

## **Bridging the Opportunity Gap (861 words)**

*By Jim Carnes*

There's a lot of talk this campaign season about America's core values. One of those is a belief in the opportunity to better oneself through hard work. We hold it as a promise that an honest worker with a regular job should be able not only to cover basic household expenses for today but also to save for tomorrow. Yet here in Alabama, that promise has been broken for many.

A new report called *Bridging the Gap*, to be released Monday by Arise Citizens' Policy Project, examines that broken promise against the backdrop of Alabama's growing economy. It analyzes the successes and failures of our workforce development policies and shows how, with a few improvements modeled on best practices of nearby states, we can close the opportunity gap. The report's findings and recommendations cover three broad areas: education and training, employment and workforce supports. *Bridging the Gap* is part of the national Working Poor Families Project, which evaluates and compares state approaches to workforce development.

In thousands of Alabama families, good-faith efforts are failing to provide economic security, much less advancement, for full-time workers. When their monthly bills come due, they find gaps in their pocketbooks. When they consider better job options, they face gaps in skills or education. A major new industrial facility launches in one region of the state, while the opportunity gap in another area only widens. These gaps are symptoms of a larger problem: the lack of a coherent and comprehensive workforce development policy for Alabama.

The state's recent economic successes make this "policy gap" even more conspicuous. Alabama has experienced unparalleled economic growth over the last decade and a half, driven primarily by our burgeoning transportation industries. For nearly 50 years, the aerospace complex at Huntsville and the engineering and manufacturing facilities clustered around it formed a high-tech island in the more traditional economy of the state. Today, mega-projects such as Mercedes-Benz, Boeing, Honda, Hyundai and ThyssenKrupp are transforming Alabama's economic landscape, deploying billions of state and corporate dollars and creating thousands of high-paying jobs. These gains signal the state's emerging role in the global economy, and a new era for Alabama workers.

But the fanfare obscures another part of the story. The true measure of our success must take into account not only the giant strides at the forefront, but also the steps we are taking to promote advancement across the entire workforce.

In the first decade of the new century, those steps are not keeping pace. Despite our impressive gains – and the state dollars expended to secure them – a significant portion of Alabama's workers struggle each day to meet basic needs. One-third of Alabama working families – almost 200,000 households with children – earn less than the amount considered sufficient to meet their needs without public or private

assistance. These families “left behind” offer a sharp contrast with the state’s bold new development and an urgent challenge to policymakers charged with guiding our economic and social progress.

A strong “bootstraps” ethic of personal responsibility accounts for many notable successes in Alabama’s political, cultural, economic – and athletic – history. Running deeper still, perhaps, is a stubborn pride that historian Wayne Flynt has identified as a defining trait among the poor, disenfranchised White Alabamians who long made up the state’s majority. Together, these independent streaks may help explain Alabama’s traditional failure to invest in the common good. Our public policy generally favors employers over employees, higher earners over lower earners. Efforts to make even modest policy changes in support of low-income working families often face fierce opposition.

A July 2007 policy brief by the Urban Institute highlights this reluctance to offer anything beyond minimal supports to working families. The brief reviews the primary federal and state work support programs – child care, food stamps, federal and state earned income tax credits, Medicaid and State Children’s Health Insurance Programs – in 44 states for which data were available. Only four states invested less per capita than Alabama. Of our neighboring states, all invested more in low-income families than Alabama did.

At one time, Alabama’s leading industries – agriculture, mining, steelmaking, fishing and textiles – relied more heavily on workers’ brawn than on their brains. In the older economy, a host of factors – including deficient education and earning power, oppressive social structures and hard-nosed independence – kept many Alabamians culturally and economically isolated from the nation at large. The changing demands of a high-tech, consumer economy are making it increasingly difficult to get by without connecting to the outside world through education and training.

As a new year begins, let’s resolve to make good on the promise that hard work can lift families out of poverty. We urge our state officials and business leaders to give *Bridging the Gap* a careful reading. Following the report’s release at the State House at 11 a.m. Monday, it will be available online at [www.arisecitizens.org](http://www.arisecitizens.org). In keeping with the best legacy of their past, Alabamians must recognize that the road to economic self-sufficiency today crosses new terrain. Until voters and policymakers support programs that bridge the knowledge and skills gap, that road will remain impassable for many of the state’s low-income workers.

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