



Good Things *from* Small Packages:

Finding Common Ground for Workforce Development in Rhode Island

Executive Summary

I. Addressing the Economic Imperative

Rhode Island's economy is changing rapidly. Global economic trends have decreased the importance of low-skilled manufacturing as an economic engine for the state. The Rhode Island economy faces twin challenges of a worker gap among employers and a skills gap among workers, which in combination are fueling a squeeze on workers and businesses. Job growth in this most recent economic expansion has been seriously bifurcated, with the greatest growth occurring in occupations requiring lower skills and paying lower wages, and smaller but not insignificant growth in jobs requiring the highest levels of skills and paying higher wages. Yet there is little debate about the increasing relationship between high levels of skill and education with family-supporting wages and business competitiveness.

Rhode Island is not well equipped to supply employers with workers having high technical skills. Nearly a fifth of Rhode Island's adults lack a high school diploma, and many immigrants, who were responsible for all of the state's population growth over the past decade, have even lower educational attainment levels than the general population.¹ Locally, the infrastructure that provides employees and employers with the education and skills services they need is also struggling to cope with diminishing federal investment in adult training, despite state efforts to address this shortfall.

On the other hand, several new initiatives have been launched by state agencies, nonprofit organizations, and local and national foundations to upgrade the quality of services and to foster collaboration across state agencies involved in workforce development. These include efforts to improve outcomes for foreign-educated immigrants, connect economic development projects to economic vitality in low-income neighborhoods, link adult education more strongly to postsecondary education and employment, and seed the capacity of dual-customer workforce partnerships focused on career advancement.

With all of these efforts to improve the workforce system, the potential exists for lack of coordination in terms of goals, strategies, and projected outcomes. The Governor's Workforce Board's "unified strategic planning" process provides an exciting opportunity to address Rhode Island's economic imperative in a comprehensive, coordinated manner. Yet workforce development is broader than the publicly funded system. It includes philanthropically supported programs, employer training, and public and private postsecondary education. And it is deeply influenced by economic development, transportation infrastructure, and human services. All these components must be included in the unified plan.

With that in mind, the United Way's Building Adult and Neighborhood Independence Steering Committee has conducted a listening process with policymakers, funders, employers, advocates, and nonprofit organizations to identify common ground and potential strategies to align resources and actions around a set of shared core values for a high-performing workforce development system in Rhode Island. These different constituencies demonstrated remarkable consistency about the key issues they perceived as presenting barriers to such a system: the fragmentation of populations, service delivery, and resources; the need for a unifying vision on the goals and outcomes of the system and leadership at the highest levels for collaboration to attain these goals; and the need for models



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and capacity building to achieve system goals. They also reinforced the idea that Rhode Island has a significant base of accomplishment upon which to build to address the issues raised by the stakeholders in the listening sessions. While many of these programs are disconnected from one another, the state's unified strategic planning process presents an opportunity to advance beyond innovative yet isolated programs to the development of a high-performing workforce development system.

II. Adopting Strategies that Support High Performance

Across the country, high-performing workforce development systems share a recognition that regional economic competitiveness increases as communities cultivate a workforce that has both technical skills in demand by local employers and the ability to problem solve and learn rapidly. Based on the observations of outstanding programs across the country, a set of seven "high-leverage principles" have been identified that might guide the workforce development system in defining its policy goals, organizing its service strategy, and promoting accountability and sustainability.²

Defining Policy Goals of the Workforce Development System

- The system provides dual customer services that meet the needs of employers and of job seekers and incumbent workers.
- The system focuses on jobs and industry sectors that offer pathways to career advancement and economically self-sustaining wages.

Organizing Service Delivery

- The system aligns investments from multiple public and private sources to provide a continuum of education, training and support services that meet the large-scale needs of employers and residents.
- The system supports the functions of workforce intermediaries that organize complex initiatives by convening stakeholders, aligning resources, and brokering or providing services to meet the workforce needs of employers and residents.

Promoting Accountability and Sustainability

- The system focuses on accountability and measurable, positive outcomes for employers and for individuals.

- The system invests its resources in building capacity and professional development to strengthen its ability to reach its goals.
- The system implements policies and investment strategies to sustain improved employer, institutional, and agency practices.

The stakeholders in the listening sessions identified several strategies for how the state can further align its system with these high-leverage principles, building on the promising models and approaches already being implemented in Rhode Island.

Strategies for Further Alignment with High Leverage Principles

Defining the Policy Goals of the Workforce Development System

1. Provide Dual Customer Services

Empower the Industry Partnerships to use their employer needs analysis to review the course offerings and degree programs at CCRI, Rhode Island College, and the University of Rhode Island. Prioritize the development of high end educational resources in industries and occupations that are significant to Rhode Island's economic future by helping local employers to grow their highly skilled, professional workforce.

2. Emphasize Career Advancement Leading to Economically Self-Sustaining Wages

Focus public investment on workforce development for industries and employers with both a high demand for labor and opportunities for career advancement. Require service providers to demonstrate how their proposed services advance low-skilled adults towards family sustaining wages in these industries, including how they are linked to feeder programs and to readying participants for the next step along a career pathway. Commit to scaling up effective programs and systematically adopting proven practices that help low-skilled adults to advance to family sustaining incomes and that address the workforce needs of industries and employers of economic significance to the state.

Organizing Service Delivery

3. Align Funding in Support of a Continuum of Services

Explore underutilized financing approaches to expand the resources available to pay for education and training. Underutilized financing approaches may include Food Stamp Employment and Training 50/50 matching grants;

employer-matched Lifelong Learning Accounts; Section 127 tax incentives for employer-paid training; and bond financing authority for the community college and Workforce Investment boards, among others.

Expand the Youth Forum model to the adult workforce development system. Promote policies at the state level that align resources. Conduct a scan of all workforce development-related funding sources (including General Assembly funds), the current infrastructure that manages these resources at local and state levels, the program/missions they support, the services they provide, their outcomes, and what changes might help improve alignment. Convene a working group of state agency policymakers to analyze the scan for gaps and disconnects in the “pipeline” as supported by multiple programs and funding sources. Develop specific recommendations to close the gaps, reduce duplication in program designs and outcome standards, and build a continuum of career advancement resources in which entry and exit standards match at transition points. Include guidelines on implementing these recommendations in each agency’s plans and program RFP specifications.

Award planning grants to seed the development of new programs and services that expand the number of seats in training for high-demand skills in occupations of significance to the state’s economy.

4. Support the Core Functions of Workforce Partnerships

Allocate resources from a flexible funding source, such as the Job Development Fund, to form new workforce intermediaries and to sustain the core functions of successful intermediaries. Core functions are those “value adds” that enhance the direct provision of education, training, job matching, and support services.

Encourage public funders to specifically seek service providers that function as intermediaries, or that partner with other organizations that provide the intermediary functions of convening stakeholders, aggregating dual customer needs, planning and organizing a response, aligning funding, and brokering or providing services.

Develop the Industry Partnerships into full-fledged workforce intermediaries that aggregate industry sector and individual employer-level workforce development needs and connect them to the curriculum content, outcome standards, and program offerings of educational institutions and training providers throughout the workforce development system, including postsecondary institutions, adult literacy providers, and the Network RI system.

Use the data aggregated by the Industry Partnerships to create career maps based on industry and employer demand. Develop these maps into career pathways (including basic skills development and support services) that are clearly and realistically articulated and easily communicated to jobseekers and incumbent workers.

Promoting Accountability and Sustainability

5. Ensure Accountability for Measurable Outcomes

Develop high-level systems outcomes that every part of the system adopts. Each agency (e.g., DLT, DHS) or stakeholder group (e.g., employers, funders) can identify how their individual missions further the overall state goals and intended impact.

Identify performance measures and develop an integrated data system, accessed by multiple agencies and programs, to track them. Build on the Providence Plan Data Integration Project to access UI wage data to track the long-term success of participants from multiple programs.

Conduct research and evaluation on effectiveness at the systems level in terms of impact, return on investment, and best practices.

Develop a public process to communicate results and promote accountability, such as a state report card.

6. Strengthen the System through Capacity Building

Expand the reach of RIDE’s Professional Development Center by using its infrastructure to also build the program development and instructional competence of staff in the workforce development, offender re-entry, welfare-to-work, and related agencies.

Encourage public funders to conduct an assessment of the professional development needs of their service provider networks. Assess not only the competencies of service delivery staff, but also the management competencies to respond to changing economic conditions, address new policy priorities, and strengthen organizational capacities.

Encourage public funders to allocate resources from every funding source to professional development, and to require service providers to budget for professional development in their grant applications.

Adopt innovative approaches to delivering professional development services, such as Web-based curricula, distance learning, interactive software, and virtual learning communities for professional networking.

Build the capacity of the public One-Stop system and address the barriers to greater effectiveness.

Develop a communications and marketing strategy to teach employers the value of investing in frontline workers. Develop a marketing campaign that features the economic benefits of positive employer practices such as providing release time for training, work-based learning, or strong internal career ladders.

7. Promote Policy to Sustain Successful Practices

Create a funders group of public and private funders to foster greater communication, add clout and credibility to the work, maximize opportunities for systems change, and enhance the possibilities for co-investment.

Create a forum to discuss key policy issues arising from the work. The state can use available resources and capacity to convene such a forum, such as the Workforce Alliance or the Economic Policy Center. Incentives can also be provided to support this convening function.

Focus on communicating successes to sustain focus and momentum beyond the development of the strategic plan.

III. Achieving a High Performance System for Rhode Island

Building on what it has in place, Rhode Island has the opportunity to develop a high performing workforce development system that meets the needs of employers and workers resulting in increased economic competitiveness, improved business productivity, and a higher quality of life. The high-leverage principles and strategies above provide some guidance for how Rhode Island can do this. Below, we offer some specific recommendations for applying these principles based on input offered during the listening process.

To achieve a high performance workforce development system, **the Governor's Workforce Board can:**

Use the high-leverage principles as a lens. The Governor's Workforce Board can use these principles as a "screen" or set of benchmarks for evaluating its strategic plan. This will help ensure a focus on high performance at the strategy level. This screen can also be used to assess implementation plans to ensure high performance in service delivery and ultimately in outcomes.

Articulate a concise workforce development goal for the state that unifies the contributions of individual programs, agencies, and funding sources. The Governors' Workforce Board can articulate a vision for the state in a manner that speaks to employers and residents. The unified state plan can lay out how each program, agency, and funding source contributes to that vision, in addition to meeting its individual regulatory goals.

Create a clear, cohesive workforce development agenda early in the planning process. The GWB can identify three to five high-level issues to focus on, and then communicate these to key stakeholders even before the final strategic plan has been completed. Even while tactics for addressing these high-level issues are being developed, advocates can use the the issues to rally key stakeholders, including public and private funders and the private sector, around the agenda.

Place a high priority on public investment in building the skills of low-skilled adults. Compared to low-skilled and often low-income adults, higher-skilled adults often have access to greater personal and professional resources to facilitate their skill development and career advancement. Given the proportion of low-skilled adults in Rhode Island compared to other states, the state's competitiveness will be correspondingly higher based on success in addressing the needs of this population.

Provide high-level leadership and visibility in the strategic planning process. This will make key stakeholders and the public at large aware that the process is underway, communicate its significance to the state, encourage greater participation and support, and build a constituency base that can promote greater accountability to high performance.

¹ William Collins, 2005, "Economic and Social Trends Affecting Rhode Island," p.6. Nearly 18% of Rhode Island's adults lack a high school diploma, ranking the state 38th nationally and last in the Northeast. U.S. Census data, 1990-2000. Fifty percent of Hispanic adults in Rhode Island (the state's largest immigrant group) have a high school diploma.

² These high-leverage principles were identified by Jobs for the Future and Abt Associates on behalf of Skill Up Rhode Island, a dual customer, career advancement initiative sponsored by the United Way of Rhode Island.