

"New Innovations and Best Practices under the Workforce Investment Act"

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Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, my name is Kathy Cooper, representing the Office of Adult Basic Education for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges in Olympia, Washington.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the innovative efforts of adult basic education programs at Washington state's community and technical colleges. I'm going to do that by answering four questions:

"Why innovate? Why isn't the way we've always done adult education good enough?"

The short answer is that we looked at what was happening in our state and compared that to the outcomes of our efforts. Despite good work, the data showed that our efforts fell short of meeting the continually accelerating needs of our students and our state. Specifically we learned three important things:

First, we were serving less than 10% of those that needed our services. This had serious implications for our state's future because these under-prepared and under-served adult workers are from our fastest growing populations and will account for all of the net growth in our state's workforce for at least the next two generations.

Second, not enough of our students were succeeding. Joint research by our state board and the Community College Research Center at Columbia University found that too few low-income adult learners in our colleges ever reach what the study called the "Tipping Point," that is, enough education to make a significant difference in economic self-sufficiency and to enter into the talent pipeline needed by our state's employers to compete.

Third, our employers, in the midst of the last recession and at the height of our economic boom, couldn't find enough qualified workers. In fact, the number of Washington employers who identify lack of basic and English language skills among workers as a barrier to their success tripled in two years.

This combination of changing demographics, accelerating skill requirements, students' goals, and our determination to help every student move forward further and faster toward the Tipping Point is what spurred us to innovate.

"What are we doing that's different?"

The flagship effort among our innovative practices is I-BEST --- Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training. (See the I-BEST summary.)

At its core, I-BEST tosses to one side traditional assumptions about educational scope, sequence, and readiness to learn. I-BEST puts an adult basic education and a professional-technical instructor in the same classroom at the same time. They offer instruction that integrates job-specific and basic skills for any student that is ready to succeed, whether or not they have a GED or high school diploma. That instruction leads to a real certificate recognized by local employers in a demand field that pays a living wage. It's the same certificate earned by traditional college

students and it carries college credit. And that instruction prepares students not only for that first step on their education and career pathways, but it gives them the skills and knowledge they need for the next step. Change your mental image from the picture of a career ladder with rungs spread too far apart for some of us to reach into the image of a chain with links that interlock. That's I-BEST.

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

“How do we know it's working?”

This question has the same answer as the first question: We listen to what our data are telling us.

One measure of I-BEST success is the growth of the program. I-BEST has expanded from pilots at 10 colleges to 138 approved programs at all 34 community and technical colleges in our state. (See the Program Inventory)

Another measure of success is how much better I-BEST students perform. For example, Tacoma Community College has an I-BEST accounting program that includes adult basic education and ESL students along with the adults you would expect to see in a community college classroom. But there is a difference in the performance of these two student groups. 100% of I-BEST students are retained in the program. Their average GPA is a 3.5. Finally, all of the I-BEST students pass the courses. In short, their outcomes outpace traditional students.

We have independent evidence of I-BEST success as well. Columbia University's Community College Research Center just released a working paper at the end of April that documents I-BEST's positive outcomes. The paper notes that I-BEST students, on average, not only earn 52 credits - more credits than needed to reach the Tipping Point, but they also increase their basic skills more than students enrolled in traditional ABE classes. With the same hours of instruction, 62% of I-BEST students make significant gains compared to 45% of traditional ABE students.

The data just confirms what our students tell us all the time: I-BEST works.

What can Congress do to support these kinds of efforts, especially as you consider reauthorization of WIA, Title II?

From the perspective of Washington state we need three changes in order for us to continue to innovate and bring to scale successful practices.

Redefine the purpose of Title II as student success in post-secondary education and progress along career pathways. 86% of the students who come to adult basic education in Washington state come to get and keep a good job. And we know that they must progress at least as far as the Tipping Point to achieve that dream. Surely the focus of our national system should reach as far as the vision of our students.

Reform the data and accountability system to reflect the new purpose and make the data useful for teaching and learning, as well as accountability. We embrace accountability that is objective, measurable, and evidence-based and we want it to be useful. The data must tell us if students are making progress toward the skills and credentials that have meaning in the labor market and their own lives. And it must tell us which program activities are most effective. And we need it in real time so that we are able to improve outcomes.

Link a clear purpose for adult basic education and a reformed accountability system with an increase in funding so that adult basic education programs can expand services to the growing numbers of adults that needs them. It makes no sense to acknowledge exponential increases in under-skilled population groups as well as continuously increasingly levels of skills required by a recovering economy and then starve the solution to them both.

On a specific level, we recommend that new legislation target \$75 million in new Title II state grant appropriations for seeding and scaling up approaches that integrate basic skills and post-secondary education and training or which dually or concurrently enroll students in basic skills and post-secondary education and training.

We also recommend that the Secretary of Education conduct an evaluation of the impact of integrated programs on the rate at which students attain career and post-secondary success.

We are proud of the innovative efforts of adult basic education providers at community and technical colleges in Washington state. As you reauthorize WIA Title II, you have the opportunity to create a fresh vision and new opportunities that will make it possible for us to expand those efforts and be joined in innovation by our colleagues across the nation.

Thank you for your time this morning. We believe that better skills lead to better jobs, leading to better lives. And that is still the American dream.

I am happy to take your questions.