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Commentary: Funds help adult career program boost workforce, families

By Juan Garza and Bob Batlan - Special to the American-Statesman - Wednesday, May 10, 2017



The Texas Innovative Adult Career Education Grant Program “has launched new careers across Texas with students working as nurses, electronic technicians, network administrators and other highly needed and well-paying professionals,” write Juan Garza and Bob Batlan of Capital IDEA.

Amy Lopez-Escobedo, a Round Rock mother of three, graduated from Austin Community College last May as a registered nurse. She immediately filled one of the nearly 2,000 advertised RN jobs in Central Texas. She is back in a community clinic — this time as a practitioner and not as a patient.

She is one of 83 formerly low-income adults in Central Texas and 794 statewide who have graduated with the support of the Texas Innovative Adult Career Education (ACE) Grant Program since 2014. The initiative has launched new careers across Texas with students working as nurses, electronic technicians, network administrators and other highly needed and well-paying professionals. Their average starting wage was \$20.66 per hour.

ACE provides competitive grant funds to match local funding for innovative and effective economic development workforce strategies across Texas. The programs it supports are based on partnerships with employers and education providers. They move Texans from poverty to the

middle class. The programs supported by ACE result in a significant return on investment to the state.

ACE is in danger as the Texas Senate and House play a high-stakes game of budget chicken. The program and its funding — \$5 million — is a “special item” in the higher education budget, along with other items that don’t fit in a tidy box, such as the University of Texas’ McDonald Observatory. The House budget cuts ACE modestly to \$4.56 million, along with many other special items. The Senate Finance Committee, rather than weigh the merits of any special item, erased them all.

Legislators are in key positions to save ACE. The legislative conference committee will soon forge a budget compromise.

Loss of ACE would be especially painful. Texas needs more trained health care and tech workers. The low-income resident-employer-community college model ACE supports — including Capital IDEA with Austin Community College in Central Texas — has just been validated as one of the most successful workforce development approaches in the nation.

Statesman reporter Dan Zehr covered the recent release of a gold-standard, 10-year, random assignment evaluation of Capital IDEA’s template, Project QUEST in San Antonio. His report states: “A new study finds that the model for a handful of workforce-training initiatives in Texas — including one in Austin — not only lifted low-income residents to middle-class careers, it also led to earnings advantages that expanded over time, making it perhaps the first job-training program in the country to show sustained increases.”

ACE’s impact extends to entire families, including the next generation. Amy’s husband worked two jobs while she was in school. She is now supporting him as he goes to ACC for a career in construction management. Their three children are considering where — not if — they will go to college. Their opportunities are wide open.

We wish the budget conference committee Godspeed as they argue, debate and compromise. Texas families are depending on them.

Garza is chair of Capital IDEA. Batlan is vice chair of Capital IDEA and is involved with Austin Interfaith and Congregation Beth Shalom.