

# THE **POWER** OF ADULT EDUCATION

Moving the Adult Education and Literacy System of  
the United States From the Margins to the  
Mainstream of Education

Thomas G. Sticht  
International Consultant in Adult Education

March, 2001

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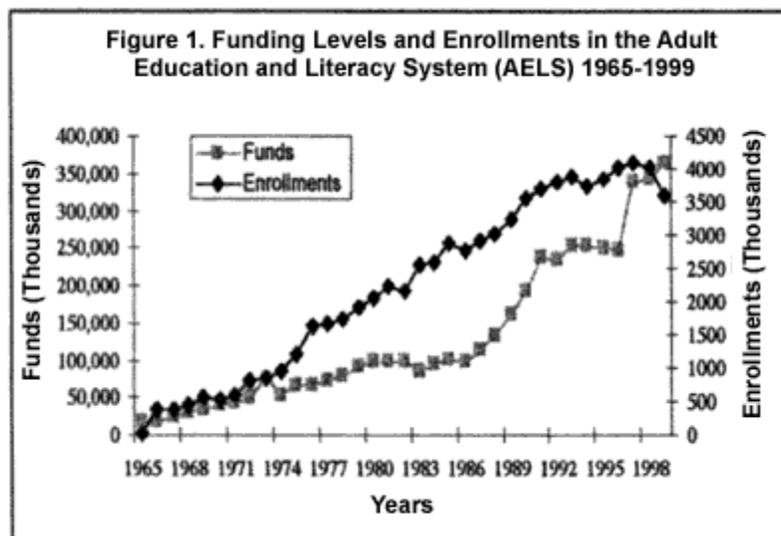
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### What is the Adult Education & Literacy System (AELS) of the United States?

The Adult Education & Literacy System (AELS) of the United States was formed in 1966 when the Adult Education Act (AEA) was passed by the U. S. Congress and signed into law by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. The AEA brought adult educators at the local, state, and federal levels together to work under an agreed to set of common rules and regulations that began the process of systematizing adult education in the United States. Since then the AEA has undergone numerous amendments and name changes. It was renamed the National Literacy Act in 1991, and in 1998 it was incorporated into the Workforce Investment Act as Title 2, The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA).

Today, some 4,000 organizations operate under the rules and regulations of the AEFLA. Together they join the K-12 and Higher Education branches to form the nation's third major publicly funded branch of education. These thousands of educational institutions make-up the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States and they provide learning opportunities for adults throughout their lives.



From 1996 through 1999, the number of adults enrolled in the diverse programs funded wholly or in part through the federal government's Division of Adult Education and Literacy increased at an average rate of almost 100,000 per year, growing from around 377,000 in 1996 to over 3.6 million in 1999.

In the last third of the 20th century, millions of adults chose to improve their minds and lives by learning in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States.

The AELS serves those most in need of education. Of some 31 million enrollees in the AELS from 1992 through 1999, 7.9 million were the working poor, over 3.3 million were welfare recipients, 9.3 million were unemployed and 2.2 million were incarcerated. Over two-thirds of the 15 million enrollees during 1992-1996 had not completed 12 years of education or received a high school diploma and over 3.4 million were immigrants.

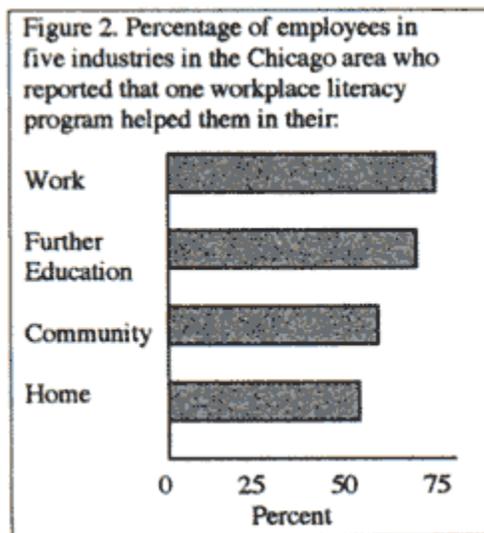
[This is a summary paper to accompany a one hour presentation at adult education meetings. See [page 4](#) for more information . ]

## Getting "Double Duty Dollars" in the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States

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It is axiomatic that government spending should produce the very most for the monies spent. The POWER of the Adult Education & Literacy System (AELS) results from findings that the same dollars used to help adults learn do "double duty" by generating additional outcomes that produce a wide variety of benefits for adults, their children, communities and the nation as a whole.

What is the Power of the Adult Education & Literacy System of the United States?



An examination of several hundred applications for UNESCO literacy prizes awarded over the last 22 years has revealed many multiplier effects that investments in adult education can produce. Importantly, unlike government investments in childhood education, for which we must wait up to twenty years or more to begin receiving returns to our investment, *we get these returns to investment in adult education almost immediately.*

Research strongly suggests that through the generative power of adult literacy education, governments can expect multiple returns on investments (ROI) in at least five areas:

1. Improved productivity at work, at home, and in the community leading to higher tax bases for communities, decreased violence at home and in the community, and greater participation in citizenship activities by a larger segment of the adult population.
2. Improved self confidence and other psychological and physiological aspects of health of adults, including activities that will help the brain grow throughout adulthood and contribute to reduced medical costs for adults as they age.
3. Improved health of adult's children due to learning in adult education programs leading to better prenatal and postnatal care, reductions in low birth rate infants, and better home medical care, thereby contributing to lowered medical costs for children and fewer learning problems in school.
4. Improved productivity in the schools by providing adults with the knowledge they need to better prepare their children to enter school, help them achieve in school, encourage them to stay in school and increase their opportunities to enroll in higher education.

5. Improved criminal justice system due to less recidivism from providing education for prisoners in correctional institutions to permit them to acquire skills and knowledge needed to get along better with others and learn and perform jobs that allow them to *overcome social exclusion* and join in the mainstream of society.

The Adult Education and Literacy System Teaches Topics Not Taught in the Public Schools "In one of our classes, after having workshops on diabetes and offering diabetes screenings, some students discovered that they had very high sugar glucose. The combination of the increased literacy together with the impact in life is what can make literacy so powerful." - Andres Muro, Adult Education and Literacy Program Director, El Paso, Texas, January, 2000.

## The Adult Education & Literacy System of the United States: A Marginalized Education System for the Socially Excluded

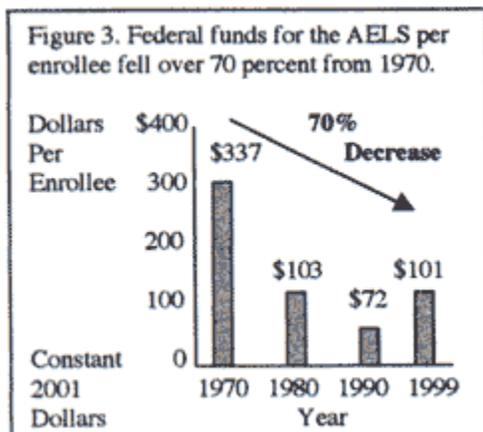
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*Mar-gin-al-ize (mär2jú-nú-lhz1) v. tr. mar-gin-al-ized mar-gin-al-iz-ing mar-gin-al-iz-es 1.  
To relegate or confine to a lower or outer limit or edge, as of social standing. - American  
Heritage Dictionary*

Despite the many valuable contributions of the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States, the system remains a marginalized, under-funded, step-child of the total American educational enterprise. It seems likely that to a considerable extent, the marginal value placed on the AELS reflects the marginalized status of the adult students who make-up the majority of those who turn to the AELS for educational opportunity.

### Why is the Adult Education & Literacy System of the United States Marginalized?

The social and economic status of the millions of adults seeking education and literacy development contribute to their being considered, by and large, a marginalized group according to the dictionary definition. As a group they earn well below the medium income of the nation, they live largely, though not exclusively, in areas with lower education where there are higher than average crime rates, unemployment rates, and higher rates of other social problems (drug usage, teenage pregnancy, etc.). Their neighborhoods are generally those recognized as of lower social standing and they generally exercise little or no political power. So it is easy to relegate their educational system to the margins of our major educational concerns, and in general to dismiss them when it comes time to talk about educational funding.



Cultural beliefs about "intelligence," cognitive development and when something can or cannot or should or should not be learned also provide the basis for the *social exclusion* of many adults and the educational system that exists to serve them. Beliefs about the "bell curve of intelligence" and that it reflects "good" or "bad" genes makes some adults believe that their undereducated fellow citizens may be "too dumb" to learn, and, indeed, many adults with educational problems think they are "too dumb" to learn and avoid seeking educational opportunities that might remind them of past failures.

Some policymakers appear to think that the proper time and place to learn basic skills is in childhood, and that any programs of adult basic skills education are just temporary until the public schools get fixed and produce only highly educated adults. So why spend very much money on the Adult Education and Literacy System?

The marginalization of the Adult Education and Literacy System is revealed by the fact that there is practically no coverage of the AELS by the news media. The National Newspaper Index for the years 1982 to 1999 cites 6,742 articles about the public schools, 2,604 about higher education, but only 53 about adult literacy education.

## The Adult Education & Literacy System of the United States: Moving From the Margins to the Mainstream of Education

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Today, the Adult Education and Literacy System is positioned to take its place alongside the K-12 and Higher Education systems as the third branch of the structure of public education in the United States. This opportunity for moving from the margins to the mainstream of education can be realized by taking **three important steps**.

How can The Adult Education & Literacy System of The United States Move From the Margins to the Mainstream of Public Education?

**Step 1: Increase Funding.** The present combined federal and state funding of some \$320 per enrollee in the adult education and literacy system is unconscionably low. A concerted effort should be taken over the next decade to increase the federal per enrollee funding for the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) to at least \$2500 a year. This would increase the funding from around \$540 million in 2001 to \$10 billion in 2011. Though this is a large growth in federal funds for the AELS, it does not provide parity with the Early Start, Head Start, and Title 1 compensatory education programs of today which aim largely to educate the children of many of the very same adults that the AELS serves. Through the intergenerational transfer of positive attitudes, language and literacy skills from parents to children, an enhanced AELS could lead to fewer children needing compensatory education.

**Step 2: Increase Enrollments.** That some 3.6 million adults sought learning in the AELS in 1999 is evidence that the system has considerable drawing power. However, over forty million adults lack a high school diploma and various bodies of complex health, technology, and other knowledge that require assistance in learning are growing rapidly. So there are millions more adults who can benefit from participating in the AELS. For these reasons, a large, national, long term educational activity is needed to inform the nation about the existence and benefits of the AELS as an education system that is non-formal, convenient, and accommodating of the many needs of non-traditional adult students in a diversity of settings. An orchestrated strategy is needed to increase awareness of the AELS and its many benefits for adults of all ages and for the intergenerational benefits of children.

**Step 3. Improve the Adult Education & Literacy System.**

Many AELS programs are challenged by poor facilities, few materials, lack of technology, poor attendance, high drop out rates, and small gains in learning. Given the extremely low funding level of this marginalized education system this is not unexpected. R & D efforts to improve the quality of AELS 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 progress in a greatly expanded mode. As a goal, R & D to improve the AELS should be increased to at least match the \$100 million or so per year that the military services and the Department of Defense spend on human resources R & D to enhance the performance of military personnel.

**The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) should be renamed the Adult Education, Literacy and Workforce Investment Act (AELWIA) to recognize the many returns to investment in adult education and literacy beyond workforce development.**

As an important symbolic move, the U. S. Department of Education ought to include the Adult Education and Literacy System as an integral component of any graphic displays of the educational structure of the United States that the National Center for Education Statistics or any other government agencies provide in reports of the status of education in the United States.

Resources: Citations of studies providing data and research findings given herein can be found in various papers by Thomas G. Sticht available on the internet at [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca) under Full Text Documents searched by the letter "S". Key papers discuss returns on investment, moving from the margins to the mainstream, and Beyond 2000, a look at the future of adult education. Dr. Sticht can be reached at (619) 444-9133 or [tsticht@aznet.net](mailto:tsticht@aznet.net)