



# NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

## WORKFORCE & FAMILY PROGRAM

Issue Brief #4

March 2006

### **MORE ATTENTION NEEDS TO BE PAID TO AMERICA'S WORKFORCE SYSTEM**

By David Gray\*

Why isn't more attention paid to the need for a public and private sector revolution in job training? In the past few years, there has been much attention paid to improving America's education system. By tradition and even by law, education is a state and local responsibility. However, education has seen a critical change over the past five years in terms of the federal role. The Republican Party has transformed from calling for a decreased federal role in education (many in 1994 wanted to abolish the Department of Education) to being a party of a new increased federal role. President Bush campaigned successfully on education in 2000 calling for a standards-based approach. This campaign promise led to the No Child Left Behind Act, to substantial increases in federal expenditures on education, and to new calls for voucher programs to reform education from within the system.

Beyond the public sector, the private sector has unleashed significant energy, passion and funding to revamping education from outside the system. Social entrepreneurs, charter schools, on-line education, home school curriculums, supplemental services, and new for-profit education companies are changing the face of how we prepare young people to succeed in the world.

At the same time, there is significant concern in America about a lack of job skills for adults. Americans are concerned that globalization might lead to outsourcing of their jobs, that immigration might decrease their wages, and that a loss of manufacturing opportunities might necessitate new training. Demographic trends about the graying of the workforce, the need for phased-retirement and the need for more health care workers have caused policy analysts to take a fresh look at the coming reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act. All these concerns stem from a realization that in the global economy, workforce skills matter more than ever. Even if the education system prepares a young person with certain skills, in a world where the average worker changes jobs

within five years, it is important that workers constantly update their skills.

Despite all these trends, there has been relatively little attention paid to reforming America's workforce investment system. There are private sector opportunities to reform America's system. In the public sector, the Bush Administration has made good efforts in trying to align worker training with high growth job areas, but there has been insufficient Congressional action in providing appropriate public investments in adult training. A focus on community colleges by both the executive and legislative branches is promising and important. Community colleges are an untapped resource. Not only do they provide demand-driven training in needed areas, but community colleges are good places for lifelong learning, either to help people acquire the skills needed to change jobs or to succeed in their current jobs. As many companies are reducing their on-the-job training, community colleges have an opportunity to be the place people and companies go for job skill training.

Investments in community colleges over the past few years have helped young people, particularly disadvantaged youth in transition. One area that needs more attention to help the community college system and the workforce system generally be successful is mentoring. Mentoring can help low-income youth transition to adulthood, gain skills, become employed and maintain strong family ties.

As disadvantaged youth transition from public support and foster care into adulthood, mentors can provide critical support in helping them gain and maintain employment. Jobs provide critical economic and social stability that allow young people to better succeed in their families. Jobs can help stabilize low-income families and break the cycle of children growing up without role models.

*\*David Gray directs the Workforce & Family Program at the New America Foundation.*

Two of the biggest overall problems for disadvantaged youth are a lack of motivation and an understanding to take advantage of programs. Increased support for community colleges, apprenticeship and vocational programs, and attention to “one-stop” job centers have provided opportunities for low-income Americans to develop job skills. However, family situations and a lack of role models leave many young Americans, particularly out-of-school youth, without the direction to take advantage of the policy programs being provided. Mentoring provides critical support that allows disadvantaged youth to take advantage of these programs. Mentoring fills the gaps where public policy ends.

Secondary schools, vocational programs and community colleges prepare people for real world jobs. Grants often take care of tuition and books, there are night and weekend classes for flexibility if students are working, and there are remedial courses for those with weak

academic backgrounds. Mentors are needed to help disadvantaged youth take advantage of programs, develop the confidence and motivation to follow through, and develop the skills of how to apply for jobs, dress, and talk with people appropriately. Mentors can boost confidence, help with resume writing and interview skills, help provide transportation and help develop good job habits like being at work on time every day, leaving personal problems at home, and respecting authority.

Mentoring is an untapped research and policy area. Too little research has been conducted on the results of mentoring and on how society should support mentors, particularly of children over 14. Mentors should be supported to fill gaps and maximize the benefits of policy programs. More attention should be paid to America’s workforce system, and increased support for mentoring should be in the mix.