



THE FUTURE OF **WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

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Conference Participants' Ideas and Highlights

The Future of Workforce Development in Mississippi - October 29, 2013

The Future of Workforce Development in Mississippi forum in Jackson, Mississippi, brought together over 100 leaders from across the state. They represented community colleges and secondary and postsecondary education, workforce development, human services, economic development, private business and industry, and government officials. Key objectives were to:

- Identify solutions to advance Mississippi's workforce development ecosystem currently and in the foreseeable future
- Share promising practices that may benefit Mississippi's workforce development networks and strategies
- Link key and strategic partners who may not currently work together.

The conference was kicked off by Mississippi Governor Phil Bryant, who underscored the importance of implementing effective workforce development strategies and the need to prepare individuals at all points across the education and income continuum for job opportunities in the state. National subject matter experts then shared their perspectives on emerging economic, demographic, and labor market trends and their potential impacts for the state. Invited speakers shared their perspectives on the role of employers, with a particular focus on successful industry-workforce partnerships. They also discussed the role of the education sector and innovative training approaches that are effectively addressing workforce development needs. Close to 100 individuals participated in small work group sessions to discuss ideas and recommend specific policies, programs, and initiatives that should be undertaken in Mississippi to improve its workforce and workforce system.

Audience suggestions for next steps

Conference participants represented over 75 public and private organizations in the state. Here are recommendations and key ideas:

Participants discussed the importance of emphasizing skilled trades and not just four-year college degrees as a path to employment, both to address important business needs and to improve the state's low labor force participation rate. To accomplish this goal, participants noted the need to:

- Improve transitions and partnerships between community colleges and skilled trade associations and businesses
- Develop dual enrollment track programs in both adult basic education and skilled trade training using contextualized curriculum
- Develop policy incentives that address the current imbalance in the K-12 system between vocational/trade/technical education and college bound/academic education
- Design and execute a broad educational campaign to inform parents and young adults about the viable careers available to them that do not require a four-year college degree, but do require a mastery of basic reading, writing, and math
- Design and execute a similar educational campaign for teachers about the importance of preparing students in high school (and in earlier grades) about the viability and necessity of vocational and technical education for students, particularly those who may not be best positioned for success in college



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- Foster stronger partnerships between skilled trade and technical employers (advanced manufacturers, construction, and so on) and the K–12 secondary and postsecondary education community.

Forum participants reiterated the need to identify and address workforce needs for young adults so that all youth will succeed in school and in the labor market, and in turn improve their quality of life. Participants made these recommendations:

- Integrate more contextualized learning into school curriculum at younger ages for students to see real job and real-world applications between school and work
- Integrate programs in K–12 curriculums such as [The Leader in Me](#) that teach successful work and career habits
- Improve career education and career awareness for students (and their parents) before they start high school. Offer stronger mentoring and vocational guidance in high school as well as opportunities for all students to be exposed to a wider variety of career choices using techniques such as internships and job shadowing in areas of interest
- Develop stronger early intervention strategies to lower the school dropout rate, reduce discipline problems and absenteeism, and increase academic gains in low-achieving students
- Create and champion a stronger value proposition for all Mississippi residents, especially families with children, about the value of education and training not only for furthering their personal economic futures but also for the well-being of the community and the success and survival of local business and industry
- Develop dedicated workforce academies in all state community colleges to offer GED preparation, remedial basic skills training, and financial literacy. Help pre-community college students learn about different pathways to employment and economic opportunities.

Forum participants noted that the majority of the “future” workforce was already in the workforce; therefore, it’s important to focus on addressing challenges related to underemployed adults and those with a high school education or less. Participants emphasized the need to develop strategies for improving future employment prospects for these individuals and reducing the risk of future unemployment, growing public benefit receipt, and/or incarceration. To realize these goals, participants offered the following ideas:

- Develop incentives for community colleges to work more closely with the business community to develop incumbent worker training programs to improve the education and skills of entry-level and low-skilled workers. For example, offer basic skills and/or English as a second language training to workers at their place of employment, provide resources for the development and implementation of new career and technical programs for workers entering emerging and high-growth industry areas, and offer training stipends or training during work hours to allow workers to attain advanced credentials in their fields
- Expand entrepreneurial training and access to risk capital for individuals interested in self-employment as a career option. This may include developing or expanding resources that foster microlending, angel investment, and college loan remediation to local entrepreneurs with new businesses that have growth potential to the community, state, and region. Develop policy incentives for stimulating entrepreneurial activities
- Identify measures to reduce the burden for workers outside of Mississippi to transfer their licenses and credentials for employment to the state.



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Forum participants recognize the need to boost soft skills and work readiness practices, particularly for youth and young adults to help make them attractive to prospective employers and increase their chances of getting jobs and remaining in the labor market permanently. To address this issue, participants noted the need to:

- Foster stronger partnerships and more integrated initiatives between health and human services resources such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and current Workforce Investment Act (WIA) resources
- Identify strategies for rethinking the additional roles that community colleges can play to provide a more holistic package of supports (child care, transportation) that will allow low-income residents to gain the education and training, including soft skills, they need for jobs in the current labor market
- Align adult basic education funding with these efforts.

Forum participants considered the need to improve the coordination, resourcing, collaboration, and functionality of the many agencies and organizations that constitute today's Mississippi workforce ecosystem. These groups include K–12 education, postsecondary education (community colleges, four-year institutions), the public workforce development system (Workforce Investment Act), the health and human services system (TANF), and the corrections system, as well as business and industry—all of which play a role in the development, preparation, and investment of individual success in the labor market. To undertake these efforts, participants recommended the following:

- Expand the use of available state administrative data and advanced analytics to improve both the state's labor market and workforce development intelligence. Strategies should be developed that (1) provide better information to both job seekers and workforce and education professionals about emerging occupations, skills, and credentials needed by employers hiring in the state, (2) offer intelligence about the effectiveness of the education and training provided to state residents and other workforce practices and strategies designed to foster faster labor force attachment and longer retention, especially to low-income and incarcerated individuals, (3) provide better information that demonstrates the effectiveness of emerging and established industry-education partnerships both for new job seekers and incumbent workers, and (4) provide data on how these strategies are working to supply Mississippi employers with better trained and skilled workers
- Invest in advanced technology to connect out-of-work and underemployed Mississippi residents with employers who are hiring. Strategies may include developing an online registry of Mississippi residents looking for work that contains not only their résumés and credentials, but also uses advanced technology and algorithms to match their interests, education, and experience to jobs not simply based on "keyword" technology
- Develop common performance metrics across all state agencies with workforce implications, including economic security, education, higher education, human services, and corrections
- Provide financial incentives to encourage community-based and industry-specific partnerships between the state's community colleges and universities and employers
- Create an umbrella organization designed to result in a more seamless and unified system that allows Mississippi to integrate fully the strategies, programs, and resources across a



continuum that spans kindergarten through adult education. The organization would also be responsible for coordinating all sources of workforce (federal and state) funding to reduce fragmentation and encourage stronger coordination and efficiency.

Conference Highlights

Speakers at the forum shared insights about key workforce development issues. **Todd Greene**, Atlanta Fed vice president of community and economic development (CED), opened the forum by highlighting the importance of workforce development to the economic recovery of both the nation and the Southeast.

Mississippi Governor **Phil Bryant** emphasized the state's commitment to ensure that every resident who wanted a job had one, and schools are key players in helping people prepare for their life's work. Governor Bryant discussed the importance of job creation, how the state has helped the private sector expand by 7,000 jobs, and his desire to see that number grow. He also spoke about the success Mississippi has realized as a leader in such areas as being a top state to do business in, having a competitive labor force, being competitive in terms of the cost of doing business, and encouraging entrepreneurship. However, more can be done. Finally, he emphasized the importance of the role of the education community in preparing tomorrow's workforce today, especially the state's community colleges. Governor Bryant highlighted the aggressive efforts the state is taking to stop the high rate of dropouts and increase the number of children graduating with the skills they need to succeed in the labor market.

Panel 1

Emerging Workforce Needs: Economic and Demographic Trends

The first panel discussion asked four regional and national economists and workforce experts to reflect on the following questions:

- What critical national, regional, and state trends and projections in the economy, including demographic trends, have implications on Mississippi's workforce ecosystem?
- Can we anticipate shifts in the workforce of the future, and if so, what are they?
- What types of models, partnerships, or other strategies may need to be developed or strengthened in Mississippi to respond to or address these trends?

Moderated by **Kathy Krepcio**, executive director of the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, the panelists included **Ted Abernathy**, managing partner of Economic Leadership LLC, **Domenico "Mimmo" Parisi**, professor and director of the National Strategic Planning & Analysis Research Center (nSPARC), **Marta Lachowska**, an economist with W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research, and **Nicole Smith**, research professor and senior economist at Georgetown University.

Ted Abernathy spoke about the changing trends affecting the workforce and labor market and the increasing complexity of the economy. These changes included demographic transformations taking place that will result in more women, more ethnic and cultural diversity, and a greater number of older workers in the labor market. He noted that the talent bar, that is, the level of skills and education needed to be successful in the labor market, is higher. In addition, globalization and the rapid pace of



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technology are changing jobs and markets quickly, making it difficult for job seekers to keep pace with the changing demands of employers. He stated that the current workforce system is based on a supply-side model when, given changes in the economy, the system needed to shift to a demand-side system.

Marta Lachowska discussed her research findings, which looked at labor force participation in Mississippi and how it compared to other states in the Southeast. She noted that the labor force participation rate in the state is five to seven points lower than other states in the region, suggesting that the Mississippi labor market is somewhat less prosperous. Her research points to five key factors compared to other southeastern states: Mississippi is more rural and more residents live in nonmetropolitan areas; Mississippi has a significantly higher percentage of black residents; Mississippi residents report a higher incidence of health problems; Mississippi residents tend to rely more on government transfers such as Social Security, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP); and a higher percent of Mississippi residents have not completed high school and a lower percent are college graduates.

Mimmo Parisi spoke about the differences in these factors at the regional and local levels. Community colleges are at the front line in addressing and responding to these differences, suggesting that success or failure to address these problems is best solved at the local level. He noted the importance of a “can do” attitude toward tackling the large workforce problems facing the state and that setting expectations for success is vital. The business community recognizes that a skilled workforce is an important asset and that every major stakeholder (business, secondary and postsecondary education, economic development, human services, and so on) needs to be part of the solutions discussion.

Finally, **Nicole Smith** discussed the types of skills workers will need for jobs in the labor market of the future. She noted the necessity of developing strong cognitive skills (critical thinking, problem solving, and so on) and soft skills (punctuality, dependability, and motivation) to succeed in the labor market, and the importance of developing these skills in youth and young adults. She also talked about adult learners and the challenge of developing a workforce and education system that can help workers figure out their skills, and their skill gaps, and how they can transfer those skills to jobs emerging in the labor market.

Panel 2

Industry Approaches to Workforce Development

The second panel discussion asked four local and national business and philanthropic leaders and workforce development policymakers to discuss the following issues:

- What are some examples of challenges and promising practices taking place in the area of industry engagement in workforce development? What are the critical elements associated with the success (or lack thereof) for these particular approaches?
- What does business and industry see as anticipated skills in the workforce of the future and areas needing action to address gaps?
- What types of partnerships need to be developed or strengthened to better address these issues? How can other sectors best engage with industry?



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Moderated by **Heidi Kaplan**, Federal Reserve Board of Governors senior community development analyst, the panelists included **Mark Popovich**, senior program officer at the Hitachi Foundation, **Jim Van Erden**, senior policy adviser at the National Association of State Workforce Agencies (NASWA), **Laura Davis Chandler**, executive director of the Southwest Alabama Workforce Development Council (SAWDC), and **Teri Fontenot**, president and CEO of Women’s Hospital and the 2012 Chair of the American Hospital Association.

Mark Popovich spoke on the Hitachi Foundation’s research in how employers are proactively integrating workforce strategies into their own operations. He noted the importance of the role of an intermediary to bring together employers and educators such as community colleges. He mentioned “pioneering employers” such as one in the health care industry that looked at a federally qualified health care center whose costs were rising and that had difficulty recruiting physicians. The employer realized that it needed to change its workforce model by increasing training of medical assistants, which, in turn, increased productivity of both the assistants and physicians. Another example was a manufacturing company that needed to train press operators. By increasing wages as well as training, the employer was able to gain higher-skilled workers while improving productivity.

Jim Van Erden discussed the communication necessary between employers and workforce development system professionals. He noted that workforce professionals sometimes think employers have all the answers, which is not the case. Today’s workforce system is characterized by many stovepipe programs that are not well understood by business and industry, he said. While in the past it was difficult for workforce practitioners to think about employers as their “customer,” today they have made a dramatic change and recognize the necessity of understanding employer demand. From NASWA’s perspective, the strengths in the current system are an improved system of assessing job seekers for employment and improved relations with business. Challenges include continuous resource constraints with an increasing demand for services (and better quality services), and a system still siloed and lacking a cohesive focus. Fundamentally, the top three areas NASWA believes need attention over the next year include increasing and improving engagement with business, increased flexibility of federal funding, and better efforts at leveraging existing resources especially with other education and human services agencies.

Laura Davis Chandler described SAWDC’s efforts to develop a more integrated workforce development system in Alabama and its experiences as part of the National Fund for Workforce Solutions industry partnerships efforts. SAWDC, which serves eight counties in southwest Alabama, established a delivery model for moving its low-skilled workers into career opportunities by creating industry partnerships that provide services to address skills gaps and competencies articulated by industry, lead to industry recognized credentials, and work to promote career advancement. SAWDC focused on four industry clusters—aviation, maritime, industrial construction and manufacturing, and health care—which were chosen due to their high-growth and high-demand characteristics. A key component of SAWDC’s efforts is measuring success. It has developed a robust set of performance measures to track its progress.

Finally, **Teri Fontenot** reflected on the increased demand for health care workers, prompted by such factors as the rollout of the Affordable Care Act and the aging of the population (including frail elderly individuals with chronic health conditions). She noted some of the challenges facing the field, including



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the enormous need for advanced technology especially in the area of electronic health care records, issues pertaining to an aging health care workforce (where the average age is 45), and the growing complexity of medical billing and coding. All of these issues have implications for the workforce. For example, billing and coding complexity will require more skilled medical coding and billing professionals. The implications of an aging and more frail population will likely result in the need for more personal health care aides. She stated that over half of the nurses working today are 40 years or older, which will likely result in an increased demand to replace nurses who retire. And, because of the growing use of technology, front-line workers will need to improve their ability to use technology and manage data, and health care informatics workers will be in growing demand. She concluded by stating that a critical challenge facing the health care sector is understanding all of the moving parts driven by policy, technology, and demographics, and then assessing where the labor market is going and what skills will be needed by workers and when.

Panel 3

New Approaches to Workforce Training: The Role of the Education Sector

The third panel discussion asked three national experts and local practitioners to discuss the following:

- What innovative approaches to providing education, training, and certifications to prepare individuals for future industry needs can you share with us today?
- What types of information or partnerships need to be developed in order for the education sector to engage successfully in local workforce development efforts?

Moderated by **Karen Leone de Nie**, Atlanta Fed CED research director, the panelists included **James Williams**, vice president of economic and community services at Itawamba Community College, **Mike Beatty**, president and CEO of Great Promise Partnership, and **Maureen Conway**, executive director of the Workforce Strategies Institute at the Aspen Institute.

James Williams talked about Itawamba Community College's approach to employer engagement, working with dislocated workers and the K–12 educational system. He noted the problem of underemployment among dislocated workers who find new jobs, and how solutions to overcome this problem need to be individualized and local. A critical component to developing effective programs for adult students is active and deep engagement with local employers. Listening to their needs and spending time on their premises are crucial to building a trusting relationship that ensures educational programs benefit both the employer and the student. He also commented on partnerships with K–12 education, pointing out the importance of establishing career pathways for children by eighth grade. He cited the college's manufacturing career pathway program that provides a seamless transition for youth from eighth grade into the community college system and employment. Finally, he spoke on the value of apprenticeships and job internships, especially as a vehicle to address the reemployment of dislocated workers.

Mike Beatty discussed the problem of youth dropping out of school and ending up in the corrections system. The Great Promise Partnership is working with youth that are at risk of not graduating from high school. The Georgia program helps students complete their high school education while gaining real-world skills for further education, military service, and/or work in the labor market. Critical to its success is a partnership with Southwire and its 12 For Life effort, which has helped 600 at-risk youth stabilize their lives. He stressed the importance of identifying at-risk youth early and working with them and local business organizations and technical colleges to identify jobs. The key to success is packaging



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interventions and services that include an educational component, a vocational/job component, caring adults involved through a support team, and the involvement of business and local political leaders who embrace the effort.

Maureen Conway talked about the Aspen Institute's work in sector strategies and the features that make for a successful strategy. These include identifying and partnering with local and regional industries in a particular growth sector, building relationships with nonprofits and intermediaries to move people into a career ladder in a sector, and relationships with educational institutions that both work with employers on identifying skill needs and with students on developing those skills and providing a variety of different supports that meet their unique personal circumstances. She emphasized the importance of helping parents to be better educated and helping them get better jobs. In doing so, that can translate into superior education-job success for their children. She pointed out there are two types of magical people: those who recognize when a student is slipping and help the student get back on track and reimagine possibilities, and those who help programs do more with less or figure out how to make a program work. Finally, she mentioned that for many states, the future workforce is already working. States and educators need to think hard about how they are reaching adult learners, both in terms of technical skills training as well as soft skills. There are a number of strategies that postsecondary institutions can use to help people, such as providing English as a second language to foreign-born students, securing Pell grants to help adults complete their education and training, or exploring the use of portable credentialing that would give people college credit for work experience. Apprenticeships are one of the most underutilized programs available in the United States, and the Aspen Institute has been studying how pre-apprenticeship programs can prepare and contribute to a student's success.

Panel 4

Policymaker's Perspectives

The fourth and final panel discussion asked national experts and Mississippi state officials to discuss the following issues:

- What innovative approaches to addressing workforce challenges with the policy (state and local) framework can you share with us?
- At a general level, what types of information or partnerships are most helpful in order for policymakers to engage successfully in local workforce development efforts?

Moderated by **Karen Elzey**, vice president of policy, Business-Higher Education Forum, the panelists included **Mark Henry**, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Employment Security, **Jack Mills**, director of the National Network of Sector Partners, and **Hank Bounds**, commissioner of the State Institutions for Higher Learning.

Mark Henry stated that one of the key issues that can be addressed with policy is fostering innovation through the use of more flexible funding. He noted the challenge of being allowed to innovate only if the U.S. Department of Labor allows it, and he championed the need to allow federal dollars to be used more flexibly at the state level. In discussions with employers, they need better prepared workers and a more motivated workforce. Mississippi has launched a program to help veterans get jobs, which includes giving credit to veterans for work/life experiences and helping military spouses get temporary professional licenses when they're from out of state (such as nurses). Finally, he mentioned a program started with the colleges to help soon-to-graduate students register in the state's job matching system.



Jack Mills discussed problems facing both employers and job seekers in today's economy. He noted how the world is rapidly changing and how difficult it is for publicly funded institutions to keep up with the enormous pace of change. Mississippi has some of the fundamental building blocks, which is an important base, especially in terms of lifelong learning. However, the challenge is one of building a system that is flexible and innovative to support and sustain this effort in a policy arena where federal funding is not flexible. According to Mills, community colleges have a good track record of improving return on investment for employers and job seekers (for example, the IBEST model in Washington State), but there needs to be stronger partnerships with human services organizations and other supports to keep individuals in school and on the job (such as transportation and child care assistance). He also commended Mississippi on the number of partnerships and results that are being realized in the state, but it's important to look at success over the long run using longitudinal data to identify both opportunities and impacts.

Hank Bounds discussed the challenges facing educators and students in Mississippi. He noted that many children are getting to third grade without having the skill set necessary for future success. He stated that the state needs to improve early childhood proficiencies, attract the best teachers, and put in place a system that ensures young children are prepared from K–12 and beyond. He stressed that employers, while identifying problems in educational preparation, also need to be part of the solution. That may include devoting time to meet with career counselors in both the K–12 and postsecondary system, and helping the state with messaging to children and their parents about the value of an education and work, particularly the value of technical careers.

Concluding remarks

Jay Moon, president and CEO of the Mississippi Manufacturers Association and chair of the Mississippi Workforce Investment Board, wrapped up the forum by asking, What do we need to do to get “from good to great” in this new and more challenging economy and labor market? How do we enshrine in policy some critical goals such as the importance of moving state residents into sustainable employment and creating an economic environment that helps Mississippi businesses be more competitive nationally and globally? He offered several areas for policy focus:

- We need to develop policy goals that both serve job seekers by helping them move into good jobs at sustainable wages as well as help businesses be more competitive
- We need to base decisions on sound and current labor market and workforce intelligence and data
- We need to allocate funding where there are emerging needs and growth, and withdraw it where needs are not being met and positive impacts and outcomes are not being achieved
- We need leadership that focuses on better alignment within state and local organizations and agencies as well as across the broad workforce system
- We need to hold people accountable for results, and use better metrics to track results
- We need to foster stronger partnerships, but measure and manage them
- We need to look continually at the extent to which the system is changing and how (and whether) it is responding to change.