



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

No Worker Left Behind (NWLB) was an unprecedented offer by the State of Michigan from 2007-2010 of free tuition to low income and unemployed workers willing to go back to school and attain a market-relevant degree or credential. Participants were offered up to \$5,000 per year for up to two years worth of education or training.

The offer attracted more than 162,000 people who enrolled in *NWLB*, 50% more than the state's original goal. *NWLB* became perhaps the largest concentrated investment in adult worker retraining seen in at least a generation.

NWLB was built on the belief that large numbers of at-risk workers need to obtain new skills and/or enhance current ones to retain or win jobs in Michigan's changing economy. Implemented at a time when more than 350,000 Michiganders were unemployed and many thousands more were underemployed, *NWLB*'s intent was to connect unemployed and underemployed workers to new and emerging opportunities, and the education and training required to secure them.

NWLB offered a clear proposition to workers facing transitions – any Michigander who was unemployed or had a family income of \$40,000/year or less could enroll. To do so, they simply had to go to their local Michigan Works! Agency (MWA) office and indicate their interest in taking advantage of *NWLB*. All funding provided through *NWLB* supported participants' training and educational expenses, including books and fees.

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) helped the State of Michigan to initially design and develop *NWLB*, and maintains substantial interest in learning how participants experienced the program itself, and whether and how involvement ultimately impacted their subsequent experience in the labor market. Previous analyses of *NWLB* have focused on other stakeholders (e.g., community colleges) or relied heavily on Federal program data to report participant outcomes.

This study explored the experiences of those who enrolled in *NWLB*, seeking insight into how *NWLB* affected participants and their families. The goals of this research and analysis were threefold:

- Learn about *NWLB* participants and their experiences in the program;
- Identify participant employment outcomes, including wage and retention rates; and
- Determine whether training helped participants attain and/or perform in their jobs.

The following report, based on survey responses from 4,231 participants, outlines the experiences of a set of *NWLB* participants and explores the implications for workforce programs aimed at training unemployed and underemployed workers.

Key Findings

Survey responses provided a wealth of information about participant experiences. Highlights include:

- **Most Respondents Found *NWLB* Valuable.** Nearly two-thirds of respondents indicated that participation in *NWLB* was valuable in finding and performing in their jobs. Some (55%) indicated their *NWLB* funded training helped them find a job. Even more (58%) found their training to be helpful in performing their work.
- **Program Retention and Completion Rates were Very High.** At the time of the survey, few respondents (7%) had left their training program without completing and earning a certificate. Nearly 47% completed training, while more than 46% were still enrolled in their training program. At the time of the survey, more than 35% of respondents who completed training earned an Industry Recognized Certificate, 16% earned an Associate's degree, and 7% earned a Bachelor's degree.
- **Most Respondents Who Completed Training Were Employed.** Nearly two out of three respondents who completed training had found employment. Nearly 60% were earning the same or more than they had before entering *NWLB*. Those respondents who earned a Bachelor's degree at the time of the survey were employed at a higher rate (67%) than those who earned an Associate's degree (61% employed), an occupational license (61% employed), or an Industry Recognized Certificate (50% employed).
- **Advising and Guidance Mattered to Program Participants.** Overall, respondents appear to have recognized that case managers¹ played a critical part in *NWLB*, but individual participants experienced widely different depth and quality of supports. A significant number of respondents said that increasing advising and navigational help would strengthen *NWLB*.

Program Design

Enrollees found *NWLB* in many ways, but once at the Michigan Works! Agency (MWA), prospective participants were required to complete a skills assessment to identify whether or not they were prepared to enter *NWLB* funded training. Participants then worked with MWA staff to determine what training was appropriate, reflecting on their existing skills, knowledge and abilities as well as whether the training would result in new or enhanced competencies and a degree or other credential of value for in-demand occupations.

Local MWAs were charged with identifying training priorities for in-demand occupations within their region and case managers helped guide participants toward appropriate training.

NWLB was intended to be a "last-dollar" program, meaning that participants were expected to use traditional grant-based financial aid (Pell grants, scholarships, college-funded grants) before receiving *NWLB* funding. *NWLB* thus filled the gaps for nontraditional students, ensuring that they could enter training. MWAs were expected to work with training providers to prepare funding packages for participants that ensured *NWLB* funding was the last dollar to support their education and training expenses. Once program eligibility and funding levels were identified, MWAs were expected to co-enroll participants in all appropriate federal programs to ensure that they were able to receive *NWLB* funding and any supportive services they could.

NWLB was funded in large part by aligning multiple workforce programs in support of the retraining initiative, including Workforce Investment Act (WIA) adult and dislocated worker funding, Trade Adjustment Assistance (TAA) monies, Jobs, Education and Training (JET) funding (Michigan's welfare reform program), and Michigan Rehabilitative Services (MRS) funding. The state asked local workforce boards to allocate a substantially greater proportion of their funding to training (which occurred), and similarly committed state discretionary funding and state-controlled program funding to support *NWLB*.

¹ It is important to note that each Michigan Works! Agency had a different title and name for their case managers. However, the state required the MWA's to assign an individual who performed effectively the same functions to each *NWLB* participant. We use the term "case manager" throughout this paper to refer to all such individuals, regardless of the actual titles used in particular locations.

Participant Reflections

Enrolling in *NWLB*

When asked what would most improve *NWLB*, many respondents said reducing time to entry. Nearly 45% of respondents waited more than three months after visiting an MWA office before starting their training program. They indicated the delays were a result of a combination of inefficient, confusing processes and having to wait for the start of new semesters at educational institutions.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents found their case managers helpful and valued their support. However, those with the least certainty about which careers and training programs to pursue were most dissatisfied with the support they received. They noted both the large caseloads of case managers and the need for increasing the capabilities of case managers to assist with career navigation.

Workers 45 and older who responded saw *NWLB* as a valuable, if sometimes frightening, opportunity to change careers. Some older respondents wished *NWLB* would've supported hands-on learning options, such as on-the-job training or apprenticeships, rather than only classroom-based courses.

Most *NWLB* participants started with at least a high school diploma or a GED, given the program's emphasis on attaining a post-secondary credential within two years. Many MWAs attempted to connect applicants with basic skills challenges with adult education providers in their area. Numerous survey respondents would've found opportunities to refresh their basic skills as useful, given that many were returning to school after many years away from classroom experiences.

Experience in Training through *NWLB*

Once enrolled in *NWLB* supported education, participants indicated a strong propensity to complete their programs. Just 7% of respondents had dropped out at the time of the survey, an impressive result given the competing pressures faced daily by unemployed and low-income workers. Respondents who completed the first quarter of their training were much more likely to complete the entire program; almost half of those who dropped out did so during the first quarter.

Among the nearly half of respondents who had completed training when surveyed, 35% had attained an industry-recognized credential, 16% had received an associate's degree, 14% an occupational license and 7% a bachelor's degree. Those earning certificates and licenses were likely to be enrolled in training for less than a year, while those earning degrees were more likely to be enrolled in longer-term training programs. About 82% of completers indicated they were very satisfied with their training programs.

Suggestions by respondents for improving training completion included increasing advising supports, increasing work-based, accelerated and online options, and increasing the flexibility about timing and uses of *NWLB* funds.

Experience in the Labor Market after *NWLB*

Survey respondent data suggests a connection between the type of credential attained and employment. The percentage of those earning a credential who were employed at the time of the survey ranged from 50% (industry recognized credential) to 66% (bachelor's degree).

Their responses also suggest the rate of reemployment depends on the occupational field. The highest employment results were found in transportation, healthcare nursing, engineering, computer professional and other science occupations, and education occupations.

Younger completers were more likely to have found employment at the time of the survey than had workers 35 and older. Only 41% of African Americans respondents who had completed training had found employment, contrasted to roughly 60% for other racial and ethnic groups.

Respondents found their *NWLB* supported training valuable both for finding and performing their jobs.

Of those reemployed, 40% reported they started new jobs at lower wages than at their previous ones, compared with 32% saying they were making more than before.

Respondents said *NWLB* would be improved if participants could obtain intense, upfront career counseling, using real-time labor market information to inform their training program choices.

Authors' Reflections on *NWLB*

Based on these findings and our experience in workforce development, we offer the following reflections on structuring and improving programs to train unemployed and underemployed workers:

- **Policy and program metrics drive practice.** Current federal workforce programming does not emphasize market relevant credentials and degree attainment. States that want to implement programs similar to *NWLB* must develop their own measures and metrics that reflect the goals of their programs. Careful consideration and alignment of metrics is critical to ensuring that innovative training programs are implemented successfully.
- **Flexible training programs and funding meet diverse worker needs.** By increasing the flexibility of training programs and funding to better meet student needs, programs could significantly reduce barriers to training for workers. This could include offering programs beyond the semester model, individualizing course pacing and providing experiential learning opportunities.
- **Clear, simple information about credentials' value in the market place can help participants select programs.** In order for participants to be able to make informed and efficient training choices, the value of the training outcomes must be made more transparent. Instead of focusing training on proxies to measure market relevancy (such as length of training), programs should focus on the market relevancy of degrees or credentials earned.
- **Basic skills training can help many participants succeed.** Training programs targeting unemployed or underemployed workers should consider options to include appropriate basic skills training for participants to help ensure they are positioned for success.
- **Employer engagement is critical to success.** Involving employers in all phases of an education and training initiative can inform program design, identify employer demand for workers and result in training that meets specific needs. Employer engagement throughout the entirety of a program can also improve participants' ability to find employment upon completion.
- **Older workers likely require more and/or different supports in finding employment.** Age-appropriate support can help workers overcome unique barriers to employment. These supports could include helping workers repackage their experiences after long hiatuses as they enter training and later when they are seeking employment.
- **Professional development and quality resources are critical for case managers.** Support from these "gatekeepers" is often vital to participant success. They need the skills and tools required to be effective in this role. Resources must be invested to lighten case managers' loads so that they can provide the best possible services to all participants.
- **Participants are seeking individualized and robust career navigation supports.** Career navigation should provide program participants with support in identifying good career opportunities based on their interests, skills and goals and effective pathways to pursue and achieve those goals. Robust career navigation support is critical in ensuring that training participants choose a path that both fulfills their personal aspirations and leads to suitable, secure career pathways.

This analysis investigated the experiences of survey respondents and offers useful insights about their engagement in *NWLB*. This initiative was a large-scale experiment in state investment in adult worker retraining, and other important learning could result from further research designed to better understand the impact of *NWLB* on participants' ability to enter, persist and complete training, and obtain jobs.