

## INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION IS AN ECONOMIC CATALYST

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### ABSTRACT

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 skills gap? Employers, economic and workforce developers, and educators are all asking this challenging question. For the sake of our nation's global competitiveness, our adult education system must take our students further faster. We know we must be flexible, nimble, and responsive, addressing the adult education-related challenges of America's competitive skills crisis with a laser focus and sense of urgency. We stand at the ready to partner with employers and economic and workforce developers to do our part in closing America's skills gap.

*Keywords:* skills gap, economic catalyst, adult education

### HOW DO WE ADDRESS AMERICA'S SKILLS GAP?

Employers, economic and workforce developers, and educators are all asking this challenging question. The sense of urgency has never been greater for those most educationally and financially disadvantaged individuals trying to rebound from the economic impact of a global pandemic (COVID-19). Unfortunately, individuals who lack a high school diploma and essential skills are the first out when the economy declines and the last back in when it recovers.

As past chairman of the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE) and current Advisory Board member of the National Career Pathways Network (NCPN), I may be 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 through our nation's adult education systems, particularly when it comes to addressing America's competitive skills crisis.

It's been noted that upwards of two thirds of all jobs in the United States will demand education and skill levels beyond high school. In other words, a high school diploma or equivalency is simply not enough to succeed in today's economy. The percentage of jobs today

and in the future will increasingly require some postsecondary education and training. In *The Coming Jobs War*, author Jim Clifton (2011), 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? We don't currently produce enough high school graduates to meet this demand. Thus, bold and transformative solutions are needed to re-engage the 22.4 million (11.2% of the workforce) Americans without a high school diploma or equivalency to enter the educational pipeline. This is perhaps the most important public policy issue we faced prior to the economic devastation of the COVID crisis and one that should be addressed with greater urgency postpandemic.

Our nation's adult education professionals are working passionately to prepare our students to be college and career ready, not just for a job, but for a better job, and ultimately for 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 need for students to progress faster in obtaining skills and education credentials, enabling them to meet both their own and their employers' needs in a timely manner. Without a high school diploma or equivalency, these individuals are unable to fully participate or advance in the workforce.

However, to transform our nation's workforce, it is essential that employers become our partners. Engaged employers should encourage their prospective and incumbent employees without a high school diploma to obtain an equivalency by offering incentives (such as tuition assistance and paid release time) to participate in education and training programs. This assistance would offer hope and lead to employment or advancement opportunities for individuals successful in earning a high school equivalency (HSE) diploma. With this support, I strongly believe the educational attainment levels of our nation's working-age population would soar.

Another strategy to aid high school equivalency-seeking students to become work ready is one I'm most familiar with from my time as Executive Director of Kentucky Skills U (KYSU). The Kentucky Community & Technical College System (KCTCS) and KYSU partnered to launch GED+PLUS ([www.gedplusky.org](http://www.gedplusky.org)), an accelerated and innovative program allowing students to enroll in Skills U and short-term KCTCS classes concurrently and earn a GED® credential and a college certificate tuition-free, funded by the Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program.

The time is now for policymakers at all levels to take additional action to support adult education programs and their students. Financial investment in K–12 education far exceeds adult education support. We should expect no less support for adult students (our neighbors, friends, and family members) who were impelled to drop out of school by difficult life situations or regretful youthful decisions. For far too long, policymakers have viewed these individuals through a judgmental lens. Truthfully, we've all been given a second chance in some facet of our lives, and those without a high school diploma deserve a second chance as well. My passion in this arena is fueled by the example of my father, who dropped out of high school to serve his country in the U.S. Navy. Afterwards, he earned a GED® credential, and then used the G.I. Bill to go to college and earn multiple degrees. He went on to become a teacher,

principal, and ultimately the superintendent of our county school system. Needless to say, his second chance forever changed the trajectory of our family, not to mention the lives he touched in our community.

An investment in adult education is an investment in positive and transformative change in America by breaking 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 the nation's skills gap by equipping employers with a well-educated and highly skilled workforce. Simply put, investing in adult education is an economic catalyst.

Across the nation, adult education leaders stand ready to boldly transform our system. However, we need policy changes in a reauthorized Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA), employer incentives, and engaged partners to help us achieve this transformation more rapidly. The Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) has been a key partner with NASDAE in launching a successful and award-winning national awareness campaign, "Educate & Elevate, Adult Education: An Investment in America's Future." While much has been accomplished, much work remains.

For the sake of our nation's global competitiveness, adult education systems must take our students further faster. We must address the adult education-related challenges of America's competitive skills crisis with a laser focus and sense of urgency. We stand ready to partner with employers and economic and workforce developers to do our part in closing America's skills gap. ⌘

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## REFERENCE

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