

EDITORIAL

Training Workers for Good Jobs

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American politicians give lip service to the idea that retraining can give laid-off workers a second, better chance in a globalizing economy. Too often, the government treats such courses like arbitrary hoops for the unemployed to jump through if they expect to receive unemployment benefits. Instead, it could be finding better ways to target skills training to the very best jobs available.

The labor market is full of contradictions. Manufacturers have let millions of skilled laborers go, yet they report personnel shortages. The problem is that someone laid off by a carmaker won't necessarily have the skills to work at a semiconductor factory, or even at a more advanced auto plant.

The majority of federal money for training dislocated workers goes to job-search help — writing résumés, preparing for interviews. The Trade Adjustment Assistance program pays for serious vocational education to help some shift occupations, but last year only 36,000 people began such training.

One program that might be a model for a larger national effort is Per Scholas in the Bronx, which trains low-income residents to be computer-repair technicians. What makes the program so successful is consulting closely with area businesses when it puts together its curriculum, to ensure that its graduates have the skills they need to get hired. That can mean something as simple as asking employers what kind of certification they require or as immediate as letting a company train one of its instructors.

As Dale Russakoff reported recently in *The Washington Post*, since 1998 more than a thousand students have graduated from Per Scholas, and it has found jobs for close to 80 percent of them. The program operates on an annual budget of just \$1.9 million, provided by the City Council and foundation grants. As Per Scholas shows, the question is not whether job training can work, but why there hasn't been a concerted national effort to make it work.