



**REGIONALISM: A DEFINITION AND GUIDING FRAMEWORK  
FOR THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM  
Approved April 4, 2008**

The concept of “regionalism” is becoming a central tenet of current theory on best workforce development practices. The Illinois Workforce Partnership espouses the goal of crafting high-quality workforce programs not only in conjunction with local partners in education, economic development, workforce development, business, human services, and other stakeholders, but also bringing together groupings of these partners across the traditional boundaries of states, counties, cities, and local workforce areas.

**REGIONALISM IN THE ILLINOIS WORKFORCE SYSTEM**

**IWP believes that high-quality, responsive regional initiatives must be optional, agreed-upon, dynamic (flexible) organizations, not geographically fixed areas, that are formed in response to specific issues and not funding-driven.**

**IWP further believes that regional interactions should be project-by-project, free to cross political boundaries and include all relevant partners, and based on the needs of the specific situation rather than being imposed through static mandated regional partnerships.**

This definition of regionalism includes the following components. **Regional projects and partnerships should in all cases be.....**

**...optional:** As evidenced by the experiences of our twenty-six member workforce areas, any project works best when partners come to the table out of their own self-interest and a desire to collaborate. Partnerships tend to fail when externally mandated if the partnership is not in the interests of each partner or if all partners don't see the value of the collaborative relationship.

**...agreed-upon:** Partnerships must involve a full commitment from all parties. Formal structures such as Memoranda of Understanding must be in place even when no contractual or financial relationship exists. All relevant organizations must participate. It is not enough for the workforce boards to agree, if their local One Stop operators, educational entities, or business partners are not also invested in the project. Regional partnerships by nature demand the same coordination (the DOL's “e3” concept) of education, economic development and workforce development.

**...dynamic (flexible) organizations:** Everyone is invited to the table, and all perspectives are welcomed. Fixed memberships based on long-term programmatic agreements are not responsive enough to meet the needs of demanding regional projects. Rather, new partners may be required to succeed on one project, when their role is smaller/marginal on another project. Leadership/authority, fiscal control, scale and scope should be based on the needs of the project and the qualifications/capacities of each partner, not on hierarchy, tradition, politics or “turf.”

**... not geographically fixed areas:** Our membership has found that just as regional economies interact, inter-relate and blend into one another in ever-shifting and overlapping ways, so regional workforce projects must build different partnerships over time, across industry and across projects based on the needs of the specific project. Thus while one project may warrant/demand a broad regional approach utilizing the efforts of three contiguous workforce areas, another may require two of those workforce areas plus three different areas, and a third project may best be crafted to meet the needs of a specific business or set of proximate businesses within one local area.

**...formed in response to specific issues and ...project-by-project:** As stated above, each project should be crafted based on the needs of that industry/population/economy/etc. and not based on externally mandated relationship definitions.

**...not funding-driven:** Projects should utilize multiple funding streams and not be limited to the allowable activities, eligibility limitations or goals of one funding source or government program. Local areas should avoid “creating” new programs or partnerships simply because funds become available for projects of that type, but should craft projects to meet the specific needs of the local and regional economies, and seek funds for those projects once the partnerships have been built and systems put in place.

**... free to cross political boundaries and include all relevant partners:** Not only do workforce development and economic development partnerships occur across local workforce areas, but they often occur across state and even national boundaries. Particularly in northeastern Illinois and Southern Illinois, but actually in all areas bordering other states, economic activity and thus workforce activity must and does cross these borders. We advocate for funding and program solutions from the Federal government and through agreements among State governments that facilitate smooth operations of collaborative regional projects across state lines.

**...based on the needs of the specific situation rather than being imposed through static mandated regional partnerships:** In summary, we advocate a network of regional workforce projects that is responsive to local and regional needs and that remain under the authority of each local workforce area partner. We believe that regional workforce projects may be initiated by local workforce agencies, local boards, economic development entities, state entities or other partners – whatever organization is most appropriate and able to initiate such a project. We continue to believe that artificial regional boundaries and top-down approaches are counter-productive to high-quality, responsive regional workforce solutions. We cite as examples the attached descriptions of successful regional workforce development partnerships implemented by our local workforce area members. These projects share the characteristics we have described and serve as testimony to the value of our position.

We provide this definition...

- As a guide for our membership and other workforce professionals as we undertake efforts toward building regional partnerships and
- To provide elected officials, economic developers and other policy makers a framework for developing, improving, guiding and funding the best possible regional workforce initiatives in their communities and throughout Illinois.

For more information on this position, contact any member of the Illinois Workforce Partnership. As a supplement to this definition, IWP will be collecting and disseminating case studies of excellent regional workforce development projects undertaken by our members and their local and regional partners.