in this area and the state should maintain or increase investment in these programs. Earn and Learn brings together Michigan Works! Agencies, local training partners such as Focus: HOPE, adult education providers and employers to provide skill-building opportunities and support services to youth and adults in the Detroit area who have left the corrections system. Moreover, PHI National (formerly Paraprofessional Healthcare Institute) recommends modifying state laws that prohibit hiring some individuals in healthcare or long-term supports and services long after those individuals have completed prison time for the convictions. If the laws were changed to include an opportunity to show rehabilitation by the job seeker, a successful demonstration of rehabilitation would keep hiring discretion with the employer but would not automatically exclude the job seeker from entire industries.

### 3) Encourage employer participation in the skill-building process

- ▶ **Provide incentives to partner with regional stakeholders.** Michigan should explore ways to encourage businesses in need of specific skills to partner with learning institutions to provide training at their worksites. This would minimize risk to employers and help workers gain skills while earning wages. The regional collaboratives described under Strategy 2 are one way to provide opportunity for workers to receive on-the-job training in connection with postsecondary credential programs, but there are also other models for regional partnerships that are established in the state, including:
  - a) ***The Detroit Regional Workforce Fund***, which brings together funders and leaders from the private, public and nonprofit sectors to connect low- and moderate-income persons to emerging and growing career pathways and to increase economic competitiveness for the entire region. The DRWF works with employers in the health and green economy sectors to create sector-specific training programs that will help employers in these areas share training expertise and costs. Specifically, the partnership aims to:
    - Increase employers' ability to attract, retain and advance high-quality talent to satisfy critical business needs;
    - Increase the number of residents who advance to middle-skill careers paying family-sustaining wages;

---

<sup>8</sup> The three states with paid family leave laws are California, Washington and New Jersey.

- Enhance the structure for workforce development in the region so it promotes economic growth in existing and emerging sectors. Focus is on immediate, tangible change.

Administered by the United Way for Southeastern Michigan (which also functions as the fiduciary), the DRWF is made up of multiple investors, including private foundations; federal, state and local government agencies; and employer groups.<sup>9</sup>

- b) ***Employer Resource Networks***, which are groups of small to midsize employers in a common sector that link and leverage talent development resources. In these networks, companies in a geographic area aggregate their needs around training and employee assistance to provide an opportunity toward continuous improvement. West Michigan TEAM has established several ERNs in its part of the state.

The Upjohn Institute recommends that ERNs have at least five- to six-member firms with 75 to 500 employees each that come from a variety of industries; that services should be accessible to all employee levels; and that the ERN facilitate productive networking among member companies and with other ERNs.<sup>10</sup>

- ▶ **Provide incentives for businesses to enter into partnerships with state agencies to help workers gain marketable and transferable skills, including providing support services such as transportation and child care.** Such partnerships could be targeted to helping specific populations such as cash assistance recipients and workers leaving the corrections system, or to low-skill workers in general. The Source, a consortium of employers in Grand Rapids, is an example of a successful public-private partnership; it has an on-site Department of Human Services caseworker funded 50% by the consortium and 50% by federal TANF funds (and therefore is cost neutral to the state). As discussed previously, Earn and Learn provides support services to those it serves in its training programs. We recommend providing such incentives as tax credits, technical assistance or performance funding (i.e., how many FIP recipients are moved into full-time work) for companies that wish to enter into similar partnerships. One way to do this is to support pilot projects in which employers can see success and replicate accordingly.

#### 4) Strengthen state investment in building basic skills

- ▶ **Restore the level of state funding for adult education to previous levels.** From FY 1997 to FY 2001, Michigan funded adult education at \$80 million per year. Since FY 2004, state funding has been \$20-\$24 million each year, and the number of students enrolling in and completing adult education programs has fallen significantly since 2001.<sup>11</sup> Because addressing the basic skills needs of low-skill workers is crucial to Michigan's overall workforce development, the Legislature should restore the level of state funding to \$80 million per year.

<sup>9</sup> The funders listed on the partnership's website (<http://www.detroitregionalworkforcefund.org>) are: Knight Foundation, U.S. Department of Labor (through Jobs for the Future), Kresge Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, National Fund for Workforce Solutions, State of Michigan Workforce Development Department, United Way for Southeastern Michigan, Skillman Foundation, Blue Cross-Blue Shield of Michigan Foundation, Ford Foundation, Detroit Workforce Development Department, Detroit Economic Growth Corporation, and the Wayne County Economic Development Growth Engine.

<sup>10</sup> Timmeney, Bridget, and Kevin Hollenbeck, *Employer Resource Networks: What Works in Forming a Successful ERN*, Upjohn Institute, developed on behalf of Disruptive Innovation for Social Change - Grand Rapids, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Michigan League for Human Services, *Good Ideas are Not Enough: Michigan's Adult Learning System Needs More Funding*, May 2010.

## CHALLENGE #2

---

### ▶ EMPLOYERS OFTEN FIND THAT NEW HIRES WITH OCCUPATIONAL CREDENTIALS LACK ESSENTIAL WORKPLACE SKILLS

Employers generally hire applicants on the basis of whether they possess the needed occupational skills, often signified by possession of a recognized credential and by job experience. However, employers frequently terminate employees due to a lack of essential workplace skills related to learning aptitude, problem solving, communication, teamwork and/or personal habits. These skills are sometimes referred to as “soft skills” to distinguish them from “hard” academic and occupational skills, but they are no less important. Rather, they are increasing in importance as the job market grows more global, technologically advanced and oriented toward the service sector, and as the workforce becomes more diverse. (Hence the adage heard from more than one employer that workers are “hired based on hard skills and fired based on soft skills.”)

Employers have identified the need for skills such as those identified by the Lifelong Soft Skills Framework Council and have begun to use various assessment tools for evaluating such skills among potential employees. Soft skills, as identified in the framework, fall into three groups: personal traits (ethics, initiative, judgment, positive attitude, self-confidence and work ethic), life skills (acceptance of criticism, acceptance of diversity, financial literacy, adaptability, teamwork, time management, conflict management), and academic learned skills (the basic skills discussed in the first section).<sup>12</sup> Increasing the soft skills competency of the workforce requires commitment from stakeholders and support from public policymakers.

## Recommended Public Policy Responses to Challenge #2

---

### 1) Make soft skills development a coordinated effort among stakeholders and policymakers

- ▶ **Adopt a universally recognized instrument for measurement of soft skills.** Develop awareness among educators and public policymakers of certificates that are recognized and accepted by industry, and seek ways to encourage employers to use, and individuals to acquire, such certificates. One instrument is the ACT’s National Career Readiness Certificate Plus (NCRC Plus), which incorporates a measurement of basic skills (reading for information, applied math, locating information) and soft skills (teamwork, discipline, order, striving, creativity, goodwill, savvy and cooperation). This assessment is gaining recognition by industry and is utilized by employers nationwide for various employment purposes, including training and development of employees. Additional assessments that can be used by employers are WorkKeys Fit, determining an individual’s suitability for a particular occupation, and WorkKeys Integrity, evaluating an individual’s potential to perform well on the job. The WorkKeys Fit assessment can be built into the curriculum as part of adult education programming.
- ▶ **Seek ways to incorporate employability skills development into adult education.** Michigan should support local efforts to integrate nonacademic soft skills into adult education programs, provided it can be done in such a way as not to jeopardize the rigor of the academic skills training. The state could consider allocating extra funds (or seeking additional federal funds) for this purpose that can be used by adult education centers

---

<sup>12</sup> Southeast Michigan Council of Governments, *Lifelong Soft skills Framework: Creating a Workforce that Counts*, April 2012

and other training entities to provide such courses. Focus: HOPE and Earn and Learn are two programs in southeast Michigan that incorporate employability skills into their basic and occupational skills programs.

## Conclusion

The Workforce Development Coalition urges Michigan to continue building its workforce development efforts by addressing the needs of low-skilled workers. Such workers are an important part of Michigan's economic future. In addition to enabling them to acquire occupational skills that lead to better employment, investing in building basic skills and addressing soft skills decrease the chances of them falling on difficult times and needing public assistance or experiencing home foreclosure. In the long view, building the skills of low-skilled workers can prove just as crucial for Michigan's future as investing in their high-skilled counterparts.

Some of the recommendations in this paper pertain to the exploration or promotion of best practices. These include promoting soft skills measurement instruments, exploring and championing best practices in community college developmental education, and encouraging the formation of and participation in Employer Resource Networks. Other recommendations, however, require specific policy changes, either at the department level by the administration or through legislation.

### **The recommended changes that can be done at the department level include:**

- ▶ Strengthen the P-20 data system to include information on adult learners
- ▶ Require the posting of Michigan Works! Agency data on the Internet
- ▶ Mandate that entities receiving state or federal workforce funding participate in regional collaboratives
- ▶ Provide technological support and website space for each regional collaborative
- ▶ Increase, where appropriate, the use of federal funds to support bridge programs, career pathways and other skill-building efforts of the regional collaboratives

### **The recommended changes that would require legislation include:**

- ▶ Pass a paid family leave law
- ▶ Increase child care funding and the child care subsidy
- ▶ Support funding for light rail and other regional transportation projects
- ▶ Maintain (or increase as needed) funding for prisoner re-entry programs that offer basic skills training
- ▶ Restore state funding for adult education to \$80 million per year

There is a growing consensus among policymakers, employers and service providers that Michigan must include addressing the skills needs of low-skilled adult learners in its strategy for building the workforce and turning the economy around. It is penny-wise and pound-foolish to cut funding for programs and strategies that facilitate basic skills development. On the other hand, investing in programs that build skills and reduce barriers to work will reap benefits down the road, as skilled workers have more disposable income to spend in the economy, pay more in taxes, and are less likely to need public assistance. These are investments in Michigan's future.