



## Action Plan Seattle-King County Washington Workforce Education Collaborative Known as SkillUp Washington

The **Seattle-King County Washington Workforce Education Collaborative** is a pioneering partnership of nonprofit organizations, community colleges, employers, private foundations and public agencies working to help low-income working adults and employers meet the demands of the economy. Members include:

- The Seattle Foundation
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- BuRSST for Prosperity (A Partnership with the Northwest Area Foundation)
- Medina Foundation
- Microsoft Corporation
- Northwest Area Foundation
- The United Way of King County
- Office of Economic Development of the City of Seattle
- Department of Community & Health Services of King County
- Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges
- Washington State Training and Education Coordinating Board
- The White Center Community Development Association

### The Challenge

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King County's middle-and lower-income families are struggling. While the region's economy has performed relatively well over the last decade, this prosperity has not been shared equally and the income gap has widened considerably. From 2000 to 2004, the proportion of households earning less than 50 percent of the median household income and those earning more than 150 percent of the median grew while the proportion of households earning between 50 percent and 149 percent of the median shrunk.

King County's overall poverty rate also has increased over the past decade<sup>1</sup>, putting too many of its residents at risk for entering a cycle of homelessness and preventing their children from having a better start at life. While many of the estimated 170,000<sup>2</sup> people living in poverty in King County work (9.5 percent of the total population), they are trapped in low paying jobs whose wages barely cover the basic costs of living or raising a family. Despite their best efforts, many within the ranks of King County's working poor are not able to lift themselves—and their children—out of poverty. At the same time, our region's employers say they struggle to find qualified workers, a fact that puts our region's economic engine at risk.

While there are multiple organizations and systems serving low-income families, including community colleges, employers, local and state government, and public and private funders, they are neither designed nor coordinated as well as they could be to help low-income residents obtain the skills and jobs they need to earn enough to support their families.

The well-being of low-income families is even more in peril given the current economic crisis. If the funding and operational strategies of organizations and systems working with this population were

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://your.kingcounty.gov/budget/benchmrk/bench08/econ/Indicator\\_3.pdf](http://your.kingcounty.gov/budget/benchmrk/bench08/econ/Indicator_3.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Source: [http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2004193003\\_middleclass21m.html](http://seattletimes.nwsources.com/html/localnews/2004193003_middleclass21m.html)

better aligned and coordinated, low-income working adults would have more accessible, efficient and effective pathways out of poverty and to financial stability.

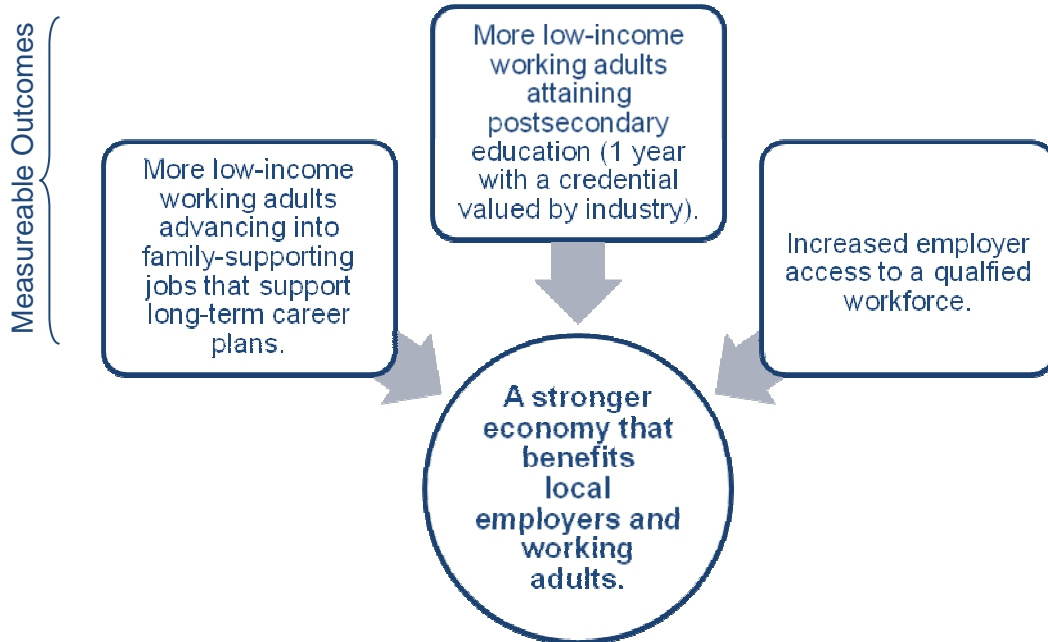
## The Opportunity

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Just as no single cause of poverty exists, there is no distinct solution. Low-income people face multiple barriers to success in life and require support systems to lift themselves out of poverty. **Workforce education—particularly postsecondary education—is one of the most promising anti-poverty strategies.** Completing a postsecondary education greatly increases a person's economic status and is the single most important predictor of intergenerational mobility. Today—and in the future—the majority of family-supporting jobs require some postsecondary preparation.

Building the skills of the adult workforce—and ensuring that Seattle-King County employers have qualified workers—is an economic necessity. Rapid technological change, global competition for skilled workers, the failures of the current education system (over 30 percent high school dropout rates), and the aging workforce underscore the importance of investing in the skills of adult workers. Unfortunately, low-income working adults typically don't have the skills, resources or flexibility to pursue or complete education and training programs that qualify them for the higher-skilled and higher-wage jobs in demand by employers.

With this in mind, public, private and philanthropic organizations have formed **an unprecedented partnership to systematically help low-income working adults participate in and complete postsecondary education and other forms of “second chance” education and training services and to strengthen the quality, labor market relevance and delivery of those programs.** These organizations will work in partnership with social service, community college, workforce development organizations and others to explore how funding and policies can be better aligned more effective in creating pathways out of poverty for low-income working adults. Through coordination, careful targeting, and more ambitious expectations of performance, these efforts have the potential to help build a stronger regional economy in which workers and employers prosper.



Critical to long-term changes in the organizations and systems involved in producing these outcomes are **increased infrastructure and coordination** among nonprofit organizations, community colleges, employers, private foundations, public agencies and others to support low-income working adults as they transition across programs and systems.

## Who We Are Trying to Reach

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While the efforts of the Collaborative are designed to support one primary audience—low-income working adults—it will engage multiple individuals and organizations with the potential to affect the lives of adults involved in the new program strategies outlined in this plan and those that come after, including those that provide employment and training-related services, social service organizations that provide support services, and employers.

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<b>Target Population</b>	<p><b>Low-income working adults</b> – Approximately 78,400 people, ages 18-54, with no PSE credential and who live in King County households with incomes at or below 200%<sup>3</sup> of the federal poverty level.</p> <p><b>All community and technical colleges</b> serving King County, in particular those who offer “second chance” education and training for low-income working adults.</p>
<b>Other Audiences and Strategic Partners</b>	<p><b>Local, state and national funding sources.</b></p> <p><b>Government agencies</b> that provide support services of all kinds to low-income working adults,</p> <p><b>Nonprofit workforce development and community-based organizations and economic development groups.</b></p> <p><b>Human services organizations</b> that focus on issues of affordable housing, homelessness, immigration, public health, criminal justice or public safety but who see education, training and employment services for low-income people as critical to their mission.</p> <p><b>Regional employers and unions</b>, specifically 5-8 regionally strong sectors, such as manufacturing, construction, transportation/distribution/logistics, hospitality, health care, office technology support/administrative services, automotive service repair, and clean energy.</p> <p><b>City, county and state policymakers</b> in a position to take action that will promote better education and skill attainment for low-income working adults.</p> <p><b>Opinion leaders in Seattle and King County</b> including activists, organizational leaders and media.</p> <p><b>Other interested stakeholders.</b></p>

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<sup>3</sup> 200% of the 2007 federal poverty level is \$34,300 for a three-person household or \$41,300 for a four-person household.

### Guiding Principles of the Collaborative

- Collaboration and alignment yields great results.
- Building the skills of the adult workforce is an economic necessity.
- Educators and employers should structure education and training programs to accommodate the schedules and obligations of working adults.
- Education and training programs should aim to get an individual to a credential beyond high school.
- Completion of an education or training program at any level should automatically lead to and qualify an individual for entry into a program at the next level.
- Human, social and housing support programs should encourage and support the educational advancements of their clients.

## Strategies

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The Collaborative has adopted five strategies, each of which can be strengthened by building partnerships and aligning investments among organizations dedicated to helping low-income working adults, employers, and policymakers. These strategies reflect extensive input from local and national experts representing workforce development, postsecondary education, human service organizations, employers and low-income working adults.

### **Strategy 1** **“On-ramps”**

### **Increase participation in and effectiveness of programs and support services (“on-ramps”) that prepare low-income working adults to participate in postsecondary education.**

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Low-income adults often cannot advance their education or careers for multiple reasons. Some lack basic skills or experience economic or personal crises—such as housing instability—that prevent them from securing or succeeding in entry-level employment. Others work in low-wage jobs and have a desire to advance their careers and education, but simply cannot because of economic conditions or lack of skills. There are several organizations, programs and systems that help these individuals stabilize their lives and find rapid employment.

The Collaborative’s investments will help ensure the services offered by these organizations, programs and systems also effectively promote the advancement to a certificate or degree beyond high school that will provide much greater economic stability and social mobility. The outcomes of these investments will include the following:

- Increased postsecondary readiness among low-income working adults.
- Increased access to and awareness of postsecondary education and training programs.
- Increased access to and awareness of non-education support.
- Improved support services to help low-income adults attain college readiness or postsecondary credentials while they work.

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**Strategy 2**      **Increase the number and rate of low-income working adults**  
**“Completion”**      **completing postsecondary programs.**

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Low-skilled working adults face overwhelming barriers to attending and completing a postsecondary program. They have limited flexibility in their schedules and financial and family obligations that take priority over certificate or degree attainment. These adults usually work full-time; with financial pressures that seldom allow them to cut back their hours. They are also prone to interruptions in classroom attendance that delay program completion. In addition, the registration process can be difficult to navigate; given the limited time availability of low-skilled working adults, they may not have access to campus-based advising.

There is an urgent need for postsecondary programs leading to a one-year certificate or a two-year associate degree that fits the needs of low-income adults who work fulltime. The Collaborative will support the design, testing, and expansion of high-quality, economically relevant education and training programs that accommodate the schedules and obligations of working adults so they can build skills, earn an income, and fulfill family obligations. Outcomes of this work will include:

- Improved postsecondary education and training programs for college-ready, low income working adults.
  - Increased enrollment of low-income working adults in these education and training programs.
  - Increased learning and support communities among low-income working students.
  - Decreased interruptions and increased persistence among low-income workers attending postsecondary education and training programs.
  - Increased retention of low-income working adults in education and training programs.
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**Strategy 3**      **Expand industry and employer engagement in developing the skills**  
**“Employers”**      **of the workforce.**

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Employers represent the single greatest source of direct investment in developing the skills of their current and potential workforce. However, only a small portion of that investment is aimed at the career advancement of lower-skilled entry level and incumbent workers. At the same time that many low-wage workers lack clear ways to advance into higher paying jobs, employers are increasingly reporting difficulty in obtaining qualified workers for jobs that require an education level beyond high school but less than a bachelor’s degree.

Strong employer engagement is essential to expanding and strengthening workforce-readiness and vocational training programs that help low-income people find employment quickly. Employer participation is also a key to developing more transparent career and credentialing pathways that allow working adults to build their credentials *as they work*. The Collaborative will help establish five industry-driven partnerships with the following outcomes:

- Expand industry and employer involvement in the development and support of education and training, resulting in a larger pool of skilled workers and more opportunities for employees to advance in their position and education.
- Increase employer commitment to employ low-income working adults.

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**Strategy 4**  
**“Alignment”**

**Align investments in workforce education by establishing a set of common strategies and objectives and introduce aggressive accountability standards.**

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Many government agencies, non-government organizations, community colleges, workforce intermediaries, service providers, philanthropies and corporations are actively engaged in building the skills of the Seattle and King County workforce. However, the workforce education system is not structured nor funded in a way that encourages joint planning or coordinated service delivery.

The Collaborative, by its nature and by purposeful investments, will explore the opportunities for ongoing coordination among investors and program operators. Possible outcomes, depending on the degree of coordination achieved, would include the following:

- Increased organizational capacity to coordinate and sustain:
    - o A countywide system of postsecondary education. [and on-ramps, support services during education, job placement and support, etc.]
    - o Comprehensive and cohesive workforce strategies that reflect diverse priorities and expertise of multiple stakeholders.
    - o Frequent discussion among stakeholders about existing programs and new investments in ways that build synergy and increase results.
  - The development of a common framework to evaluate, measure and report progress.
  - Increased investments in workforce education and development strategies that are coordinated and effective.
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**Strategy 5**  
**“Advocacy”**

**Develop and implement communications and advocacy strategies that increase public and political will to support postsecondary attainment for low-income, working adults.**

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Achieving long-term success will require active advocacy on behalf of low-income working adults, specifically to their educational needs. Through communications and advocacy outreach, the Collaborative will work to have the following impact:

- Increased awareness of issues faced by low-income working adults.
  - Increased awareness of the need for a coordinated and cohesive approach to increase postsecondary attainment for low-income, working adults.
  - Increased political will to adopt policies and fund programs that support low-income working adults and their transition into postsecondary attainment.
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