

# **Building Essential Skills through Training**

## **Baseline Evaluation Report**

**March 2003**

### Project Overview

The Building Essential Skills through Training (BEST) Initiative is a two-year, \$3.5 million, multi-agency partnership designed to integrate adult basic education and job training for Massachusetts' front-line workers.

The BEST initiative aims to:

1. Support industry-driven partnerships that help address the workforce development needs of Massachusetts firm and industries by building workers' skills through education and training;
2. Reform the workforce development system by improving the collaboration and leadership capacity of workforce development organizations and agencies at the state, regional, and local level.

Six Regional Industry Teams (RIT's) were selected and funded through a competitive RFP process in February 2002. Grants ranged in size from approximately \$340,000 - \$700,000.

### Research Summary

FutureWorks' evaluation of BEST runs through the course of the grant. Data collection began in September of 2002 and will continue through December of 2003. The evaluation includes the following:

- Qualitative and quantitative analysis across the six BEST RIT's
- Systems reform analysis at both the regional and state levels
- Impact of participation in BEST on workers and employers
- In-depth case studies of three RIT's (biomanufacturing, metro south west hospitals, Boston financial services).

This baseline report is the first of three reports FutureWorks will deliver to Commonwealth Corporation. The goal of the Baseline Report is to introduce the BEST initiative and provide an accurate description of each RIT at the close of the start-up phase of the initiative

### Key Findings

One-year planning grants may have benefited some sites, especially those sites with little career pathway experience and/or new partnership relationships. It is clear that these sites are struggling to design and implement their projects at the same time.

To enable RIT's to achieve the goals of the BEST initiative, flexibility on the part of sponsoring state agencies is key at both the programmatic level and in the funding arena. Some sites have struggled with the myriad of rules and regulations stemming from a multi-agency partnership.

RIT's are juggling three fundamental components of the BEST initiative: partnership building; training design and implementation; and career pathway mapping and development. Overall, it appears that the time and resources afforded through the BEST grant are insufficient to fully develop each component. As a result, RIT's are prioritizing among project components and focusing on areas that are most relevant to participating partners.

Data reporting has been a challenge for sites and for the evaluation. The statewide MOSES database is not sufficiently tailored to meet that data reporting needs of the BEST project and as a result, each site has created its own data collection and reporting system. This process is inefficient and costly.

Through the BEST initiative, the Regional Industry Teams are forging new and mutually beneficial relationships between local workforce investment boards, education and training providers, and employer and industry groups. To date, the RIT's have been less successful at incorporating organized labor and/or workers into the partnership model. Across the RIT's, few mechanisms have been established to include the voice of workers.

Some employers have expressed concern about the amount of time the initiative is taking – particularly as many employers are currently understaffed. Any industry-driven initiative must grapple with the balance of involving employers enough to know what they need, but not so much as to over-burden them. RIT project managers are already experiencing the difficulty in striking such a balance.

Employees seeking to advance their employment status through BEST training typically require the support of their direct supervisors. In some instances the employees' desire to advance may conflict with supervisors' desire to retain good employees.

The struggle to cover shifts when employees attend BEST courses has the potential to undermine supervisor support for employee training. The tension around work release is especially acute in the health care RIT's where extra personnel to cover shifts is scarce, and needs to be dealt with up-front in the design stage of any incumbent worker training initiative so that supervisor-employee relations are not strained.

RITs beginning career pathway mapping are realizing that it is a time consuming process that requires employer involvement and buy-in. Sites delivering extensive short-term training may be attempting to build trust and buy-in from the employers prior to engaging them in career mapping.