

TESTIMONY OF  
MARTHA KANTER  
UNDER SECRETARY OF EDUCATION  
BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON  
HEALTH, EDUCATION, LABOR, AND PENSIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE SAFETY  
UNITED STATES SENATE

July 16, 2009

Good morning, Chairman Murray and Members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you about the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). The current economic crisis shows that we must think strategically and systematically about how best to invest Federal dollars to ensure that the programs under WIA assist people in obtaining the necessary skills to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce. The Department of Education makes significant contributions to this effort through our programs for adult, career and technical education, literacy and English language training, vocational rehabilitation services for people with disabilities, and services for under-skilled or at-risk youth. The reauthorization of WIA provides a unique opportunity to better align and integrate programs within and across Federal agencies, states, and localities to improve educational and employment outcomes for those we serve.

As we look toward reauthorization, we must continue to recognize the interconnection between adult basic education and workforce development and provide services accordingly. Many examples exist where these goals intersect. For example, literacy training must be contextual, goal-oriented, and embedded into career and technical education and employment training. We must develop best practices for integrated career pathways and connect our under-skilled youth and students with disabilities to high-growth sectors.

One high-growth, high-demand industry toward which programs can gear their efforts is healthcare. In California there are a number of examples of hospitals and

hospital foundations partnering with high schools, literacy centers, and community colleges to expand and enhance training programs for registered nurses, medical lab technicians, and other in-demand healthcare positions. These programs fund more faculty as well as tuition, fees, books, and other expenses for students. Working collaboratively with the Department of Labor, the Department can help ensure that our students get the skills and jobs they need.

In Illinois, the Instituto del Progreso Latino (IPL) is extending its certified nursing assistant program and creating a certified medical assistant program in response to the local labor market demands in healthcare. Career pathway programs like the one at IPL link basic education funding with projects for academic postsecondary coursework, work-specific instruction, hands-on classroom, and work site training supported by others.

Washington State's Yakima Valley Community College and South Central Workforce Council work together to enhance adult learners' basic literacy skills and their transition to employment. The project assessed clients receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits and referred those with appropriate skills and interests in allied health to a nurse's assistant certification training program offered by the college.

The Department of Education also has been working with the Department of Labor to address these interconnected goals in other areas - for example, in Madison, Wisconsin, at Madison Area Technical College (MATC), one of five sites participating in the Department's Career Connections initiative. MATC, a recipient of a DOL Community Based Job Training grant and a WIRED grant, leveraged these resources to develop a "Prep for Success" course to promote the success of limited literacy students in Lab Animal Caretaker training and to map career pathways associated with animal lab science. This collaboration provides one clear

pathway to move under-skilled adults into postsecondary pathway programs in high-demand, high-growth industries.

We must take these pockets of best practices and turn them into standard practices to ensure that all students are achieving educational and employment success.

While we will have many opportunities to talk about specific changes to WIA, I would like to highlight a few key target populations that should be considered as we move forward.

The first is youth. Approximately 1.2 million students drop out of school each year. By dropping out, these students greatly reduce their earning potential. The Department of Education has made addressing this crisis a high priority by supporting in-school programs to identify these students early and help keep them on track, and develop comprehensive strategies in partnership with businesses and community-based organizations to re-engage those who do drop out. WIA Youth programs can be key to this effort. By giving students work experience, skills training, mentoring – helping them to understand the connections between school and postsecondary education and work – WIA Youth programs can help get youth back on track and re-engage them in school so that they graduate prepared to succeed in postsecondary education and the workforce.

We are collaborating with our Federal partners to support these programs in an efficient and effective manner. The Departments of Education and Labor have been meeting and discussing ways to align programs, leverage resources, and ensure that youth receive the services and support they need – whether in school, out of school, academic, job training, or social services – or a combination of all of these. We intend to reach out to other Federal partners, including the Department of Health and Human Services, in these efforts.

The second group I would like to address is people with disabilities, including youth with disabilities. We must ensure that WIA One-Stop Centers are prepared to serve people with all disabilities and that they are physically and programmatically accessible. We must ensure that the vocational rehabilitation system helps to prepare people with significant disabilities for high-quality employment, suited to an individual's abilities and informed choice and to local workforce opportunities. We must also promote early intervention in the transition process so that youths with disabilities are prepared to access post-secondary education and high-quality employment to maximize their potential for successful careers, self-sufficiency, and independent living. Investing in WIA services for transitioning youth with disabilities will build upon the educational foundation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and increase their potential for gainful employment and self-support. Finally, we must promote activities that foster innovation and evidence-based practices and reward states for testing innovative service-delivery approaches that can be replicated by other states and service providers.

The final group I would like to address is those with low English proficiency. About three-quarters of adults enrolled in courses aimed at improving their English proficiency were found to have “low beginning” to “low intermediate” English literacy levels. These are individuals looking to integrate, advance, and contribute to our economic prosperity, but who face a significant language barrier to doing so. As we design programs, we must keep this low-English group in mind.

We have many opportunities for reform through WIA. There are a number of examples of best practices, but alignment and outcomes have been inconsistent. We need to recognize and reward progress on both educational and employment outcomes—and we need integrated data systems to track our progress as we go. We should also use this opportunity to modernize our literacy training programs, using

technologies not available during the last reauthorization. Cutting-edge technology can more efficiently remove barriers and accelerate the performance of low-skilled adults so they can enter the workforce more quickly.

The Department of Education looks forward to continuing collaboration with the Department of Labor and working with Congress to ensure that the individuals served by our programs have the skills they need to become full and successful contributors to our nation's economy.

I would be happy to answer any questions you might have. Thank you.