

BUSINESS VIEW

Giving the state the skills to compete

A highly trained and capable workforce is a key ingredient to drive Massachusetts' recovery from the recession. To strengthen the state's position for economic recovery, the Workforce Solutions Group, a coalition of business, labor and workforce development groups, has filed three pieces of legislation to help workers gain the training they need to get back to work and advance to better paying jobs.

First, the Educational Rewards Bill would provide financial aid resources to working adult students who are enrolled in education or training for in-demand professions such as health care and life sciences and attend school less than part time. Based on a successful model from Washington state, the program helps low-income students complete their education and pays for itself in increased payroll taxes as the students increase their wages and employability. Nontraditional students now make up the largest pool of students at community colleges and yet are the least likely to graduate. Small investments and adjustments in the current system can accelerate their progress and likeliness of completing a degree or professional certificate.

Second, the Middle Skills Solutions Act would develop more efficient transitions to college for working adults and increase credential and completion rates across the state. It would create Regional Skills Academies to leverage and coordinate resources across agencies and schools, bringing vocational technical high schools, community colleges, adult

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education programs and employers together according to industry needs. The bill would also require regular review of local labor market information and the development of regional plans to coordinate training and education activities to meet Massachusetts' demand for middle-skill workers.

Third, the Youth Solutions Act would establish a commission to promote pathways to higher education and the job market for people ages 16-24. The Youth Solutions Commission would develop a strategy for better coordination and alignment of the state workforce and education systems and the contributions being made by community, religious, labor and philanthropic organizations. The "Great Depression" for young workers will only continue unless we open up avenues like apprenticeships and on-the-job training to our young people entering the workforce.

As Congress considers repairs and investments in our infrastructure, and as the Legislature examines the future workforce needs in Massachusetts, let us be ready with a trained and skilled next generation.

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