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Improving Outcomes for Workers and Employers through Mayoral Leadership

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The United States is leading an innovation revolution, transforming the world's products and how we make them. We have a productive workforce, with abundant energy and unparalleled capability. Yet as our nation strives to create new jobs and put people to work in new and burgeoning industries, the growing skills gap—the lack of trained workers—leaves many employers scrambling for talent. The nation's mayors are continually looking for new ways to make strategic investments in education and training to close that gap. Among their most critical priorities are supporting economic growth and preparing a skilled workforce poised to meet the challenges of an ever-changing global marketplace. With the world's growing complexity and the increasing demands on the twenty-first century workforce, it is crucial that all students graduate from high school fully prepared for college and careers.

City leaders know that many of their constituents won't be able to gain a foothold in the middle class unless they earn a postsecondary credential that is valued by local employers. Although mayors may lack the direct authority to improve local community colleges or even a public mandate to take charge of training programs, they can pull a number of levers to bolster the talent pipeline in their cities.

For example, they can:

- encourage local colleges, particularly community colleges, to conduct return-on-investment surveys of their graduates by program and to make those reports widely available;
- encourage community-based organizations to adopt programs that support the connection between education and work;

- engage with employers to help educators meet local labor market needs;
- engage with college and workforce boards to create policies to align supply and demand for talent; and
- assign a staff person in City Hall to connect education and workforce issues programs.

Economic prosperity will favor cities that support a highly qualified talent pipeline and a robust education and workforce system aligned to meet the needs of employers. A mayor's leadership can make a real difference in building a more purposeful path to and through college and on to rewarding careers.

This essay acknowledges and recognizes three mayors who have successfully navigated this arena, established successful programs to provide education pathways with the purposes of completion and entry into the workplace, and calculated the measurable results of that success.

RUNNING START FOR CAREERS—ALBUQUERQUE MAYOR RICHARD BERRY

Running Start for Careers (Running Start) is a public-private, multi-partner initiative launched in 2011 by the City of Albuquerque, New Mexico. It represents a strong and enduring collaboration between education systems (primarily local high schools and the public community college) and employers (in an ever-expanding set of locally relevant industries) to address college preparation and long-term career success. Mayor Richard Berry paved the way for Running Start during his tenure in the state legislature between 2006 and 2009. The original intent of his proposed measure reflected the great local need to advance college and career readiness among students and support better alignment with workforce needs; to help young people learn valued, industry-driven job skills; and to give them increased motivation to stay in school, graduate, and pursue gainful employment and/or higher education.

Running Start engages high school students in viable and in-demand career pathways while at the same time providing workforce

development opportunities to employers through dual-credit, industry-led instruction in well-paying, locally in-demand fields. Participants take courses in career disciplines in 12 industries, and earn an industry-recognized certificate, life/workforce skills training, and dual credit (high school/college). Students opt in to the program and receive advising, attend weekly off-campus classes, and are placed in internships or pre-apprenticeships (most of which are paid) with industry partners. The program is open to all, but it focuses on students in low-income, disadvantaged neighborhoods who are at risk of not graduating. Running Start closes the gap for these students, creating relevance to core subjects and providing career mentoring, in many cases bilingually. By leveraging resources in Albuquerque schools and community, Running Start builds on New Mexico's investment in students and is increasing retention, graduation, access to higher education, and workforce development in New Mexico. The program has expanded its reach and impact each year: over 230 students participated in 2017 in 12 industry areas, with more than 1,240 students in 70 schools in the Albuquerque area having participated since the program's inception (Albuquerque School District is one of the 30 largest school districts in the country).¹ The program goal is to reach 500 Albuquerque area students in 2017–2018, place 60 students in internships, become a permanent program as one of the City of Albuquerque's public-private partnerships, and to serve as a model for statewide expansion and beyond.

The motivation behind Running Start stems from the scale and scope of the challenges that Albuquerque and New Mexico are facing. Coupled with Albuquerque's low high school graduation rate (66 percent in 2016, an increase from the previous year but still lagging well behind the 83 percent national rate), 20 percent of youth in Albuquerque are considered disconnected (defined as 16- to 24-year-olds who are neither working nor in school), which is higher than the national average of 7.6 percent (New Mexico Public Education Department 2017; Ross and Svajlenka 2016). These factors illustrate the importance of developing supports that retain and motivate students, training them for careers and/or postsecondary education. It is critical to support the struggling students who are most likely to drop out of school and miss the mark for a possible middle- or high-skilled job. Running Start is designed to meet the needs of the most disadvantaged students, while also being open to all other high school students. Running Start also

emphasizes the importance of training for middle-skills jobs—those that require a high school diploma and some postsecondary education, but not a four-year degree. These jobs are important to local labor markets across the country, particularly in New Mexico, where they comprise 48 percent of the state’s employment projections for 2024 (National Skills Coalition 2017). Yet, there is a skills gap: only 47 percent of the state’s workers have the appropriate training for these jobs, and this skill/job mismatch is reflected in metropolitan areas across the country (National Skills Coalition 2017; Sommers and Osborne 2009).

Running Start was operational in 24 schools during the spring 2017 semester, and generally operates in 25 to 30 Albuquerque Public Schools each semester. Currently, schools in Bernalillo, Torrance, Valencia, and Sandoval counties of central New Mexico are part of the program, but statewide expansion is planned in the coming years. The program is open to any New Mexico junior or senior student at an in-district high school (public, charter, alternative, ancillary, or private) offering elective credit in career pathways, provided there is a school representative to document and monitor progress and arrange pre-apprenticeships. Students opt in to the program and receive placement testing and advice free of charge. Class sessions are scheduled on a once- or twice-weekly basis and are typically held at union halls, training facilities, worksites, or one of the community college’s applied technology departments. Running Start currently supports courses related to more than 65 career disciplines in 12 industries identified as critical career clusters: Construction, Drone Mapping and Surveying, Electrical Field Services, Film, Health Care, Hospitality and Tourism, Financial Services, Information Technology and Coding, Medical Laboratory Sciences, Pipefitting and Plumbing, Public Safety, and Veterinary Administrative Support. Industry partners also place students in internships or pre-apprenticeships, most of which are paid. Each course is tailored to the discipline and structured to give high school students the opportunity to explore pathways while learning skills in industry internships, job shadowing, and other hands-on activities that are directly transferable to the workplace. Bilingual participants can earn additional wages or stipends.

As previously mentioned, Running Start is open to all high school students, but focuses on those in low-income, disadvantaged neighborhoods. The majority of active Running Start students live in poverty (67 percent), and most are Hispanic (63 percent) and female (58 percent;

the majority had been male until 2017).² As the program expands into more schools beyond the Albuquerque School District, it will continue to serve a majority of low-income communities and schools. Running Start for Careers defines low and moderate income by the standards applied by the New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED). The majority (68 percent) of New Mexico's K–12 students qualify under NMPED terms as economically disadvantaged (NMPED 2017). The program closes academic and career gaps for participating students, creating relevance to core subjects such as applied math and science, while providing bilingual and impactful career mentoring.

Results to date include increased graduation rates, improved student outcomes and access to higher education, and a newly established pipeline of talent to fill jobs in high demand. More than 1,240 students have participated in the program since its inception in 2012.³ In terms of aligning workforce needs and education, and enhancing student persistence and entry to employment in high-value occupations or post-secondary education, the results have been stunning. Running Start is an overall economic driver because the supported career pathways are critical to Albuquerque's infrastructure and include the fields of construction, health care, financial services, energy, transportation, production, and public safety. They are selected from New Mexico's 30 fastest growing industries, and 21 include middle-skill jobs.

A full 98 percent of participants graduate on time; 86 percent maintain industry employment and/or enter college; 358 program and high school graduates have enrolled in Central New Mexico Community College (CNM), and 61 of those students have received either a degree or certificate from CNM.⁴ About 86 percent of Running Start participants identify as students of color, indicating the program has increased access to these opportunities for a population often not well represented in the talent pipeline. Furthermore, graduation rates have risen from 4 to 12 percent among schools with Running Start.⁵

This groundbreaking program knits together the public sector, private sector, and higher education anchor institutions to deliver instruction outside the classroom, using state-of-the-art technology and equipment. Unlike traditional vocational training, Running Start is not bound by campus infrastructure, relevant faculty, the domain of specialty schools, or specific industry types.

INNOVATE BIRMINGHAM—BIRMINGHAM MAYOR WILLIAM A. BELL, SR.

Designated a TechHire city by the White House in the fall of 2015, Birmingham's tech industry was experiencing the second fastest growth rate in the country during the first half of 2016, with over 5,300 new IT jobs posted on hiring websites.⁶ At the time, there were just over 14,600 IT professionals in the Birmingham metro area. The demand for new IT talent called for innovative new models to develop the workforce and stimulate the local economy.

Accordingly, in 2016, Birmingham Mayor William A. Bell, Sr., established the Innovate Birmingham Workforce Partnership and secured nearly \$6 million in a prestigious America's Promise Grant to help establish a sustainable pipeline of local talent to fuel inclusive innovation for local employers. Led by the mayor and the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), the network of partners from the public, education, and tech sectors joined forces to create Innovate Birmingham to offer new paths for traditional and accelerated demand-driven educational opportunities for Birmingham youth. Innovate Birmingham is the overall effort underway to create an innovation district in Birmingham to attract and retain high-caliber companies and talent, cluster startup and entrepreneurial activity, and connect surrounding Birmingham neighborhoods with technology training and job opportunities. Financial assistance in the form of grants and scholarships are now used to help ease the financial burden of pursuing education or training endeavors, breaking down barriers to increase completion rates.

The broad coalition of leaders who comprise the Innovate Birmingham partnership team are committed to fostering economic growth for the region and offering better opportunities for young adults. The coalition includes the City of Birmingham, UAB, Lawson State Community College, Jefferson State Community College, Jefferson County's Alabama Career Centers, the Central Six Workforce Development Council, and Tech Birmingham. In addition, more than 30 employer partners, including many of the region's largest employers, have signed on to support Innovate Birmingham programs by interviewing candidates, offering positions, providing mentorship opportunities, or delivering feedback on the course material.

Students are selected for the program via a rigorous interview and screening process that assesses their motivation, competency, and career vision. They complete 12 weeks of full-time intensive technical and professional training at Innovation Depot, a business incubator that's home to more than 100 startups, to prepare them for immediate entry into the IT workforce. Classes are the product of partnerships with McKinsey Social Initiative and Covalence, which have built strategic and rigorous curricula for industry-driven needs in hardware support and software development.

The Innovate Birmingham Workforce program aims to prepare Birmingham-area young adults to obtain 925 high-paying IT jobs by 2021. Many of the 18 graduates of the first class—all from the Birmingham area—have already received job offers with enterprises such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Alabama, Brasfield & Gorrie, Regions, and UAB.

The Innovate Birmingham program is administered in the UAB Innovation Lab (UAB iLab) at Innovation Depot. The depot then connects participants in the program with its tenants and other partner businesses. The program uses Tech Hire data, in combination with local resources, to align education and training providers with regional employers, ensuring industry-aligned skill development for workers.

Sustaining this great source of skilled workers makes the Birmingham region far more attractive when recruiting new employers. The program targets nine high-demand IT occupations, identified using data from the Alabama Department of Labor. With Birmingham's rapid IT job growth, demand has greatly surpassed supply for two primary reasons. First, current training programs fail to adequately align skill development with corresponding workforce needs. Second, disconnected youth frequently fail to complete available training options because of the barriers they confront, including tuition prices, transportation, and other associated costs. A pillar of Innovate Birmingham is to establish career pathways for people who do not have the resources to obtain a four-year degree, or even a two-year degree. Creating fast-track training programs, such as coding boot camps and apprenticeship programs is vital to the sustainability of the IT industry. Consequently, the Innovate Birmingham model is designed to offer industry-aligned, job-seeker-centered, flexible training options to fill this gap in workforce supply. These training pathways enable skill-building opportuni-

ties from secondary school through a bachelor's degree or alternative training at low or no cost to participants.

Innovate Birmingham serves the City of Birmingham, the largest municipality in the state, along with surrounding municipalities in Jefferson County. The service area was chosen because of the economic need, supply of disconnected youth, IT demand, and close proximity of education and training. Two critical barriers that restrain employment of disconnected youth in Birmingham are poverty and insufficient education or training. Over 30 percent of Birmingham residents and 42 percent of families with children live at or below the poverty threshold (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Approximately 20 percent of Birmingham City School students failed to graduate with their peers during the last school year, and over 35,000 high school graduates are without a post-secondary degree or credential.⁷ Nearly 90,000 Jefferson County residents are unemployed or underemployed, including a disproportionate number of young people (U.S. Census Bureau 2017). Furthermore, Birmingham is home to more than 26,000 disconnected youth, and Innovate Birmingham expects that approximately 85 percent of program participants will be disconnected youth (ages 17 to 26), and additional participants will be economically disadvantaged service-area residents over the age of 26.

Innovate Birmingham expects to serve 925 participants throughout the duration of the grant period (four years). Based on past completion rates from project education and training providers—a 95 percent completion rate from Depot/U, 85 percent from Generation's IT curriculum, and graduation rates near 60 percent from two-year and four-year institutional partners—Innovate Birmingham estimates that nearly 80 percent of participants will complete training. Additionally, because of the program's direct alignment of curriculum to IT workforce needs, consistent employer engagement, and job placement mechanisms, the city anticipates 75 percent of the participants will advance to new employment positions as a result of credentials acquired.

KIDS' HOME RUN—WEST SACRAMENTO MAYOR CHRISTOPHER CABALDON

West Sacramento is one of the largest employers in the six-county Sacramento region, but it also recently had one of the highest unemployment rates (Civic Dashboards, n.d.). Since its incorporation in 1987, West Sacramento has been a regional leader for infill housing and economic development. The city's workforce development activities, however, took time to mature with the changing economic landscape. Once a blue-collar city across the river from Sacramento, West Sacramento has developed tremendously in the past 30 years into a hub of research and development, advanced manufacturing, food processing, and logistics. However, the education system has yet to fully respond to the altered business environment. Many residents who had the financial ability to do so sent their children to private schools. Upon assuming office in 2004, Mayor Christopher Cabaldon committed to improving the quality of education in the community. In spite of the high levels of poverty in the city, West Sacramento had the lowest percentage of subsidized preschool spaces of all the municipalities in Yolo County. Approximately 70 percent of the three- and four-year-olds in the city who qualified for Head Start or State Preschool were not being served.⁸ The few private centers that did exist did not have the resources and workforce to support high quality preschool. Additionally, while the Washington Unified School District identified seven regionally relevant, high wage, high growth industry sectors (Agriculture and Natural Resources; Art Media and Entertainment; Building and Construction Trades; Engineering and Architecture; Health Science and Medical Technology; Hospitality, Tourism, and Recreation; and Information and Communication Technology) for which they have created 10 career pathways inside River City High School, they had yet to outline an effective work-based learning component in the career pathway system. As students exited high school, there was no direct connection to student supports at the local community college that brought them to and through a postsecondary education and back into the local workforce.

In 2016, Mayor Christopher Cabaldon took action to address these issues. To start, under his leadership and through a partnership with FutureReady, the City of West Sacramento became one of 12 cities to

be part of the national LRNG network, a digital badging platform used to create, host, and validate online badges (virtual credentials that validate learning experiences). The digital badges allow student success in school and the workforce to be displayed to employers and institutions of higher education while also tracking progress. Mayor Cabaldon then announced the creation of the Kids' Home Run during his 2016 state of the city address. Kids' Home Run incorporates elements of the mayor's signature education programs (e.g., Universal Preschool for West Sacramento [UP4WS] and FutureReady) with internships for students in career pathways and digital badging, and combines them with new initiatives to create a seamless cradle to college and career experience for young people, families, and communities in the City of West Sacramento. Additionally, in November 2016, West Sacramento voters approved Measure E, a mayor-led ballot initiative endorsed by the entire City Council, that added a quarter of a percentage point to the city's portion of the local transactions tax (sales tax) rate to fund the Kids' Home Run.

The Kids' Home Run initiative was designed to be a data-driven means of ensuring that, from cradle to college and career, programs within the initiative would be available to provide students and families with meaningful educational opportunities while helping employers, policymakers, and educational institutions make better workforce and education decisions.

The goal of the Kids' Home Run initiative is to change the culture of the City of West Sacramento into one where every young person is prepared for college and career while creating a more robust workforce for local employers and enhancing the City's economic development capacity and competitiveness. Kids' Home Run is organized temporally, so that one can envision the journey of a West Sacramento youth, starting at age four and continuing on through age 18, when they enter college or begin an entry-level career with a local employer. Kids' Home Run begins with a youth's enrollment in UP4WS to receive a high-quality preschool education. Once a youth has graduated from a UP4WS preschool, they will then have access to a guaranteed college savings account when entering kindergarten within the Washington Unified School District, with the goal of a match for family deposits. High-school-aged youth within the Washington Unified School District will have access to paid internships in a relevant industry sector or job

type if they are enrolled in an integrated college and career pathway and making satisfactory progress in school. Finally, through the Kids' Home Run program, every West Sacramento student graduating from high school and directly enrolling full time in a program of study at the Sacramento City College Campus can enroll fee free and have access to a points-based scholarship of up to \$1,000. A system of digital badges, virtual credentials that can unlock opportunities for young people, will be used to track young people's progress and motivate them to work their way through the Kids' Home Run program. The initiative was implemented in 2017 for all youth and is designed so that someday in the future, a West Sacramento young person would be enrolled in every program at some point in their life.

There have been dramatic results from the programs that are a part of the Kids' Home Run, particularly the program that has existed for the longest time, UP4WS. Before the UP4WS program, parents did not have access to high quality preschool within the city limits, nor did they know where their children could attend a high quality preschool. The program has increased the number of preschool spaces within the city from 210 to 780, largely due to the growth of the UP4WS program and improvement in access to child care and preschool. Whether a child is cared for in a home-based child care or a licensed child development preschool, the City of West Sacramento is committed to making sure that all learning environments are safe and nurturing. The varied learning environments all actively promote the acceptance of differences in children and embrace diversity among the many cultures of the children, families, and teachers in the programs. One of the goals of UP4WS has been to improve the well-being of children and their families through supporting and promoting the provision of high quality preschool education for low-income and at-risk children in West Sacramento. Mayor Cabaldon has ensured that every child enrolled in UP4WS child care programs receives an extraordinary educational program that prepares him or her for active learning and success in school.

All children in UP4WS are assessed using the Desired Results Developmental Profile at least twice yearly. Quality rating scales consistently place UP4WS classrooms at between six and seven on a seven-point rating scale, with 7 being the highest possible score. In a state where the current monitoring of centers by Community Care and Licensing is rated among the lowest in the nation, this quality monitor-

ing is not just a good idea, it is vital to preserve the integrity of licensed programs.

CONCLUSION

There is no better job creation or wealth creation strategy than a trained and educated workforce, and no single issue impacts how a city succeeds and grows more than the quality of its workers. City and mayoral support for and involvement in education and workforce development is not a choice—it is an imperative. Partnerships are key and mayors are well positioned to build the crucial relationships and coalitions that succeed in preparing a strong and skilled workforce. Because of their status as the chief elected local official in their cities, mayors can make significant contributions by bringing visibility to the issue, increasing public participation, enhancing funding and resources, supporting existing priorities, and setting new ones when necessary. The bottom line is simple: mayors can help make education and training opportunities more productive and successful for all residents, and their involvement makes a difference.

Notes

1. Based on confidential data summarized by program staff and provided to the author.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.

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