

Southern states must build a skilled workforce for a stronger economy

Jun 11, 2018 · By Melissa Johnson, [@LissaDJ23](#)

Southern states face a skills gap and must adapt to a new U.S. economy in which most jobs require training beyond high school, according to a new report from the National Skills Coalition and the Federal Reserve Banks of Atlanta and St. Louis, [*Building a Skilled Workforce for a Stronger Southern Economy*](#).



Most of the jobs in the South are middle-skill jobs, requiring education or training beyond high school but not a four-year college degree. However, across the South, there are not enough workers trained to fill middle-skill jobs.

This middle-skill gap, however, isn't insurmountable. Southern states could step up to the challenge of educating more of the region's adults to close this gap. Focusing on grade school students alone won't be enough to close the skills gap now. **If each and every one of the South's graduating high school students were to stay in the region and train for open jobs that require postsecondary education, there would *still* be unfilled positions.**

Moreover, if southern states are going to close their skill gaps, they must provide more opportunities for all adults – including people of color – to access high-quality education and training. More than four in ten Southerners are people of color. A skilled and thriving southern economy must be an inclusive economy.

To help states realize economic improvement, this report includes a roadmap of critical steps states may take to establish policies that could help them close their skills gaps. State policymakers could:

- Use workforce development strategies, such as sector partnerships and work-based learning, as economic development tools capable of meeting industry needs.
- Invest in communities to implement high-quality workforce development strategies at the local level.
- Establish job-driven financial aid programs that are available to a wide range of students.
- Form middle-skill training pathways and include comprehensive supportive services that enable completion.
- Create state data systems that provide accountability on how training programs are helping residents with diverse needs get skilled jobs.

State policymakers could consider also easing their path to implementation of these steps by taking the following actions, which could help unite a broad set of stakeholders around a common plan for skills development:

- Set a bold goal for increasing the number of adults trained for skilled jobs.
- Create a cross-agency “Skills Cabinet,” and task agency leaders with working together to develop and implement a strategy for meeting the state’s postsecondary attainment goal for adults.

In addition to the roadmap, this report also includes examples of current policy from southern states, proving that these policy changes may be implemented in the region’s unique context. Residents, businesses, and state economies are counting on their leaders to examine these policies and take the appropriate steps that will help them thrive now and in the future. In conjunction with the launch of this southern-focused report, National Skills Coalition is launching its *Southern Skills Policy Initiative*. Through this Initiative, National Skills Coalition will work with teams in five states –Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas – to advance policies that can build a skilled workforce.

Over the next year, National Skills Coalition will work intensively with partners in Georgia, North Carolina, and Tennessee to put forward state policies that help workers and businesses in those states to get the skills they need to compete:

In Georgia, we will promote policies that prepare more residents for skilled jobs by making it easier for people with low incomes to afford postsecondary training. *Partner organizations include Center for Working Families, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute, Annie E. Casey Foundation Atlanta Civic Site, Atlanta Career Rise, and Metro Atlanta Chamber.*

In North Carolina, we will conduct research and engage key stakeholders to build more equitable pathways and work-based learning opportunities for skilled careers for students and workers of color and other underserved populations. *Initial partner organizations include North Carolina Justice Center, North Carolina Community College System, and Eastern Carolina Workforce Development Board.*

In Tennessee, we will identify policies that address the non-academic and advising needs of working students so they can succeed in postsecondary training, as well as opportunities to promote apprenticeship, work-based learning, and postsecondary training that responds to industry needs. *Partner organizations include Complete Tennessee and the Nashville Chamber of Commerce.*

National Skills Coalition will also work with partners in Mississippi and Texas in 2018 to support in-state discussions on apprenticeship and work-based learning.

In Mississippi, we will discuss policies that help more parents build their skills while supporting their families by providing child care assistance to workers in pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs. *Partner organizations include Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative and Moore Community House Women in Construction Program.*

In Texas, we will discuss policies that expand apprenticeship and work-based learning opportunities for both adults and young people. *Initial partner organizations include Educate*

Texas, Austin Community College, and the United Ways of Texas.

Through the duration of the Southern Skills Policy Initiative, NSC will create opportunities for partners from each state to share lessons learned with each other and other community leaders in the region.

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