



Fixing the Leaky Pipeline: Why Adult Education and Skills Training Matters for Michigan's Future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the last couple of decades, Michigan has seen a dramatic change in the nature of its workforce. The national economic downturn has hit the state particularly hard, and Michigan continues to experience layoffs and job losses. Many skilled workers who previously had secure, well-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector now find themselves either unemployed, working only part-time, or working at jobs with low skill requirements, low wages and low employment security. Many working families in Michigan have fallen below the poverty line.

For some workers, the barrier to adequate employment is a lack of skills, while for others the demand for the skills possessed by the worker has decreased due to technological innovation or outsourcing. The better-paying jobs require education or training beyond high school, and the skills they require are often represented by a credential such as a degree, license or certificate. However, only 26.1 percent of Michigan adults aged 25 or older possess a bachelor's degree, and only 36.4 percent of adults age 25 to 54 have an associate's degree or higher. Many workers, including those with high school diplomas, lack even basic job-readiness skills in reading, writing, and mathematics. Being underskilled in one or more of these areas not only blocks access to many jobs, but blocks access to the postsecondary education or specialized on-the-job training that is often needed to advance in a job.

Opportunities to acquire or upgrade skills through education and training give such workers a

chance to restore their previous standard of living. Efforts to build the skills of its present and future workforce depend on Michigan's ability to address the various "leaks in the pipeline" of the educational and skill-building sequence. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 70 out of 100 Michigan ninth graders graduate from high school within four years and 41 go on to college immediately. Twenty-nine are still enrolled in their sophomore year and 18 graduate within 150 percent of time (i.e. graduate with an associate's degree within three years or a bachelor's degree within six years). In other words, 82 percent of ninth graders are lost at one of the "leakage points" in the educational sequence and thus do not graduate from postsecondary education.

Possession of a high school diploma no longer signifies that a worker has the vocational skills required by the labor market, and as such it is important to consider the large number of high school graduates who do not pursue further study or training as a leakage in the pipeline. To increase the number of workers who meet the skills demands of the new economy, Michigan needs to significantly increase the percentage of ninth-graders who graduate from high school on time and who enroll in and complete a program of postsecondary study. Despite the apparent long-term benefits, cost, competing time commitments, length of time needed to complete programs, and inadequate preparation are major reasons many high school graduates do not enroll in further education, and why a significant number who do enroll do not finish their programs.

Adult education is the means by which workers who lack the skills associated with a high school diploma can be brought back into the pipeline of skill-building and career development. However, there appears to be a decline in access to adult education by those who need it most. Enrollment has dropped steeply in recent years, primarily due to reduced classroom seats available in Michigan resulting from cuts in state adult education funding. Moreover, recent statistics show that up to 75 percent of students drop out of beginning adult education programs, and the completion rate of any program level rarely exceeds 50 percent. The state has identified lack of funding, lack of post-testing, an increased need for support services and inadequate training of instructors as the reasons behind these troubling trends. Identifying these problems is a positive first step in addressing the leak, but it remains to be seen what succeeding actions will be taken ensure adequate resources and trainer preparation to meet the needs of the increasing number of students with significant barriers.

Two new approaches toward adult education are becoming widely recognized and implemented across the country. Bridge programs help students successfully transition from adult education into employment or into postsecondary education that leads to employment, and assist adults with or without a high school diploma whose reading and mathematics skills are below the ninth grade level. Career pathways programs, on the other hand, differ from bridge programs in that they combine education or training with job opportunities in a particular sector. (Often, however, bridge programs are a component of career pathways systems or are linked with them in order to provide a continuous learning sequence.) Adult education in this context connects the learner to both employment and further education or training, with implications for where and how the adult education is presented. For this reason some programs offer their adult education classes in close geographical proximity to college classes and vocational training, or even to employment sites.

Several community colleges in Michigan are using the bridge model to develop a seamless learning pathway between adult basic education, postsecondary education, and career entry. Community colleges and other institutions of higher education have a unique ability to strengthen the adult education component of bridge programs because they have more than one means to provide basic skills education. They can do so as a partner in the traditional adult education system, or through developmental or remedial education programs that are funded by state higher education earmarks. This gives community colleges much flexibility to combine the two funding streams in ways that enable them to efficiently use their dollars to reach as many low-skilled learners as possible.

Community colleges in the state are institutionally independent of one another and are not linked under a formal policy-setting umbrella structure. This makes it easier for individual colleges to develop creative programs and policies suited to local and regional needs, but it makes it more difficult to develop state policy that would streamline adult education policies or facilitate replication of successful programs among the community colleges. Although several community colleges in Michigan have implemented bridge and career pathway programs and there is a movement underway to increase the number of such programs, there is currently no state policy guiding or encouraging this process, nor are there any statewide programs as such.

In conclusion, Michigan cannot afford to let a large number of its unskilled workers continue to leak from the various education and training systems and be left behind as the skill demands of employers advance. Strengthening the adult education system to simultaneously meet both the needs of businesses and low-skill workers is the best response to this challenge. As Michigan formulates policy to build the skills of its workforce, it ought to draw on the successful practices taking place in other states and in community colleges within its own borders.