

Making the Nation Smarter by Strengthening
the Adult Education and Literacy System

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Making the nation smarter through education is the over-riding strategy available to federal, state, or local policymakers for protecting the security and freedom of United States citizens as they pursue life, liberty and happiness. For this reason, all candidates for public office need to have a comprehensive understanding of and commitment to the thousands of programs across the nation providing adult education and literacy services

Today, these programs are positioned to become a "high impact" educational system for the 21st century with the power to reach not only adults, but, through the intergenerational transfer of attitudes and knowledge, to teach children, too. It has already established itself as a system for continuing education that is actively sought out by a growing segment of the hard-to-reach adult population. Many of these are adults whose knowledge and skills were once adequate for their needs but are no longer. Some are adults whose childhood was frequently unfavorable for acquiring large bodies of knowledge, but whose lives now call for the development of new knowledge and skills. Many do not seek the types of formal, structured education in various "disciplines" that are offered in high schools, colleges and universities. Instead they are looking for the non-formal, "functional" education that helps them achieve short-term goals of a specific nature.

The extraordinary diversity of the adult population, with its range of ages from 16 to over 80, numerous native languages, and all sorts of formal and informal educational backgrounds and life experiences, requires resources, facilities and methods of teaching that are much different from the traditional schools and colleges for students in the K-12 or higher education components of our educational system.

The adult education and literacy system, with its mix of educational providers, ranging from traditional educational institutions such as adult public schools and community colleges to libraries, military bases, prisons, workplaces, churches and a variety of charitable, community-based organizations, comprises the multifaceted system that a highly diverse population of adults need to have convenient access to and comfortable feelings in while continuing their education.

As we move forward in the new millennium the adult education and literacy system is poised to become a mainstream education system to help traditionally hard-to-reach adults, their children, and their communities participate more fully in the lifelong learning of new knowledge and skills for living in our contemporary global system of work, transportation, information and telecommunications.

Action Steps Present and Future Policymakers Should Take

To take advantage of this opportunity for making the nation smarter we need to strengthen the adult education and literacy system by taking three important steps.

Step 1: Increase Funding. The present combined federal and state funding of some \$600 per enrollee in the adult education and literacy system of Title 2 of the Workforce Investment Act is unconscionably low. A concerted effort by federal and state governments should be taken over the next five years to increase the per enrollee funding of the adult education and literacy system to at least \$3000 per enrollee. This would raise the funding level to a level more comparable to that adult students enrolled in other educational programs in post-secondary education

Though this would represent a significant growth in federal funds for the adult education and literacy system, it does not even amount to parity with the Head Start program which aims largely to educate the children of many of the very same adults that the adult education and literacy system serves. Through the intergenerational transfer of positive attitudes, language and literacy skills an enhanced adult education and literacy system could, in fact, lead to a decrease in the numbers of children needing compensatory education. This way some of the increased costs of the expanded adult education system would be recovered by producing cost savings in the Head Start and/or Title I elementary school compensatory education programs.

Step 2: Increase Enrollments. The fact that some 3.0 million adults may seek learning in the adult education and literacy system in 2004 is evidence that the system has considerable drawing power. However, over forty million adults lack a high school diploma, and over ninety million are below the levels of literacy established as the standards we should be striving for by the National Governor's Association. So there are many more adults who might presently benefit from participating in continuing education in the adult education and literacy system.

A large, national, long term educational activity is needed to inform the nation about the existence and benefits of the adult education and literacy system as a continuing education system that is non-formal, convenient, and accommodating of the many needs of non-traditional adult students in a diversity of settings. A national coalition of private foundations, business and industry, the media (newspapers, radio, television, internet), community based organizations, associations of adult educators and adult learners, and various government departments at federal, state and local levels should develop an orchestrated strategy to increase awareness of the adult education and literacy system and its many benefits for adults of all ages and for the intergenerational benefits of children, too.

Step 3. Improve the Adult Education and Literacy System. Research has revealed that many adult education and literacy programs are characterized by poor attendance, high drop out rates, and little if any improvements in learning. Given the extremely low funding level of this marginalized education system such findings are not unexpected. Efforts underway to improve the quality of adult education programs through better staff development, new technology-based curriculum materials, new methods of assessment of knowledge and skills, and the routine collection of data on indicators of program achievements need to continue in a greatly expanded mode. Much of this effort requires additional research and development.

Though each of the three major military services have personnel research organizations, for all fifty states, there is only one federally funded R & D center concerned exclusively with adult education, learning and literacy. Given the central position of adult education in achieving national citizenship,

economic, and education goals, there is clearly a need for a greatly expanded and improved R & D investment to provide the highest quality education possible for tens of millions of the nation's adults, many of whom have encountered great difficulties in learning both academic and functional knowledge and skills.

Without diminishing in any way the importance of the formal pre-school, K-12 and higher education systems, there is a pressing need for all of the nation's citizens, and especially those seeking to provide leadership in government positions to understand the role that the less formal, adult education and literacy system plays in our educational strategy for making the nation smarter.

Overall, the adult education and literacy system, like the other components of our educational system, serves the general purpose of improving the entire network of minds in the nation in which we live and helps to maintain our very survival as a society of human beings in contemporary times.

Like our other educational components, adult literacy education deserves recognition and adequate support for the contribution it makes to forming bridges among minds and insuring social inclusion so that "no mind is an island" in our land.

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