

# PRESS RELEASE

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THE WASHINGTON WORKFORCE ASSOCIATION

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## **US Workforce Skills Falling Behind Global Competitors; Conference Builds Momentum for Reform**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – Washington Workforce Association held its statewide conference on Oct 19 and 20 in SeaTac. The conference highlighted the fact that the skills of our people will be the primary determinant of each community's economic success. Senator Patty Murray, Speaker of the House Frank Chopp, Senator Cantwell's Chief of Staff Kurt Beckett, and Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Hedrick Smith headlined the conference.

Hedrick Smith reported that the global economy is moving faster than anyone realizes. For example, Shen Zhen, China took only ten years to grow from a city of 500,000 to the third-busiest seaport in the world. The National Governors Association has called for immediate action to make sure the US maintains its competitiveness, and the Global Economic Forum has reported that the US will lose its position of economic leadership unless we take steps to improve our education and workforce training systems.

Senator Murray highlighted efforts by Washington's local Workforce Development Councils, which coordinate the education, training, and job placement system to meet local economic demand. She highlighted the In Demand Scholars program, which has provided 114 scholarships for high school students to move into high-skilled jobs with local employers. The program maintains a strong employer-student relationship from high school through completion of post-secondary training and entry into the local workforce. Murray also called for passage of stalled reforms to the Workforce Investment Act, which would make the workforce development system more responsive to economic demand. She criticized the White House for cutting job training funds at a time when the skills of the workforce determine our economic strength.

Senator Cantwell's Chief of Staff, Kurt Beckett, added that the biodiesel and composite manufacturing industries need workforce training, and that the locally-driven Workforce Development Councils, community colleges, and K-12 system need funding to scale up demand-driven programs. Beckett remarked, "If we don't get this right, scaled to meet the demands of our changing economy, we will have failed our communities, our families, our businesses, and our economy."

A bi-partisan panel of state legislators put forth their reform proposals. Rep. Glenn Anderson called for a co-equal emphasis during high school on rigorous career and technical education pathways, as well as college prep curriculum. Rep. Skip Priest noted that 50% of high school students are not passing the WASL and 30% are dropping out. He proposed developing clear alternative assessments for WASL and better funding for local Skills Centers. Rep. Deb Wallace called for new funding for communities to define strategic industry sectors that drive their economy and focus on closing the skills gaps in those regionally-targeted industries. House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler added that, "We've done enough pilot projects. The stakes are high and it is time to do something big."

A second bi-partisan legislative panel addressed budget priorities. Speaker of the House Frank Chopp and Rep. Phyllis Kenney called for expansion and improvement of the Opportunity Grants programs, which offers training scholarships to low income individuals. They suggested that this state program might be reformed to include stronger employer-student relationships and closer alignment with local economic

demand, similar to the existing In Demand Scholars program. Speaker Chopp proposed an "Opportunity Partnerships" component to make this happen. Rep. Glenn Anderson noted that now is the time for action, or else when our children are grown the United States will no longer be the world's economic superpower.

Governor Gregoire has called for a comprehensive workforce development reform proposal, named *Washington Works*, and a draft was discussed in detail. Rick Bender, President of the Washington State Labor Council, called for the state to avoid micromanaging local programs, and proposed that the trades should be more able to translate their skills into higher degrees. For example, in many other nations journeyman electricians can move directly into accelerated electrical engineering programs. Mike Hudson represented the Association of Washington Business, and called for a clear focus on outcomes for the business customer and for job-seekers and workers. Don Bennett, Interim Executive Director of the Washington State Workforce Board, called for local Workforce Development Councils to think bigger about their role as regional coordinators of the workforce training system, and work still more closely with K-12 career and technical education and community and technical colleges to create a community-wide response to economic demands for skilled workers.

The Washington Workforce Association's conference was titled *Building the World's Best Workforce* and was dedicated to, "our customers, Washington's job-seekers, workers, and businesses; and to our common commitment to make Washington *the* place in the global economy where the world's best companies find the world's most talented workforce."

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For locations of Washington's local Workforce Development Councils, see: <http://www.washingtonworkforce.org/WDCs/index.php>.

For TVW conference coverage, see <http://www.tvw.org/tvguide/schedtent.cfm>.

For more information on policy reforms, see <http://www.washingtonworkforce.org/documents/BuildingTheWorldsBestWorkforce.pdf>.

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