

## **Modernizing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998 to Help Workers and Employers Meet the Changing Demand of the Global Market**

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Chair Murray and members of the committee, I am honored to provide perspective about WIA reauthorization from Washington state's adult basic education providers. It is a special privilege to have this role before a committee chaired by Senator Murray – a champion of so many efforts to support low-income families and economic growth.

You could not have picked a more critical time to modernize the framework provided by the Workforce Investment Act. Your work will shape our ability to meet the needs of the emerging workforce and fuel a revitalized economy.

Despite diligent efforts and significant state level investments, we are not able to meet the accelerating needs of adult students and our state's economy within the parameters of the current law. The populations that adult basic education/English as a second language programs target are Washington state's fastest growing groups. Almost all of our students work – often at more than one job. They earn low-incomes, are under-prepared for today's jobs, and lack the skills to succeed in traditional education and training programs. This population will provide the growth in our state's workforce for at least the next two generations. We are able to enroll less than ten percent of these hard-working adults, recognized by President Obama as making up most of our nation's talent pipeline.

At the same time, skill levels required from workers continue to accelerate exponentially. When we talk with employers in Washington state, they no longer discuss the workforce needed to support a recovering economy. Instead, they talk about the workforce needed to fuel a new economy – one in which workers must demonstrate even higher skills and be much more agile and ready to change.

In response to those urgent needs, I am here today to ask you to focus on four areas as you reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).

**Redefine the purpose of Title II as student success in post-secondary education and progress along career pathways.** Eighty-six (86) percent of the students who enroll in adult basic education in Washington state come to learn the skills they need to get and keep a good job. Joint research carried out by the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University found that far too few of them ever complete enough education to make a significant difference in economic self-sufficiency or to meet employer needs. The research also identified the point at which students have just enough skills and knowledge to get family-wage jobs and take the first steps along career pathways. We call that the Tipping Point – one year of college credit and a vocational credential or certificate. It's the goal that our adult literacy programs have over time for every student they serve and it's a goal President Obama identified for our national education system.

**Drive the creation and expansion of integrated education and dual enrollment programs that move adult literacy students further and faster along education and career pathways.** In Washington state, the flagship among these kinds of innovative practices is Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training or I-BEST.

I-BEST puts an adult basic education and a professional-technical instructor in the same classroom at the same time. This team offers instruction that integrates job training and adult basic education for highly-motivated students, whether or not they have a GED or high school diploma. Their success demonstrates the importance of concurrent, rather than sequential, learning to accelerate progress for adults. In fact, all I-BEST programs lead to vocational certificates recognized by local employers in demand fields that pay family wages. They are the same certificates earned by other college students and carry the same college credit. That instruction not only prepares students for first steps on their education and career pathways, it also gives them the skills and knowledge they need to succeed at the next steps. In Washington state, we look beyond mythical career ladders that have rungs spread too far apart for the reach of most adult basic education students. Instead, we think about skills as a chain with links that interlock.

Beyond integrating basic skills and professional-technical education, I-BEST students also receive a full range of student support, including advising, counseling, case management and financial aid. Blending enhanced student services with innovative instruction is critical to I-BEST success.

The most important thing about the 138 I-BEST programs offered through Washington's 34 community and technical colleges is that they work for students and for employers. The Community College Research Center released a study in May documenting that I-BEST students earn an average of 52 credits, which is more than the 45 credits needed to reach the Tipping Point. At the same time, I-BEST students demonstrate greater gains in their adult basic education/English language skills than students enrolled in traditional adult basic education classes.

That's only the data part of the story. The rest of the I-BEST story lives in the success of students and the employers who hire them. They are students like Harry, who was injured and had to leave the job he'd held for three decades. He was apprehensive about enrolling in the manufacturing processes I-BEST program at Lower Columbia College, not sure he could master the required skills after 47 years away from a classroom. Eight out of ten students who begin college without a diploma don't make it. Instead, Harry has a 3.6 GPA, will complete his certificate in December, and already has an internship job waiting.

The I-BEST story is about Dien, who came to North Seattle Community College in the fall of 2007 as a recent immigrant from Vietnam. In only two years, he enrolled in adult literacy and I-BEST accounting classes, finished an initial accounting certificate, got a job, completed his AA degree, and will continue work this fall towards a bachelor's degree in accounting at Central Washington University.

The success of I-BEST is echoed by Kekebush and her five children. A refugee from war-torn Eritrea, she developed English skills and completed her Licensed Practical Nurse certificate in the winter of 2008 – part of Renton Technical College's second, two-year I-BEST cohort. Like her I-BEST peers, her grade point average was higher than traditional students in the same classes. She is scheduled to graduate from the Registered Nurse program at the end of this summer.

**Ensure that those most in need of services will get them by aligning activities, outcomes and partnerships in Titles I and II.** The needs of under-prepared workers and employers cannot be addressed using the current capacity of either the workforce development or adult basic education system alone. Gaps in service and unsatisfactory results will not be resolved at the level of coordination possible within the confines of the current act. Despite the goodwill of local workforce investment boards and adult basic education providers in Washington state, we have not been able to overcome structural barriers.

Current program definitions, allowable activities, outcome measures, and aggressive targets in Title I don't match those in Title II. The mismatch leaves providers from both systems in the same quandary. They choose between addressing the needs of clients and communities or hitting performance targets through activities that serve clients who need the least support. Alignment of the two titles will allow qualified providers from both systems to leverage each other's strengths and resources, count shared success, and invest in workers who will benefit the most.

In addition, community and technical college systems are going to play a more central role in moving low-skilled adults along education and career pathways. In Washington, we are learning that the quality of the relationship between the college and workforce development systems predict success in both Title I and Title II. Reauthorization provides an opportunity to change the parameters of this relationship from a series of individual contracts between boards and college vendors into a systemic relationship between partners capable of delivering coherent and comprehensive services.

**Don't starve the solution.** Faced with increases in both under-skilled population groups and the skill/knowledge levels required to recreate a vital economy, we are starving the solution to both dilemmas. Adult literacy funding continues to decrease across the country.

Three actions will reverse this trend and allow us to better meet the demands of workers and the economy. One, authorize an additional \$17 million in the current appropriations bills to hold harmless all 36 states penalized when the Department of Education changed the data source they use for distribution formulas. In Washington state, we stand to lose more than a quarter of a million dollars. Two, increase next year's appropriation to \$750 million, allowing states to serve 40 percent of those already on waiting lists across the nation. Three, target an additional \$75 million for seeding and scaling up approaches that integrate basic skills and post-secondary education and training or which dually enroll students in adult basic education and post-secondary education and training.

We are proud of the innovative efforts of adult basic education providers in Washington state and celebrate the success of our adult learners. As you reauthorize WIA Title II, you have the opportunity to create new parameters and support new opportunities that will make it possible for us to expand our successful efforts and be joined in innovation by colleagues across the nation.

I am happy to take your questions.