Career Pathways Are Not Enough

Andy Nash

Education is Just One Key Component
Adult education programs are offering a lot more work-focused classes nowadays. They teach basic education and ESOL in the context of workforce training. And the training depends on where local employers have said there are jobs. Why focus so much on job preparation? One reason is because most living wage jobs need workers who have stronger math, communication, and technology skills. Also, employers are not doing as much in-house training as they used to. Finally, government funders see education as the solution to the problem of low-wage jobs.

Of course it’s true that education helps some adults access a career pathway and move out of low-wage work. However, the fact remains that those low-wage jobs are still there and someone’s going to do them! The Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that the fastest growing jobs (in real numbers) are low-wage, poor-quality jobs that require no more than a high school diploma. These jobs include retail sales, home health, food preparation, and food service. (See the chart on the next page.) And these jobs are not only low-wage, they also often have poor working conditions, irregular hours, few employment benefits, and limited options for advancement.

So What Should We Do?
According to the Aspen Institute, to help low-wage workers secure high-quality jobs, we need to follow two strategies:

1) BUILD LADDERS. We need to help low-wage workers climb out of poor-quality jobs by providing access to education and training (career pathways).

2) RAISE THE FLOOR: We need to make poor-quality jobs better by improving compensation, benefits, schedules, training, and working conditions so that every worker can have some security and dignity on the job.

“Building ladders” and “raising floors” would improve life for ALL workers — not just provide an escape route for the minority of workers who have the support to succeed on their career pathway.

What Would This Look like in Programs?
If adult education programs embraced this broader approach to workforce development, then in addition to career pathways, we might discuss what
we mean by a “good job.” For example, a good job:

- provides steady income that supports a family
- is meaningful, contributes to society, and provides dignity, self-respect, and opportunities to learn
- provides a predictable work schedule and access to benefits: health and disability insurance, family and medical leave, a safe working environment, grievance protections, retirement savings
- supports worker success through adequate training, supportive supervision, and opportunities for advancement
- encourages worker engagement in the work, creating opportunities for workers to build competence, exercise judgment, and feel a measure of control over their work

We might also study the history of how regular people have fought for and won many improvements in their working conditions. We have the power to make changes. Here are some things we can do:

- Advocate for a minimum wage that is also a “living wage.”
- Work on a public campaign to encourage or require employers to adopt “good job” practices for their low-wage employees.
- Organize a union, or join a worker association that negotiates with employers for better working conditions.
- Advocate for an improved social safety net, which ensures that people can meet their essential needs, such as health, education, food, and housing.

The Cost of Bad Jobs

Poor-quality jobs make all of us less secure, less healthy, and less happy. They lead to low worker morale and high worker turnover. And they put a strain on communities because low-wage work-

### Top 12 Occupations with the most job growth, 2014-24

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<thead>
<tr>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All occupations</td>
<td>150,539.9</td>
<td>160,328.8</td>
<td>9,788.9</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>$35,540</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal care aides</td>
<td>1,768.4</td>
<td>2,226.5</td>
<td>458.1</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>20,440</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registered nurses</td>
<td>2,751.0</td>
<td>3,190.3</td>
<td>439.3</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>66,640</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home health aides</td>
<td>913.5</td>
<td>1,261.9</td>
<td>348.4</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>21,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food prep. &amp; servers (incl. fast food)</td>
<td>3,159.7</td>
<td>3,503.2</td>
<td>343.5</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>18,410</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail salespersons</td>
<td>4,624.9</td>
<td>4,939.1</td>
<td>314.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>21,390</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nursing assistants</td>
<td>1,492.1</td>
<td>1,754.1</td>
<td>262.0</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>25,100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Customer service representatives</td>
<td>2,581.8</td>
<td>2,834.8</td>
<td>252.9</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>31,200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cooks, restaurant</td>
<td>1,109.7</td>
<td>1,268.7</td>
<td>158.9</td>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>22,490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations managers</td>
<td>2,124.1</td>
<td>2,275.2</td>
<td>151.1</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>97,270</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction laborers</td>
<td>1,159.1</td>
<td>1,306.5</td>
<td>147.4</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>31,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountants and auditors</td>
<td>1,332.7</td>
<td>1,475.1</td>
<td>142.4</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>65,940</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical assistants</td>
<td>591.3</td>
<td>730.2</td>
<td>138.9</td>
<td>23.5</td>
<td>29,960</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analyze the chart. Make true statements about the data you see. Source: www.bls.gov/news.release/ecopro.t06.htm
ers do not contribute very much to taxes, so the government has less to spend on programs. Meanwhile, since bad jobs do not pay very well, workers who have those jobs are poor, and they suffer from the stresses of poverty. So they tend to need subsidized health insurance, food stamps, and housing support. With bad jobs, no one wins.

Escape Route for the Few vs. Better Work for Everyone

If the adult education system wants to help students escape poverty, it needs to support adults in many ways. One way is to teach about career pathways. Even in the current context—with so many bad jobs—a career pathway can help a student get out of poverty. However, to help all our students, our programs should teach about the ways we can change the context. After all, we don’t want our career pathways to be narrow ladders that provide an escape route for a few while so many others get left behind in jobs that don’t pay a living wage and offer little in the way of meaning or dignity.

Organizing together as workers and community members, regular people have won all sorts of benefits, including the 8-hour day, a minimum wage, social security benefits, and much more. But there is more to do. By building more ladders and raising the floor, more people will be able to enjoy fulfilling work, meet their needs, care for their families, and create stronger communities.

Andy Nash is the director of the New England Literacy Resource Center at World Education.


AFTER YOU READ:

1) Explain the relationship between building ladders and raising the floor.
2) Look at the box on the right. “High-road” and “low-road” are used as adjectives to describe employers. What do these adjectives mean?
3) How does the data in the chart on p. 52 back up the author’s point that we need to “raise the floor”?