



New Approaches to Job Training

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WASHINGTON – Career and technical educators gave Department of Education officials an earful of suggestions at a Capitol Hill meeting Thursday on the reauthorization of the [Workforce Investment Act](#), a law many in attendance called unnecessarily complex and discouraging of innovative job training programs in its current form.

The legislation was enacted in 1998 to fund training programs for displaced workers and the unemployed. As it has not been reauthorized since, many in the career and technical education sector hope Congress will make significant revisions to the law if and when they consider reauthorization next year.

Brenda Dann-Messier, assistant secretary for vocational and adult education at the Department of Education, reminded the roomful of education lobbyists at Thursday's meeting that the political and economic climate is significantly different today than it was when the Workforce Investment Act was enacted. In 1998, she noted that there was a 4.6 percent unemployment rate and the government had a rare budget surplus. Now, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports a [10 percent unemployment rate](#) and the Congressional Budget Office recently projected a [budget deficit of \\$1.4 trillion](#). These drastically different times, Dann-Messier continued, require a new take on this legislation.

Though a representative from the Department of Labor was unable to attend the gathering, Martha Kanter, undersecretary at the Department of Education, assured those in attendance that the two departments, oft [criticized](#) for their lack of cooperation, are [enjoying a good working relationship](#) under the Obama administration. She also noted, before opening the floor to solicit suggestions from the roomful of lobbyists and other experts, that both departments “can do so much more to give students meaningful work and education at the same time” by improving and reauthorizing the law.

Thomas Hilliard, senior policy analyst at the [Center for Law and Social Policy](#), offered [a number of revisions](#) the organization would like to see in a new version of the law that were echoed throughout the meeting by representations from other think tanks and associations. Chief among the recommendations, he argued that connections between workforce development and adult education systems should be strengthened so that the teaching of basic skills, such as reading and writing, is better integrated with occupational-specific training.

“We actually ask the government to support these innovative strategies as soon as possible,” Hilliard said. “Give out guidelines now, prior to the reauthorization of WIA and encourage institutions to use these methods.”

Title I of the legislation funds workforce training programs, while Title II – officially know as the [Adult Education and Family Literacy Act](#) – funds basic skills programs. Hilliard argued that the current language of the legislation lacks the flexibility institutions need to garner funds for the integration of these disparate programs.

Rachel Gragg, federal policy director at the [Workforce Alliance](#), admitted that because of the difficulty of utilizing the two funding

mechanisms in concert with one another the “workforce community is practically guilty of having ignored Title II for a long time.”

“It’s so difficult to combine funding that almost by default we followed the money,” Gragg told the Department of Education officials. “It’s not serving clients well in that manner. We need to better align Title I and II so that we make sure low-skilled individuals get the basic skills they need while gaining workforce skills. They’ve always been thought of as being separate, but they need to be taught together.”

Also among her organization’s [policy recommendations for reauthorization](#), Gragg argued that the government should encourage states to develop “career pathways” that lead trainees to educational credentials and advancement within particular industries. Currently, she noted that there are a number of federal restrictions within the legislation that interfere with these efforts.

David Baime, vice president for government relations at the American Association of Community Colleges, provided a slightly different perspective on the Workforce Investment Act, telling the gathering that community college officials often feel like their institutions “are mere vendors in a system in which they should be true partners.” He argued that community colleges should be given preference in federal workforce investment initiatives because they are, as he wrote in a [list of policy recommendations](#), “the closest thing this country has to a national network of ubiquitous, low cost and high quality training providers, and the WIA legislation should reflect that.”

Local workforce investment boards are given federal funds; their “one-stop” centers then give vouchers to students to train at whatever institution they prefer. Other than at community colleges, students also use these vouchers at for-profit institutions and community-based organizations.

Despite the plethora of suggestions offered at the meeting, anxiety was on the minds of some attendees who felt as if the government had let them down in years past during failed attempts to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act.

“We’re not going to achieve our goals by just making some marginal improvements in the existing WIA or by a grant program here or a research program there or just by you guys getting along between Labor and Education.,” said Forrest Chisman, executive vice president of the [Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy](#). “That’s not going to be enough. I believe we must think large. We must think aggressively, and there must be thorough, comprehensive changes in every provision of this law. I really believe this might be our last chance to fix this, period. Unless we get this right, adult education might not be around ever again.”

Thursday’s meeting was just the latest in a series of “community conversations” the Department of Education has hosted regarding the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act. Comments from previous meetings held elsewhere in the country are available on [the department’s blog](#).

— David Moltz