

At the intersection of immigration and skills policy

A roadmap to smart policies for state and local leaders

BY AMANDA BERGSON-SHILCOCK



Who are immigrant workers?

People born outside the United States represent 17 percent of the American workforce, or one in six workers.¹ While immigrants are found in every industry and at all occupational skill levels, there are particular hotspots of immigrant employment in areas such as healthcare, accommodation and food services, and construction.

Approximately 75 percent of immigrants in the U.S. have legally authorized status, while the remaining quarter are unauthorized. Overall, immigrants have a higher labor force participation rate than their U.S.-born peers, at 66 percent compared to 62 percent.

With regard to educational attainment, immigrants are more likely than their U.S. counterparts to lack a high school diploma or equivalent, but also more likely to have a graduate degree.

In recent years, local and state government initiatives that welcome and incorporate immigrant residents have grown rapidly. Today, there are nearly thirty municipal offices of immigrant affairs and a half-dozen states have launched New Americans initiatives. In addition, more than ninety communities have instituted immigrant welcoming initiatives. Some of these welcoming efforts are housed in public agencies; others are led by private, nonprofit organizations.

Despite a difficult and, at times, chaotic national landscape on immigration policy, there is palpable energy at the state and local levels and innovative *immigrant integration* policies are blossoming. Economic integration, including education and workforce development, is an important element of immigrant integration.

Acknowledgment: This publication was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank the Foundation for its support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Foundation.



While state and local immigrant affairs offices tackle a wide range of issues relevant to their immigrant and U.S.-born constituents, skills policies represent a notable and growing area of emphasis in their work. Public officials and the broader community of business and civic stakeholders are recognizing the important role that workforce and adult education policies play in ensuring a robust talent pipeline for local employers. And, they acknowledge the value of such policies in fostering the economic and social integration of immigrant residents.

This publication illustrates a handful of the ways that states and localities are approaching immigrant skill-building policy. It focuses in particular on policies that provide a pathway to middle-skill jobs – those that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Middle-skill jobs remain the largest segment of the U.S. economy,² and are a crucial pathway to good, family sustaining employment.

This brief is not meant to be a comprehensive survey; the field is changing too rapidly and this publication does not

have the space to include every activity being undertaken in this realm. However, it is intended to provide a roadmap of potential policy levers for advocates who are interested in sharpening the skills focus of state and local immigrant affairs offices, in strengthening the connections between those offices and their peers in labor and education agencies, or in bolstering attention to immigrant skills issues in states and localities without dedicated immigrant offices.

This publication is divided into three sections: The first provides examples illustrating how local and state agencies have implemented immigrant skills policies. The second section describes how immigrant skills policies can fit into the larger context of state and local workforce and education goals. Finally, the publication concludes with recommendations for advocates interested in strengthening immigrant affairs offices' ability to advance effective skills policies, and/or strengthening cross-agency connections with workforce and education officials in their own locales.

UNDERSTANDING THE THREE TYPES OF IMMIGRANT OFFICES

Mayoral offices of immigrant affairs

Cities of all sizes have launched special offices to address immigrant constituents' needs. The oldest and largest of these offices are found in major cities such as New York and Boston. But offices of immigrant affairs are also found in places as diverse as Pittsburgh, Nashville, Atlanta, Detroit, Salt Lake County, and San Jose.

The structure of these offices varies according to the municipal government in which they are housed. Offices may exist under the supervision of the Mayor or Managing Director, within a city's Commerce Department or other agency.

With a few noteworthy exceptions, budgets for these offices are typically small, ranging between \$200,000 and \$500,000 a year, and support one to three staff members. As a result, mayoral offices typically need to collaborate with fellow city employees and other stakeholders to effect change. Primary areas of focus for these offices generally include access to municipal services, language access, municipal identification cards, and citizenship and naturalization. Some offices have supported worker-rights efforts, immigration legal services, and/or English language classes.

State New Americans initiatives

Most state New Americans initiatives have been instituted via administrative actions – typically a governor's executive order. California is alone in having launched⁹ its effort via legislation establishing a state-level Director of Immigrant Integration, housed within the Governor's office and possessing a \$750,000 budget. In contrast, efforts such as the Michigan Office of New Americans, housed within the state's Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs (LARA), and the Ohio Office of Opportunities for New Americans, housed within the state's Development Services Agency, were both created via executive order. Areas of focus for these offices can include access to public services (including workforce development services) and immigration legal services.

Local welcoming initiatives

A majority of the ninety-plus welcoming initiatives in the United States are civic-led efforts housed within nonprofit organizations or similar community groups, such as Global DSM (Des Moines Partnership). However, there are also welcoming initiatives that are part of local government. Examples of the latter include the Welcoming Charlotte Partnership, launched by the Charlotte, North Carolina, Mayor's Office, and One Macomb, an initiative of Macomb County government in Michigan. Welcoming initiatives range widely in terms of their primary issue areas, although most include a general focus on cross-cultural understanding, public education campaigns, and community-building events. A subset of welcoming initiatives include adult education and/or workforce development among their issue areas.

Examples of state and local immigrant skills policies

States and localities use different mechanisms to pursue immigrant skills policies and programs. Some policies are implemented directly by a mayoral or state office focusing on immigration issues. Others are led by state labor departments, municipal workforce agencies, or other agencies.

Below, we highlight specific examples of how states are implementing policies that are inclusive of immigrant adult learners and workers. For a deeper exploration of specific skills policy models, see National Skills Coalition's (NSC's) state policy toolkits and 50-state scans. Available on the [State Policy page of the NSC's website](#), these materials are designed for advocates to use in drafting their own state or local policies on topics such as career pathway alignment, integrated education and training, or apprenticeship and work-based learning.

Improved access to public workforce services

Several city and state immigrant offices have worked to improve immigrant access to publicly funded workforce services. These services are often funded through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Title I of WIOA provides formula funding to each state's workforce agency. WIOA infrastructure in each state includes a state workforce board, one or more local workforce boards, and a network of direct-service centers known as American Job Centers.⁴

- In New York State, the Office for New Americans spearheaded an effort to [use approximately \\$1 million in federal Community Services Block Grant \(CSBG\) funds](#) to improve immigrants' access to public services, including workforce development. The project provided grants of approximately \$75,000 each to fourteen community action agencies and other nonprofit partners in various regions across the state. Funds in each local area supported a Community Navigator position responsible for gathering data on immigrant workforce needs and opportunities, organizing monthly workshops on workforce topics, and overseeing a corps of volunteer navigators who could help immigrants access public services for which they were eligible.
- In 2017, the Michigan Office for New Americans (MONA) used WIOA Title I Governor's Reserve funds (sometimes called discretionary funds), paired with state funding, to establish new Refugee/Immigrant Navigator positions in collaboration with four local workforce boards and community partners. The Navigators are modeled on an earlier state program that provided similar services to jobseekers with disabilities. Navigators receive specialized training and are available to help refugee and immigrant jobseekers understand their eligibility for workforce

services and access job training, placement, and related services as appropriate. In 2018, MONA collaborated with the Michigan Talent Investment Agency to issue two publications – [a checklist](#) and [PowerPoint presentation](#) – to aid all workforce agency staff in understanding state and federal policy requirements for determining immigrant and refugee eligibility for WIOA services.

- Working in collaboration with the California Employment Development Department and other state officials, the California Workforce Development Board issued an [English Language Learner policy brief](#) as one of a series of such publications designed to assist local workforce boards in serving individuals with barriers to employment.

Apprenticeship and work-based learning

Apprenticeship is often described as “the other college, without the debt.” It is perhaps the best known version of a broader array of earn-and-learn models known collectively as work-based learning. Work-based learning is a type of job training that combines on-the-job and classroom instruction.

- In Maryland, state officials drew on a U.S. Department of Labor American Apprenticeship grant to support the nonprofit [Baltimore Alliance for Careers in Healthcare \(BACH\)](#) in developing several healthcare related apprenticeships, including environmental services technician, surgical technologist, and licensed practical nurse. Founded in 2005, BACH analyzes labor market needs to identify healthcare occupations that are in high demand by local employers such as Johns Hopkins Hospital. Notably, while immigrants are among BACH's target populations, the nonprofit serves significant numbers of U.S.-born jobseekers who have barriers to employment.
- In Philadelphia, the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, Office of the Managing Director, and city Department of Commerce collaborated with the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians as a key partner in implementing a [municipal fellowship program](#). Designed as one piece of a larger strategy nicknamed City as Model Employer, the program provides twelve-week fellowships that help to fill in-demand positions at city government agencies. The fellowships pay \$13 per hour, and provide an opportunity for immigrants who have credentials from their home countries but have been unemployed or working in low-wage jobs in the U.S. to gain crucial municipal work experience. In addition to immigrants, other target populations for the initiative are expected to include out-of-school youth, justice-involved individuals, and adults with foundational skills gaps.
- In Idaho, state refugee officials worked with the Idaho Department of Labor and the nonprofit [Global Talent Idaho \(GTI\)](#) to provide work-based learning opportunities for refugees. GTI is a nonprofit initiative that supports



refugees and immigrants who have degrees and credentials from their home countries and are seeking to find skill-appropriate employment in the United States. Its programming has been supported by a U.S. Department of Labor Job-Driven National Emergency Grant (JD-NEG) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training funds, as well as private donors.

Expanded access to adult English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services

A number of city and state immigrant offices have addressed the need for ESOL. In some cases, this effort consists primarily of providing a map showing locations of local ESOL classes offered by private providers. The examples below pertain to more robust ESOL programming that is directly supported or overseen by municipal offices of immigrant affairs; a far greater number of cities are supporting ESOL through traditional adult education channels.

- New York State's Office of New Americans invests substantially in ESOL using state dollars.⁵ Tens of thousands of adults have participated in in-person classes offered through nonprofit and other partners, and approximately 1,500 individuals have participated in the mobile phone-based [Cell-Ed distance learning model](#). The office's innovative Cell-Ed partnership is especially notable given the identified demand for remote English language learning among workers in the upstate dairy industry.
- The Boston Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement (MOIA) is one of the oldest municipal immigrant offices in the country. While MOIA does not directly provide workforce or adult education services, the office maintains a web-based directory of adult English language classes that can be used by English learners and advocates who serve this population. In addition, MOIA uses money raised in its annual We Are Boston fundraiser to

support English learning: in 2018, the office made a total of \$150,000 in grants to the nonprofit [English for New Bostonians](#) (to support ESOL programming) and to ten grassroots organizations (for a variety of educational and civic activities).

- In Michigan, MONA funded five innovative adult ESOL pilot programs during 2017. Each program received a one-year grant of approximately \$50,000. Funding came from the Governor's office. The intent of the pilots was to provide in-demand English learning services that could reach under-served populations and could not easily be funded using existing state or federal ESOL funding. Among the models funded were a [contextualized ESOL program for the construction industry](#) that also allows participants to earn an Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) safety certification and forklift license.

Effective Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) implementation

Since WIOA was reauthorized by Congress in 2014, state implementation has moved forward on numerous fronts. California is among the states that have made particular effort to ensure that immigrants and English learners have equitable access to WIOA services.

- California's Director of Immigrant Integration is housed within the Governor's office, and works closely with peers at the state Workforce Development Board and the California Employment Development Department, which includes the Labor and Workforce Development Agency. These officials have collaborated to improve services to immigrants and English learners under WIOA, such as through the release of [WIOA planning guidance](#) from the state Workforce Board. The guidance includes detailed instructions to local workforce boards about how to ensure that both the WIOA planning process and WIOA-funded services are responsive to the needs of English learners. For example, WIOA regional plans that include counties where more than 15 percent of the workforce are English language learners (ELLs) are required to provide specific information in their plans about how this population will be served.
- In 2017, California launched a [pilot initiative](#) known as the ELL Navigator program, in which [\\$2.5 million in WIOA Title I discretionary funds](#) was distributed to five local workforce boards (and their local nonprofit partners) to support new navigator positions helping English learners to access WIOA services for which they are eligible.

Workforce and education data policies

State workforce data policies guide the collection, analysis, and use of public data to inform workforce and education policy decisions.⁶ In some cases, this data is part of a larger State Longitudinal Data System (SLDS) that combines

records from K-12, higher education, and workforce systems to understand patterns of educational attainment and employment outcomes among state residents. To date, state and local immigrant offices have not been formally involved in SLDS, but at least two states have used such data to help inform skills policies as they pertain to immigrants.

- Following advocacy by a wide range of stakeholders, in 2014 Minnesota's legislature passed a law mandating that the Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) produce a regular [report on publicly funded workforce program outcomes](#). Unusually for a public dataset, the information is required to go beyond the traditional demographic categories and provide disaggregated information (where possible) on specific populations of interest. For example, outcomes for Somali immigrants, Hmong immigrants, and American Indian populations — all groups that have a significant presence in Minnesota — are broken out individually. In addition, the report cross-tabulates data to illustrate equity gaps between populations in terms of their workforce outcomes.
- Washington State's [Training and Education Coordinating Board](#) produces a robust array of workforce program reports and data. In addition, the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) has used its own data to analyze student progress. The SBCTC's use of a [pathway evaluator analysis](#) helped inform the development of the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model of combined adult education and job training. I-BEST has proven highly successful for a range of individuals, including immigrants and English learners, and has since been replicated in numerous states.

Supporting skill-building via Community Development Block Grant funds

Federal Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds are distributed annually by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to local governments and states. Funds are distributed on a formula basis to cities of 50,000 or more residents. Some cities have used CDBG funds to support skill-building for low-income immigrant (and U.S.-born) community residents. In particular:

- The Boston Mayor's Office of Workforce Development [reframed its priorities](#) for the use of federal Community Development Block Grant Public Service (CDBG-PS) funds. The city is now more explicitly focused on what it refers to as the "three Es of workforce development: employment, education, and economic security." Among the forty-eight nonprofit organizations receiving CDBG-PS funds are three agencies that provide English, job training, and job placement services to Latino and immigrant families.

- The Seattle Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs (OIRA) has been a robust advocate for immigrant workforce issues. Acting in response to concerns that lower-level English learners were struggling to navigate the existing system, the office [developed a pilot program](#) to provide English language, job preparation, and job placement services through community-based nonprofit partners. With the program design in hand, OIRA staff took advantage of the city's mandates under its Race and Social Justice Initiative to make the case for funding. The program, known as [Ready to Work](#), was launched in 2016 using CDBG funds, and quickly demonstrated robust outcomes. City policymakers' interest in the program spurred an expansion to two additional neighborhoods in 2017 and 2018, using municipal funds allocated by councilmembers.

Investing in career pathways

While the term career pathways has been used in a variety of ways,⁷ it commonly refers to a series of linked education and training steps — with multiple entry and exit points — that allow an individual to advance over time, attaining credentials and improving their ability to obtain employment and earn higher wages. States and cities have invested in career pathways through numerous different strategies and initiatives, though the work is often led by workforce and education agencies rather than immigrant affairs offices per se.

- Although Idaho does not have a state-level Office of New Americans, the Idaho Office for Refugees and its refugee resettlement director have been leaders in developing partnerships with peer officials in the state Department of Labor as well as local nonprofit agencies. These partnerships have resulted in workforce-focused initiatives for refugees, who make up a significant portion of the foreign-born population in Idaho. For example, an Office of Refugee Resettlement Targeted Assistance discretionary grant was used to establish a Career Pathways Navigators Program, which provides funding and other support for Idaho refugees to complete short-term, in-demand career training and make progress on a career path. Target populations include women and youth. The Idaho Office for Refugees contracts with the nonprofit International Rescue Committee in Boise and College of Southern Idaho Refugee Center in Twin Falls to deliver these services.

Upskilling of adult learners/ incumbent workers

A frequent area of concern for immigrant advocates is how to ensure that workers have the opportunity to build skills and advance in the workforce. In addition to the numerous examples of upskilling for entry-level workers that are highlighted in the Business Case for Immigrant Skill-Building sidebar in this publication, states have also focused on

another population: Immigrants with degrees from abroad who are working in low-wage jobs that do not draw on their full talents and abilities.

- MONA's [Michigan International Talent Solutions](#) (MITS) program provides direct assistance to immigrant job-seekers who have credentials from abroad. In addition to career coaching and job-placement assistance, MITS provides eligible candidates with an opportunity to improve their English language skills using an online tool from Education First. As appropriate, MITS participants can also receive up to \$6,000 in "re-skilling" assistance that allows them to pursue short-term training that will prepare them to use their international experience in a U.S. context. Re-skilling vouchers can be used at U.S. institutions such as community colleges or private training providers. Examples include training in QuickBooks software for bookkeepers or accountants, training in AutoCAD for architectural professionals, and numerous other opportunities.
- In 2014, the Massachusetts Governor's Advisory Council for Refugees and Immigrants and three state agencies convened a [statewide Task Force on Immigrant Healthcare Professionals](#). The Task Force was coordinated by the New Americans Integration Institute at the nonprofit Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy (MIRA) Coalition, and was charged with providing policy and program recommendations to advance the career opportunities and contributions of foreign-trained health professionals in the Commonwealth. The Task Force's [report and recommendations](#) identified a range of policy barriers and potential solutions to address Massachusetts' health workforce needs.
- Philadelphia's workforce board, known as Philadelphia Works, has provided support through WIOA Title I funding for the [International Professionals Program](#) at the nonprofit Welcoming Center for New Pennsylvanians. The program serves individuals who have credentials from abroad but have not yet been able to find skill-appropriate work in the U.S. Select participants in that program are also eligible for the municipal fellowship program described in the Apprenticeship and work-based learning section above.

Other policies

In addition to the specific immigrant workforce development and adult education policies described above, there are four other areas in which states have advanced policies that can have a significant effect on immigrant students and workers.

- At least eighteen states have implemented [state-level Integrated Education and Training \(IET\) policies](#) that go beyond what is required under federal WIOA legislation. These policies support the implementation of

programs that combine instruction in foundational skills such as math, reading, or spoken English with training for a specific occupation or industry. Such programs can be implemented by a community college, nonprofit community-based organization, or other education and training provider. Perhaps the best-known IET model is Washington State's I-BEST program (described above). While IET policies are not specific to immigrants, many IET programs serve immigrants and English learners.

- Twenty-eight states have established a Seal of Biliteracy that high school graduates may obtain on their diploma if they demonstrate proficiency in two or more languages. While not specifically designed as a policy for immigrants – the designation is not limited to students who speak English as a second language, but rather any student who meets bilingual requirements – the policy affirms the value of multilingual skills for young people moving into the workforce. The nonprofit New American Economy works with states to advance Seal of Biliteracy policies, and has researched the demand for bilingual workers in the U.S. labor market.
- At least twenty states have established “tuition equity” policies allowing immigrant Dreamers (young

undocumented people who came to the U.S. as children) to pay in-state tuition rates at state colleges and universities.⁸ These policies vary in scope, with some being restricted to a subset of Dreamers who have been granted Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status. A handful of states, most notably California, allow undocumented students to access state-funded financial aid. (Dreamers and all undocumented people are not eligible for federal financial aid.)

- Numerous states have embarked on initiatives around occupational licensing. While many of these efforts focus on veterans, military spouses, and/or people returning from incarceration, some are specifically inclusive of immigrants.⁹ Policy efforts may focus on increasing portability across state lines (such as by establishing reciprocity agreements with other states), improving transparency and navigability of the license application process (such as by publishing licensing guides), removing duplicative requirements for licensure (such as requiring nurses to take an English exam despite having been educated in English), or creating new categories for licensure (such as by creating a hair braiding-only license that does not require applicants to meet the requirements for a full cosmetology license).

ADVANCING IMMIGRANT WORKFORCE ISSUES *WITHOUT* A STATE-LEVEL OFFICE

Although Maryland does not have an Office of New Americans, state officials have nonetheless spearheaded a range of innovative immigrant workforce efforts. Officials within the state's Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation (DLLR) oversee a New Americans Initiative, and have worked to weave immigrant adult education and workforce issues into the larger fabric of state skills policies.

- In 2017, DLLR issued joint assessment guidance to its local partners. The guidance was intended to limit duplicative testing of adult learners and jobseekers as they move back and forth between the adult education and workforce systems. English learners are among the populations most affected by this redundancy.
- In 2018, DLLR invested nearly \$1 million in WIOA Title I discretionary funds to support Career Pathways programming. A key feature of the projects was to promote co-enrollment of participants in WIOA Title I (workforce) and Title II (adult education) services. Grants were made to local workforce boards that partnered with adult education providers. Two out of three grantees chose to focus on English learners.
- DLLR also supported the nation's first competency-based (as opposed to clock-based) apprenticeship program in Baltimore, which included immigrants among its target populations. See the Apprenticeship and work-based learning section of this publication to learn more.
- DLLR participates in the Maryland Skilled Immigrants Task Force, a consortium of public and private workforce development organizations that seek to leverage the skills that foreign-trained immigrants bring to the United States to meet local job market demand.
- In addition to DLLR's state-level work, the Montgomery County, Maryland, Department of Health and Human Services supports a Welcome Back Center of Suburban Maryland (WBC) for immigrant health workers. WBC's innovative model builds on the personal and professional assets of immigrant nurses, behavioral health workers, and others to connect them with appropriate education and workforce opportunities. Its mission is to further address health professional shortages, diversify the health workforce, provide economic opportunities to underutilized individuals as they return to work in the health field, and enhance health outcomes of the entire community.

THE BUSINESS CASE FOR IMMIGRANT SKILL-BUILDING

Businesses, including small and mid-sized companies, as well as chambers of commerce and industry associations, play an important part in state and local conversations about immigrant workforce issues. Employers help shape skills policies by identifying their talent needs, informing curriculum development and workforce program design, and advocating for policies that invest in proven strategies for upskilling workers.

Data about businesses' skill needs helps to inform local and state policymakers about the specific labor market demands in their particular communities. In a few cases, this includes skills that immigrants may be more likely to have – such as bilingual abilities – but in many cases the necessary skills can be supplied by U.S.-born and immigrant workers alike. As a result, policies that address business skill needs can and should be inclusive of but not limited to immigrant workers.

To date, businesses have typically engaged with state and local immigrant affairs offices as part of community immigrant integration planning processes such as those led by the [Gateways for Growth](#) initiative, and/or as part of citizenship and naturalization campaigns such as those led by [Cities for Citizenship](#).

As a result, there is significant room for expansion in how municipal and state immigrant affairs offices engage with local business leaders. Officials could consider convening or supporting a [sector partnership](#) in an industry with a significant concentration of [immigrant workers](#), or advancing policies that incentivize local employers to provide [upskilling](#) for their existing workforce. (NSC's [Foundational Skills in the Service Sector](#) report offers numerous examples of policies that can support businesses' investment in worker skill-building.)

In addition, immigrant affairs offices could identify opportunities to strengthen connections with business leaders who are already engaging with state and local government via the workforce system, such as those who sit on their local workforce development board.

The broader context: state and local goals for education and workforce

Immigrant workforce goals are sometimes explicitly but more often implicitly connected to broader goals or mandates established by state and local officials. Policymakers can increase immigration advocates' buy-in and support for these goals by more deliberately drawing connections between the big picture goal and how immigrant workforce initiatives are supporting it. Similarly, helping so-called "mainstream" stakeholders see how investments in immigrant skills are driving toward a shared policy goal can help build support for immigrant affairs offices' activities.

Two examples help illustrate the potential. First, forty states have now set postsecondary credential attainment goals for their residents.¹⁰ In almost all cases, for states to succeed in these goals it will be necessary to incorporate immigrant adult learners and workers.

For instance, Texas has set a goal of having 60 percent of state residents ages twenty-five to thirty-four attain a postsecondary credential by 2030. Immigrants represent 17 percent of Texas residents overall, and are a disproportionately large portion among those who could be engaged in upskilling: While 37 percent of U.S.-born Texans have a high school diploma or less, that number rises to 61 percent of among immigrant Texans.

NSC has produced a series of [fact sheets](#) highlighting the role that could be played by immigrants in helping states such as Texas meet their credential attainment goals.¹¹

As a second example, states are required to set adult education and workforce performance targets as part of federal legislation such as WIOA. While specific WIOA *targets* are set on a state-by-state basis, all states must report on the same six performance *measures*. These include a focus on program participants' educational attainment (such as earning a high school equivalency credential or making a transition to postsecondary education) and success in the labor market (employment, median earnings).

Immigrants are an important piece of the puzzle for many states in achieving their WIOA performance goals. Although specific data on how many WIOA participants are immigrants is not collected, states are required to report on how many WIOA participants are in English language classes or are Limited English Proficient (LEP). Fully one-third of all WIOA Title II adult education participants nationwide (approximately 500,000 people) are enrolled in English language classes.

As these two examples demonstrate, both immigrant advocates and state and local policymakers have an interest in more explicitly drawing connections between immigrants and broader education and workforce policy goals. Regardless of whether the specific goal is to improve postsecondary access and success, address the skill-building needs of working learners or young parents, improve transitions between career and technical education programs and apprenticeship programs, or something else, an intentional focus on these connections can foster greater support and momentum from new and existing stakeholders.



Putting the pieces together: how immigrant affairs offices and workforce/education agencies can inform each other's work

As detailed above, while state and local immigrant affairs offices have a wide mandate for addressing constituents' needs, adult education and workforce issues are a frequent area of activity. At the same time, the limited personnel and budgets of these offices can preclude them from being able to advance education and workforce policies and programs on their own. Instead, offices can enact change via formal and informal collaborations with public-agency peers and community organizations. Below are specific recommendations for newly formed and long established immigrant offices, as well as their fellow public agencies in education and workforce.

Recommendations for established state and local immigrant affairs offices

- **Design formal mechanisms for immigrant affairs offices to participate in workforce and education policy decision-making.** Depending on the specific structure and policy landscape of the state or municipality,

this could include appointing immigrant-affairs officials to the state or local workforce board, including them as part of a Workforce or Skills Cabinet, requiring a higher education coordinating board to invite a representative from the immigrant office to regular meetings, or another approach.

- **Explore how non-skills issues can be a gateway to foster connections with other public agencies and eventually expand into addressing skills policy.** For example, a number of municipal immigrant affairs offices hold responsibility for ensuring that their peer agencies provide “language access” – that is, that they are equipped to serve city residents who do not speak English as a primary language. While this is an important (and legally mandated¹²) mission in and of itself, the process of working with city health centers, police departments, and other agencies to ensure language access can also help immigrant offices to surface valuable data on the need for greater investment in English language classes (including the specific neighborhoods where resources are most needed). In addition, it can shed light on ways that municipal government can improve language access by improving its own employment and upskilling processes, such

as by providing additional points on a civil service exam for bilingual candidates, or offering work-based learning opportunities to jobseekers who bring relevant experience to city government.

- **Identify opportunities to assist education and workforce partners in meeting broader policy mandates.** Whether the goal is higher participation in apprenticeship programs, improved adult literacy, better high school completion rates, increased parent engagement in the school system, decreased recidivism, or something else, immigrant affairs offices can make themselves welcome at the policy table by arriving with solutions. Immigrant offices are uniquely positioned to help education and workforce agencies understand the specific role and contributions of immigrant adult learners and workers in meeting overall policy goals.
- **Capitalize on the convening power of public agencies.** Government offices have a valuable ability to bring diverse partners to the table, including community members, business leaders, labor unions, and others. Immigrant affairs offices can strengthen the design of new education and workforce policies by bringing together stakeholders to provide input at an early stage, and can improve the odds of high-quality, broad-based implementation by partnering with nonprofit organizations that have earned the trust of immigrant communities and will be crucial allies in carrying out new policies.
- **Pursue an inside/outside strategy.** Immigrant affairs offices can provide seed funding or initial technical advising to assist nonprofit agencies in implementing pilot workforce programs as a proof of concept, while simultaneously advocating for long-term, deeper public investment in effective models. Even if immigrant affairs offices are unable to fund programmatic activities, it may be possible to support a third-party evaluation of pilots in order to assess their viability and document their effectiveness.
- **Ensure that immigrants themselves are engaged in the design and implementation of workforce and education policies.** Whether through an office of immigrant affairs or otherwise, state and local governments have both an opportunity and a responsibility to ensure that immigrant residents can provide feedback on the policies and programs designed to serve their communities. This on-the-ground expertise can help policymakers to avoid expensive missteps and achieve widespread participation in city- or state-wide initiatives.

Recommendations for newly created immigrant affairs offices

- **Consider housing the office within a labor, education, or economic development agency.** While state and local contexts vary, placing an immigrant office under a

labor department or similar agency sends a strong signal about the centrality of workforce development to the locality's immigrant integration agenda. Such a decision also emphasizes the importance of immigrant workers and adult learners to broader workforce, economic development and revitalization efforts, and provides a natural connection point for chambers of commerce and business owners interested in how immigration issues intersect with their talent development needs.

- **Recognize the specific expertise contributed by staff appointed to immigrant offices and ensure they have opportunities to build their skills.** The truism that "personnel makes policy" illustrates the importance of understanding what type of professional expertise political appointees and civil service staff bring to an immigrant office. For example, individuals who are trained as attorneys will bring a different lens than those trained in small business development. Perhaps more importantly, people coming from other public policy roles will bring a familiarity with the levers of government, while individuals who come from a nonprofit advocacy organization will typically bring experience in organizing and coalition building, and people who come from private industry will have a wealth of business relationships to draw on. In each case, staff may benefit from opportunities to bolster their existing expertise with other formal or informal training to address particular skills needed in their new roles.
- **Draw on insights from established immigrant affairs offices.** There is a rich array of opportunities for staff of newly formed immigrant offices to learn from their more established peers. Organizations such as the National Governors Association, U.S. Conference of Mayors, and the Welcoming Economies Global Network; events such as the National Immigrant Integration Conference; and alliances such as Cities for Action all provide fertile ground for civic leaders interested in drawing on their peers' experience. This opportunity is especially important when it comes to the nuts-and-bolts of how immigrant affairs offices have innovated in the use of federal funds, redesigning policy documents, or similar activities.
- **Build inclusion in from the beginning.** While it is natural and appropriate for immigrant affairs offices to focus specifically on immigrant constituents, designing them from the beginning to not just focus on immigrants but on the two-way interaction between immigrants and receiving communities can ensure greater success and a broader base of support. In particular, initiatives developed to meet the specific needs of immigrant residents can achieve more sustainable results if they can expand to address similar barriers or assets among U.S.-born community members.



- **Rather than fighting for a programmatic budget, fight for a seat at the table and ability to be a creative policy entrepreneur.** It is understandable for immigrant affairs offices to want to seek funding for their own budgets. However, evidence suggests that more influential and enduring change can often be advanced if immigrant officials have an opportunity to shape the design and implementation of the significant investments already overseen by their peers in labor and education agencies. The lack of daily programmatic responsibilities and contract oversight can actually free up immigrant affairs officials to think creatively about mechanisms for accomplishing shared policy goals. Similarly, while it may be tempting for other city agencies to “hand off” responsibility for immigrant services to these offices, this approach undercuts the vital message that so-called mainstream agencies should themselves build expertise in serving all constituents, including immigrants.

Recommendations for workforce and education agencies

- **“Cross-fertilize” business leaders’ input on immigration and skills policy goals.** Business leaders – including those who represent small and mid-sized companies, large corporations, and industry associations or chambers of commerce – are an important voice in workforce, adult education, and immigrant integration policy conversations. Their input on talent development needs can shape public policies for training incumbent workers, assisting new workers to enter or transition into the labor force, and upskilling or reskilling individuals who have been dislocated or laid off from their jobs. Yet while business leaders are also engaged in immigrant-integration conversations, to date there have been relatively limited attempts to ensure that – for example – businesses weighing in on a city’s immigrant integration plan are also being invited to participate in a locality’s established processes for providing input on their skill needs. More purposely facilitating these connections can ensure that workforce recommendations are reflective of the full range of talent needs among local companies – such as bilingual workers or those with import/export experience.
- **Incorporate an immigrant lens into state and local workforce data policy.** States are increasingly using SLDS to assess progress toward education and workforce

policy goals. At the municipal level, initiatives such as CitiStat, while focused on making city services more responsive to the public, are also providing data relevant to achieving skills policy goals. In both cases, including immigrant affairs offices as advisors or partners in state or local data policy and accountability efforts can ensure that systems are designed to be inclusive of variables that are relevant for immigrant workers and adult learners.

- **Capitalize on the expertise and community connections afforded by immigrant affairs offices.** Whether the task is obtaining community input on a workforce or education plan, designing a new initiative, or addressing challenges or gaps in meeting a skills policy mandate, more voices at the table mean a richer conversation and more creative solutions. Labor and education agencies can draw on the trust accrued by immigrant affairs offices

to obtain feedback from immigrant communities on their initiatives and future plans.

- **Ensure that immigrant-owned businesses are specifically included in education and workforce policy efforts.** Immigrant constituents are relevant to policy conversations not only given their roles as adult learners, workers, and advocates, but as business owners and employers themselves. However, depending on the size and age of their businesses, these entrepreneurs may not yet have had the opportunity to participate in sector partnerships, sit on a workforce board, or otherwise communicate their talent needs and hiring priorities to the workforce and education systems. Ensuring that these business leaders, especially small and mid-sized companies, have the chance to weigh in on skills policy conversations is vital.

READY TO ADVANCE POLICY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Advocates interested in advancing immigrant skills policies in their communities can draw on resources from NSC.

NSC's publications include short fact sheets that can be used to educate policymakers, business leaders, the media, and other stakeholders about skills policy issues. These include:

- [Adult Education: A Crucial Foundation for Middle-Skill Jobs](#)
- [Immigrant Dreamers and Middle-Skill Jobs](#)
- [State-by-state fact sheets about the demand for middle-skill workers](#)

Other publications focus on a specific, proven strategy for building skills, such as sector partnerships or Integrated Education and Training. These publications include 50-state scans (describing whether each state has a policy in place) and toolkits (providing examples of model policies and sample language that can be used as the basis for legislation or an administrative policy).

On occasion, NSC staff may also be able to participate in a webinar or other training session to provide policy background and answer questions.

To learn more, visit NSC's website and sign up for the mailing list at www.nationalskillscoalition.org.

Endnotes

- 1 Information in this section is drawn from Migration Policy Institute tabulations of US Census Bureau American Community Survey data. See: <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/data/state-profiles/state/demographics/US>
- 2 Middle-Skill Jobs in the United States (National Skills Coalition, 2017). Viewable at: <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/2017-middle-skills-fact-sheets/file/United-States-MiddleSkills.pdf>
- 3 Both Massachusetts and New York enacted legislation to formalize and/or expand offices that had originally been launched via an executive order.
- 4 In small states, the state workforce board may also function as a local board. AJCs may be branded with state-specific names. Learn more about WIOA: <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/federal-policy/workforce-investment-act>
- 5 The office's overall budget is \$6.4 million; figures for its ESOL services specifically were not available by the time of publication.
- 6 Learn more about state workforce data tools and policies from the Workforce Data Quality Campaign: <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/national-initiatives/workforce-data-quality-campaign>
- 7 Career pathways is formally defined in the WIOA statute, Section 3, Definition 7.
- 8 "Basic Facts About In-State Tuition" (National Immigration Law Center, June 2018.) <http://www.nilc.org/issues/education/basic-facts-instate/>
- 9 "Professional and Occupational Licenses for Immigrants" (National Conference of State Legislatures, January 2017.) <http://www.ncsl.org/research/immigration/professional-and-occupational-licenses-for-immigrants.aspx>
- 10 For a list of state postsecondary attainment goals compiled by HCM Strategies with support from the Lumina Foundation, see: <http://strategylabs.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/State-Attainment-Goals.pdf>
- 11 To date, NSC has published fact sheets for ten states. They are available at: <http://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/federal-policy/immigration>
- 12 The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and associated federal regulations and guidance require that federally funded services be provided without discrimination on the basis of national origin or race, including status as a limited English proficient individual.