

# Research and Evaluation Brief

Facts, figures, and insights for workforce development practice and policy

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## Strategies for Older Youth

In Massachusetts, unemployment of older youth (ages 18 to 24) stood among the highest in the nation in 2001. As such, it became critically important to address the needs of this population as part of a comprehensive workforce development strategy. The Building Essential Skills through Training (BEST) Initiative for Older Youth is noteworthy in that it is specifically tailored to older youth who face barriers to employment and self-sufficiency that straddle the worlds of both adults and youth (Lerman, 1996). Specifically, these barriers may include educational deficits, limited job experience, sporadic labor force attachment, and potentially child-care and family support responsibilities. Programs that target this population must provide flexible services that effectively identify and respond to these diverse needs.

### Program Background

In 2001, Massachusetts education and job training agencies initiated BEST, a statewide system reform effort to support regional projects to equip front-line workers in order to meet labor demand in key industries and sectors. The BEST Initiative for Older Youth, funded in 2003, seeks to build on the initial model by promoting regional workforce development programs for older youth. Specifically, the BEST Initiative for Older Youth is designed to fulfill the following purposes:

- Support integration of basic education services, employability skills development, occupational training, and youth (and adult) workforce develop-

ment systems;

- Address the needs of older youth in the areas of academic skills attainment, acquisition of a high school diploma or GED, and increased employability skills development leading to specific employment opportunities;
- Conduct creative demonstration programs;
- Address the workforce development needs of Massachusetts employers, industries, and sectors; and
- Coordinate program funding with other youth and workforce development efforts.

Seven projects located in diverse community contexts, were funded in February 2003, targeting a variety of industries and sectors, including health care, culinary arts, banking and trades. Most projects aim to serve between 40 and 60 youths, and have initiated program implementation and training.

### Literature Review

As part of a larger evaluation of the program, a brief literature review was conducted on workforce development and youth training and employment programs. The literature review was structured to respond to the following primary research objectives:

- Provide an informed context for a first-year assessment of the BEST Youth Initiative;
- Identify design and implementation concerns that constituted critical issues for program policy makers and practitioners; and
- Identify best and/or promising practices seen as im-

### REPORT FOCUS

*Evaluation Design and Implementation for Building Essential Skills through Training (BEST): Basic and Occupational Skill Development Initiative for Older Youth*

Report Released: January 29, 2004

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portant descriptors of effective programs.

### **Overview of Key Findings**

A review of relevant literature suggests that there is a continuum of workforce development program designs that vary in intensity and focus. While some program models aim solely to increase the educational attainment of program participants, others are designed to place participants in employment positions as soon as possible (Hamilton 2002). Still others employ more selective job placement procedures that focus on opportunities for career growth and advancement. In addition to these possible

models, there are a variety of other program designs that both share attributes with and differ notably from other existing models. These various program designs should not be viewed as competing models, but instead can serve as a menu of opportunities to develop services that best reflect both local needs and the realities of operating within resource constraints and political environments. Although there is evidence to suggest that more intensive, long-term interventions produce more favorable outcomes, this discussion is based on the recognition that programs, for a variety of reasons, can be expected to operate at many points along this spectrum. Several design themes were identified that characterize effective workforce development initiatives. The program designs that are most successful tend to be those that adopt a holistic outlook, emphasizing the provision of education,

training and support services a mixture of employment and skill-building services thus flexibly addressing individualized service needs (Brandeis, 1993; Poppe, 2003; Strawn, 1998). Specifically, the literature review suggests that promising programs tend to integrate some combination of the following elements when addressing the range of needs potentially facing this target population:

- Provision of comprehensive and flexible services
- Establishment of partnerships with employers or industry sectors
- Integration of a work-based learning component
- Development of motivational elements that target the needs of older youth
- Provision of long-term services that promote retention and advancement

### **Implications**

The research findings identified through the literature review provide a useful context for the assessment of the BEST Initiative for Older Youth. These findings will inform the development of data collection instruments and will help frame key evaluation objectives. The following discussion describes the implications of review findings as they relate to the evaluation.

#### **Provision of comprehensive and flexible services.**

Research indicates that successful workforce development initiatives blend program models and provide flexible services to meet diverse participant needs. In the review of the BEST program and its operations, it will be important to gain insight into initial needs analyses and the planning steps taken to precisely understand

the characteristics and programmatic needs of the specific target population.

**Establish close ties with employers.** Promising programs established strong partnerships with employers or industry sectors and tailored training to existing labor demand. In interviewing key program stakeholders it will

### ***Project Profile: Automotive Youth Educational System (AYES)***

Begun by General Motors in 1995, AYES is an innovative approach to equipping youth with industry-based skills through a strong partnership structure. The program partners automotive dealers and high schools to prepare students for entry-level automotive service positions through a school-to-work program.

The AYES program is an incorporated non-profit supported by leading automotive manufacturers, 14 private companies and foundation funders, and 30 state or metropolitan dealer associations and various state Workforce Development Commissions and Departments of Education.

*Promising programs established strong partnerships with employers or industry sectors and tailored training to existing labor demand.*

be valuable to understand the steps taken to establish and solidify a working relationship with employers and the extent to which they are emerging as “win/win” partnerships.

**Integration of a work-based learning component.** Successful work-based learning components address both occupational competencies and soft skills that contribute to employment success. Efforts to replicate “on-the-job” situations during training to acclimate

participants to the unfamiliar responsibilities, protocol, and other expectations of the workplace environment provide opportunities for applied learning. To this end, the evaluation will seek to identify efforts that are being made to proactively acclimate participants to the work environment and employer expectations.

**Development of motivational elements that target the needs of older youth.** The youth participating in the BEST Initiative are likely to face a wide array of barriers to employment related to both traditional workforce development challenges and developmental needs of maturing youth. As part of site visit interviews, observations, and document review, the evaluation will seek to document efforts to foster commitment to self-sufficiency and sustained labor market attachment among

this transitional age group.

**Provision of long-term services to promote retention and advancement.** Workforce development programs face the challenge of developing strategies that address often intangible job retention barriers to help participants succeed beyond initial placement. The evaluation will examine post-placement employment stability and those initiatives that have been put in place to promote longer-term job retention and labor force attachment.



For more information, please visit our web site at [www.commcorp.org/researchandevaluationforadditionalworkforcedevelopmentfindings](http://www.commcorp.org/researchandevaluationforadditionalworkforcedevelopmentfindings).

***Seven projects were launched in the summer of 2003.***

*The following are the Workforce Investment Boards that received awards and their training focus for the project.*

Bristol Workforce Investment Board: Health Care and Manufacturing

Franklin County Regional Employment Board: Hospitality and Culinary Arts

Greater Lowell Workforce Investment Board: Health/Human Services or Banking/Business

Merrimack Valley Workforce Investment Board: Financial Services

Boston Private Industry Council: Web Production, Facilities Maintenance, Culinary Arts, Medical Office, Appliance-Repair and Customer Service

Metro North Regional Employment Board: Health Care

North Shore Workforce Investment Board: Plumbing, Electrical, Carpentry and Auto Mechanics

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