

# Middle-Skill Credentials and Immigrant Workers: Washington's Untapped Assets

A FACT SHEET

**The Washington State Economy Has Robust Demand for Middle-Skill Workers.** More than half of all jobs in Washington (51 percent) are middle-skill occupations that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Yet only 44 percent of Washington workers have been educated to the middle-skill level.<sup>1</sup>

Middle-skill positions include jobs as varied as carpenters, software developers, and personal care aides.<sup>2</sup> Individuals prepare for these occupations through a variety of pathways, including career and technical education programs; apprenticeships and other work-based learning opportunities; community colleges; and nonprofit or other private job training providers.

Demand for workers with middle-skill credentials is anticipated to remain robust in Washington State, with 42 percent of new job openings between 2014-2024 expected to be at the middle-skill level.<sup>3</sup>

The data is clear that investing in skill building can ensure Washington's ability to meet that demand. Such an investment makes economic sense: A report from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) calculates that each year of postsecondary education leads to an increased per capita output of between 4 and 7 percent.<sup>4</sup>

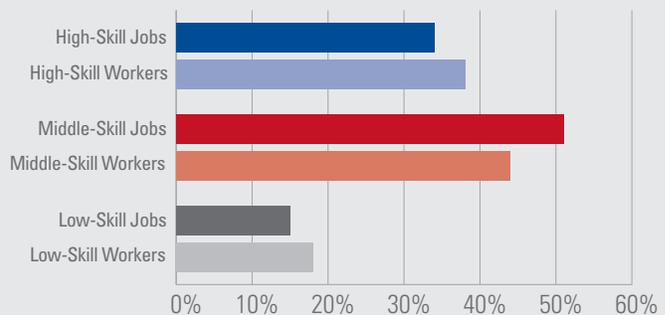
Recently, the state has established an ambitious goal for postsecondary credential attainment: By 2023, Washington aims to increase the percentage of state residents with a postsecondary credential to 70 percent.<sup>5</sup> This clear, rigorous postsecondary attainment goal will help focus state policy and spending decisions on middle-skill opportunities and ensure a strong return on investment.

## Immigrants are Part of Washington's Middle-Skill Solution

Washington State is home to approximately 1,002,000 immigrants, who comprise approximately 14 percent of the state's population.<sup>6</sup> Foreign-born Washingtonians are much more likely to be of working age; almost 80 percent are between the ages of eighteen to sixty-four, compared to just 60 percent of native-born state residents. In addition, Washington immigrants have a notably higher labor-force participation rate, at 67.3 percent compared to 62.5 percent of native-born adults.

As a result, immigrants play an essential role in the Washington

Washington Jobs and Workers by Skill Level



Source: NSC analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, May 2015 and American Community Survey data, 2015.

labor market. Their impact is expected to continue growing; already, the share of immigrants in the state's population has more than doubled from 7 percent in 1990 to 14 percent today.<sup>7</sup>

However, immigrant Washingtonians have lower educational attainment, on average, than native-born workers. In order for Washington to capitalize on the full talents and abilities of immigrant residents, the state will need to facilitate their skill building.

## Immigrants Could Contribute More if Washington Invested in Their Skills

While one-third of adult immigrants in Washington hold a bachelor's degree or higher, the majority of Washington immigrants have lower levels of formal education. In particular, 19 percent have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 24 percent have not finished high school.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, while a robust number of Washington immigrants are fluent in English, others are still building their English language skills. Overall, approximately 394,000 working-age Washington residents have limited English proficiency.<sup>9</sup>

As the OECD analysis demonstrates, investments in Washington residents' skills can have a catalytic effect on individual and state-wide economic strength.

The state has already been a trailblazer in such efforts through its widely replicated Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program.<sup>10</sup>

### Key Policy Levers Can Help Washington Boost Middle-Skill Attainment for Immigrants

There are a number of federal and state policies that can foster skill-building in Washington State. On the federal side, these policies, if implemented effectively at the state level, can boost middle-skill credential attainment. They include:

- **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**, reauthorized by Congress in 2014, which represents a powerful federal investment in workforce development and adult education. Washington State is currently in the process of implementing WIOA. WIOA offers important opportunities for states to better align federal skill-building programs to better serve workers and businesses, including those programs outlined below.
- **The Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act**, which provides key support for both secondary and postsecondary CTE programs.
- **The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Employment and Training program**, which helps individuals who are receiving food stamps to find employment and move off of public assistance. Over the past decade, Washington State has been a national trailblazer in using SNAP E&T to support skill-building opportunities.<sup>11</sup> The state's leadership in this area has been recognized repeatedly, including in 2016 when it was one of ten states selected to receive federal funding for a pilot project testing innovative approaches to SNAP E&T.<sup>12</sup>

At the state level, there are a range of innovative policies that can help Washington to ensure that it has enough middle-skill workers to meet labor-market needs, and to achieve the postsecondary outcomes that are needed to foster economic security for the state's workforce and drive economic growth. These policies fall into four major categories:

- **Skills Equity:** Policies that increase the number and diversity of individuals (including immigrants) who are on learning pathways toward skilled careers.
- **Industry Engagement:** Policies that ensure local businesses, including small and medium-sized companies, are partners in a community's workforce training and education strategies.
- **Accountability:** Policies that ensure everyone has actionable data to assess and improve the effectiveness of education and workforce programs.
- **Job-Driven Investments:** Policies that re-align a state's investment priorities with the career aspirations of its people and the workforce needs of its economy.

These policies can be adopted through legislation, executive orders, or other administrative actions, such as state grant programs or agency directives or guidance. To support states in establishing or strengthening such policies, National Skills Coalition has published toolkits that provide examples of existing state policies in these areas, and model language for enacting new policies. Toolkits are available at: [www.nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy](http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/state-policy)

### Essential Partners for Closing Washington's Middle-Skills Gap

Washington has a wealth of valuable partners that can be tapped to support middle-skill credential attainment efforts. In addition to the state's higher education system (both four-year universities and community colleges), potential partners include businesses, chambers of commerce, and industry associations; career and technical education programs; nonprofit community-based organizations; private education and training providers; workforce, adult education, and immigrant advocates; and influential civic and political leaders. In addition, local partners such as the Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs have already made significant strides in increasing skill-building opportunities through initiatives such as Ready to Work.<sup>13</sup>

**To learn more about state policies that can increase middle-skill credential attainment for immigrant and native-born workers in Washington State**, contact Amanda Bergson-Shilcock at [amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org](mailto:amandabs@nationalskillscoalition.org).

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Source: NSC analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Employment Statistics by State, May 2015, and American Community Survey data, 2015.
- 2 *Talent and Prosperity for All: The Strategic Plan for Unlocking Washington's Workforce Potential 2016*. Viewable at: <http://www.wtb.wa.gov/Documents/TAPPlanStrategicandOperational2016.pdf>
- 3 Source: NSC analysis of long-term labor projections from state labor/employment agency.
- 4 *The Well-Being of Nations: The Role of Human and Social Capital*. (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). Viewable at: [www.oecd.org/site/worldforum/33703702.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/site/worldforum/33703702.pdf)
- 5 The Roadmap (Washington Student Achievement Council [2013]) Viewable at: <http://www.wsac.wa.gov/the-roadmap>
- 6 All data in this paragraph is drawn from the Migration Policy Institute analysis of 2016 US Census/American Community Survey data.
- 7 *Ibid.*

- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.* Also note: It can be assumed that most of these individuals are immigrants. Nationwide, many adult, US-born individuals with limited English skills are from the US territory of Puerto Rico, and the Puerto Rican population in Washington is extremely small.
- 10 Integrated Basic Education Skills Training (I-BEST) <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-best/?>
- 11 Read more in NSC's policy brief: [www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Washington-SNAP-brief-web\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Washington-SNAP-brief-web_FINAL.pdf)
- 12 Learn more: <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pressrelease/2015/007115>
- 13 Ready to work: Seattle creates new on-ramp for immigrant English learners <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/ready-to-work-seattle-creates-new-on-ramp-for-immigrant-english-learners>