



# Economic Equity Policy Priority Brief

## Workforce Development

### What is Workforce Development?

The ultimate goal of policies geared toward **Workforce Development** is to create a robust, adaptable, and highly skilled workforce that meets the needs of employers and supports economic growth and competitiveness. Workforce development itself is a comprehensive approach to improving the skills, abilities, and employability of the workforce. It encompasses a range of activities, policies, and programs aimed at helping individuals gain the skills they need to succeed in the labor market and ensuring that employers have access to a skilled and capable workforce, especially as it relates to attracting new businesses to an area.

### Workforce Development in the South

When companies, regardless of industry or sector, look to either relocate or expand, one of the most important criteria they focus on is acquiring a skilled workforce. In fact, a state's workforce, both in terms of numbers and quality, remain key factors in a state's ability to remain both a top business investment and a top job creation location. Specifically, the strength of a state's postsecondary workforce and the efforts launched by a state to forge public-private partnerships in strengthening this workforce is consistently cited by economic development recruiters as of paramount importance.

For a number of years now, independent economic development professionals have ranked Southern states exceedingly high in the category of workforce development. For instance, the first seven of the top 10 states with the highest rated workforce development programs in 2023, as reported by [Area Development Magazine](#), considered the leading executive magazine covering corporate site selection and relocation, were all Southern states: in order, Georgia, Virginia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, Tennessee and North Carolina.

Georgia's [Quick Start Program](#) is offered through the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG), the state's provider of certificates and two-year programs.<sup>10</sup> While this arrangement with TCSG has been in place for well over a decade, the state continues to fine tune the program to make it even more effective. During the 2023 legislative session, the governor signed [SB 246](#),

HB 155 and SB 3 to further enhance the efficacy of the Georgia workforce development program. In addition, the state has made a concerted effort to nurture partnerships between TCSG, the Georgia Workforce and Economic Resilience Center at the University of Georgia, various county and city chambers of commerce, nonprofit foundations such as the Williams Family Foundation of Georgia and community groups such as the Kiwanis, Rotary and NAACP, all in an effort to further heighten the impact of its workforce development program.

Virginia also has a highly rated workforce development program that provides customized training to companies operating in the state. In 2023, the state made significant progress in further refining this effort when the governor signed into law HB 2195 and SB 1470 creating the Virginia Department of Workforce Development and Advancement. This was the culmination of a 30-year effort to consolidate the state's various workforce development programs under the aegis of this newly created department.

South Carolina's SC Works is another highly rated workforce development program. As with other successful workforce development programs, SC Works assists employers through the process of screening, matching, hiring, training, and retaining a skilled employee base. In addition, SC Works assists companies in applying for the range of benefits that the state offers to employers, including tax credits. South Carolina also paves the way for collaborations between the state's technical colleges and major industrial players operating in the states such as those in the automotive sector. One such highly rated program is the BMW Scholars Program. This program permits students to attend class full-time at a local community college, such as Greenville Tech, while they work part-time at BMW in nearby Greer, South Carolina. In this manner, not only do the students secure a solid education, they also gain valuable hands-on experience and qualify for full-time positions at BWM once they graduate. Importantly, once a student qualifies for this program, BMW offers tuition assistance through the duration of study. Another program is the culinary program offered at the Culinary Institute of Charleston at Trident Technical College in North Charleston, South Carolina. Students enrolling at the Institute qualify for associate degree and certificate programs in culinary arts, baking and pastry, and hospitality and tourism management with the possibility of hands-on-training at labs and restaurants in the Charleston area, one of the top culinary destinations in the country.

In addition to the above mentioned details from Georgia, Virginia and South Carolina, other Southern states, from Louisiana's Fast Start to Alabama's AIDT to Tennessee's GIVE initiative and the Tennessee Promise, are all examples of Southern states working proactively to advance their economies through workforce development. Perhaps the most striking feature of these disparate programs in these Southern states is their focus on creating customized training programs for these companies, often on a case-by-case basis. The other theme that emerges is the close nexus between the state's community and technical colleges and the departments of commerce or economic development in working closely to align workforce development programs sought by these companies.

## **How Can Establishing Workforce Development Initiatives Advance Equity in the South?**

The initiatives and programs mentioned above are successful examples for other Southern states to reference and use as inspiration for the creation of similar initiatives in their respective states. As reported by the [Center for American Progress](#) in 2019, it is important when developing these programs and initiatives to keep in mind that workforce equity cannot be achieved through skills training alone. Systemic and structural biases rooted in systems such as education, housing, and the criminal legal system that disproportionately disadvantage people of color must also be considered when developing initiatives to ensure that they contribute to advancing equity in workforce development. An emphasis on skills attainment often overlooks these systemic issues, and even high-quality training programs do not necessarily lead to well-paying jobs. This disparity is evident in the fact that many of the fastest-growing occupations pay less than the average income, highlighting that mere training is insufficient for economic stability.

Furthermore, the distribution of low-quality training and low-paying jobs is not uniform and often disproportionately affects women and people of color. These groups often find themselves funneled into lower-paying occupations irrespective of their qualifications or potential. Care must be taken to ensure that workforce development strategies address these inequities adequately. A comprehensive approach that goes beyond closing skills gaps is necessary to address economic disparities and achieve true workforce equity.

Advancing racial and class equity in the American South through workforce development initiatives should involve creating targeted education and training programs, addressing systemic barriers, and engaging communities and employers. Customized training programs should be developed in partnership with historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs), community colleges, and vocational schools to guide marginalized individuals toward high-demand, well-paying jobs. Additionally, providing comprehensive support services such as childcare, transportation, and housing assistance is crucial to enabling participation in these programs and maintaining steady employment.

A focus on enhancing job quality is essential, prioritizing living wages, benefits, job security, and career advancement opportunities. Employer partnerships are vital for creating inclusive hiring practices and offering apprenticeships and on-the-job training. Supporting small businesses, particularly those owned by people of color, with resources and access to capital will help them grow and generate more jobs within their communities. These efforts can ensure that workforce development not only provides employment but also fosters sustainable and equitable economic growth. Advocacy for increased funding and supportive legislation is also critical, ensuring that workforce development initiatives prioritize equity and protect workers' rights. By integrating these strategies, workforce development can significantly reduce racial and class disparities, creating a more inclusive and prosperous Southern economy.

## Legislative Efforts Related to Workforce Development

1. **Georgia:** House Bill 982 now requires the State Workforce Development Board to develop, approve, and annually publish a high-demand career list identifying those careers most critical to the state's current and future workforce needs. The law now also requires the Office of Student Achievement to work in consultation with the State Workforce Development Board to audit and report on the effectiveness of employment, wage attainment, and retention of students in programs that align with the high-demand career list.
2. **North Carolina:** House Bill 976 (which is still under consideration in the House of Representatives) seeks to establish the community college state endowment trust fund to provide grants to community colleges in North Carolina to, among other provisions, fund new programs to respond to local workforce demands.
3. **Mississippi:** House Bill 1567 enacted several revisions to Mississippi's current laws related to workforce development, including providing training and education to citizens seeking employment in high-wage, high-demand industries with documented workforce shortages prioritized by the Office of Workforce Development. The bill also authorizes the creation of a paid internship to students pursuing a bachelor's degree in rehabilitation services and creates a paramedics recruitment and retention scholarship program.
4. **Virginia:** Though not successfully enacted during the 2024 legislative session, House Bill 1289 sought to establish a program within the Virginia Health Workforce Development Authority to strengthen the health and health sciences workforce in Virginia. The program would be established in collaboration with the Department of Labor, the Department of Health Professions, the Department of Education, and the Community College System, among other state entities. The purpose of the program is to create a streamlined and effective pathway for individuals pursuing careers in health sciences, ensuring that education and training are directly aligned with the current and future demands of the healthcare industry with an emphasis on practical, hands-on experience and continuous professional development to ensure a skilled workforce that is adaptable to rapid advancements in healthcare technology and practices.