

Fall From The National Literacy Summit of 2000 Continues Seven Years Later

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**Thomas G. Sticht
International Consultant in Adult Education**

In September of 2000 the National Literacy Summit 2000 steering committee held a meeting in Washington, DC in a Congressional office building and launched An Action Agenda for Literacy in a report entitled "From the Margins to the Mainstream". A year later, a report by the Action Agenda staff discussed what had happened the first year following the Summit. It was reported that some 163 commitments were made by 69 organizations for action they were going to take in future years to further the National Literacy Summit 2000 Action Agenda. For year 2, however, only three commitments were made and these were the same as in year 1. No further reports of the Action Agenda staff have been found so what additional commitments have been made, or what effects past commitments have had to advance the Action Agenda are not known to me.

The Action Agenda called for a "system of high quality adult literacy, language, and lifelong learning services" offering ease of ACCESS to QUALITY services for adult students and sufficient RESOURCES to support increased access and quality services. This accessible, high quality adult education and literacy system was set as the national goal to be achieved by the year 2010. Unfortunately, after seven years into the Action Agenda, results for these aspects of the system are not encouraging.

ACCESS: In 1998 there were 4,020,550 enrollments in the Adult Education and Literacy System. After the WIA/AEFLA (Workforce Investment Act/Adult Education and Family Literacy Act) 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. Enrollments rose a bit in 2002 and 2003, to just under 2.8 million, but then fell back to 2,677,119 in Program Year 2003-04. This is a decline of over 33 percent in the first six years of the new accountability focus of the WIA/AEFLA of 1998. This indicates that there were over 1.3 million fewer adults served in Program Year 03-04 than in 1998 by the AELS. The cause of this decline has never been explained by federal or state governments.

At the present time, it looks like the Action Agenda item of ACCESS is failing with respect to increasing enrollments in the AELS, and there are no data of which I am aware to suggest it is succeeding in programs outside the AELS, such as local community based programs, library programs and so forth. I do not know of any organization that is taking a comprehensive look into the issue of ACCESS to adult literacy services throughout the nation. The National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE) have

produced a report entitled American Competitiveness Initiative (February 2006) calling for enrollments in the AELS to increase to 4,095,499 by 2010-2011. This would return the AELS enrollment back to its level of about a decade ago. The report does not specify how the additional enrollments would be recruited.

QUALITY: I have found no information to suggest that in the last seven years there has been an improvement in the quality of services for adult students in the programs of the AELS or any other programs such as those of ProLiteracy Worldwide, libraries, corrections, workplace, etc. Indeed, I have found no definitive statement about just what "quality" means in the AELS.

If growth in learning outcomes in the National Reporting System (NRS) is considered an indicator of quality, then the data for four years suggest little improvements in quality. In program year 00-01, averaged over the 50 states and territories, 36 percent of students in ABE/ASE combined made enough educational gain to move from one educational level to a higher level. In 01-02 this increased to 37%, in 02-03 and 03-04 it stayed constant at 38%. Similar data for gains in English Literacy/Language indicated that in program year 00-01, 32% moved from one level to a higher level, in 01-02 this increased to 34%, in 02-03 and 03-04 data stayed constant at 36%. I have not found NRS reports to the Congress for any years after 03-04, but clearly, the most recently available four years of data on educational gains indicate only little or, in the last two years, no improvement in the overall national data for learning outcomes.

A major initiative today at the federal level aims to get more adults to complete their high school diploma or GED and to then transition into post-secondary education, including college or occupational training. Unfortunately, since the Summit of 2000 there has been a drop in enrollments of adults in the AELS from 2.673 million in PY 00-01 to 2.581 million in PY04-05, and the percentage of these adults enrolled in adult secondary education fell from 20.8 percent to 16.3 percent. The Program Year 2003-2004 report to Congress indicates that of adults who stated the goal of wanting to complete their high school diploma or GED the national averages for High School Completion/GED for the four PYs of 00-01, 01-02, 02-03, and 03-04 were 33%, 42%, 44% and 45%, respectively. Why the larger change from 00-01 to 01-02 occurred is not known, but for the last three years of the report there was very little improvement in the rate of increase in high school completion.

For those adults with the goal of going on to post-secondary education or training, the corresponding percentages of actual achievement of this outcome were 25%, 29%, 30%, and 30% for PYs 00-01, 01-02, 02-03, and 03-04. As for high school completion, there was a gain in this outcome from PY 00-01 to 01-02, and then a slower gain, with no change from 02-03 to 03-04.

Summarily, if learning gains, completion of high school/GED, or transition to post-secondary education are considered as indicators of quality in the AELS, there is little indication that quality improved much for the four years from PY01-02 to PY03-04.

RESOURCES: In September 2000 the National Literacy Summit 2000 Action Agenda included Action Agenda Priority 1: Resources, Outcome B: Action 2: "Persuade Congress to appropriate \$1 billion annually to the adult education, language, and literacy system."

Unfortunately, the President's budget request for the AELS in fiscal year 2008 was just \$564 million. It is unlikely that the Congress will add more than some \$20 or so million to the President's request, giving a projected figure of \$585 million for FY 2008. If enrollments run at about 2.8 million, this comes to a federal expenditure of some \$210 per enrollment.

The NCSDAE American Competitiveness Initiative report calls for an AELS budget of \$2 billion in 2010-2011 with some 4 million enrollments. This would result in about \$500 per enrollment. Even with state funding added, the report projects about \$972 per enrollee as a national average, though actual amounts would vary from state to state. This contrasts with present funding per student in the K-12 system of over \$8000 and over \$18,000 in higher education. The federal Head Start program currently runs about \$6500 per enrollee and Early Head Start spends in excess of \$10,000 per child. Clearly, the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) would remain a marginalized education system even if a federal budget of \$2 billion could be achieved by 2010-2011. Given the experience of the last seven years, this seems highly unlikely.

Where Has the Action Agenda Taken The Field?

There are some indications that in various states advocacy has been successful in getting increases in funding for the state's programs. But at a national level it appears that since the Action Agenda was released at the Literacy Summit of September 2000, with regard to ACCESS, there has been an overall decline in enrollments in the national AELS. Regarding QUALITY, I have found no data or other information to determine if the AELS has improved in any manner in direct response to the Action Agenda. Finally, regarding RESOURCES, if funding for the state grants that support the AELS reaches the \$585 million projected above in fiscal year 2008 that will represent an 8 percent increase from the \$540 million for state grants in FY 2001, the year following the launch of the Action Agenda. But in constant 2007 funds, this is a drop from a purchasing power of \$635 million in 2001 to \$585 million in 2007, so adjusted for inflation, the fiscal year 2008 projected federal funds for the AELS will represent an actual decrease in funding resources from 2001 to 2007.

Since the first report about the achievements of the Action Agenda in the first year I have found no further reports. This leads me to wonder if there is actually much interest anymore in the Action Agenda among either the original sponsors and formulators of the Agenda, or the rest of the adult literacy education field. At the present time, it appears that there has not been much action toward moving the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) From the Margins to the Mainstream since the Action Agenda was launched.

We are 70 percent of the way to 2010.

Thomas G. Sticht
International Consultant in Adult Education
2062 Valley View Blvd.
El Cajon, CA 92019-2059
Tel/fax: (619) 444-9133
Email: tsticht@aznet.net