

COABE Joins National Movement to Tear the Paper Ceiling and Expand Opportunity for Half the U.S. Workforce

After decades of lost opportunity, a growing coalition is proving that skills-first hiring works — opening doors for over 70 million workers Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs)

Washington, DC September 14, 2026 – Today, COABE announced its support of the growing national skills-first movement by joining the landmark Tear the Paper Ceiling public awareness campaign led by the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work. The affiliated Tear the Paper Ceiling Coalition calls on employers and decision makers to embrace skills-first hiring practices and unlock the potential of the more than 70 million workers in the U.S. who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) — such as apprenticeships, certifications, military service, on-the-job training, and more — rather than through a bachelor's degree.

STARs make up half the U.S. labor market, yet they face a “paper ceiling” — the invisible barrier of degree screens, biased algorithms, stereotypes, and limited professional networks that blocks access to higher-wage jobs. Over the last 40 years, the wage gap between STARs and workers with bachelor's degrees has doubled; when adjusted for inflation, STARs now earn less on average than they did in 1976. STARs' exclusion hurts businesses too, artificially limiting their talent pool. Research from LinkedIn shows that hiring managers who start with skills are 60% more likely to find a successful hire.

“COABE is proud to join the Ad Council and Opportunity@Work's **Tear the Paper Ceiling** campaign”, said Sharon Bonney, Chief Executive Officer of COABE. “Adult education programs across the country are helping build this skilled talent pipeline every day. Adult learners gain valuable, workforce-ready skills through pathways such as apprenticeships, industry-recognized credentials and microcredentials, integrated education and training, on-the-job learning, and other alternatives to a traditional four-year degree.”

During **Adult Education and Family Literacy (AEFL) Week**, COABE, the Ad Council, and Opportunity@Work are joining forces to amplify a shared message: **skills and potential should open doors to opportunity—not be overshadowed by the absence of a degree**. By tearing the paper ceiling, employers can recognize the talent, experience, determination, and skills that millions of adult learners and workers already bring to America's workforce.

Along with COABE Tear the Paper Ceiling is supported by a coalition of leading national private sector and nonprofit organizations ranging from Fortune 100 employers to philanthropies and workforce development organizations. Together, the Coalition is leading the way in building a labor market that recognizes the tangible benefits – to workers and to businesses – of valuing skills from every route.

Since launching in 2022, the Tear the Paper Ceiling campaign has grown into a national movement with measurable impact. The campaign's PSAs drive two million visits annually to TearThePaperCeiling.org, and those who have seen the campaign are changing how they view talent. 83% of employers say they are more likely to hire workers without bachelor's degrees than they were 2–3 years ago. Overall, 92% of employers report they are interested in hiring people who have acquired skills through routes other than a degree.

According to Opportunity@Work's State of the Paper Ceiling report, collective action by employers and policymakers has halted the decades-long decline in STARs' access to good-paying jobs, yielding 783,000 more STARs in those roles than projected. And now, there's a clear path to open access to at least 10 million higher-paying jobs for STARs by 2030.

COABE is creating opportunities for STARs—workers **Skilled Through Alternative Routes**—by building pathways that help adult learners gain the skills, credentials, and connections they need to advance in today's workforce. Through national partnerships, COABE connects learners and programs to opportunities that might otherwise be out of reach, including industry-recognized credentials and career training through **Google**, professional learning through **eCornell**, entrepreneurial skill-building through the **Online Entrepreneurship Institute**, and construction career pathways through our **NCCER initiative**. Together, these efforts demonstrate that talent is developed in many ways—and that apprenticeships, credentials, microcredentials, entrepreneurship, and work-based learning can provide powerful routes to economic mobility. By expanding access to these opportunities, COABE is helping adult learners turn the skills they have—and the skills they are building—into credentials, careers, and greater economic opportunity.

The latest Tear the Paper Ceiling PSAs, titled "Story Unfold," speak directly to employers, encouraging them to look beyond the paper and discover how skills-first hiring can help them find the right hire. Created pro bono by world-renowned creative agency Ogilvy and directed by STAR filmmaker Loris Russier, the PSAs use the metaphor of a crumpled paper that slowly unfurls to reveal a STAR's face, encouraging viewers to look holistically at applicants and see the skills and experience that others might miss.

The campaign provides resources for both employers and STARs at TearThePaperCeiling.org — including playbooks and guides for getting started with skills-first hiring practices, case studies from organizations already hiring STARs, and career development resources for STARs. The integrated campaign appears nationwide in donated media placements across TV, radio, digital, social media, out-of-home, and print.

Organizations, employers, STARs, and individuals can join the movement by visiting TearThePaperCeiling.org to share their stories, find tools and resources, and learn more about how to adopt and promote skills-first hiring practices.

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About COABE

COABE, formerly the Coalition on Adult Basic Education is the nation's leading organization dedicated to advancing the field of adult education. Representing **more than 100,000 members, 2,384 local programs, and 3.2 million adult learners served nationwide**, COABE works to **Lead, Equip, and Empower** the adult education field through high-quality professional development, innovative resources, research, strategic partnerships, and opportunities that strengthen programs and expand pathways for adult learners. COABE is also home to the **nation's largest adult education conference**, bringing together thousands of educators, leaders, partners, and practitioners each year to share promising practices, explore emerging innovations, and strengthen the field. Through its national network and partnerships, COABE is helping transform adult education and ensure that learners across the country have access to the education, skills, and opportunities they need to thrive in the workforce, their communities, and beyond.

About Opportunity@Work

Opportunity@Work is a 501(c)3 nonprofit social enterprise on a mission to rewire the labor market so all Americans can work, learn, and earn to their full potential. Our work advances economic opportunities for the 70+ million U.S. workers who are Skilled Through Alternative Routes (STARs) instead of through a bachelor's degree. Opportunity@Work engages with corporate, public sector, talent technology, and philanthropic partners through landmark research and labor market data analysis, public awareness and narrative change, STARs-centric software tools, and multi-sector networks. Our goal is to enable upward mobility for 1 million STARs by opening up 10 million jobs, and boost their earnings by 100 billion dollars by 2035. Learn more at www.opportunityatwork.org.

About the Ad Council

The Ad Council convenes creative storytellers to educate, unite and uplift audiences by opening hearts, inspiring action and accelerating change. For more than 80 years, the nonprofit organization and its partners in advertising, media, marketing and tech have been behind some of the country's most iconic social impact campaigns — Smokey Bear, Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk, Tear the Paper Ceiling and many more. To learn more or get involved, visit AdCouncil.org.