EF INTERNATIONAL ADVISORS

DISCUSSION BRIEF

Upskilling at the Speed of AI

The pace, scale, and policy of building a tech-enabled North Texas workforce

Prepared as a contribution from EF International Advisors as a member of the
North Texas IT Sector Partnership, Policy Action Team

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Executive Summary

Artificial intelligence is recomposing work across every sector and at every level. How far it displaces workers rather than augmenting them is genuinely unsettled; the outcome depends heavily on how quickly people can adapt, reskill, and upskill. What is not in dispute is the direction of the shift: the value of human work is moving toward judgment, inquiry, adaptability, and the responsible use of new tools. The question for North Texas is whether the region can build those capacities at the pace and scale the technology now demands.

The region enters this moment from real strength. Dallas–Fort Worth was named the top-ranked tech hub in North America for 2026, sits on a regional labor force of roughly 4.4 million, and is home to more than 300,000 tech workers, one of the largest such concentrations in the country. *References: Site Selection Magazine; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; CompTIA.* But a lead is not a moat. Employers and talent are mobile, and the advantage holds only if the existing workforce can put AI to work faster than competitors elsewhere.

North Texas already has real assets to build on: an industry-led sector partnership, one of the nation's largest community-college systems alongside a deep university base, established employer-training funds, and a demand-side skills framework that defines what a tech-enabled worker needs to know. Among those assets is a live, state-funded apprenticeship in data analytics and AI. What the region does not yet have is a way to upskill incumbent workers at the speed the tools are changing. That gap (pace, scale, and currency) is the subject of this brief.

History is clear on the pattern. Every general-purpose technology shock has triggered a workforce response; the responses that worked were fast, employer-embedded mobilizations framed around competitiveness, and the recurring American mistake has been rebuilding programs from scratch each cycle rather than iterating a standing system.

This brief synthesizes that history, the most aggressive domestic and international models, and the current Texas and federal policy landscape, to support the Policy Action Team's June discussion. It does not advocate a single solution. Where it points to a concept, such as running the partnership's existing apprenticeship as a faster, employer-defined “Skills Reserve,” it is offered as an illustration and an open question, not a claim: whether such a cycle could run on the existing funding rail or would require additional or new resources is precisely the kind of thing the team and its administrators would need to determine.

Purpose and Context

EF International Advisors prepared this brief as a contribution to the Policy Action Team, one of three action teams under the North Texas IT Sector Partnership. Drawing on EFIA's advisory work across education and workforce systems and on the partnership's own materials, it synthesizes public precedent, current policy, and historical pattern into a single frame the team and its industry partners can react to.

It responds directly to what members have said they want. In the partnership's own survey, members ranked AI policy and governance their top priority, named cybersecurity and data privacy among the leading concerns, and identified talent and workforce implications as the single strongest driver of research value. *Source: Policy Action Team member survey, February 2026.* This brief sits at that intersection of AI, workforce, and policy.

It also complements the demand-side work the team has already done. The Most Valuable Employee skills framework, a draft developed from the team's discussion by Lynn Hoffman of Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas, defines *what* a tech-enabled workforce needs to know. This brief addresses the supply side: *how* a region builds those skills fast enough and at scale, and what policy and funding make that possible.

This is a member contribution, offered for the team's reaction rather than for adoption: it frames a challenge and the options around it so the June conversation can be sharper. It is deliberately a frame, not a plan or a proposal. One scope note: the focus is tech-enablement across all sectors and levels (the premise that every job is becoming a tech-enabled job), tied specifically to regional competitiveness, rather than the broader question of workforce-displacement policy that sits with other bodies.

1. The scale and pace of the challenge

The size of the shift is now measurable. Global employer surveys find that roughly 39 percent of workers' core skills will be disrupted by 2030, that 59 percent of workers will need training, and that 86 percent of employers expect AI to transform their business, even as the same analysis projects net job growth, with substantial churn beneath the surface. *Reference: WEF Future of Jobs Report 2025.*

Those proportions become concrete at the regional level. By way of scale: applied to DFW's roughly 4.4 million workers, the estimate that 59 percent will need some retraining this decade would touch on the order of two and a half million people; even the narrower 39-percent figure points past 1.7 million. Only a fraction of that involves substantive AI-related reskilling, but any reasonable fraction still dwarfs a single apprenticeship that today reaches an initial cohort measured in tens of employees. *(Illustrative; figures applied to BLS regional labor-force data.)*

The harder part is the supply side, and the hardest cell within it is specific. The entry pipeline, preparing new workers, is comparatively well served by existing career-and-technical-education and apprenticeship models and is largely the focus of a separate action team. The distinctive challenge for this team is incumbent upskilling: current workers, across all sectors and levels, who must adopt AI in roles that already exist. It is the least-evidenced, most employer-owned, and most time-sensitive part of the problem.

Pace compounds the difficulty. AI capability iterates on a scale of months, while training systems built for multi-year credential cycles fall behind; even the region's own AI apprenticeship reflects how fast the frontier moves, with its content already needing refresh barely a year after design. *(EFIA field research, 2026.)* The consequence of getting pace or scale wrong is not abstract: if the region trains too slowly or too narrowly, the productivity gains from AI accrue elsewhere, the top-hub ranking erodes, and the mobile employers and talent the ranking attracts have less reason to stay. As Singapore's leadership has

framed it, no economic law guarantees that lost roles are automatically replaced; the outcome depends on deliberate investment.

The debate: how much, and how fast

The size of the disruption is contested by the people closest to it, and the disagreement is itself instructive. Anthropic's Dario Amodei has warned that AI could eliminate as much as half of entry-level white-collar jobs within one to five years and push unemployment toward 10–20 percent, with finance, law, consulting, and tech most exposed. NVIDIA's Jensen Huang has publicly rejected that framing, arguing that productivity gains create jobs and that AI changes roles, including his own, rather than erasing them wholesale. OpenAI's Sam Altman sits between them, making a case for "realistic optimism" grounded in the long history of technological transitions. *References: Axios, 2025; reporting from VivaTech 2025; OpenAI.*

Voice (2025–26)	Position	What is notable
Dario Amodei *Anthropic*	Hard warning on entry-level displacement	Up to half of entry-level white-collar jobs at risk within five years, unemployment possibly 10–20 percent; by early 2026 reframed as an "unusually painful" transition. Names a "missing rung": AI automates the very tasks juniors once learned from.
Jensen Huang *NVIDIA*	Rejects the displacement framing	"You are not going to lose your job to AI: you are going to lose it to someone who uses AI." Points to a multi-trillion-dollar data-center buildout (McKinsey projects roughly $6.7 trillion in cumulative global investment by 2030) driving a boom in skilled trades; calls the dire predictions unhelpful.
Sam Altman *OpenAI*	Displacement is real, but mixed with hype	Says AI can already do entry-level work and that some firms are "AI-washing" layoffs they had planned anyway, while still arguing for "realistic optimism" over the long run.
Erik Brynjolfsson *Stanford*	Empirical, uneven, gradual	Field studies show AI augments most where workers are least experienced; a roughly 13 percent relative employment decline for early-career workers in highly exposed roles; the economy is moving "from an investment phase to a harvest phase."
Anthropic Economic Index *Jan + Mar 2026*	Hard data on what AI is used for	Over a third of occupations (about 36 percent) see AI used in at least a quarter of their tasks, and roughly 4 percent across three-quarters. A task-level deskilling signal: AI is used on the higher-skill parts of a job, so fully handing those off would

Voice (2025–26)	Position	What is notable
		leave a lower-skill mix. Higher-wage, college-educated workers are so far the heaviest adopters and report the largest productivity gains, and the gap between early adopters and everyone else is widening.
WEF Future of Jobs *2025*	Net growth with heavy churn	39 percent of skills change by 2030 (down from 44 percent in 2023, a sign upskilling is starting to work); 170 million new roles, 92 million displaced; 77 percent of employers plan to upskill staff for AI.

The research community is more measured. The most-cited field experiment (Brynjolfsson, Li, and Raymond's randomized study of more than 5,000 customer-support agents) found generative AI raised productivity about 14 percent on average, but roughly 34 percent for the least-experienced workers and close to zero for the most experienced: evidence of augmentation that narrows skill gaps rather than wholesale replacement. On the macro side, Daron Acemoglu estimates AI will lift total factor productivity by less than 0.7 percent over a decade, because the hardest, judgment-heavy tasks resist automation. Reviews of the early evidence describe adjustment at the margin (task reallocation and reshaped career ladders, with real pressure on entry-level rungs) rather than broad displacement. *References: Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond (QJE, 2025); Acemoglu, "The Simple Macroeconomics of AI" (2025); International Center for Law & Economics evidence review, 2026.*

These findings are often run together into a single claim, that AI mainly helps lower-skilled workers while displacing higher-skilled ones. The evidence does not support that, and the distinction matters. The controlled studies measure a leveling effect: given the same AI tool, less-experienced workers gain the most, because the tool transmits the practices of expert performers and compresses the experience curve rather than replacing the experts. A separate, task-level finding shows that AI tends to be used on the higher-skill parts of a job; if those parts were fully handed off, what remained could be a lower-skill mix. That is a conditional deskilling pressure, not an observed replacement of skilled people, and in some roles it runs the other way. And in real-world adoption, higher-skilled workers are so far the heaviest users and may be pulling ahead. The honest reading is that the effect is mixed and depends on the unit of analysis, which is precisely why the variable worth managing is the pace at which the regional workforce adapts rather than a forecast of who wins. *References: Brynjolfsson, Li & Raymond (QJE, 2025); Anthropic Economic Index, 2026.*

One near-term pattern is clearer than the rest. Entry-level hiring in exposed fields is contracting first, which severs the ladder that juniors once climbed. That shifts the target from retraining the displaced toward protecting skill trajectories and the entry rung itself, and it raises the value of precisely what AI does least well: judgment, oversight, and adaptability. *References: Anthropic Economic Index, 2026; Brynjolfsson, 2025.*

Three things are worth drawing from that spread. The common ground is real: nearly everyone agrees AI is already reshaping work, that entry-level and routine cognitive tasks are most exposed, and that the durable human advantage shifts toward judgment, oversight, and adaptability. The divergence is almost entirely about magnitude and speed (how many roles, how fast), not direction. And the speakers' incentives cut visibly: the developers sounding the loudest alarm and those dismissing it both sell the technology in question, a tension Huang pointed to directly in dismissing Amodei, while the academic economists, comparatively disinterested, land on the more incremental picture. For this team the lesson is not which forecast proves right. It is that the plausible range is wide, the one variable the region actually controls is the pace at which its workforce adapts, and that is the case for moving before the argument is settled.

How the demand-side framework compares

Because the brief turns next to supply, it is worth situating the demand-side framework against how the rest of the country and the world are answering the same question. The Most Valuable Employee draft aligns closely with the major frameworks, which is a sign it is on solid ground; the comparison also surfaces a few additions worth the team's attention.

MVE cluster (draft)	How it maps to national and international frameworks
Digital & AI fluency	Matches the WEF's fastest-growing skills (AI and big data, technological literacy) and Singapore SkillsFuture's digital core skills.
Systems thinking & problem-solving	Aligns with WEF analytical thinking and the 21st Century Skills tradition's critical thinking.
Adaptability & continuous learning	Mirrors WEF resilience, flexibility, and lifelong learning, the most-cited durable skills across frameworks.
Communication & collaboration	Two of P21's "four Cs" (communication, collaboration); also core to WEF leadership and social influence.
Not yet explicit in the draft	Cybersecurity and security awareness; ethical reasoning and responsible-AI judgment; creativity (the fourth P21 "C"); and an explicit statement of declining skills. Several frameworks name these directly, and cybersecurity is a stated member priority.

The alignment is strong, and the gaps are addressable. Cybersecurity is the most notable: it is a stated member priority and sits on the partnership's own agenda, yet it is not named explicitly in the draft skill set. *References: WEF Future of Jobs 2025; Partnership for 21st Century Skills; Singapore SkillsFuture.* Naming the missing capacities now keeps the demand side current with the frameworks the region is competing against.

2. What history teaches about upskilling at scale

This is a recurring moment, not a novel one. Mechanization, electrification, and the computer each forced a workforce to re-skill, and the record offers both models worth borrowing and warnings worth heeding, several of them at a scale that makes the present effort look modest by comparison.

Models and warnings from a century of practice

Effort (era) and size	What it shows for North Texas
Training Within Industry *U.S., 1940–45 · ~16,000 war plants*	Under wartime urgency, a fast, standardized, employer-embedded program upskilled supervisors and front-line workers across roughly 16,000 plants. It is the origin of modern structured on-the-job training. The lesson: speed and employer-embeddedness beat new bureaucracy.
Cooperative Extension Service *Smith-Lever Act, 1914 · nationwide, still operating*	A standing system to continuously diffuse new technique to an existing workforce (farmers) through land-grant universities, delivered locally and still running a century later. The lesson: durable upskilling is continuous infrastructure, not an episodic program. The modern local-diffusion node already exists in the community-college system.
GI Bill and the National Defense Education Act *1944 and 1958 · ~7.8M veterans educated/trained*	Public investment in human capital at scale: the GI Bill supported education or training for roughly 7.8 million returning veterans, and the NDEA was a direct response to an external competitiveness shock, Sputnik. The lesson: framed as competitiveness and security, large-scale skills investment has a proven return.
The federal training lineage *MDTA → CETA → JTPA → WIA → WIOA, 1962–2014*	The system was rebuilt roughly every decade, losing institutional memory each time. The lesson, a warning, is to iterate a standing rail rather than keep starting over.
Trade Adjustment Assistance *1962*	Reskilling delivered reactively, after layoffs. The lesson, a second warning, is that reactive reskilling underperforms proactive upskilling.

What made these efforts work was rarely a single actor. In nearly every case, three moved together: public policy supplied funding and legitimacy, employer groups defined the demand and absorbed the trainees, and education institutions delivered the learning. Training Within Industry paired federal mobilization with plant-level employers; the Cooperative Extension Service paired federal statute with land-grant colleges and working farmers; the GI Bill paired federal money with colleges and a returning workforce. Where any leg was missing (funding without employer demand, or a vocabulary without delivery capacity), the effort stalled. That braid of policy, employers, and education is the same one North Texas is now positioned to tie.

A regional analogue: Northeast Indiana

One regional precedent is worth the team's attention because it mirrors North Texas's choice, whether to recover an old economy or build the next one. The Northeast Indiana Talent Initiative launched in the shadow of the Great Recession, as a manufacturing-dependent region was still shedding jobs: the Fort Wayne area lost nearly 24,800 jobs between September 2007 and September 2009, and unemployment reached roughly 13 percent in May 2009. *(Recovery figures: NBER and regional reporting; to be confirmed before external use.)*

Rather than treat that as a short-term placement problem, the region treated it as a systems-design problem. Backed by a $20 million Lilly Endowment grant, the initiative aligned K–12 and New Tech Network schools, Project Lead the Way, Ivy Tech, universities, employers, workforce agencies, and economic-development leaders around the skills that defense, aerospace, advanced-manufacturing, and medical-device employers actually needed. *(Reference: Lilly Endowment; Northeast Indiana Regional Partnership.)*

It did not single-handedly save the regional economy; the broader macroeconomic rebound, the auto and manufacturing recovery, and private employer investment all contributed. But the comeback was led by the very sectors the strategy had targeted. In the five years after the recession's 2009 trough, transportation-equipment manufacturing employment in the region rose 64 percent and fabricated-metal manufacturing rose 37 percent, with health care among the other top gainers. The strategy's real significance was posture: recession as the catalyst, talent alignment as the response, regional resilience as the result. The same move is available to North Texas now, with the advantage that it does not require a downturn to force it. *(Sector figures: Northeast Indiana Works, September 2014 Labor Market Information report, drawing on Indiana Department of Workforce Development and EMSI data.)*

Where it is working now, and at what size

Other jurisdictions are already running versions of what this region is weighing. The selection below is less a menu than a set of working reference points, each tested at real scale.

Jurisdiction · program	What is portable to North Texas
Colorado *Opportunity Now + Regional Talent Summits*	The closest U.S. analog to what this region is weighing: a governor-appointed workforce council plus a single-mission non-profit, with about $85 million seeding 46 talent partnerships and regional committees producing tactical plans.
Ohio *TechCred*	Quarterly funding rounds on rolling employer applications (about $2,000 per credential, capped per round and per year), reaching roughly 3,500 employers and 120,000 credentials since 2019. The mechanism that operates closest to the speed of business.
Indiana *Next Level Jobs*	An employer training grant of about $5,000 per employee (capped per employer) across six priority sectors, roughly 30,000 trained, with the statewide community-college system as the delivery backbone, close to what an administrative pilot here could authorize.

Jurisdiction · program	What is portable to North Texas
Tennessee / North Carolina *Drive to 55 / myFutureNC*	The power of a single memorable number to organize a coalition: Tennessee's “55 percent credentialed by 2025” and North Carolina's “2 million by 2030,” with North Carolina deliberately housing the goal in a non-profit so it survives changes in administration.
United Kingdom *Local Skills Improvement Plans*	The most direct institutional parallel: under a 2022 law, a chamber of commerce is the legally designated employer voice for a region, producing a multi-year skills plan that training providers must take into account. Of 39 English plans, 33 are chamber-led, a model a region could echo through a memorandum of understanding rather than new legislation.
Australia *Jobs and Skills Councils*	Ten industry-led, tripartite councils (employer, government, and worker voice) each owning workforce planning for one sector, backed by about $402 million. Its sector structure maps directly onto a six-sector regional framework, and its 2025 plan names embedding AI skills a national priority.
Germany / Switzerland *Dual VET systems*	Employer associations co-own the training system rather than consume it; in Switzerland, firms contribute more to the system (about CHF 5.3 billion) than the state does, and roughly two-thirds of young people enter apprenticeships. The portable principle: employers own the credential definition.
Singapore *SkillsFuture*	Individual lifelong-learning accounts (about S$500 per citizen, topped up over time) with up to 90 percent course subsidy; about 555,000 enrollments in 2024, and a mid-career subsidy for workers over 40 that speaks directly to the deskilling and missing-rung problems.

Several patterns repeat across them. Systems built around sectors outperform general-purpose ones; chambers of commerce keep turning out to be the natural home for the employer voice; the most durable efforts give workers a formal seat alongside employers and government; a single memorable number organizes a coalition better than a plan does; and a goal housed in a non-state body survives the change in administration that a goal housed in an agency often does not. Two stand out for North Texas in particular: the United Kingdom's chamber-led skills plans as the closest institutional parallel, and Australia's sector councils as the closest match to a six-sector regional framework.

Texas has its own customized-grant tradition through the Skills Development Fund, and San Antonio offers the state's clearest sector-training outcome. Project QUEST, a San Antonio nonprofit founded in 1992, runs sector-based training with intensive wraparound support, and its results are among the strongest in the field. A randomized controlled trial found sustained earnings gains that grew over time, reaching roughly $5,490 per year by the ninth year, a 20 percent increase over the control group, and a later fourteen-year analysis put the return on investment at 234 percent on about $16,244 invested per participant. Participants' own earnings rose over the course of the evaluation from an average of about $11,700 at entry to roughly $33,600; because the control group also climbed, the effect attributable to the program is the difference between the two, not the full increase.

One distinction matters for how this precedent should be read. QUEST's model, and the evidence behind it, describes lifting under-skilled adults out of low-wage work and into middle-skill careers, a mobility play. That is a different problem than reskilling workers already in skilled or higher-wage roles to stay ahead of AI-driven change, which is closer to the gap this brief is concerned with. What QUEST establishes is therefore not a direct analog for that reskilling challenge but something narrower and still useful: publicly funded, sector-based, employer-aligned training with real support can produce measurable, durable returns. The city's Ready to Work program later extended that model to municipal scale through a voter-approved, 1/8-cent sales tax estimated at $200 million over five years, with QUEST among its four prime contractors. *References: Roder & Elliott, Nine Year Gains: Project QUEST's Continuing Impact (Economic Mobility Corporation, 2019), for the year-nine earnings figures; Fourteen Year Gains (Economic Mobility Corporation, 2024) for the 234% ROI; City of San Antonio / SA Ready to Work for the program structure.*

These examples operate at different altitudes. Singapore and South Korea drive change at the national level, with whole-of-government strategies; Ohio, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas act at the state level with regional and college-based delivery. North Texas sits at the regional tier, close enough to employers to define real demand, and positioned to shape the state policy that funds the response. The most effective systems pair national or state strategy with regional, employer-anchored delivery; that pairing is exactly what the partnership is positioned to assemble.

How past skills efforts actually scaled

Closer to the present, four U.S. efforts to define and spread workplace skills show how coordination actually happens, and how it fails. Each one rhymes with what this partnership is now attempting.

Initiative (era) · who coordinated it	What it shows
SCANS *1990–92 · U.S. Dept. of Labor commission*	A federal commission of employers, educators, and labor defined the workplace competencies schools were not teaching. Strength: bipartisan, employer-grounded, simple. Weakness: federal and top-down, with no engine to implement it; little happened for a decade.
Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) *2002–18 · tech-industry coalition + U.S. Dept. of Education*	Apple, Cisco, Dell, Microsoft and others funded an NGO that built the memorable “four Cs” and 16 “leadership states.” Strength: a marketable framework employers and schools could both use. Weakness: corporate funding waned and it had no permanent home; it was absorbed into Battelle for Kids around 2018.
Common Core *2009–10 · NGA + CCSSO + Achieve, Gates-funded*	A governors-and-chiefs coalition with foundation money and a federal Race-to-the-Top incentive reached 41 states in about 18 months, then became politically toxic by 2013–14 as the federal incentive was read as coercion, and states withdrew. Lesson: federal carrots accelerate adoption but invite backlash.

Initiative (era) · who coordinated it	What it shows
Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) *2014–present · U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation*	An employer-led, demand-driven method deployed through local chambers; by 2025 about 1,427 network members, 91 collaboratives, and 1,700 employers across 44 states. Strength: no federal entanglement, scales without legislation. The closest live model to what a regional partnership can run.

Read together, they reveal a recurring recipe: a precipitating frame (globalization, then the early internet, now AI); an anchor organization that is not a government agency; an industry coalition with marquee names; foundation money rather than public money alone; a simple, memorable framework; a state coalition; and at most a light federal nudge. The two efforts that avoided heavy federal involvement, P21 and TPM, outlasted the one that embraced it. Two lessons carry over directly. First, frameworks endure when a non-state body owns them across political cycles rather than depending on any single administration. Second, a skills vocabulary without funding and assessment behind it tends to stall, which is precisely why the supply-side and policy questions in this brief matter as much as the demand-side definition. The design question for North Texas is therefore less "what new program?" than "how do we iterate what we already have into something that moves at the speed of the technology, and make it durable enough to outlast a budget cycle?" *References: U.S. Department of Labor (SCANS); Battelle for Kids (P21); NGA and CCSSO (Common Core); U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation (TPM).*

What the record warns against

The same history that shows what works also shows how these efforts fail. The patterns are consistent enough to name in advance, and most are matters of design posture rather than resources.

Failure mode (real example)	The safeguard the record suggests
Disguised federal involvement *Common Core read as federal coercion via Race to the Top; six states withdrew.*	Stay state-led and state-funded. If federal dollars flow in, name them and isolate them rather than making adoption contingent on them.
New bureaucracies that outlive their purpose *Common Core's testing consortia became political targets; states pulled out.*	Run any new effort through existing infrastructure (the workforce commission, the community college, the chambers) rather than standing up a new entity that opponents can name and attack.
A framework with no delivery behind it *P21's "four Cs" outran the curriculum, training, and assessment meant to support them.*	Design the frame, the funding, the delivery, and the measurement together, and avoid publishing a framework before at least one employer-college pilot is live and producing data.

Failure mode (real example)	The safeguard the record suggests
No data on what failed and why *Reviews of job-training programs find most track enrollment and completion, not earnings two to three years out.*	Build measurement in from the start (completion, six- and twenty-four-month wages, and the reasons participants drop out), and treat failure data as a feature, not an embarrassment.
Programs too rigid for precarious workers *Long unpaid pre-training only the already-stable can afford.*	Favor modular, stackable credentials and ask employers to co-invest in paid training time, so gig, contract, and frontline workers are not screened out by design.
A framework written by committee *Sixteen-to-twenty-item skill lists that no one can remember.*	Keep the demand framework lean and let a small group make the final calls; the memorable shorthand is what does the work, and breadth dilutes it.
A communications gap *Common Core's supporters lost the social-media fight before they noticed it had started.*	Anticipate the likely lines of attack and prepare plain-language responses from the outset; let employers speak in employer language rather than policy jargon.

None of these is hypothetical; each weakened or sank a real initiative. The thread connecting them is that durability is a design choice made early: kept state-led, run through existing institutions, launched with delivery and measurement already attached, framed in plain language, and protected against the deskilling and missing-rung effects described earlier. Designing against these failure modes at the outset costs little, and far less than repairing a framework that has already lost public trust.

3. What North Texas already has, and where the gap is

The region is not starting from zero. Its assets span the local, state, and federal levels, and the installed capacity is substantial.

Regional assets

- The top-ranked tech hub in North America for 2026, a labor force of roughly 4.4 million, and more than 300,000 tech workers, alongside a deep employer base that includes T-Mobile, Cisco, Accenture, NVIDIA, Microsoft, and Amazon, with skilled-trades employers such as Balfour Beatty and Johnstone Supply. *References: Site Selection Magazine; BLS; CompTIA.*
- An industry-led North Texas IT Sector Partnership, convened by Dr. Madeline Burillo-Hopkins of Dallas College Brookhaven, Lynn Hoffman of Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas, and Jenn Sanders of NTXIA, with industry champions Chris Foster of Accenture and Michael Sherwood of NVIDIA, organized into three action teams.
- Dallas College, one of the largest community-college systems in Texas, serving more than 70,000 students a year across seven campuses and awarding 16,407 stackable credentials in 2023–24,

scale enough to make a lasting regional impact if it is aimed squarely at the problem. *Reference: Dallas College.*

- A university and college landscape among the deepest in the country, well beyond Dallas College. The University of North Texas enrolls roughly 46,300 students and is the largest public university in the region; the University of Texas at Arlington enrolls about 42,700 and the University of Texas at Dallas about 30,100, both with large engineering and computing programs. Texas Woman's University (about 15,400 students), Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University, Dallas Baptist University, UNT Dallas, and UT Southwestern Medical Center add further capacity. On the two-year side, Tarrant County College enrolls roughly 49,000 students across six campuses and Collin College about 39,500, each serving tens of thousands more in continuing education. Counted with Dallas College, regional credit enrollment exceeds 300,000 students, a talent-development base of national scale the partnership can draw on well beyond any single institution. *References: UNT, UT Arlington, UT Dallas, Texas Woman's University, Tarrant County College, and Collin College enrollment reports, 2024–2025.*
- A live, state-funded registered apprenticeship in data analytics and AI, delivered through Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas with training provider Correlation One, launched in spring 2026 to an initial employer cohort. It is the existing rail this brief returns to: real, funded, and administered. Its two honest limits are scale (it reaches an initial cohort in the tens, against a need in the hundreds of thousands) and currency: designed barely a year ago, its content already needs refreshing to keep pace with a fast-moving AI frontier. Whether it can be cycled faster and wider on its current funding, or would need additional or new resources to do so, is one of the open questions this brief returns to rather than settles.
- The Most Valuable Employee skills framework and the Dallas College talent-pipeline work on the demand side. The MVE framework has potential as a public asset, not only an internal input: shared more widely, it could serve as a common reference that others align to rather than a working document. Whether and how to publish it, however, is the framework's authors' and the team's call, not something this brief presumes.
- EDGE North Texas, the regional cross-sector umbrella whose sector launch reports map priorities across industries. Its impact is organizational rather than numerical; it convenes and aligns multiple industry sectors rather than running programs directly, so its value shows up in the coordination it enables; a precise public impact figure is not available. *(Scope per EDGE North Texas; impact described qualitatively.)*
- A substantial base of career-connected K–12 learning already feeds the region. The models that work, among them P-TECH, New Tech Network, and Big Picture Learning, share a common set of elements: authentic work-based experience, mentorship and feedback from real employers, pathways students choose because they connect to opportunities they can see, and credentials that carry labor-market value. What scales them is not adding program seats but the student demand that a visible connection to real opportunity creates. The regional capacity is real: Dallas ISD operates roughly two dozen P-TECH and Early College campuses enrolling more than 8,500 students in grades 9 through 12 (2024–25); Carrollton-Farmers Branch runs four P-TECH

academies developed with Dallas College, alongside broad CTE participation across its high schools; New Tech Network campuses operate across the metro; and House Bill 120 tripled the per-student P-TECH allotment from $50 to $150, effective September 2025. *References: Dallas ISD CTE; CFBISD; MDRC P-TECH evaluation; Learning Policy Institute (deeper-learning networks); Texas HB 120.*

State and federal rails in play

- The Texas Skills Development Fund, the state's primary customized-training grant since 1995, awards up to $500,000 per employer (more for a consortium, averaging about $2,400 per trainee) to train full-time W-2 workers, but it is applied for by a public college, workforce board, or the Texas A&M Engineering Extension Service rather than by the employer directly, runs on project cycles of roughly twelve months, and covers tuition, curriculum, instruction, and materials rather than wages; it has partnered with more than 4,900 Texas employers. Upskill Texas, a newer TWC initiative aimed at current employees, funds projects of $150,000 to $500,000 at up to $3,000 per trainee, requires training that is entirely technical, and takes applications in periodic rounds. Skills for Small Business serves smaller firms. Dallas College's workforce pathways and federal Carl D. Perkins CTE funds add delivery capacity, though all are organized around occupational programs and fixed project cycles rather than fast-moving skill clusters. *Source: Texas Workforce Commission.*
- Federal tailwinds: short-term Workforce Pell takes effect July 1, 2026, and registered-apprenticeship expansion now explicitly includes AI apprenticeships. *Source: federal statute and executive action.*
- Beyond those, Texas funds several adjacent levers the team can tap: the Self-Sufficiency Fund, the Lone Star Workforce of the Future Fund (up to $7,500 per trainee), Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grants for CTE equipment, the Texas Reskilling and Upskilling through Education (TRUE) program, and the TWC Office of Apprenticeship, most of it administered through the same 28 local workforce boards. *Source: Texas Workforce Commission.*
- Federal funding runs underneath all of it: the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the core federal workforce-training stream, Pell and federal financial aid underwrite college delivery, and CHIPS Act workforce provisions add semiconductor-sector training money, channels a regional strategy can braid together rather than treat separately. *Source: federal statute (WIOA; Higher Education Act; CHIPS and Science Act).*

How the funding posture compares

The contrast that matters is not how much money exists but how it is released. Three systems mark the spectrum from slowest to most agile.

Dimension	Texas SDF (today)	Ohio TechCred	Singapore SkillsFuture
Who decides	College applies on the employer's behalf	Employer applies directly	Individual chooses; employer co-funds
Funding scale	Up to $500K / project; ~$2,400 / trainee	Up to $2K / credential; $30K / round; $180K / year	S$500 base credit + top-ups; up to 90% subsidy

Dimension	Texas SDF (today)	Ohio TechCred	Singapore SkillsFuture
Speed	~12-month project cycle	Quarterly rounds; fast reimbursement	Continuous; learner-initiated
Posture	Project-based; intermediary-led	Credential-based; employer-led	Account-based; individual ownership
Track record	Established 1995; familiar to colleges	~3,500 employers; ~120K credentials since 2019	~24K enterprises; ~555K enrollments in 2024

Read across the rows, Ohio is the most realistic near-term template: it treats the credential, not the project, as the unit of investment, lets employers apply directly, and moves in quarterly rounds. Texas's Skills Development Fund, capable on incumbent training and well known to colleges, still requires a college intermediary and a roughly year-long project plan, which limits participation among the mid-market employers a regional strategy most depends on. Singapore sits at the far end, with individual accounts and continuous, learner-initiated enrollment. The gap is not a missing fund; it is the absence of a fast, employer-direct, per-credential lane layered onto what Texas already has, which is what the demand-side framework, applied to the existing rails, would aim to create.

The open question on the state rails is utilization at regional scale. These funds have supported DFW employers, but a precise count of Skills Development Fund and Upskill Texas dollars reaching the region's incumbent workforce is not published, and by every indication the volume sits far below what a 4.4-million-worker labor market facing an AI transition would require. The rails exist; the throughput is the issue. *(No DFW-only utilization figure is published; the scale point is qualitative.)*

That a region with this much installed capacity (a top-ranked hub, hundreds of thousands of tech workers, a community college awarding sixteen thousand credentials a year, a K–12 CTE pipeline already feeding it, and an employer base of national names) has organized an industry-led partnership to take the skills question seriously is itself significant, and the partnership deserves credit for convening it. The latent magnitude of impact is large if that capacity can be pointed deliberately at the problem. The gap is not the absence of pieces; it is that the existing machinery is built for a slower world. Grant cycles run for many months, training is bound to existing college catalogs, programs are sized for tens of employers, and content can be outpaced by the frontier within a year. The practical question is not whether North Texas has the components, but whether it can run them fast enough, current enough, and at enough scale to matter.

4. The policy landscape: what is aligned, what could be tuned

The policy window is unusually favorable. Several levers already point in the right direction; a few are powerful but built for a slower pace and could be tuned; one is structurally misaligned; and one instructive case shows what does not pass in Texas, and why.

Policy lever	Where it stands and what is needed	Read
Senate 2026 interim charge on AI and the workforce	Directs the state to prepare the Texas workforce for AI, emphasizing private-sector-led innovation, upskilling, and keeping Texas a national leader. Needed: a specific 2027 ask attached to it, carried with employer testimony.	**Aligned**
HB 149, Texas Responsible AI Governance Act	Effective January 1, 2026. Establishes a regulatory sandbox program and an AI advisory council, a statutory hook for a learning-sandbox concept, consistent with an innovation-with-light-guardrails posture. Needed: someone to actually use the sandbox and council: pilots and participation, not just statute.	**Aligned**
2024 House Select Committee on AI interim report	Concluded that AI augments rather than replaces work and that upskilling is the central challenge; industry witnesses called for statewide training initiatives and incentives. Needed: that recommendation carried into a funded 2027 vehicle.	**Aligned precedent**
Community-college outcomes funding (HB 8)	Rewards credentials of value, but eligible-credential lists can lag fast-emerging AI fields. Needed: AI, cloud, and cybersecurity credentials added to the value lists quickly and refreshed often.	**Tunable**
Employer-training grants (Skills Development Fund, Upskill Texas)	These existing funds are powerful and can train incumbent workers, but they run through a college or workforce-board intermediary, on project cycles of roughly a year (Skills Development Fund) or in periodic rounds (Upskill Texas), and are general-purpose rather than aimed at the AI frontier. Texas has the customized-grant tradition but not yet a fast, tech-focused, employer-direct, per-credential lane of the kind Ohio's TechCred provides. Needed: a faster, per-credential reimbursement lane layered onto these funds.	**Tunable**
CTE course-code structure	Funding tied to fixed course codes and seat-time can be slow to map to AI, cloud, and other fast-moving fields, a structural lag rather than a fixable list. Needed: streamlined course-code and assessment approval so emerging skills qualify without multi-year delay.	**Misaligned**
No dedicated fast AI-upskilling incentive	Distinct from the general-purpose grants above: even with the Skills Development Fund and Upskill	**Missing**

Policy lever	Where it stands and what is needed	Read
	Texas in place, Texas has no rapid, recurring, employer-defined lane aimed specifically at incumbent AI and tech upskilling. Needed: exactly that, a dedicated and recurring incentive layered onto the existing funds, the core build of a 2027 ask.	
HB 1709 (prior version of TRAIGA)	Instructive on what does not pass and why: the original, comprehensive AI-regulation bill was scaled back (most private-sector mandates removed) and re-filed as the lighter HB 149 that became law. Needed: a 2027 ask framed as incentive and enabling structure, not mandate.	**Lesson**

Two patterns are worth drawing out. First, the scaled-back path from HB 1709 to HB 149 is a signal, not a footnote: Texas's center of gravity favored innovation and light-touch rules over comprehensive mandates, which tells the team what a workable 2027 ask looks like, an incentive and an enabling structure, not a regulatory burden. A federal proposal to pause state AI laws adds uncertainty worth watching, but does not change the workforce-incentive logic.

Second, across the aligned and tunable items runs one design question that the most durable models answer the same way: where the line sits between what employers fund and what the public co-invests in. The pattern that holds across red and purple states alike is that employers pay for firm-specific capability, while the public system co-invests only in transferable, industry-recognized skills and the shared infrastructure around them, reimbursing employer-defined training against real credential and wage outcomes rather than operating the training itself. Tuning the existing Texas rails toward that line, in the form of a faster and more tech-focused reimbursement lane on programs already in statute, is precisely the conversation the 2026 interim charge invites for the 2027 session.

What the team can move, and what to guard against

Read as a to-do list rather than a status report, the table points to four moves this group can push on: three to advance, one to resist.

Category	What the team can do
Protect & strengthen the aligned	Back the Senate's 2026 interim charge with concrete employer testimony, and treat the HB 149 sandbox and advisory council as live venues to use, not provisions to leave on the shelf.
Tune the tunable	Press for AI, cloud, and cybersecurity credentials to be added quickly to the HB 8 value lists, and for a faster, tech-focused reimbursement lane on the Skills Development Fund and Upskill Texas.

Category	What the team can do
Build the missing	Develop and carry the dedicated fast AI-upskilling incentive that does not yet exist, the core opportunity the 2027 session presents.
Guard against	Resist overly broad AI mandates of the kind the original HB 1709 carried before it was pared back, and rigid seat-time or course-code funding rules that lock emerging skills out of support. The interest is in incentives and enabling structures, not prescriptive mandates the Legislature has already shown it will reject.

5. What the region and this team could do

The moves below are organized by who would make them, because the most common failure mode in workforce strategy is a good idea with no clear owner. None requires a new institution; each iterates something already in place.

The Policy Action Team

- Consolidate employer demand signals into one shared picture of which skills the region most needs, so the case rests on evidence rather than anecdote.
- Shape the 2027 policy ask the interim charge invites, and carry it forward with employer testimony.
- Coordinate with the Education and Narrative action teams and with EDGE North Texas, so the sectors move together rather than separately.
- Consider, with the framework's authors, whether to share the Most Valuable Employee framework more widely as a regional reference, and commission the learning conversations with Ohio, Colorado, and Singapore set out in the next section.

Employers

- Define the concrete, current skill targets their roles require, the demand signal only employers can give.
- Commit pilot cohorts to an upskilling cycle and contribute the outcome data that make the case credible.
- Draw on a tiered, “leagues” model (a broad base of foundational AI fluency, a practitioner tier of applied skill, and an advanced or frontier tier) so they can recruit at the right level and give workers a visible ladder to climb.

Policymakers and the Legislature

- Create a fast, tech-focused “Texas TechCred” reimbursement lane layered onto the Skills Development Fund and Upskill Texas (employer-defined, recurring, and aimed at incumbent workers), directly answering the Senate's 2026 interim charge.

- Keep credential-of-value lists current with AI, cloud, and cybersecurity, and protect the HB 149 sandbox as a place to pilot.

The Texas Workforce Commission and Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas

- Test whether a faster cycle can run on the existing rails. The open question this brief poses is whether a “Skills Reserve” (the current Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas–Correlation One apprenticeship run as a faster, employer-defined, frontier-tool cycle) could operate on the same funding pathway, or whether reaching the needed pace and scale would require additional or new resources. That is a question for the Texas Workforce Commission and Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas to answer, not an assumption to build on.
- Operate the tiered structure and vet the portable credentials that flow through it.

Education institutions and school districts

- Colleges and universities: keep curricula current and deliver stackable, portable credentials at the speed employers actually need, and host a learning sandbox (a firewalled environment for safe, hands-on AI practice), inexpensive and politically light, with a statutory hook in HB 149's sandbox provision.
- K–12 districts: sustain and expand career-connected learning, the work already under way in the partnership's Education action team, by strengthening the elements these models share. Those elements are real work-based experience, employer mentorship, student-chosen pathways tied to visible opportunity, and credentials that carry value. The aim is to grow the student demand that draws young people into these pathways, rather than to depend on a few flagship campuses.
- Streamline the structural friction only districts and the state can fix: CTE course-code approvals, STAAR and assessment alignment, and standards that currently lag fast-moving fields. These are the specific levers that decide whether an AI or cybersecurity course can be offered and funded in time to matter, and they are best pursued in coordination with the Education action team rather than separately.

A cross-cutting focus: cybersecurity

Cybersecurity cuts across every actor above, and it surfaced in the member survey and on the partnership's agenda as a near-universal need, so it deserves sharper definition than a single word allows. It spans at least three distinct surfaces: infrastructure security (networks, systems, and the operational technology behind critical services); application and software security; and a fast-growing new surface created by AI-generated or “vibe-coded” software, where working code is produced quickly by people who may not fully understand its vulnerabilities. That last surface raises the deeper question for this team: if routine coding is increasingly automated, the durable human skill is no longer writing code but securing it: threat modeling, validating and stress-testing AI-generated output, identifying risk, and exercising oversight. Framing cybersecurity this way turns it from a job title into a capability the whole tech-enabled workforce needs, which is how it should enter the skills conversation.

The shape of it

Taken together, these are less a program than a posture: proactive rather than reactive, continuous rather than episodic, employer-defined with the public system de-risking the transferable layer. The actors differ, but the direction is shared, which is what lets a region move faster than any single institution could alone.

6. Measuring success

Whatever the region chooses, the precedent argues for deciding up front how success would be known, both because incumbent upskilling is the least-evidenced part of the field and because numerical goals are what organize coalitions.

- **Pace.** Time from an employer's skill signal to a completed credential, and how often training content is refreshed against the frontier.
- **Scale, by tier.** Workers reached at each level of the leagues model (foundational fluency, practitioner, advanced), measured against the current baseline of tens of employees, so progress is visible at the base as well as the top.
- **Outcomes.** Wage gains and role advancement for upskilled workers, employer-reported productivity and retention, the portability of credentials earned, and equity of access across sectors, levels, and demographics.

Evidence posture matters here. The entry-and-reskill leg can borrow proven architecture. The sector-based models cited earlier, Project QUEST among them, have produced large, durable earnings gains in rigorous evaluations, as have two national programs worth naming directly: Year Up, an intensive program that trains low-income young adults for technology and business roles and raised annual earnings by 30 to 40 percent in a multi-site randomized trial, sustained over five years; and Per Scholas, which provides about fifteen weeks of tuition-free information-technology training and produced sizable, sustained earnings gains across independent randomized trials at a markedly lower cost per participant (roughly $5,800). The incumbent-upskilling leg is newer ground, and is best run as a defined experiment with metrics specified before launch, so the region learns what works rather than assuming it. *References: Year Up and Per Scholas randomized evaluations (Economic Mobility Corporation; MDRC). (QUEST figures appear in Section 2.)*

A single memorable target, some number of North Texas workers AI-credentialed across the tiers by a given year, is offered here not as a figure to adopt, but as the kind of anchor the most successful efforts have consistently used: Tennessee's “Drive to 55” and North Carolina's “2 million by 2030” are the clearest cases of a single number organizing a coalition and outlasting the administration that launched it.

7. Practical next steps

Beyond the open questions below, there are concrete things the team could begin now, some time-sensitive, given the legislative calendar.

- **Prepare for the 2027 window.** Track the Senate's 2026 interim charge, the Texas Workforce Commission Sunset review, and the interim hearings, and develop a concrete “fast upskilling lane” concept the team could put forward, so the region arrives with a proposal rather than a reaction.
- **Open learning conversations with the leaders.** Study how the strongest models are actually administered by talking with Ohio (TechCred), Colorado (Skill Advance), and Singapore (SkillsFuture). The design and administration details (reimbursement mechanics, credential vetting, cycle speed) are where these programs succeed or stall.
- **Convene employers around real targets.** Move from the skills framework to specific, employer-defined skill targets, and line up a pilot cohort on the existing apprenticeship rail to test the faster cycle in practice.
- **Decide the metrics first.** Set the success measures above before launching anything, so the pilot generates evidence rather than anecdote.

These are starting moves, not a finished plan, but each is something the team can act on without waiting for the larger questions to be settled.

8. Summary

The moment is a recurring one with a clear historical pattern. North Texas holds real assets and a genuine lead (a top-ranked hub, a 4.4-million-strong workforce, 300,000-plus tech workers, a major college system, and a live apprenticeship), but the gap is pace, scale, and currency. The policy window is open, and Texas's own track record points to an incentive-and-enabling approach rather than a mandate. The durable design lets employers define demand while the public system de-risks transferable skills, and the most promising path iterates what already exists rather than building anew. This brief frames that terrain and points to concrete first steps; the choices belong to the team and its partners.

Framing Future Conversations

These questions are offered to open the June discussion, not to lead it toward an answer.

- Durability: Should the region rally behind a single public target (some number of workers AI-credentialed by a given year), and who should own it so it survives a change in administration?
- The strategic tension: AI is thinning entry-level roles even as it pressures incumbents to reskill. Which does this team put first, and can we credibly do both?
- The open question, made concrete: Before asking for anything new, what do we need to learn from the Texas Workforce Commission and Workforce Solutions Greater Dallas about whether the existing apprenticeship can run faster and wider on its current funding? Where should the line sit between what employers pay for and what the public system co-invests in?
- Cybersecurity as baseline: If securing and verifying AI's output is becoming a baseline expectation rather than a specialist role, what should every tech-enabled worker be able to do, not just the security team?

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