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Adult Education Key to Competitive Mississippi Workforce

*New Report Finds Strength of State's Economy Depends on
Increasing Numbers of Highly Qualified Workers*

(JACKSON) – Investing in adult education is an important strategy for building a competitive workforce and a key first step in connecting low-income and low-skilled workers to livable wages, according to a new report issued today by the Mississippi Economic Policy Center (MEPC).

The report, “Adult Education: Gateway to a More Competitive Workforce,” outlines the challenges facing Mississippi’s economy as the state confronts a projected shortfall of 100,000 qualified workers by 2014. The report also calls for increased investment in adult and postsecondary education to stimulate the state’s economic growth and provide upward mobility for low-income working families.

“In Mississippi, there are more than 330,000 adults of prime working age that have limited opportunities to earn good wages due to a lack of education,” said Ed Sivak, MEPC director. “Increasing education opportunities for these workers gives Mississippi a competitive edge in the knowledge-based, global economy and is especially important given the anticipated shortfall of qualified workers in the state.”

According to the report, workers with higher levels of education are much less likely to be unemployed, rely on public assistance or live in poverty. In Mississippi, the need for increased access to post secondary education is clear:

- Mississippi ranks 49th in the percentage of its working-age adults who have a high school diploma or GED.
- Among the state’s working families, 39 percent are low-income.
- In 57 percent of those families, neither parent has any post-secondary education.

The report identifies innovative programs from the state’s community colleges that effectively provide low-income adults with access to educational opportunities and job training. “In the 21st century economy, 85 percent of jobs require education and job training beyond high school. Mississippi’s community colleges are meeting those needs for hundreds of thousands of

Mississippians each year” stated Dr. Eric Clark Executive Director of the State Board for Community and Junior Colleges.

Workers can substantially increase their earnings by receiving at least one year of postsecondary education or training and a credential. Without the first step of earning a GED, however, opportunities to increase their earnings through additional educational attainment are limited. To address these challenges, the report recommends increased student support services and continued tracking and assessment, of student progress. *Adult Education* also proposes the development of career pathway programs to cultivate industry specific skills for in-demand occupations that pay livable wages.

“Mississippians with higher levels of education earn more and contribute more to their state and local tax systems,” Sivak added. “Investing in adult education is the first step in a successful career pathway and one that can secure long-term prosperity for Mississippi.”

The full report is available on-line at www.mepconline.org.

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The Mississippi Economic Policy Center is an independent, nonpartisan initiative that undertakes rigorous and timely analysis on issues that affect the economic and social well-being of working families and low-wealth Mississippians. MEPC is managed by the Enterprise Corporation of the Delta, a regional financial institution and community development intermediary dedicated to strengthening communities, building assets and improving lives in economically distressed areas across the Mid South.