



Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SENATE BILL 0630:

Education - Adult High School Pilot Program - Funding and Grants

TO: Hon. Guy Guzzone, Chair, and Members of the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee

FROM: Christopher Dews, Policy Advocate

DATE: February 17, 2021

The Job Opportunities Task Force (JOTF) is an independent, nonprofit organization that develops and advocates policies and programs to increase the skills, job opportunities, and incomes of low-skill, low-wage workers and job seekers in Maryland. JOTF supports Senate Bill 630 as a means of ensuring that lower-income adult workers, job seekers, and formerly incarcerated persons have access to adult education services that will enable them to garner improved employment opportunities.

The Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce estimated that by 2020, 69 percent of the jobs in Maryland will require some training beyond high school—making a high school diploma a necessary, but not sufficient, credential for most employment opportunities throughout the state and region. Current data both pre and post-pandemic show that this analysis was correct. Even more so considering the amount of small business, restaurant, and retail jobs that have permanently closed were a high school diploma was not necessary. Yet, areas like Baltimore City, where 30-plus years of poorly performing public educational institutions, high dropout rates, and increased levels of juvenile incarceration have led to low levels of high school diploma attainment, are finding thousands of residents in a precarious position with respect to their employment.

In 2019, the Abell Foundation reported that an estimated 81,000 Baltimore City adults (age 18 and over) are lacking a high school diploma—the absence of which leaves them at a considerable disadvantage in the current economy and is correlated with a host of other poor outcomes for individuals, their families, and the broader community. The lack of a high school diploma both reflects and exacerbates some of the most severe inequities in our society. According to the U.S. Census American Community Survey, those with a high school diploma or its equivalent in Baltimore earn about \$7,000 more a year than those without one (an estimated \$28,396 versus \$21,359). The lack of a high school credential restricts opportunities for further education and training—that is, access to the sort of postsecondary career training required for competitiveness in pursuing the region’s middle-skill jobs. There is a correlation between not having a high school diploma and lower employment rates and higher rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration. The absence of a diploma exerts a cost on society in terms of lower tax revenue and higher costs of social services.

It is also of interest to note the correlation between a lack of a high school diploma and incarceration in Maryland. The average reading level of the 19,332 incarcerated citizens in the Maryland prison system is

JOTF JOB OPPORTUNITIES TASK FORCE

Advocating better skills, jobs, and incomes

between 5th and 8th grade. Less than half of this population has a high school diploma when they enter the correctional system. Current Maryland law attempts to address this issue by mandating that incarcerated persons enroll in educational or workforce skills classes for a minimum of 120 days if they lack a high school diploma, but the state fails to offer any incentive for actually completing these programs (i.e. diminution credits). In FY 2017, only 55 of the near 600 youth under the age of 21 attained their GED while enrolled in Correctional Education classes. This system is not effective for ensuring that returning citizens (especially youth) have a fighting chance in the job market upon their release. Studies have shown that recidivism rates for incarcerated persons with a high school diploma/GED or college degree are 7.9% less than the overall imprisoned population.

In September 2020, the Maryland Department of Labor made a tremendous effort to spread access to adult education for lower-income workers and job seekers by providing \$16.8 million in combined state and federal funding to 25 specific adult education providers. Grantees included all 16 Maryland community colleges, state correctional education, and others (the full list can be found [here](#)). Senate Bill 630 seeks to build on these efforts by establishing grant funding for *private* nonprofit organizations that provide adult education services. These appropriations will do wonders in reducing recidivism and increasing employment opportunities for both returning citizens and lower-income jobseekers. For these reasons, we urge a favorable report.