

Shifting Gears: Minnesota *FastTRAC*
Training, Resources And Credentialing
for Pathways to Sustainable Employment



Executive Summary

Background and Need: Minnesota’s economy faces an interrelated set of serious challenges: employers in many of the state’s critical industries confront skilled labor shortages while thousands of Minnesotans are unemployed or stuck in low-paying jobs and unable to access basic education, training or postsecondary credentials needed to advance in the labor market and earn family-supporting wages.

While about 25 percent of today’s jobs require a college degree or postsecondary credential, the Bureau of Labor Statistics has projected that about 45 percent of all new jobs over the next decade will require a college degree or postsecondary credential. There are over 692,000 Minnesotans of prime working age—between the ages of 25 and 55—who have a high school diploma/GED or less education. This is a cohort of workers who are a readily-available human resource for Minnesota employers provided they can get additional basic and technical skills and credentials valued in the labor market. It is critical to the state’s economy to take immediate and decisive action to address the “talent development” issues relative to the low-wage, low-skilled workforce. Improving our K-12 schools alone will not solve the talent development problem. The number of adults already in the workforce is far greater than the number of school-aged children. An estimated 65 percent of Minnesota’s workforce in 2025 is already beyond the reach of our school system. Simply, the workforce of the foreseeable future in Minnesota is the workforce of the present.

In 2007, the Governor’s Workforce Development Council received a Shifting Gears planning grant from The Joyce Foundation to work with Minnesota state agencies and their partners to strengthen policies that enable low-wage and low-skilled adult workers to advance in education and training systems, acquire postsecondary credentials and compete in the labor market. As part of the planning, the partners studied the state-level policy, programs, administration and budget issues confronting the delivering of education and training services directly focused on low-wage and low-skilled workers.

The planning efforts revealed there is a growing consensus about the need to reform our adult education and workforce development systems to better enable low-wage and low-skilled adults to pursue further education needed to gain family sustaining employment. The planning efforts led to a commitment by the state’s education and workforce development partners to build on their foundation and collaborations and form more sustainable partnerships that will help remove barriers before low-wage and low-skilled adult workers. The partners committed themselves to work together toward this common effort through an initiative called **Shifting Gears: Minnesota FastTRAC**—Training, Resources And Credentialing.

In 2008, two lead agencies for the initiative—the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system Office of the Chancellor (OOC) and the Minnesota Department of Education Adult Basic Education (ABE)—applied for and received a Shifting Gears implementation grant from The Joyce Foundation to launch Minnesota FastTRAC. In addition to OOC and ABE, FastTRAC also has the financial and institutional commitment of the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, the Minnesota Department of Human Services, the Office of Higher Education and the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry.

FastTRAC Goal and Strategies: The initiative will focus efforts around the identification of major system and policy changes that are necessary to:

Create a state-level “stackable credentials” education and training framework for low-wage, low-skilled adults that integrates ABE, non-credit occupational training, and for-credit postsecondary degree and certificate programs that currently lack coordination and resource sharing. A stackable credentials framework works through career pathway models built around occupations and within industries with high unmet needs for skills.

Once built, the stackable credential framework will better align existing systems and reduce barriers that arise because of the current lack of systematic and systemic coordination and resource sharing.

At least three key strategies are necessary to develop a stackable credentials framework:

1. Identify and provide low-income adults with the **student support services** they need to transition across education and training programs and achieve stable employment and family supporting wages.
2. Create **bridge curricula** that provide seamless transitions between ABE, non-credit occupation training and for-credit postsecondary certificate and degree programs.
3. Build a state-level **integrated data capability** to follow participant progress and outcomes across education and employment programs.

The FastTRAC initiative is working with 7 ongoing education and work transition programs called *incubators*. Each incubator is receiving supplemental funding (i.e. a grant) and assistance to identify its stackable credential (also called “career pathway”) model and “incubate” innovative ideas surrounding student support services and/or bridge curricula. Career pathways are models of learning that move low-skilled adults through basic skills and workforce-oriented adult education programs on to postsecondary training/non-degree or degree programs.

In addition to incubators the initiative is building on existing cross-agency initiatives, especially related to adult student/worker transitions between ABE programs, community and technical colleges and workforce centers.

Successful testing of changes at the local and regional level, and collaborative actions at the local and state level, will lead to specific recommendations to better align resources and policies across relevant agencies/systems and move toward creating a state level stackable credentials framework.

FastTRAC Governance and Oversight. The FastTRAC Systems Leadership Team is responsible for preparing findings and recommendations for building a stackable credentials framework to the Governor and state workforce development and education policy makers no later than July 2009. The Systems Leadership Team includes leaders from state agencies providing public employment services, as well as leaders from public and nonprofit local organizations that provide basic education and skills training to low-skilled and low-wage adult workers, and individuals who influence policy makers in education and workforce development.

Information on Shifting Gears: Minnesota FastTRAC and related initiatives is available at <http://www.cte.mnscu.edu/perkinsIV/fasttrac2008.htm>

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