



March 7, 2011

## Community Challenge | Budget cuts will hurt education

Civic, political and corporate leaders have endorsed a program to meet one of this region's biggest challenges: raising the educational attainment levels of our work force. They propose to make the Greater Louisville region more competitive by producing 55,000 additional associate's and bachelor's degree recipients by 2020.

This 55,000 Degrees initiative is a laudable effort, and worthy of our praise and support.

Unfortunately, the federal budget cuts approved recently by the U.S. House of Representatives would make it much harder to meet that goal and much more likely that our region will remain frozen in place, lagging behind the cities we consider our key competitors. Those cuts eliminate federal support for the Workforce Investment Act, which funds job training scholarships that have helped hundreds of low-income and laid-off workers return to school to earn college credits, professional certificates, and associate's and bachelor's degrees.

Instead of being able to help 1,000 or more adults go back to school each year in pursuit of a degree, as KentuckianaWorks has done in each of the past three years, these scholarships would be eliminated as of April 1.

The Workforce Investment Act also funds two youth programs in our region that are the last chance for the 25 percent of our region's ninth-graders who do not graduate on time as 12th-graders. These two programs — called the KentuckianaWorks Youth Career Center in Jefferson County and Bullitt County — have helped more than 300 young people earn their GEDs in the past three years. Hundreds more have been helped in getting jobs while they go back to class to earn that important credential. Even better, dozens of students at the youth career centers each year move from the GED to enroll in college.

The federal budget cuts also would reduce the size of Pell Grants — the federal government's primary way to provide financial support to low-income people so that they can afford to attend college.

For a relatively poor and undereducated state like Kentucky, these cuts will be catastrophic. Without federal funding of the Workforce Investment Act, thousands of adults across our state will stay where they are — laid off or trapped in dead-end jobs. There will be no way for them to go back to school to learn a new skill or obtain a degree.

Without federal funding for Workforce Investment Act youth programs, thousands of young (ages 16-21) high school dropouts will join thousands of adults who left high school without diplomas. They all will be on the streets trying to survive financially in a new economy that offers few jobs for low-skilled Kentuckians and registers a current unemployment rate of 25 percent for high school dropouts.

Citizens of all political persuasions understand the long-term threat large budget deficits represent for our nation's economic health. Unfortunately, the cuts I have described would shrink or eliminate the federal government's investment in the education and retraining of unemployed and underemployed Kentuckians. The net effect is that our economy will lack the skilled workers needed to produce the kind of economic growth that can help the United States work its way out of some of our current budgetary woes.

Now is not the time to cut the federal government's investment in programs that help Kentuckians lift themselves up to a better life through education. If you agree, I urge you to let your congressional representatives know before these threatened cuts take away educational opportunities for Kentuckians.

**JAMES C. WORTHINGTON, Sr.**

Louisville 40202

*James C. Worthington, Sr., is the chairman of the board of KentuckianaWorks, the work-force development agency for Jefferson, Henry, Oldham, Trimble, Spencer, Shelby and Bullitt counties in Kentucky. Worthington, attorney-owner of Worthington Law Firm, PLLC, in Louisville, has been a member of the KentuckianaWorks board since 2002. — Editor*

---