



NEWS RELEASE

State of the Region 2008

For Immediate Release

Contact: Greg Northrup, President

616-356-6060 Cell: 616-204-0155

WMSA Seeks to Expand Certification of the Region's Workforce *Certificate Will Provide Common Definition of 'Qualified Job Candidate'*

WEST MICHIGAN—April 23, 2008—The West Michigan Strategic Alliance and its partners are seeking to leverage \$60 million in funding over the next nine years to strengthen skills and 'certify' the next generation of employees in West Michigan for the modern workforce.

WMSA and its partners are planning to offer the National Career Readiness Certificate (NCRC) in the region to provide a standard definition for "qualified job candidate." ACT Inc.'s National Career Readiness Certificate is a nationwide workforce credentialing initiative that allows recipients to demonstrate competence in the key foundational skills necessary for virtually every job, and at the skill levels required for the particular jobs of interest to them.

The plan was announced today as part of WMSA's 2008 State of the Region event, "It All Adds Up," which focused on labor force issues. At last year's annual meeting, participants indicated that recruiting and retaining workforce talent was the number one priority for the region. The certification program was highlighted at a pre-event media briefing today as one of several efforts underway or planned to build on and strengthen the skills of the regional labor pool. **[See other talent-related projects in sidebar release in this media kit]**

The NCRC was developed by ACT, [www.act.org] the same not-for-profit organization that develops and administers the ACT test for students entering college. More than 203 Michigan employers representing nearly 35,000 employees are already requesting and/or requiring the NCRC for current employees and new hires.

[For more on the NCRC, see www.act.org/certificate/]

Bill Guest, president and managing director of Metrics Reporting Inc., made the business case for the NCRC. The idea is part of the next phase of the WorkKeys Innovation, which in turn is part of WMSA's WIRE D (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) project.

[See <http://www.wiredwestmi.org/> for more on WIRE D West Michigan]

[See elements of the WorkKeys Report in this media kit; full report available]

"The NCRC provides individuals with steps to success, leading to valuable occupational training," Guest said. "The benefits to this approach are that the NCRC is based on WorkKeys, an ACT product already proven to be valid, reliable, cost effective and most important, aligned to employer needs."



[Facts for reporters about WorkKeys are available at: www.act.org/news/mediakit/work.html]

The WIRED project has already successfully piloted the NCRC program in the West Michigan region. Officials issued 11,732 certificates in West Michigan in 2007 and the first quarter of 2008, a higher concentration per capita than any region or state working with WorkKeys-driven Career Readiness Certificate programs.

Based in part on the successful efforts in West Michigan, the certificate is gaining traction in the rest of the state as well. The Michigan Department of Education has included in the Michigan Merit Exam two WorkKeys assessments – Reading for Information and Applied Mathematics – needed to receive an NCRC. Michigan's workforce development board, the Council for Labor and Economic Growth (CLEG) is reviewing the NCRC for potential statewide implementation as a work skills credential. Community colleges around the state are implementing NCRC programs.

"ACT developed WorkKeys and the National Career Readiness Certificate as a way to communicate essential skills to all groups that make a successful economy function -- including businesses, educators, workforce and economic developers, employees and job seekers," said Richard Ferguson, CEO and chairman of ACT. "ACT is pleased that West Michigan is using these tools so effectively to improve the region's economic prosperity and the careers of its residents. West Michigan is demonstrating its commitment to ensuring that its current and future workers possess the skills they require for success." [See Ferguson bio in media kit]

The funding requested from government and philanthropic sources to implement the NCRC comes as the three-year WIRED grant for the region is nearing expiration in February of 2009. The WIRED funds provided most of the start-up costs for piloting the program, and for garnering a critical mass of employers in the region who now recognize – and request – the NCRC as a measure of core job skills. The \$60 million requested would be used through 2017 to, in part, reach special populations and work on literacy skills to ensure that 100 percent of the West Michigan population has the opportunity to earn the NCRC.

"Our goal with this certification process, as always, is to collaborate to make West Michigan a leading region when it comes to having a talented pool of local employees for the next generation of companies," said Greg Northrup, WMSA president. "This will benefit the many businesses and residents of the region alike."

About the West Michigan Strategic Alliance

The West Michigan Strategic Alliance serves as a catalyst for regional collaboration among the businesses, institutions and governmental units serving 1.3 million people living in a seven county region encompassing the cities of Grand Rapids, Muskegon and Holland. The Alliance works to encourage a regional mindset, which will foster collaboration on critical issues that impact how we live, learn, work and play. Additional information on the Alliance is available at www.wm-alliance.org

-end-