

# Education & Skills

*Strategies to overcome obstacles keeping adults out of the workforce.*



## 24%

OF JOB VACANCIES IN WEST MICHIGAN ARE CONSIDERED "HARD TO FILL"

## 39%

OF HOUSEHOLDS IN OUR AREA FALL BELOW THE ALICE SURVIVAL BUDGET THRESHOLD

IN 2016, JUST

## 58.6%

OF ADULTS IN OUR AREA HAVE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION OR CREDENTIAL

## The Barrier

A shortage of post-secondary education and credentialing among working-age adults contributes to the difficulty West Michigan employers face in hiring a skilled labor force. At the same time, high-demand jobs remain out of reach for the working poor who lack education and training. For workers, a high school diploma is no longer sufficient to gain access to a job that provides a living wage.

- In West Michigan, 24 percent of job vacancies are considered "hard to fill," having been listed for 90 days or longer.
- Michigan's unemployment rate for uneducated adults is approximately twice as high as the overall national rate. Reports show that 8.1% of those with less than a high school diploma are unemployed.
- In West Michigan, 39% of households earn less than the survival level income defined by the United Way as ALICE: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. This is often the result of working in low-wage, low-skill jobs without much opportunity for advancement due to a lack of post-secondary education or skills.
- In 2016, just 58.6% of adults in West Michigan held some level of post-secondary education or credential.
- The lack of a basic education and employability skills limits ability to find gainful employment and to navigate the healthcare, education, and social welfare systems.

## Leading Practices

Goal 2025 calls for 64% of all adults (25+) in West Michigan to have a credential beyond a high school diploma. Employers will find it easier to hire qualified employees, while workers will thrive in sustainable career paths with access to increased education.

- Increase capacity and collaboration of employers, community organizations, and educational institutions to communicate programs and career pathways of in-demand occupations.
- Create and support accessible training programs for adults so that the number of adults with a post-secondary education or training exceeds the national average and the number of adults with less than a high school diploma is lower than the national average.

## Recommendations and Strategies

Increase the skills of working-age adults, 18 to 54, in West Michigan and build a talent pipeline around in-demand occupations.

- Increase employer investment in talent attraction, retention, and development by focusing on clear communication about career paths, tuition reimbursement, on-site training, and partnerships. Connect employers with funding sources for grants and programs to upskill their workforce.
- Improve effectiveness and investment in Adult Basic Education (ABE) programs by providing literacy assessments and training in the workplace.
- Utilize apprenticeships, including those for non-trades occupations.
- Increase state investment in post-secondary education and training by funding more apprenticeships and public-private partnerships and by restraining tuition growth.
- Build partnerships between employers, educational institutions, and community-based organizations. Examples include tuition grants and class credit for skills learned on the job.



After using data to identify four barriers to employment, the Workforce Development Working Group wanted to put a face to our research and test our insights. This persona project, compiled from interviews and the data, confirmed our research and insights, and gives us a clearer view of how barriers impact real people.

## *Karen's Story*

### On mom's career path, education holds the key.

"Karen" knows exactly where she wants to be in three years: a nurse at the local children's hospital. She just has a few other objectives to cross off her list first.

Until this year, the married mother of two was among the 10.3% of adults in West Michigan who have less than a high school diploma. She began pursuing her GED (General Education Development) certificate after discovering she could not land even entry-level work in retail or food service.

Simply finding information about pursuing the GED was difficult until the principal at her son's preschool connected her to resources.

With her GED in hand, Karen is ready to start her nursing education at the local community college. She also is ready to start looking for work, although she knows the lack of post-secondary education will limit her choices and income.

Without any access to tuition support or credit for on the job training, she plans to pursue a third-shift job to maximize her availability for school and family.

"My husband and I respect and support each other, and family is the motivation for everything we do," Karen says. "It's important for me to demonstrate the value of education to our children."



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Learn about other barriers in this series, and strategies for overcoming them.

- [Child Care](#)
- [Substance Use](#)
- [Transportation](#)

[Read the full report on Education & Skills here.](#)