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*Raising
Skills
to Raise
Wages*

CLOSING THE GAP

MassINC

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CLOSING THE GAP:

Raising Skills to Raise Wages

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The Boston Globe

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Study calls for overhaul of adult ed

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Mass. jobs are reported at stake

By Richard Chacón
GLOBE STAFF

Massachusetts must embark on a major adult education initiative, including expansion and restructuring of the state community college system, or face a critical shortage of skilled labor, say the authors of a new report to be released today.

With one in five adults in Massachusetts unable to read above a fifth-grade level, the state risks losing companies to states that are building a highly skilled work force with better job-training programs and community colleges, such as California and Washington, says the study by MassINC, a Boston-based public policy research group.

"The workplace has changed from 20 years ago, when companies just wanted a body," said Edward Moscovitch, principal author of the

report.

"Today, there's a need for workers to read, write, compute, and think on their feet, and we simply are not educating people for professional-level careers," said Moscovitch, who is president of the consulting firm Cape Ann Economics.

The report recommends that state officials, business leaders, and higher education administrators create a new model of adult education that would help workers with lower skills move through a sequence of educational programs including basic literacy classes, job training seminars, and community college courses.

Massachusetts and the region are currently enjoying robust economic growth, especially for workers with advanced skills and a college education.

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Study calls for major reform of adult education in Mass.

■ EDUCATION

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But the economy's continuing demand for highly-skilled labor is leaving behind hundreds of thousands of less educated workers, the report says, and creating a shortage of qualified workers for local companies.

"We've had a substantial number of openings for people with basic computer and math skills, and we've not been successful in finding them," said J. David Officer, president of Mellon Trust's Boston office, which last year commissioned the MassINC report and employs roughly 10 percent of the company's 24,000 employees worldwide.

"We want to keep these jobs in Massachusetts, but if we can't find people to do the work, we'll put the jobs in other places," he said.

About 2 million Massachusetts adults, or 44 percent of the population, lack high-school-level proficiency in math and English. That is a slightly better showing than the national average of 50 percent, according to the state Department of Education.

But despite the state's image as a home to dozens of world-class universities and a seemingly endless supply of educated workers, there are about 877,000 adults in Massachusetts — approximately one in five residents — who cannot read beyond the 5th grade level, according to state figures.

"We still have an international reputation for the quality of our work force, but it's also a bit of a half-truth," said Gloria Cordes Larson, former secretary of economic affairs and cochairwoman of the state-run Mass. Jobs Council. "We still have a value-added work force, but not all boats are rising at the same rate and some are not rising at all, and it's because of limited education."

Although the report credits state officials with increasing funding in recent years for basic literacy programs, which now serve about 23,000

adults, it also recommends that lawmakers double the number of courses available to meet increased demand and ease jammed waiting lists. In larger cities, the wait for an opening in these programs can be as long as two years.

The next step of the adult education model proposed by the MassINC report is broadening short-term job-training programs to allow welfare recipients to complete up to 10 months of training and to link these programs more closely with two-year associate's degree programs offered at community col-

**'For all
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enrollment here is
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EDWARD MOSCOVITCH
Author of study

leges.

Job-training programs, which are funded mostly through federal dollars, have succeeded in placing low-income and displaced workers in higher-paying jobs. But research has shown that the skills learned from these programs often become obsolete after five years, according to the report.

The most significant state investment in the adult education model, the report states, is the role of the state's 15 community colleges, which must be expanded and restructured to accommodate more part-time and evening students.

Although community colleges in Massachusetts serve about 70,000 students, Massachusetts has only 1.3 percent of its population enrolled in courses for credit at these colleges.

To reach the national average, the state would need another 50,000

community college places. And to equal other states, such as California, Illinois, or Washington, Massachusetts community colleges would have to triple their current enrollment.

"For all Massachusetts' reputation as an education-oriented state, community college enrollment here is shockingly low," Moscovitch said. "And it has nothing to do with having colleges like Harvard or MIT here, because they don't draw community college students."

The report recommends that the state guarantee access to two years of community college for every adult, and that tuition and fees be paid through a combination of increased state scholarships, federal grants, and tax credits.

And rather than eliminating community college tuition for some students, as the state Board of Higher Education has pledged to do by the year 2001, the MassINC study says students should be required to pay a net cost of \$500 a year, to emphasize the value of investing in a college education.

Although most adult, working students attend community college part-time in the evenings, state funds support only the day programs that are more likely to serve younger, full-time students. Since labor contracts prohibit regular community college faculty from teaching night courses, none of the evening programs are available for credit.

"To have a system where the state doesn't support the area where two-thirds of the students are enrolled doesn't make sense," said Moscovitch. "That needs to be changed."

The report also recommends that the public and private sectors team up to provide \$1 million in seed money to each of the state's community colleges to develop new employee-training partnerships.

MassINC policy director Michael B. Gritton estimated it would cost about \$160 million to implement all the report's recommendations.

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A gap in Bay State education

Use job training to close the wage gap. That's the advice a comprehensive new report gives Massachusetts. But in thinking about job training, the report says, think big.

Mayors in cities large and small have raised the problem that the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth - MassINC - is out to solve: Low-skilled residents can't find a toehold in the state's high-tech economy.

Massachusetts has some 877,000 functionally illiterate adults, according to the state's Department of Education - people who cannot read or write beyond the fifth-grade level. And basic education waiting lists have some 15,000 names on them, so far too many people who want to progress can't. More jobs are always good, but the immediate need is for more job training.

The Commonwealth provides education from kindergarten through Grade 12, and it is famous for its crowded collection of good colleges. What is missing, MassINC argues, is strong adult education. The organization's report, to be released to-

day - calls for a continuum, a bridge that spans the pillars of adult basic education, vocational skills training, community colleges, and worker training.

This is an exciting idea. In addition to churning out four-year college graduates, Massachusetts should be known as a major manufacturer of widespread reading and reasoning skills. The altruistic reasons for doing this are obvious. But expanded adult education is also an economic development tool. Businesses crave skilled workers. When looking to build or expand, companies often consider the skill levels of the local work force.

As for costs, MassINC has come up with the doable price of \$160 million a year in state spending. This would pay for scholarships to fill the gap left by federal programs; expand the capacity of community colleges to meet the demand for adult education; and build short-term training efforts into steps toward college degrees.

MassINC's report is a smart plan, a way for legislative, business, education, and community leaders to begin productively closing the wage gap.