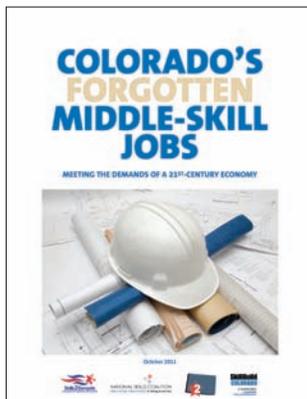


Skills2Compete–Colorado

Preparing for the Future: Closing Colorado's Middle-Skills Gap



Middle-skill jobs—those that require education beyond a high school diploma but not a four-year college degree—account for 47 percent of all current jobs in Colorado, and a substantial share of projected future job openings. But only 36 percent of Colorado’s workforce has the educational credentials to fill these positions, posing a risk of worker shortages in crucial industries like health care and information technology that could put the state at a disadvantage in an increasingly competitive regional, national and global economy.



To learn more about the Skills2Compete-Colorado campaign or to download a copy of the report, go to www.nationalskillscoalition.org/Colorado.

The newly released report, *Colorado's Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs*, produced by the Skills2Compete-Colorado campaign—a partnership of National Skills Coalition and a coalition of Colorado-based government officials, business leaders, educators, advocates and service providers—illustrates the dimensions of the challenge. Ensuring an adequate number of middle-skill workers will require educational opportunities not only for young people, but also for those already in the labor market: close to two-thirds of those who will be in Colorado’s workforce in the year 2025 were already working adults in 2010, putting them well beyond the traditional high school-to-college pipeline.

Existing Efforts

Numerous organizations both public and private throughout Colorado are currently engaged in excellent efforts to help people move out of poverty through employment and help businesses recover and thrive with a skilled workforce. These successful efforts should continue to be applauded and supported. In addition, this policy brief makes specific recommendations related to middle-skill jobs that will help Colorado fully realize the goal of economic recovery and prosperity for individuals, businesses and industries.

A New Skills Vision

If Colorado is to realize its full economic potential, education and training must reflect the demands of the new, knowledge-based economy. Colorado should embrace the following vision to meet these demands:

“Every Coloradan should have access to the equivalent of at least two years of education or training past high school and the supports necessary to complete a vocational credential, industry certification, or one’s first two years of college, available at whatever point and pace makes sense for individual workers and industries. Every person must also have access to the basic skills needed to pursue such education.”

This policy brief makes recommendations to state policymakers and other stakeholders as to how Colorado might progress together to achieve this goal given current circumstances and constraints unique to our state. The recommendations included are informed by the following key overarching principles.

Acknowledgments

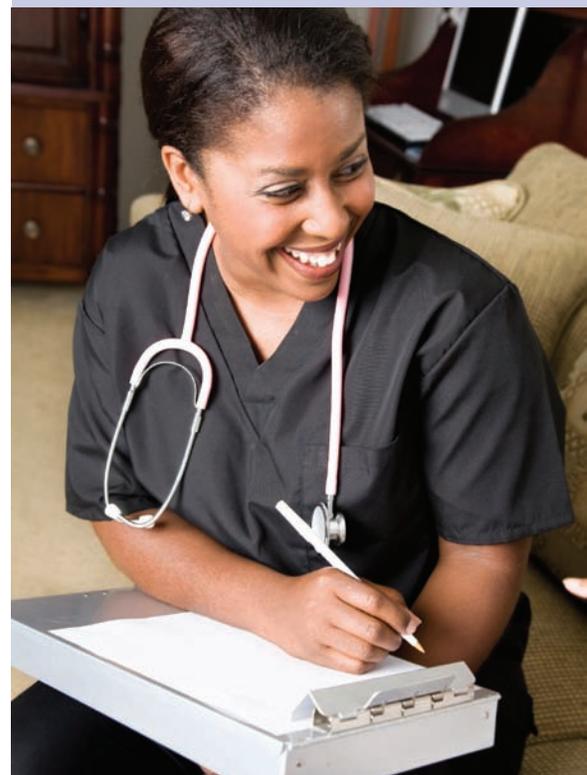
Colorado’s Forgotten Middle-Skill Jobs was written for the Skills2Compete-Colorado campaign by National Skills Coalition, Washington, DC, as part of its national Skills2Compete Campaign.

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Principles of the Skills Vision

- The best way to help adult workers achieve economic prosperity is to equip them with the skills needed to effectively compete for careers in high demand occupations.
- Businesses and industries will be attracted to Colorado, stay here and grow if the workforce training and development system understands and meets their demand for the skilled workers they need to thrive in a global economy.
- A high school education is no longer adequate for most jobs in today's economy, or to provide the skills needed to attract, retain and grow businesses.
- A majority of Colorado's workforce of 2025 was already working adults in 2010, so there needs to be a balanced approach to workforce development that is focused on adults as well as youth.
- Colorado must have a workforce system that meets the skilled worker needs of industries and prepares all workers for the new economy, including recent high school graduates, current workers, and unemployed individuals.
- Colorado's workforce system is comprised of economic development, workforce development, adult basic education, higher education and community based organizations that must be aligned toward achieving common goals.
- The workforce system for preparing skilled workers should be data driven and have the capacity to measure progress toward and attainment of all types of credentials and employment outcomes.

Growing Colorado's Economy by Investing in the Forgotten Middle

Middle-skill jobs, those that require more than a high-school diploma but not a four-year degree, comprise the largest share of jobs in Colorado today (47 percent) and will into the next decade. Despite the current economic downturn, key industries in Colorado are still struggling to find sufficient workers trained to fill these jobs. As a result, economic recovery is stifled. We can't afford that—particularly now—in Colorado.

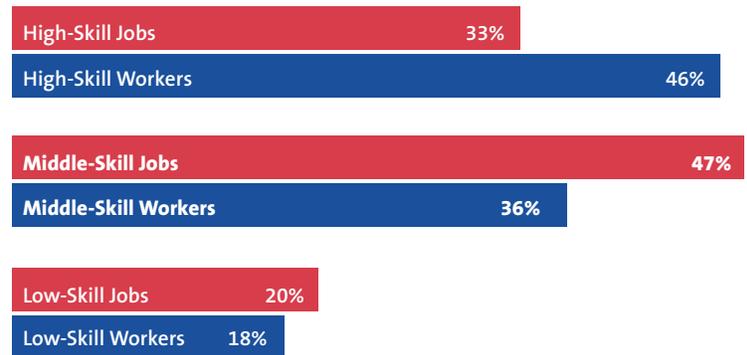
Middle-Skill Jobs are the Backbone of Colorado's Economy

Middle-skill jobs are essential to Colorado's health, infrastructure, and economic growth. Many of these jobs are local, hands-on jobs, meaning they are unlikely to be outsourced. Examples of middle-skill jobs include licensed practical nurses, carpenters, biomedical equipment technicians, and auto repair diagnosticians. Middle-skill jobs are often well-paid jobs, offering economic security and prosperity for Colorado's workers.

Colorado's Skills Mismatch: A Middle-Skills Gap

Almost half of Colorado's jobs (about 47 percent) were in middle-skill occupations in 2009. But only 36 percent of the state's workers were trained to the middle-skill level. The demand for middle-skill workers in the Colorado will remain high through 2019, with 39 percent of all job openings requiring a middle-skill credential.

Colorado Jobs and Workers by Skill Level, 2009

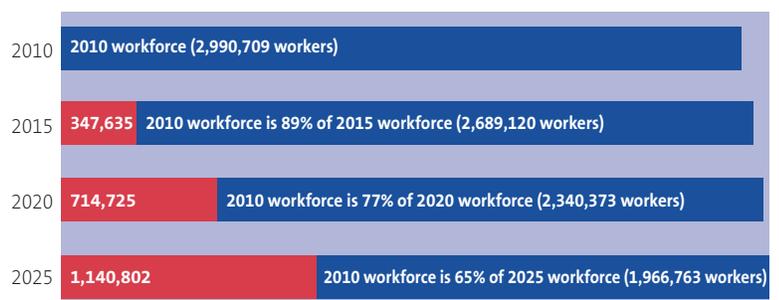


Sources: Calculated by National Skills Coalition from the Bureau of Labor Statistics website.

Colorado's Workforce of Tomorrow is Working Today

Colorado cannot address its middle-skill challenges by focusing its policies and public investments in education and training resources solely on youth. Two-thirds of the people who will be in Colorado's workforce were already working adults in 2010—long past the traditional high school-to-college pipeline. According to The Bell Policy Center, about 362,500 Coloradans age 18-64 do not have a high school diploma or GED—equivalent to about 14 percent of Colorado's total workforce of 2.7 million. Of these people, only about 14,000, or 4 percent, are enrolled in adult education programs. The state of Colorado appropriates no state funds for adult basic education. The workforce system must provide Colorado's low skilled workers, the unemployed, newly dislocated, and entry level workers with the skills to compete for and succeed in the middle- and high-skill jobs of the new economy.

Working Colorado Adults Age 20-64 in the Current and Projected Population, 2010-2025



Source: Calculated by National Skills Coalition using population projections from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Key Policy Recommendations

To grow the skilled workforce needed for Colorado's economic recovery we urge state policymakers to adopt the following recommendations to improve efforts to train adults for the middle-skill jobs that will continue to drive Colorado's economic recovery.

★ Create a visionary goal for credential attainment

State policymakers should adopt a cross agency credential measurement framework that collects credential outcome data across multiple federal and state programs to support a workforce development system that is outcome driven and responds to the reality of the state's labor market needs. In a society where "you measure what matters," we need to count the full range of skilled credentials and degrees that Coloradans are earning with our public dollars. Colorado needs to collect credential data to know how the skills and credentials being produced with their investments in education, training, human services and workforce development funded programs are meeting the skilled worker needs of employers. As Colorado agencies are being called to do more with less, it is more important than ever for state leaders to support stronger collaboration across education, training, human service systems to collect credential data and use this data to set goals and measure progress toward strengthening the workforce.

Recommendations

- Set a goal and framework for the workforce system to increase by 20 percent the number of Colorado residents trained for in-demand occupations by 2014.
- Track credential attainment outcomes in the state (along with traditional degrees) across a range of public workforce and education programs, in order to assess if education and training investments are aligning with demand in the labor market. Publicly report outcomes on an annual basis and hold agencies accountable for outcomes that increase the skills of the workforce [to fill the projected demand for middle- and high-skill workers as defined by industry].
- Charge an existing body or establish a new senior level cross agency policy committee that will collect, analyze and report credential attainment information in a way that allows policymakers to determine the outcomes of the myriad of programs that compose the state's workforce system.

★ Support career pathways that provide education and training for all workers

State policymakers should strengthen existing efforts to develop a statewide framework for establishing career pathways programs that expand access to workforce education and training for all workers. Career pathways align adult basic education, developmental education, job training and higher education systems to create pathways to postsecondary educational credentials for people while they continue to work and support their families.

Recommendations

- State policymakers should support and expand existing efforts to coordinate the workforce, education and training programs and initiatives conducted under higher education, adult education, labor and employment, human services, economic development, community colleges and corrections that will realign existing programs and resources across departments to drive innovative career pathway programs.
- Realign resources to provide greater support services for low-income working adults seeking postsecondary credentials.
- Increase public investments in training and education by developing a coordinated tuition-assistance program across departments for adult workers seeking training in occupations with clear career pathways and in high-demand industries.
- Require that there be at least one bridge program in each County to move low-skill adults into advanced training opportunities.

★ Refocus and fund adult basic education

Colorado is near the bottom among the states in providing resources for adult basic education, and appropriates no state funds for this purpose. This is a "root cause" of many of our state's education and workforce problems, including the middle-skills gap. To be competitive economically, Colorado must invest in adult education and reach more of the eligible adult population so that workers can enter and succeed in industry recognized credentialing programs.

Recommendations

- Colorado should adopt a bold goal to increase the number of people served in adult basic education programs by 50 percent by 2013. The overall goal would be to move Colorado closer to the national average in providing funding for this program and to increase the number of people served.
- The departments that comprise the workforce development system should adopt common goals and redesign adult basic education programs to focus on moving students more quickly and successfully toward postsecondary certificate and degree completion.
- Encourage the development of programs such as those in Washington and Minnesota, which assist adults in acquiring the critical language, literacy skills and occupational training needed to bridge students from adult education into postsecondary education and training, to ensure postsecondary and career success.

★ Implement industry-focused strategies for workforce development

Foster the development of employer-driven, industry-focused strategies, including sector and cluster approaches that combine education, training, workforce development and economic development resources in ways that lead to employment and career advancement in high demand industries.

Recommendations

- Support the creation and sustainability of postsecondary academic, technical, vocational and apprenticeship programs that create the skilled workforce to meet worker demands as identified by industry.
- Engage economic development entities—Chamber of Commerce, local development corporations, and industry associations—in the development of pipelines to prepare and place middle-skill workers.
- Coordinate engagement of economic development and industry organizations to determine the aggregate demand for middle-skill workers across all workforce development stakeholder groups in a manner that increases collaboration and reduces duplication of effort.