

Future of Work Task Force Meeting 4 Brief: Education, Skills and Barriers

Workforce development and life-long education systems and strategies are key to success for the future of work. Illinois has several initiatives in place to improve State workforce development systems with an eye toward equity. [The Governor-appointed Illinois Workforce Innovation Board \(IWIB\)](#), composed of employer members across industries, is charged with the goal of evaluating and meeting the workforce needs of Illinois' employers and workers. The IWIB launched the [Equity Task Force in 2020](#) to assess policies, programs, and data and identify strategies to target underserved communities and close the gap in access to quality WIOA-funded workforce development programs in Illinois. Further, [the Governor has convened a Commission on Workforce Equity and Access](#) charged with creating a vision and proposals for an equitable, accessible, and effective state workforce system grounded in an understanding of user and stakeholder experience, including how racial, social, and geographic inequities inform experience and outcomes across Illinois' federally and State-funded workforce systems. With all the great work happening in Illinois, our task force can look toward long term solutions to barriers faced by Illinoisians in their pursuit of life-long learning and skill development.

[Thrive Chicago reports](#) that about 50,000 Chicago youth aged 16-24 are Opportunity Youth, defined as not in school or the labor force, and these youth are disproportionately youth of color. While Illinois houses many education and skills training organizations, they can be difficult for young people to navigate. There must be radical transformation to ensure that we serve disconnected youth. [JFF with Education Systems argues one of the radical changes must be “the big blur.”](#) eliminating the strict boundaries between high school, higher education, and workforce training. Students who do not have post-secondary education are at higher risk for unemployment. Illinois needs to provide new paths for youth to develop skills and networks outside of a college education. [The P33 report on talent in Chicago echoes](#) the need for improved talent development for youth, as their organization works to revitalize the pipeline for young adults to the technology sector. P33 found that the technology industry in Illinois is growing, but has not kept pace with the talent needed for the new workforce. They argue that education systems, K-12 and college, should focus on computer skills as a requirement and increase professional projects that students can use as experience in the labor market. They also urge companies to take responsibility for improving their company culture and hiring practices to increase the diversity of their talent pool. The traditional path to employment out of high school is changing rapidly. In our past task force meetings, many members have suggested solutions that connect employers directly with government workforce programs to create a more streamlined system and ensure the training leads to jobs. Illinois needs solutions that enable young people to receive the skills and training to prepare for the future of work.

Illinois should raise the floor of workforce development and education by focusing on the most vulnerable groups facing the largest barriers to entry. [The Chicago Jobs Council surveyed in 2020 to assess the challenges facing workforce development programs and participants.](#) In their

analysis, they found that the top unmet needs of participants in these programs were child care assistance (50.6%), housing assistance(50.6%), mental healthcare (44.1%), and lack of emergency funds (42.4%). Similarly, the greatest barriers to completion of the program were financial barriers (62.7%) followed closely by childcare (59.3%). A [report by the National Equity Atlas \(NEA\) on workforce equity in Chicago](#) expressed similar concerns for barriers to entry in workforce development programs, noting barriers disproportionately affected people of color, and particularly Black workers. People in Illinois want to learn new skills, but they often cannot due to systemic barriers. Without addressing the barriers to workforce development and education, we cannot adequately address the needs of Illinois workers and employers looking for skilled employees.

The concept of “high-skill” is often more about who is in the profession than what is done. For example, farmworkers, line cooks, and para-professionals all have demanding and difficult work but are considered low-skill occupations. These jobs are largely staffed by marginalized communities: women, people of color, immigrants, incarcerated or formerly incarcerated people, and so on. The future of work will require us to reconsider the definition of a “skilled” job. Traditionally direct care work has been devalued as a profession, notably staffed by women of color; however, a [recent PHI report argues](#) that with the explosion of the care economy it is pivotal we create better professional training for people entering the industry and serve our most vulnerable. By redefining what a skilled professional means, we can widen the opportunities for youth and adults looking to enter growing industries.

[The NEA report](#) also cautions using workforce development if we are not improving the quality of jobs in tandem. They found that people of color are overrepresented in bad jobs at all education levels, writing that “While higher education tends to narrow racial gaps in labor force participation and employment, it does not close gaps in median hourly wages.” The pandemic is increasing the disparity between white workers and workers of color. [P33 similarly notes](#), technology workforce training is often geared toward accessible jobs, but those jobs are not growing in the industry and provide fewer routes to stable, high-earning employment. The care economy is one of the most rapidly expanding sectors, but even if we have skilled workers to do the vital work of caring for our most vulnerable, they must have access to quality jobs after their training. If workers are entering long term education and workforce development programs, we must ensure they have quality, stable, living-wage supported employment when they graduate from the program.

The future of work will require everyone to develop lifelong learning skills and Illinois leaders need to examine the responsibilities that the government, companies, and communities have in creating pathways for people to access skill-building programs.

Reports Used:

[Thrive Chicago - Reconnecting Chicago's Youth A Brief On Assets And Gaps](#)

[JFF - The Big Blur](#)

[P33 - The State of Chicago Tech Talent Report](#)

[Chicago Jobs Council - Supportive Services: Lessons Learned from the Field](#)

[National Equity Access - Advancing Workforce Equity In Chicago A Blueprint For Action](#)
[PHI - Direct Care Work Is Real Work: Elevating the Role of the Direct Care Worker](#)

Guiding Questions:

1. How can Illinois re-envision workforce development and education to include life-long learning?
2. What barriers do workers face when trying to learn new skills and complete educational programs? How can we support their journey's?
3. How can we develop workforce development programs that keep up with emerging technologies?
4. What is considered a "high skill" occupation and how do our unconscious biases play into our definition? What can we do to expand jobs considered "high skill?"
5. How can we develop strategies that combine training and skills development with improving job quality?