



## Commentary: Business, labor, public officials agree on job-training programs

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The opinions of business leaders and unions, advocates and elected officials, educators and social service providers have absorbed much ink on these pages throughout this paper's history. But rarely have those opinions come together with one voice, in support of a shared proposal that is not in the interest of one particular interest group, but in the broad public interest of Connecticut. This year, representatives of a very diverse group of stakeholders have come together in common cause to call on lawmakers to invest in our state's economic present and future.

The request, put forth by the Campaign for a Working Connecticut is simple: Ensure that Connecticut's workforce has the skills needed to compete in a global economy, attract and retain jobs, meet employer demand, and ensure broadly shared prosperity.

There is a great burden on, and a great incentive for, states today to invest in the skills of their workforce. While the United States was once the leading workforce educator in the world, we have slipped considerably in that role over the past decades. Today, other countries are investing more per capita in workforce skills, creating new programs for technical education, and graduating more people from college.

**An analysis released earlier this year by the Workforce Alliance in Washington, D.C., revealed that since 2002, the administration had proposed a cumulative 28 percent in cuts for key Labor Department employment and training programs and 72 percent in cuts for key Education Department adult and vocational education programs. Last year's administration budget, if adopted, would have completed a five-year campaign to cut federal job training, eclipsing all cuts over the preceding 15 years.**

Not surprisingly then, federal dollars train only three percent of the workforce. This leaves states like Connecticut with a major role to play in developing a local workforce that can grow good jobs, support a vibrant middle class, and develop a strong tax base. And not surprisingly, this kind of task requires the commitment of all of those who benefit when our workforce has access to skills, and suffer when they do not.

Connecticut labor officials predict that by the year 2014, about 60 percent of the 20 fastest-growing occupations in the state will require a minimum of a bachelor's or master's degree for entry-level employment. But twenty-nine percent of Connecticut residents lack a postsecondary education. What's more, 40 percent of Connecticut adults lack adequate literacy skills to function well in the workplace.

These education and skill disparities are greater for non-white residents, which has a significant and direct economic impact on our state. According to a 2006 study by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, if all ethnic groups in Connecticut had the same educational attainment and earnings as whites, total personal income in the state would be about \$2.9 billion higher. Think of the family economic security, tax dollars, and purchasing power that could be generated if we closed that gap.

Given what Connecticut has to gain from investing in a skilled workforce, it is not surprising that such a diverse group of stakeholders has come together as the Campaign for a Working Connecticut. The Campaign has put forth a five-part platform that calls for basic skills education for adults, occupational skills training for those transitioning from public assistance, educational assistance so that adults can obtain industry demanded credentials, career services to connect job seekers with employers, and training to help current workers adapt to changing skill demands in a changing labor market.

That such diverse interests have come together around such an important part of Connecticut's economic future is good news. The better news is that there is an opportunity before Connecticut lawmakers to act on this momentum. In the coming weeks, Connecticut lawmakers will consider a comprehensive approach to training the workforce that supports three of the campaign's strategies.

The interests represented by the Campaign for a Working Connecticut rarely come together to speak with one voice and their unity suggests the importance of the issue at hand. Perhaps it is time for lawmakers to listen.