

Statement of Brent Parton, President, CareerWise USA

before the

Subcommittee on Higher Education and Workforce Development

Building an AI-Ready America: Strengthening Employer-Led Training

Chairman Owens, Ranking Member Adams, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to testify on the importance of employer leadership in the design and delivery of high-quality workforce development. Industry leadership in the design, delivery, and direct investment in workforce training better supports the talent needs of employers of any size, and improves economic and education outcomes for students and workers these programs serve.

I am Brent Parton, President of CareerWise USA, the nation's leading youth apprenticeship intermediary. As an intermediary, CareerWise connects and partners with employers, high schools, two- and four-year colleges, and state and local education and workforce organizations in over 15 states to build registered apprenticeship programs for young Americans.

Employer-led training is core to our DNA. CareerWise was founded in 2016 by Colorado business leader Noel Ginsburg, inspired by the Swiss apprenticeship system where coordinated industry, education, and government leadership and investment deploys quality apprenticeship at scale for youth across industry sectors. CareerWise built a model to achieve similar results for America's youth.

Today CareerWise partners with hundreds of employers in a wide array of industries — from manufacturers in Colorado to New York healthcare providers to global organizations like my fellow panelist, Accenture— serving nearly 2,600 young people across more than 25 occupations. Our apprentices have earned over \$37 million in wages while still in school, and 93 percent of graduates are employed in their field or enrolled in postsecondary education

We believe the power of apprenticeship is not something our youth can afford to wait to find until they are 29 years old – the average age of apprentice in the U.S. today. Our mission is to make more apprenticeship opportunities available to American youth earlier in their education journey. Apprenticeship is not just a job; it's a foundation in the critical post high school years for building a meaningful career. Apprenticeship is not an alternative to college, it's an affordable earn while you learn postsecondary option that helps students make informed choices about their higher education.

For employers, it's not charity or just corporate social responsibility. It's real work, real skills, and a critical strategy for how employers and industries will connect with and build a generation of talent. For our education and workforce systems, apprenticeship is the key for how they keep pace. Active employer participation in the design and delivery of youth apprenticeship programs is core to the model, which ensures students and workers can work alongside the rapid technological advances in workplaces. The schools and colleges we partner employers with to deliver apprenticeships move at the speed of these changes for their students.

The adoption of AI across industries only will only continue to speed this technological change. This is why I particularly appreciate you, Chairman Owens, and you, Ranking Member Adams, for hosting this timely hearing to discuss how to scale apprenticeship – a proven training model and the gold standard of employer-led training – to prepare students and workers for what is to come in the AI age.

I believe apprenticeship is key to the response of not only the chief concern of this moment: the impact on entry-level jobs. Entry-level jobs aren't going away; however, the nature and types of entry level jobs are quickly evolving and we must redefine career pathways alongside this change, not just react to it. CareerWise is seeing the impact firsthand and are working actively with our employer partners in this critical moment. From employer partners working with us to revise their apprenticeships to include new AI skills, to new demand in manufacturing and the trades, to redesigning apprenticeship pathways to not only assess what apprentices know, but how well they can learn and adapt. In the AI age, more learning happens at work, and more work demands continuous learning. Industry has to play a bigger role at every level and apprenticeship is a key to ensure students and workers actually share in the productive advances AI can bring.

But we are not yet at the scale we need to confront the challenges and opportunities of the AI age. Federal policy that strengthens our workforce education development system is necessary, with sector-based, industry strategies at the center. By this, I mean real national commitment to a workforce system purpose built to be a generational platform that helps prepare the future workforce to compete and secure critical industries, keep workers connected to a job while they upskill, and ensure workers have the support they need to change careers while keeping their livelihoods. Our workforce system should be the infrastructure -- characterized by high-impact value – to ensure Americans can thrive in the AI age.

As a practitioner on the front lines, CareerWise suggests, based upon its work to scale youth apprenticeship, federal policy should pay attention to three distinct features:

- A sector-based infrastructure that makes it easier to partner with industry at scale;
- Investments, including incentives, to focus on real, high quality results; and
- A focus on youth and on early career infrastructure.

Let me say a few words about each feature.

Sector-based Infrastructure: We can't grow youth apprenticeship programs company by company. We need intermediary organizations and industry associations that will make it easier for employers — especially small- and mid-sized businesses — to engage in program design and delivery. The building trades show what happens when industry sets standards, partners in delivery, and shares in cost. I commend the Administration's focus on registered apprenticeship and see real promise in bipartisan A Stronger Workforce for America Act's (ASWA) emphasis on employer-led training and industry-sector partnerships.

Investments Leading to Quality Results: Investments in training should include strong accountability measures reflecting real world outcomes. For example, ASWA's expanded emphasis on skill training investments for upskilling adult workers and incumbent workers training is positive; and ASWA's steps to ensure investments should be linked to results that build high-skills, high-pay careers – is also important. Another example is registered apprenticeship which provides quality, results-oriented frameworks that can be expanded to more occupations across the economy. In addition, the Committee's support for expanding Credential Registries, Learning and Employment Records (LERs) can help workers navigate and present their skills in an increasingly complex credential landscape.

Youth and Early Careers: AI is transforming entry-level work. Rather than eliminating them, AI is rewriting the first rungs of the career ladder. For example, AI will require digital fluency and competence in using AI tools. Added to this are necessary work ready skills such as critical thinking, judgement, complex problem-solving, flexibility or adaptability, and learning skills. At CareerWise, we focus on what we call the "Launchpad Decade" — the window from high school through early adulthood that shapes long-term economic mobility. This is a critical time to deliver experiences that transform young persons' outcomes — not leaving young people alone to navigate debt and struggle to access training to get the skills they need for academic and career success in a rapidly changing economy. The bipartisan A Stronger Workforce for America Act's Youth Apprenticeship Readiness Grants provided an investment guide to increase opportunities for youth participation in registered apprenticeship, including pre-apprenticeship programs. It reflects current thinking that registered apprenticeship is a high-quality, professional, and accelerated pathway to a career, similar to college but with practical learning built-in. ASWA also took critical steps to integrate more work-based learning into youth serving programs.

Throughout my work in this field, I have witnessed firsthand how the absence of consensus around strengthening our workforce system has limited our ability to respond effectively to both looming economic challenges and emerging opportunities. From worker displacement due to trade and prolonged unemployment during the Great Recession, to missed opportunities to better align the workforce system with infrastructure investment, reindustrialization, and growth in the energy sector, the consequences have been clear. I have seen how under-resourced and outdated systems can prove brittle in the face of such pressures. Yet I have also seen extraordinary

resilience — in workers striving to adapt, employers investing to build talent, educators innovating to meet demand, young people pursuing opportunity, and dedicated workforce practitioners at the state and local levels who continue to do the work despite systemic constraints.

The Committee has before it a set of common-sense, bipartisan solutions to address the pressing challenges facing jobseekers and employers. The choices you make now will shape the direction and strength of our nation's workforce efforts for years to come.

First, reauthorize the Workforce Innovation & Opportunity Act (WIOA) with employer-led training at the center of this engagement.

Second, update and modernize the National Apprenticeship Act to clearly define and strengthen the connections among youth apprenticeship, Career and Technical Education (CTE), and registered apprenticeship.

Finally, reauthorize the Carl Perkins Career and Technical Education Act, creating much tighter linkages to registered apprenticeships.

Addressing these challenges does not call for Republican or Democratic solutions — it calls for an American solution, grounded in collaboration. You have the opportunity to connect these tools and build a workforce system that equips the next generation to compete and lead in the global economy.

Our country needs sustained, bipartisan focus on that vision — grounded in what works and bold enough to reimagine what is possible. CareerWise stands ready to partner in that effort. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. CareerWise looks forward to working with the Committee to meet these challenges together.