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## **High School Not Enough for Wisconsin Workers or Potential Employers**

*New Report Offers Specific Steps to Help More Workers  
Reach the “Tipping Point” and Compete in the New Economy*

**Madison** – According to a report released today by the Wisconsin Council on Children and Families (WCCF) titled **Bridges, Pathways and Leadership**, higher education officials and legislative leaders can take a number of specific steps that will help more Wisconsin workers and employers compete in the increasingly knowledge-based economy.

“Many working adults clearly need to retool their skills in order to earn a family-supporting wage,” stated Charity Eleson, WCCF executive director. “A large population of low-skilled adults and their families are struggling in low-paying and dead-end jobs, and the only way out is to get beyond the GED or high school diploma and become higher skilled.”

Research highlighted in the report shows that there is a “tipping point” where education and training levels achieved bring a significant labor market payoff. This is typically at about a year of postsecondary schooling and attainment of a post-GED credential like a certificate or technical diploma or an associate’s degree.

In Wisconsin, for example, the average wage of someone earning an associate’s degree is 32.5 percent higher than someone earning some college credit but not obtaining that post-GED credential.

“Our knowledge-based economy rests on the capacity of our citizens to be creative and innovative, bringing new skills into the work place. That is why the UW Colleges and UW-Extension are hard at work providing Wisconsin’s underserved adult population with multiple and convenient ways for starting and completing associate and baccalaureate degrees. Our goal is to make these programs broadly accessible with minimal time and place restrictions,” said David Wilson, Chancellor UW Colleges/UW-Extension.

### **Report recommendations:**

#### *Program Changes*

Taking the “tipping point” research into account, develop more *career pathway* and *bridge* program opportunities at Wisconsin’s technical colleges and 2-year campuses.

“Working adults are having a difficult time raising their skill and education levels sufficiently to experience a real labor market payoff,” added Eleson. “Career pathway and bridge programs can have better results than traditional programs, and can help usher more low-skilled adults into technical diploma and associate programs that are in such high demand in our economy today.”

Career pathway and bridge programs often include the following four elements: (1) accelerating the time it takes to complete a program of study; (2) making the coursework more relevant to actual work and specific job skills (contextualization); (3) focusing on transitioning from basic education courses to postsecondary programs; and (4) providing enhanced student supports for these working adults who are often juggling school, family and work.

### *Policy Changes*

Remove policy barriers to successful workforce innovations such as these by taking the following steps:

- Require the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) to report annually to the Legislature data on adult basic education (ABE) completion rates and rates of transition from ABE to postsecondary programs. This data is currently collected but not reported. Additionally, require WTCS to report on employment and earnings outcomes for ABE students. Without this comprehensive data, there is no way of gauging the return on public investments in basic education programming.
- Require WTCS to use this performance data to develop a plan for increasing the rates of those who transition from basic education programs to postsecondary programs of study. Officials in other states have done this and have seen significant improvement in their transition rates.
- Depart from a longstanding reliance on the GED by prohibiting the use of the GED as an automatic prerequisite for postsecondary occupational programming and allowing widespread dual-enrollment opportunities that would allow adult learners to simultaneously enroll in basic education programming and an occupational program. This change would decrease the time it takes to get into and through postsecondary programs.

Allow WTCS to determine exemptions to this requirement with degree programs that require a higher degree of educational attainment than this population of returning adult learners would have.

- The legislature should examine the current low level of investment being made in adult basic education programming. Wisconsin is currently 4<sup>th</sup> among five midwestern states in state and local adult education expenditures per student (at \$360 per student, compared with Michigan at \$1,846, Minnesota at \$778, Iowa at \$708, and Illinois at \$130).

This low level of funding appears inconsistent with the fact that we are in an intense competition with other states to increase the skills of our workforce, putting Wisconsin at a distinct disadvantage for the industries that require workers in this market.

“The legislature has an important role to play, not just in funding of workforce programs, but also in fostering workforce innovation by identifying and removing other policy barriers such as those highlighted in this report,” Keckhaver concluded.

*Bridges, Pathways and Leadership* executive summary can be viewed online at:

[http://wccf.org/pdf/bridges\\_execsumm\\_200707.pdf](http://wccf.org/pdf/bridges_execsumm_200707.pdf)

Full report: [http://wccf.org/pdf/bridges\\_fullreport\\_200707.pdf](http://wccf.org/pdf/bridges_fullreport_200707.pdf)

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