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A work-force prescription for the new governor

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Massachusetts stands at a historic, but alarming, crossroad. Over the next two decades, the highly skilled baby-boom generation will be retiring, and many industries will face critical skills shortages.

Increasingly, employers are unable to find workers with the skills needed for their businesses to remain competitive. Continuing evidence underscores the reality that Massachusetts' work force is insufficiently prepared, not only for the jobs of the future but also for the jobs of today. Many young people are not graduating from high school, fewer high school graduates are going to college, and working adults have limited opportunities for lifelong education and career advancement.

The key findings of the recent report *Mass Economy: The Labor Supply and Our Economic Future*, released by MassINC, reinforced what we already know:

1. From 2000 to 2005, the Massachusetts labor force did not grow at all, while the national labor force grew by nearly 5 percent.
2. From 2000 to 2005, the state lost, on net, 233,000 residents to other states. This is tantamount to losing two-to-three cities of people.
3. Fewer teens and young adults, especially those who are low-income and/or minorities, are working. Fewer than one-third of high school dropouts (31.4 percent) had any type of job.

In the face of this looming crisis, the commonwealth has remained mired in an antiquated patchwork quilt of a work-force development system, dominated by competing public bureaucracies that are woefully ill-equipped to make changes necessary to effectively cope with the changing requirements of work in our global economy.

The current system has failed to identify funding or performance priorities or to unify funding, oversight, data collection, grant administration and research across its multiple agencies. The system demonstrates little understanding of regional labor-market issues. And although work-force growth is driven by the private sector, the commonwealth's work-force development system has no private sector leadership.

To its credit, the Legislature has increased investment in recent years and created tools to reform the system. However, gubernatorial leadership is the single most important factor for successful reform, and it has been lacking. As a result, state bureaucracies are not focused on the critical task of aligning the work-force system with the realities of today's labor market.

We offer the new governor the following eight-point prescription for restructuring the ailing work-force development system:

1. Restore private-sector leadership. Empower private-sector business leaders in the governance of the system and in policy setting for all state agencies involved in work-force development. The system has no private-sector leadership, the principle drivers of job creation, and is dominated by competing bureaucracies.
2. Conduct a comprehensive review of the system and streamline it. Conduct a comprehensive review of the system to better align investments with a strategic statewide work-force agenda. Consolidate funding silos into a single statewide work-force budget, integrating the various funding streams for adult basic education, welfare-to-work and adult-and-youth training efforts.
3. Recognize WIBs (workforce investment boards, also known as regional employment boards) as regional drivers of the system. Guide the work-force development system centrally but drive it locally and regionally through the 16 well-established, business-led work-force boards and network of One-Stop Career Centers. WIBs can be agents of change for greater efficiency and effectiveness eliminating outmoded and duplicative organizational structures in partnership with the chief elected officials.
4. Focus on growing the skilled labor supply as well as creating jobs through a sectorized approach. While growing the supply of well-paying jobs, don't ignore building the skilled labor supply. Focus resources on industry clusters in which Massachusetts has a competitive advantage and which possess the potential for the growth of well-paying jobs and family self-sufficiency.

5. Create a learning commonwealth. Make basic education, English for speakers of other languages and competency in science, technology, engineering and mathematics high priorities. Eliminate the 24,000-person waiting list for Adult Basic Education and ESOL.

6. Create a Governor's Youth Employment Initiative. Bring together public- and private-sector resources to create occupational opportunities for unemployed older youth, high school dropouts and in-school youth by connecting them to work-based learning opportunities.

7. Make use of community colleges as training resources. Utilize the state's 15 community colleges as work-force training service providers. Community colleges must be better linked with work-force and economic development initiatives to leverage private and public resources.

8. Provide postsecondary skills training and career ladder opportunities. Provide all Massachusetts residents access to high quality postsecondary education and skills training and expand career ladder opportunities for working adults to create pathways to high-wage jobs.

The governor faces enormous challenges in balancing the interests of competing constituencies and limited resources. Nonetheless, the restructuring and rebuilding of the work-force development system is an integral part of the future success of the state economy.

In the face of the worldwide work-force paradigm shift, the commonwealth can no longer function with a patchwork system that can barely cope with the status quo. We offer the governor a prescription for this ailing system.

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