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Floor Statement of Senator Claiborne Pell (D,RI) on the Workforce Development Bill, S. 143

Mr. President, I rise to express my strong support for this legislation, which makes dramatic and sweeping changes not only in job training but also in vocational and adult education.

In job training, change is without a doubt necessary. We need to consolidate programs and to build a system that better meets the needs of those who need job training services. In vocational and adult education, however, the need for a massive overhaul is much less clear. In some ways, we need simply to refine and not revamp what we already have in law.

In job training, I am generally pleased with the course that has been set in this bill. It will bring coherence and coordination to a system of too many programs that have often operated at odds with each other. It will focus job training services on those who need them most, and in a way that will help them get the advice, assistance, and training they need.

In vocational and adult education, I believe we have fashioned an agreement that should sustain the strong bipartisan support these programs have traditionally enjoyed. Among the important provisions are: (1) a within state formula; (2) a focus on at-risk students from low-income families; (3) maintenance of effort and supplement not supplant language; (4) an emphasis on the integration of academic and vocational education; (5) the linking secondary and postsecondary education through exciting programs like tech prep; (6) the disaggregation of data to let us know better the progress we are making; and (7) the continuation of the critically important adult education
programs.

I would emphasize, however, that we can make this bill even better if we adopt a series of important amendments. I am very concerned, for instance, that adult education should have a separate stream of funding so that its accomplishments are not diminished. I believe that the flexibility account, which constitutes 50% of the funding, is too large, and that a better configuration would be one-third for workforce education, one-third for workforce training, and one-third for the flex account. Further, I believe we should approve an amendment strengthening the Job Corps provisions now in the bill. And, I do not believe that we should repeal the Trade Adjustment Act which helps individuals who because of international competition, and through no fault of their own, have lost their jobs.

Mr. President, I supported this bill in Committee largely because of the strong provisions for adult and vocational education. I support it today for the same reasons. However, I believe we have the opportunity to make a good bill an even better one if we approve amendments such as those I have mentioned. I look forward to a lively and productive debate, and remain very hopeful that the end result will be legislation that has broad and deep bipartisan support.