

# Federal Accountability System Fuels the Decline of the Adult Education & Literacy System of the United States

## **Research Note**

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Just recently the U. S. Department of Education released the first report on the use of the National Reporting System (NRS) to obtain performance data from the states about the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States. The AELS is comprised of those programs funded in part by the State Grant program of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Title 2: the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (WIA/AEFLA).

Called, "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Report to Congress on State Performance, Program Year 2000-2001", the report is available on the Education Department's Web site at: [www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE).

The report presents a summary of the accountability data obtained by the National Reporting System (NRS) for program year 2000-2001. It presents both national and state data on the enrollments in the AELS, federal funding levels, hours of instruction, advancements in learning, and other outcomes of participation in the AELS. In this brief report I focus on just a portion of the data available in the report, that dealing with enrollments, hours of instruction, and learning outcomes. I focus first on information about enrollments because the federal government has argued for a decade that some 40 to 90 million adults are deficient in literacy skills and in need of further education. Yet only a small fraction of adults actually attend the AELS programs. Hence it is of interest to know if the new accountability requirements of the National Reporting System has encouraged additional enrollments in the AELS. As will be seen this has not been the case. In the data that follow, numbers are based on the states plus Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia.

## **The Decline in Enrollments in the AELS**

In 1998 there were 4,020,550 enrollments in the AELS. After the WIA/AEFLA of 1998 was passed, introducing new accountability requirements, enrollments fell to 3,616,391 in 1999, to 2,891,895 in 2000, and to 2,673,692 in 2001. This is a decline of over 33 percent in the first three years of the new accountability system now operated as the National Reporting System (NRS). This suggests that there were 1,346,858 fewer adults served in 2001 than in 1998 by the AELS. Of course, some of this decline may be due to better accounting and the reduction of double counts, but no evidence for this is presented.

Ethnicity and the decline in enrollments. Minorities accounted for over 75 percent of the decline in enrollments from 1998 to 2001. Enrollments for Asians fell by 56 percent, for Hispanics by 38 percent, for Whites by 29 percent and for Blacks by 17 percent.

Age and the decline in enrollments. Older adults suffered most from the introduction of the NRS into the AELS. From 1998 to 2001, enrollments for those aged 16-24 years fell by 21 percent, for those 25-44 years by 37 percent, for those 45-59 years by 42 percent, and for those adults 60 years of age or above enrollments fell by an astonishing 58 percent. Thus, at a time when the population is aging and the need for education to help older adults maintain their health is increasing, the accountability system of the federal government appears to be driving older adults out of the system.

Personnel and the declines in enrollments. Not only student enrollments fell after the NRS accountability requirements were introduced. In 1998 there were 177,943 personnel in the AELS. By 2000 personnel had declined to 153,364, a 14 percent drop. Of the 24,579 personnel lost from the AELS, 3 percent were part-time workers, 10 percent were full-time workers, and a whopping 87 percent were volunteers. This suggests that much of the decline in enrollments and personnel resulted from the loss from the AELS of community-based programs that rely largely upon volunteers.

### **Hours of Instruction**

An issue that has faced adult education and literacy programs for decades is the need to have adults attend enough education to make significant increases in knowledge and skills. In a national survey of AELS programs in 1991-92, Young, et al (1995, p. 12) reported that overall adults received a median of 58 hours of instruction. For those in adult basic education (ABE), median hours of instruction was 35, for adult secondary education (ASE) median hours were 28, and median hours for English as a Second Language (ESL) were 113.

In the recent report from the U. S. Department of Education, overall median hours of instruction were approximately 68, those for ABE 68, for ASE 55 and for ESL 63. Thus, overall hours of instruction increased from 1991 to 2001 by 17 percent, ABE and ASE hours almost doubled increasing by 94 and 96 percent respectively, but ESL decreased by 44 percent. Exactly what is going on here is not clear, but it is important to keep in mind that in 1991 there were some 3.7 million enrollments in the AELS while in 2001 there were less than 2.7 million enrollments in the AELS. This suggests that the populations being studied may be quite different in these two time periods.

State differences in hours of instruction. The median hours of instruction for the total AELS population conceals dramatic differences among the states. For instance, in Florida, hours of instruction for ABE, ASE, and ESL were 236, 165, and 350 hours respectively, considerably above the national medians for these programs. But at the other end of the spectrum, in Wyoming, hours of instruction for ABE, ASE, and ESL were 34, 23, and 46, considerably below the national medians.

Considered together, 8 states reported fewer than 49 hours of instruction for ABE, 39 reported 50 to 99 hours of ABE instruction, and 5 reported over 100 hours of ABE instruction. For ASE, 11 reported fewer than 49 hours, 25 reported 50-99 hours, and 6

had over 100 hours of ASE instruction. For ESL, 10 reported less than 49 hours of instruction, 35 reported 50-99 hours, and 6 reported over 100 hours of ESL instruction.

Hours of instruction and learning gains. The WIA/AEFLA calls for states to report on "Demonstrated improvements in the literacy skill levels in reading, writing and speaking English, numeracy, problem-solving, English language acquisition, and other literacy skills." To measure education gain, the NRS established a set of six levels of ABE/ASE, with Level 1 being the beginning level of literacy and with the next five levels indicating a learning progression up through the attainment of a GED or high school diploma. A similar arrangement of levels of knowledge and skill was made for ESL. To indicate learning in their programs, states first reached agreements with the federal government on targets for what percentage of adult learners in a given level would move up one or more levels as a consequence of their participation in their programs. Then, at the end of the year, states reported the actual percentage of adults who gained one or more levels of learning.

Given these data, it is possible to compare hours of instruction to learning gains in the AELS. This reveals some interesting findings. For instance, Florida, reporting an average of 236 hours of instruction in ABE and 165 hours of instruction in ASE, set an average target for learning across the levels of ABE/ASE of 17 percent and actually achieved 36 percent of adults who moved up one or more levels of learning. Now compare this with Wyoming, which reported hours of instruction in ABE/ASE of 34 and 23, an average target for ABE/ASE of 34 percent and achievements of 48 percent who moved up one or more levels of learning. Thus, though Wyoming reported less than one sixth the number of instructional hours that Florida reported, it set its targets for ABE/ASE learning twice as high and achieved 12 percentage points more learning gains than Florida.

For ESL, Florida reported an average of 350 hours of instruction, an average learning target of 18 percent, and actually achieved 26 percent of ESL learners who moved up one or more levels. Wyoming, on the other hand, reported an average of just 46 hours of ESL instruction, less than one seventh the hours of Florida, set its ESL average learning target 10 percent higher at 28 percent and achieved 35 percent of adults who gained one or more levels in ESL, a number 9 percent greater than that for Florida.

Overall, the Report to Congress indicates that 47 states met or exceeded their targets for learning in ABE/ASE and 41 met or exceeded their targets for ESL. However, an examination of the targets set by the states and their actual achievements, as in the case of Florida and Wyoming above, raises the questions of why states vary so much in the number of hours of instruction they report, their setting of learning targets, and why their achievements vary so much with little relationship to reported average hours of instruction.

### **Congressional Decision Making**

As I read this Report to Congress, it was not clear to me just how the Congress might use the data it presents in making decisions about the development of policy and legislation

for adult education and literacy development. The report cautions about comparing one state with another because measures of learning or methods of determining post-course outcomes may vary widely from state to state. Instead, one is guided to consider that the only comparisons that are valid are comparisons within a state from one year to the next. The present report provides baseline data that will be monitored to discover if continuous improvements are being achieved within a state.

But how that is supposed to inform the decisions that Congress must make about the whole Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) funded through the WIA/AEFLA of 1998 and its successors is not clear to me. Doesn't it matter that, from the system's point of view, different states set different targets for learning? Do adults in Florida learn differently from those in Wyoming? Shouldn't adults receiving 350 hours of ESL instruction in Florida learn more than those receiving only 46 hours of instruction in Wyoming?

More generally, what does it mean to move up a level of learning? If one enters right on the border separating levels then it might be easy to move up a level, but if one enters at the bottom of one level it may take quite a bit of effort to move through that level and up to the next. Shouldn't one get credit for learning within a level?

Concerns such as these, and others not addressed here, lead me to question the usefulness of the present data being collected by the National Reporting System (NRS) for either advancing the effectiveness of the AELS at the state level or for informing the decision making processes of the Executive or Congressional branches of the federal government.

So far, the most notable impact of the accountability requirements of the WIA/AEFLA of 1998 and the NRS data collection procedures seems to me to be the fueling of the departure of over 1,000,000 adult learners and over 20,000 paid or volunteer educators from the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States. As of now I have seen no action aimed at reversing this tragic situation for adult education and literacy development.

Reference: Young, M. B. & others (1995). National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs. Executive Summary. Washington, DC: U. S. Office of Education.