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Innovations in Workforce Development

With a large number of unemployed residents and a widening skills gap, New York City will need to expand and improve its workforce development system. This policy brief profiles three innovative workforce policies from other cities that could serve as models.

by Tom Hilliard

One of the biggest challenges New York's next mayor will have to confront is the city's troubling skills gap. Simply put, far too many New Yorkers lack the skills and educational credentials to compete for decent paying jobs in today's knowledge economy.

The good news is that cities across the United States have been experimenting with innovative new approaches to building the 21st century workforce, some of which New York clearly could replicate. This policy brief profiles three of the best workforce development models from other cities, all of which target areas that consistently challenge New York policymakers and providers: meaningfully engaging employers, connecting adult education with higher education, and getting disconnected young adults back on track.

All three of these model programs would help address a key shortcoming of New York's workforce system—the lack of collaboration and coordination among the city's many educational and workforce providers. New York, like other cities, must deal with multiple agencies, a crazy-quilt of funding streams, inconsistent oversight from federal and state agencies, and the difficulty of forging common strategies and programs to respond to the real needs of their clients. But several cities have found ways to break through this gridlock in ways that could serve as models for New York City.

Sector Panel: Putting employers in the driver's seat

Perhaps the hardest task in workforce development is engaging employers. Few things, though, are more important. Without employer guidance, the government and nonprofits will find it difficult to target work readiness or training activities to actual job openings, or to effectively prepare workers for openings that will exist in the near future. Yet employer engagement strategies often focus on individual executives at individual companies who have only a hazy and limited notion of what their

industry needs from the public sector.

The Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council (WDC) has found an effective vehicle to build close collaboration with employers—the Sector Panel. These task forces convene a group of employers in one particular industry to focus on workforce needs of that industry. A sector panel continues for anywhere between 6 to 18 months and begins with a detailed labor market analysis. Employers and industry leaders representing the full spectrum of employers in the industry comprise at least half the members, and the remaining seats go to workforce organizations, postsecondary institutions, labor unions, economic development agencies and community-based organizations.

One panel focused on green construction, a notoriously difficult sector to define, let alone build workforce strategies for. David Allen, executive vice-president of McKinstry, a construction and energy-efficiency contractor, chaired the panel. “It was fantastic for the construction industry,” says Allen. “The magic of the panel is that it convened a broad constituency. It had big contractors, labor, voc-tech, engineering, home builders. It brought the discussion to a table, and forced everyone to figure out what a green job really is, how it affects construction, what training is needed.”

The panel produced a detailed employer survey of the green labor market, training curricula for community colleges to use in preparing workers for jobs related to green construction, and a career pathway for entry-level workers to become building maintenance engineers with a green emphasis. The panel helped to bring clarity to a poorly understood field, which in turn prompted the U.S. Department of Labor to award the WDC a $3.6 million grant to provide green economy education and training services to more than 450 King County residents. The WDC has utilized sector panels in several other industries, including healthcare, maritime, interactive media and life sciences.

At present, New York City’s main workforce providers concentrate mainly on matching unemployed adults with job openings. That is an important service that results in continuing dialogue with employers, but it does not foster a deep and open-ended dialogue. Convening sector panels in New York could yield a more strategic understanding of employer needs and of structural gaps in major industry sectors, and could lead to highly targeted and cost-effective workforce interventions.

I-BEST: Connecting adult education to higher education

Adult education is one of the most important ways New York City develops its human capital and one of the least appreciated. The 1.5 million New Yorkers who lack a high school diploma[i] and 1.3 million who lack English proficiency absolutely must improve their literacy, numeracy and English-language skills if they hope to obtain a rewarding job or advance in a career. Simply attending an adult education class or passing the GED will not enable most people to break out of poverty. They have to keep going and get a postsecondary certificate or degree. But few low-literacy New Yorkers continue beyond the GED, and those who do seldom graduate from vocational school or college.

Many stumble because of the huge difference between adult education and college. However, it is possible to bridge the gap between the worlds of adult and postsecondary education. The strategy that might make the most sense for New York City—I-BEST (Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training)—originated in Washington State.

It features a team-taught entry-level college course. One teacher instructs students in a vocational subject, such as health care or early childhood education, and the other provides adult literacy instruction in the context of that vocational subject. The college pays the vocational teacher, and the adult-ed program pays the adult-ed teacher. The course leads to a certificate valued by employers and that also counts toward eventual completion of an associate degree. Studies have found the I-BEST model to be highly effective, making it one of the only proven strategies for getting low-literacy students through college and into a rewarding career. Adult education students who enroll in one of Washington State’s community and technical colleges using I-BEST are nine times as likely to graduate as those who do not.

President Obama has personally praised I-BEST, and his Council of Economic Advisers called it a “highly effective…approach to teaching adults who need both basic skills and job skills.” Minnesota and Indiana have successfully

copied the model, and the Gates Foundation is supporting an initiative to replicate I-BEST in 11 additional states. The New York State Education Department added an I-BEST option to its most recent round of federally funded adult education grants.

In New York City, LaGuardia Community College in Queens and Kingsborough Community Colleges in Brooklyn have launched their own version, renamed NY-BEST, and achieved successful outcomes. However, the programs have suffered from funding problems. Kingsborough lost its funding and had to shut the program down. LaGuardia has kept its program going, but just barely. “We have cobbled together a bunch of different funding sources,” says Amy Dalsimer, LaGuardia’s director of pre-college academic programming. “But none of it is reliable.”

Reliable funding sources for adult education do exist, but government agencies in New York are not doing enough with that funding to help low-literacy adults get college credentials. The New York City Department of Education runs a $30 million state-funded adult education program, yet it does not oversee even one innovative program aimed at bridging the gap to postsecondary education. The Department of Education should step forward to create NY-BEST partnerships in all of the city’s community colleges, either directly or by contracting with one of the city’s highly capable non-profit organizations. The city and state should support these programs by providing more funding for team-taught courses using this model.

Youthsource Centers: More than just jobs

New York City has a large population of young adults who dropped out of high school. City officials have soughtopportunities to steer them back on track to a productive adulthood, but in practice the burden falls on one agency, the Department of Youth and Community Development, which has seen its main federal funding source drop by more than half over the past decade. The Department of Education is primarily concerned with keeping students in school, and the Department of Small Business Services, which runs the Workforce1 Career Centers, treats youth no differently from adults.

The city’s career centers serve many young people, but not in a way that meets their developmental needs. Over a 15-month period in 2010 and 2011, the city’s nine career centers found jobs for more than 10,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 24, including 1,500 who lacked a high school diploma. The career centers, though, have no responsibility to try to persuade to persuade these high school dropouts to get a diploma or high school equivalency or take adult literacy classes. On the contrary, the centers tend to place these young people primarily in retail and food services, industries where irregular schedules make it difficult for workers to attend classes and attain a high school credential.

If New York’s leaders want to build a more collaborative and forceful strategy to meet the needs of out-of-school youth, they should look toward Los Angeles. There city and county public agencies, major employers, labor unions and philanthropies have launched an all-hands-on-deck campaign to get high school dropouts back into school. The centerpiece of their strategy is a network of 16 Youthsource centers staffed by multiple agencies and capable of providing a broad and carefully organized spectrum of services to young people.

Young people often enter a Youthsource Center to find a job, but the first person they meet is a counselor with the Los Angeles Unified School District. The counselor, with access to the youth’s educational records, can provide an educational plan that will get the youth back on track toward a high school diploma and a career.

“The young person will come in and say, ‘I need a job, any job,’” says Robert Sainz of the Los Angeles Community Development Department. “But the last thing an 18-year-old high school dropout needs is a job. It might put immediate dollars in their pocket. But they’ll be in a nothing job when they’re 28 and probably when they’re 38.”

The Youthsource Centers have reached scale rapidly: in the past year, the network has provided more than 5,000 educational assessments. The architects of the new system are only beginning to track how many young people return to school and how successful they are. Once they get it, that information will enable the network to provide and test supportive services for their clients.

“Youthsource will have a great impact on our economy,” predicts Alma Salazar, vice president of the Los Angeles Chamber

of Commerce. "We think that connecting disparate sources to support these youth is just common sense. It's already recovering lost wages for our employers and the economy."

New York City should consider piloting a program similar to Youthsource. Even if the city cannot open dedicated youth centers, staffing its Workforce1 career centers with education and youth development specialists could provide much-needed educational support to out-of-school young people.

All of these innovative strategies have features that New York City badly needs. Most importantly, they coordinate theactions of multiple city agencies, providers and other stakeholders to achieve common goals. They also create a platform to explore more ambitious strategies, such as establishing career pathways that can take disadvantaged and displaced jobseekers from the unemployment line into an upwardly mobile career. Finally, they break down barriers to communication and create a framework for collaboration between city agencies that too often appear to act unilaterally and without consideration for the whole person in need of help.

The next mayor will have an opportunity to build a more coherent and integrated system for building the city's human capital. The strategies of other cities across the United States offer promising starting points.

[i] *Based on 2000 census, 25 and older.*

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