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Courtesy reprint from ETR 10/24/10, p. 90

State Programs

MD. PUSH TO INCREASE TRAINING YIELDS GAINS, COMPLIMENTS

As Maryland officials watch enrollments grow in varying types of training and education aimed at middle-skill jobs, one national workforce organization says other states can learn from the accountability behind a Chesapeake campaign to build human capital.

Skills2Compete Maryland is Gov. Martin O'Malley's (D) initiative aimed at encouraging residents of the state to participate in various types of postsecondary education and training to improve their skills.

O'Malley, in March 2010, announced a goal, in the words used by his communications staff, to "increase the skills of Maryland's workforce by 20 percent," by the end of 2012.

The context for this call was a growing number of projections, from academics and groups such as the National Skills Coalition, that state and national job opportunities are in occupations that typically require some postsecondary education or technical training short of a college degree. It was the vogue of middle-skill jobs.

"In this economy, we must do everything we can to build the middle-skill and high-skill workforce that is so critical to economic recovery and long-term economic success," the governor said, announcing the campaign last year. "Economic recovery takes more than just attracting business and creating jobs, it also means equipping those businesses and filling those jobs with a world-class Maryland workforce."

First PR

Since then, state officials have taken a variety of steps to encourage Marylanders to look to community colleges, apprenticeships and an array of other programs that will increase their skills. The visible side of much of this work includes a public relations campaign, focused on jobs, necessary skills and training opportunities through websites and public service announcements.

Behind the scenes, Maryland officials set out to identify what the governor's goal really means,

whether the state as a whole is moving toward that objective and how individual agencies fit in. With some early results in, some workforce policy observers think there are lessons to be learned from the campaign's goal setting and monitoring.

"Some argue that simply setting a goal to count credentials and outcomes across programs is not an inherently valuable exercise — that it must be preceded by an effort to define credentials of value, an effort that can be highly contentious and divisive. But Skills2Compete has shown that the process of simply counting outcomes across programs can in and of itself become a consensus building process," says a new report, issued by the National Skills Coalition.

The report, *Beyond Degrees: Lessons Learned from Skills2Compete — Maryland*, extols the accountability work behind this campaign. Authors Rachel Unruh and Eric Seleznow suggest that other states pay attention to how the O'Malley administration set and promoted one statewide goal for skill attainment; asked an array of agencies from across state government to align strategies and their own metrics to this goal; counted a variety of outcomes, appropriate to different programs, toward the goal, rather than emphasizing only postsecondary degree completion; and instituted a cross-agency data monitoring system.

Then Action Plan

"Collectively setting a broad state policy goal and having individual agencies implement strategies was a successful step toward meeting the goal. More importantly, Skills2Compete allowed leaders to view workforce training programs as a system regardless of what agency they sat under, provided them with valuable information about training and credentials and moved all partners toward working together to improve the outcomes of the system," the authors write.

The National Skills Coalition, in recent years, has been promoting middle-skill jobs strategies and released an analysis of Maryland's job market with findings along these lines, when O'Malley announced his goal. Seleznow previously served as the executive director of Maryland's Governor's Workforce Investment Board during the initial years of the O'Malley administration.

Unruh and Seleznow describe how state officials from a variety of agencies worked with O'Malley's Lt. Gov. Anthony Brown to select their own outcomes and performance benchmarks to measure progress toward the governor's 20-by-2012 goal, which had gradually morphed into "increasing the number of Marylanders who receive skills training by 20 percent."

Some of these measures are being posted, as the data come in, on www.statestat.maryland.gov, a state accountability website.

The project is still a work in progress. But agencies have worked out measures and identified strategies for nudging their programs toward meeting the goal. (For the most part, the strategies aren't new program designs or initiatives, but are more subtle plans to emphasize skill training as a service and devote resources to it.)

An action plan, drafted for the initiative, is guiding each agency involved. For instance, officials in charge of the state's apprenticeship registration office aim to increase the number of individuals graduating from apprenticeship programs each year, with a fiscal year 2009 baseline set at 1,045. Their strategies include recruiting new apprenticeship programs, targeting some of their outreach effort toward industries that have not traditionally used this model, such as health care.

Their goal under the initiative is to have 1,245 workers graduate from apprenticeship programs by the end of 2012, and that number was 1,143 for the most recent state fiscal year, according to figures released by the state this summer.

The Department of Labor, Licensing and Regulation has pledged to seek grant resources to supplement formula funds and has asked local workforce boards to have their one-stop career centers work with unemployment insurance claimants and veterans to determine if training is appropriate.

The local workforce system was given the goal of increasing the number of its participants who partake in training from a baseline of 2,759 to 3,211 by

the end of the campaign, and was up to 3,172 according to this summer's numbers.

The Maryland Business Works incumbent worker training program was tasked with reaching 2,515 workers annually, up from a benchmark level of 2,096 at the start of the initiative. State officials responsible for the program planned to work with one-stops to find industry partners in addition to the health care and small business employers that have typically used the program. The program currently exceeds its 2012 goal substantially.

"When the governor sets a goal, a measurement provision and an accountability loop, it keeps people focused on that goal. It is a very constructive process," Seleznow told MII, when asked for his thoughts on why these numbers are growing.

So far, seven of 10 outcomes of various state workforce programs are trending positively toward their 2012 goals, though the numbers show some decline in technical education students concentrating in programs that lead to industry-recognized credentials, fewer state prison inmates in occupational skills training and a lack of outcome data come from a state weatherization training program grant.

"While Skills2Compete — Maryland is still a work in progress, it has proved to be a policy initiative that is dismantling some of the barriers that have prevented governors from holding the state's human capital investments accountable to the demands of the labor market and from realigning their systems to better serve this end," Unruh and Seleznow conclude. "This type of initiative is relevant in any fiscal climate, but it is particularly relevant today when resources are tight and all investments must be evaluated."

✓ Find the report *Beyond Degrees: Lessons Learned from Skills2Compete — Maryland* at www.nationalskillscoalition.org.

—Ryan Hess

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ETR is published by: MII Publications, P.O. Box 34504, Washington, D.C. 20043-4504 **E-mail:** service@miiipublications.com ☆ **Web:** www.miiipublications.com ☆ **Call:** (800) 524-8960, toll free; or (202) 347-4822, ext. 101 ☆ **Fax:** (202) 347-4893.