



**The Middle-Skills Solutions Act:**  
An Act establishing a middle-skills council  
and the creation of regional skills academies in the Commonwealth  
(Senate Bill 921; House Bill 2713)

### What's in this legislation?

The Act's three main sections build upon existing resources to develop a more robust system to prepare adult, non-traditional students for employment in economic sectors targeted by the Commonwealth for increased growth and investment:

**Section I.** Establish a middle-skills council to make recommendations that increase the readiness for and success of working adults and other non-traditional students in education and training in order to increase the number of adults with credentials for middle-skill jobs. The council's work will include establishing baseline data on the Commonwealth's middle-skills gap and making recommendations for a system-wide plan to better align adult basic education programs with post-secondary institutions.

**Section II.** Establish Regional Skills Academies, aligned with the Commonwealth's economic development strategy, to address the gap between the skills currently held by the Commonwealth's workers and the skills needed by its employers for middle-skill jobs. The Academies are not new structures but rather provide a mechanism to incentivize greater resource coordination and innovation across agencies, departments, and schools to increase credential and completion rates.

**Section III.** Require the regular review of local and regional labor market information and the development of regional plans to coordinate training and education activities to meet Massachusetts' demand for middle-skill workers.

### Who filed the legislation?

**The Middle-Skills Solutions Act** was filed in January 2011 by Senator Kenneth Donnelly and Representative Cheryl Coakley-Rivera, along with a total of 54 co-sponsors from both houses of the state legislature.

### Who's supporting this effort?

The Skills2Compete MA coalition, which is led by the Workforce Solutions Group and SkillWorks and comprises a broad group of advocates from business, community-based organizations, labor, adult basic education providers, community colleges, and philanthropy, is spearheading the effort to pass this legislation.

### Why does the legislation focus on middle-skill jobs and credentials?

Report after report from sources ranging from the [McKinsey Global Institute](#) to the [Federal Reserve Bank of Boston](#) to the [National Skills Coalition](#) have pointed out that middle-skill jobs, those that require at least some level of post-secondary training and a credential, comprise a substantial share of the



Massachusetts economy (approximately 40 percent) and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the same time we have fallen behind in making sure our workforce has the skills that businesses are looking for. If we want our Commonwealth to be competitive in attracting companies to locate and grow here, we need to invest in pathways to middle-skill jobs and credentials.

In addition, research consistently shows that those with post-secondary training, including certificates, AA degrees, and other credentials, not only earn significantly more than their counterparts with only a high school diploma, but they are more likely to be employed and working more hours.<sup>2</sup> A high school diploma is no longer enough to thrive in our economy; helping people get middle-skill credentials is an important way to help build the middle class.

### **Why does the legislation focus on Adult Basic Education transitions to college and developmental education?**

Often, when we think about strategies to increase college credential attainment, we focus on how to make sure more students graduate from high school ready to succeed in college and how to better prepare young people from pre-K through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. However, we know that two-thirds of our workforce a decade from now is already in the workforce today, and according to a recent study by the Center for Law and Social Policy and the National Center for Education Management Systems, our population of high school graduates is shrinking.<sup>3,4</sup>

If we are going to grow the population of middle-skilled workers, we need strategies that will help working and job-seeking adults succeed in post-secondary training and education. Transitioning from adult basic education/GED programs into college and getting stuck in “developmental” (non-credit, remedial education classes at many colleges) are two of the largest stumbling blocks for adults trying to earn post-secondary credentials. In fact, one study has shown that only 2 to 3 percent of students who start college in ESOL or adult basic education classes earn a certificate of one year or more or an Associate’s Degree within five years.<sup>5</sup>

### **Why do we need a middle-skills council, and what will it do?**

The middle-skills council is tasked with examining and quantifying the real middle-skill gap in the Commonwealth. Currently, no one agency or body collects information on all middle-skill credentials granted in the state. The council will collect baseline data on credentials awarded and credentials needed by employers and in so doing will establish a process for regularly gathering and updating this information. Several other states are embarking on this work already, and a good model can be found in Maryland’s cross agency council that collects and evaluates credential outcomes from community colleges, apprenticeships, private career schools, WIA occupational and incumbent worker training, vocational technical high schools and adult education matriculating to post-secondary credentials, and vocational rehabilitation, veterans training programs, TANF, and programs for criminal offenders.

The council will also be tasked with making recommendations for minimizing remediation and increasing credential attainment rates of adults and non-traditional students by developing a system-wide plan to better align adult basic education and pre-college programs with post-secondary institutions.



## What are Regional Skills Academies, and how do they work?

The Regional Skills Academies in this bill are inspired by the successful work of the Commonwealth Corporation's [Innovative Post-Secondary Education Models \(IPSEM\) project](#), which seeded innovative programming in the community colleges. One of these programs, the [Academy of Health Professions](#) at Middlesex Community College, has become a national model for flexible programming for working and unemployed adults, offering “stackable” credentials that help unemployed workers get back into the labor market more quickly and continue to work toward a higher level certificate or degree.

In essence, this bill expands support for initiatives like the Academy of Health Professions, providing funding to establish like projects in a variety of industry sectors in all regions of the state. One main difference is that this new generation of Skills Academies is not strictly focused on community college programming; our bill has structured them to encourage greater partnership with other education and training institutions like regional vocational technical high schools, ABE providers, career centers and WIBs, labor-management training funds, and community-based organizations.

The Skills Academies do not add another layer to the workforce training system; they encourage coordination and enhance existing institutions and resources to make credential attainment more accessible.

The Skills Academies will be selected through a competitive grant process administered by the Commonwealth Corporation through the existing infrastructure of the Workforce Competitiveness Trust Fund, much like the IPSEM grants.

## How is this different from the Vision Project and other higher education systems change efforts?

Commissioner Freeland's exciting Vision Project focuses on improving a range of outcomes across all of the Commonwealth's public higher education institutions. The Skills2Compete MA coalition supports the Vision Project and considers our effort to be supportive of realizing that project's goal of increasing overall college completion and credential attainment rates.

This legislation, however, focuses specifically on middle-skill credentials and both program and systems improvements to increase the success of adults and other non-traditional students in attaining these credentials. This group of students now makes up the largest pool at community colleges and most of the growth in community college enrollments across the state.<sup>6</sup>

## How much funding does this legislation need?

We are requesting \$8 million annually from the consolidated budget surplus to support the Regional Skills Academies.



## How can I get involved?

Support the Middle-Skill Solutions Act (SB 921/HB 2713), which creates better pathways and more opportunity for workers to gain the middle-skill training and credentials that Massachusetts' businesses need:

- Testify at the hearing before the Joint Committee on Labor and Workforce Development on October 27, 2011.
- Let your representative and senator know that you support the Middle-Skill Solutions Act and would like him or her to pass it.
- If you are an employer, share your stories about the importance of properly-trained workers to your business and your experiences of trying to fill middle-skill positions.

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### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> National Skills Coalition, *Massachusetts' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs*. July 2010. Available at [http://skills2competema.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/forgottenjobs\\_ma.pdf](http://skills2competema.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/forgottenjobs_ma.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, *Not Just Kid Stuff Anymore: The Economic Imperative for More Adults to Complete College*, June 2011. Available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/NotKidStuffAnymoreAdultStudentProfile-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> National Skills Coalition, *Massachusetts' Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs*. July 2010. Available at [http://skills2competema.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/forgottenjobs\\_ma.pdf](http://skills2competema.files.wordpress.com/2010/07/forgottenjobs_ma.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Center for Law and Social Policy and National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, *Not Just Kid Stuff Anymore: The Economic Imperative for More Adults to Complete College*, June 2011. Available at <http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/NotKidStuffAnymoreAdultStudentProfile-1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> The Boston Foundation, *Massachusetts Community Colleges: The Potential for Improving College Attainment*. February 2007. Available at

[http://www.tbf.org/uploadedFiles/tbforg/Utility\\_Navigation/Multimedia\\_Library/Reports/CommunityCollege.pdf](http://www.tbf.org/uploadedFiles/tbforg/Utility_Navigation/Multimedia_Library/Reports/CommunityCollege.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, "Highlights: 2009 Early Enrollment Estimates." October 6, 2009. Available at <http://www.phenomonline.org/images/documents/2009earlyenrollmentreport.pdf>

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