

Partnerships aid lifelong learning, job growth

In the final presidential debate last week, some people were surprised when President Bush started talking about education... in response to a question about jobs.

But as Bush completed his response, it was clear how education and jobs are linked.

An example of the public and private sectors working together on lifelong learning is the Northeast Indiana Lifelong Learning Account (LiLA) demonstration.

LiLAs are employer-matched, portable individual savings accounts used to finance workers' education and training. LiLAs differ from traditional job training programs in that they create systemic change in the way individuals can invest in their own futures, while leveraging employer involvement and investment.

The vision is for any individual worker to be able to contribute to a LiLA account and be matched by his/her employer and, in some cases, third parties.

The combined contributions could then be used for education and training and related activities. The goal is to make LiLAs available to all employees as part of standard employee compensation packages, putting learning opportunities within reach of every working adult.

In its second year, the northeast Indiana LiLA demonstration has 13 employers: five in the public sector, and eight in the private sector. So far, 155 individuals have enrolled in the LiLA program, 76 in the private sector and 79 in the public, including the cities of Auburn and Kendallville.

The Ford Foundation is a lead funder; other supporters are the City of Fort Wayne, Olive B. Cole Foundation, Indiana Department of Workforce Development, Indiana Northeast Development, Lincoln Financial, Noble County Community Foundation, Northeast Indiana Workforce Investment Board, Verizon and a donor-advised account of the Steuben County Community Foundation.

The LiLA concept was developed by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL), a national nonprofit organization, headquartered in Chicago, which focuses on adult learning and education services.

Every LiLA participant has a unique story. For example, "Mike" is a line leader at a manufacturing company in Angola. He is taking classes at Ivy Tech State College in Fort Wayne. His goal is to become a licensed practical nurse.

A cancer survivor, he wants to "give back to the community that gave life back to me."

"LiLAs really give people the opportunity to find out they CAN go back to school," he says. "Before, they wouldn't even bother ... because it is so expensive."

"It is exciting to see the private and public sectors working together to promote lifelong learning," says Amy Sherman, public policy director for CAEL. "(Already) we are seeing increased job skills and even promotions."

The basic demonstration model consists of employers who match employee account funds and employees who contribute a minimum of \$120 up to a maximum of \$500 per year.

The employee maps out a learning plan with an education and career advisor. Third party sources match the combined employer and employee amounts. Once funds are sufficient, the employee submits an application for course fees from an account that is under the administrative oversight of CAEL.

Sherman says CAEL is building support at the local, state and federal levels to make LiLAs available to all workers in Indiana and nationwide.

We applaud the workers, employers and organizations that are helping to give the region a competitive edge through a stronger workforce.

OUR VIEW is written on a rotating basis by Grace Housholder, Dave Kurtz, Matt Getts and Michael Marturello. Publisher Terry Housholder is also a member of the editorial board. We welcome readers' comments.