



Adult Education

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Recommendations to Refocus WIA Title II on Career and Postsecondary Success

President Barack Obama has asked “every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training. This can be community college or a four-year school; vocational training or an apprenticeship. But whatever the training, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma.”ⁱ He also has challenged the nation to add 5 million community college graduates by 2020 in our quest to regain our global competitiveness. In setting these goals, the President has called attention to a new economic reality: Most occupations that pay a family-sustaining wage will be filled by workers with postsecondary education or training beyond high school.

Yet half of the American workforce has not had any postsecondary education or training. Among these workers, the goal of a marketable credential is furthest out of reach for the 25 million who did not even finish high school.ⁱⁱ The main federal adult basic skills program, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), also known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) serves only 2.3 million students annually.ⁱⁱⁱ

Title II of WIA has long suffered from too little funding and too many goals. This has hindered its ability to provide more Americans with the literacy and English language skills necessary to succeed. More funding for adult basic skills and English language services is urgently needed, especially after a decade of record immigration and the need to retrain those who have been laid off in the most recent economic downturn. But expanded federal investment in adult education and English language services should focus more on providing, in partnership with states and localities, services that dramatically increase the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success. Currently, most adult education students leave after just 30 to 80 hours of instruction without receiving any credential and before achieving meaningful learning gains.^{iv} Reforms are urgently needed that create new and shorter career and postsecondary pathways that give students reason to persist.^v Federal adult education funding should focus on increasing the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success. States can continue to spend their own funds—roughly 75 percent of all adult education funding—on various purposes. Just as the federal government targets its elementary and secondary education expenditures to achieve specific goals, the federal government needs to be more strategic about how it invests its spending on adult education. The following recommendations for WIA reauthorization will help ensure Title II better serves learners and our nation.

Revise the WIA Title II purpose and activities to focus on increasing the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success.

- Set as the purpose of Title II increasing the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.
- Focus required local activities funded by Title II on increasing the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.

- Each of the three required local activities funded by Title II—adult education and literacy (including workplace literacy), family literacy, and English literacy—should increase the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.
 - The law should explicitly allow these three services to be provided either before or concurrently with work or postsecondary education and training. The law should also recognize that program strategies can include, but are not limited to, approaches that integrate basic skills and postsecondary education and training content or which may dual or concurrently enroll students in basic skills and postsecondary education and training. Although the current law sets broad economic goals for the program, Title II has been implemented more narrowly than its original intent, which has stifled innovation.
- Require states to ensure that every region has at least one adult education program that offers more than one option for earning a credential with value in the local labor market to students who do not yet have a high school diploma or GED and who are unlikely to earn one in the short-term. Such an option could include partnering with a community college or job training provider and may or may not include getting a GED in the process. Students, including those at lower-skill levels, need more options to connect more quickly to education and training that leads to better jobs.
- Target \$75 million of federal Title II state grant appropriations over current appropriations to states for seeding and scaling up approaches that integrate basic skills and postsecondary education and training or that dual or concurrently enroll students in basic skills and postsecondary education and training. Research suggests such approaches are more effective than the traditional, solely sequential, academic approach in helping students earn postsecondary credentials.^{vi} We recommend, initially distributing \$25 million through formula to states so all states can work on designing new programs and then providing \$50 million in competitive grants to states that wish to scale up these new efforts. In the interest of ensuring that lower level students have access to innovative approaches, the federal government should give priority to those states that include programs that target students below the 9th grade level. The Secretary should develop separate performance measures for these programs, rather than holding them accountable for the current adult education performance measures, and conduct an evaluation of the impact of integrated programs on the rate at which students attain career and postsecondary success.
- Help adult education students gain access to career counseling, job placement, and support services by increasing co-enrollment of these students in Title I programs under WIA. These supports have been shown to increase persistence among adult learners.^{vii} Require states to promote closer connections between Titles I and II and to set targets that steadily increase the percentage of co-enrolled students over time. During PY 2007, only 0.2 percent of exiters from the WIA Title I Adult program were co-enrolled in adult education.^{viii} There is no comparable information on the percentage of Title II students who are co-enrolled with Title I.
- Create Career Pathways state policy leadership grants, to be jointly administered by the Departments of Education and Labor to support systemic state policy change across adult education and postsecondary education and training programs. Often, these systems are not coordinated, resulting in a leaking pipeline that prevents low-skilled individuals from reaching family-sustaining employment. These grants would

provide states with resources to make the necessary changes to align services and improve outcomes across workforce development, postsecondary education, and adult education/English as a Second Language in a career pathway framework.

- Update the law to reflect the greatly increased need for English language services and the importance of helping English language learners to succeed in careers and postsecondary education and training by changing the funding formula to include those limited English proficient individuals with high school diplomas. These individuals are eligible for services and states are serving them, but the current formula only includes limited English proficient individuals who lack high school diplomas.
- Reestablish an independent national adult education research center. The previous center provided valuable research that helped ensure the field was continually evolving to better meet learners' needs.
- Request an independent review of how Title II's "direct and equitable" provision has been implemented. The intent of this provision was to ensure that the full range of adult education and English language service providers—including community colleges and community-based organizations—are able to compete equally for funds provided to states under this Title. It appears that some states, however, are not using a fully open and competitive process to distribute federal adult education funds.

Reform the National Reporting System, Title II's data and accountability system, to reflect Title II's new focus on increasing the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success.

The National Reporting System (NRS) has led the adult education system to focus more on outcomes, but it is not an effective tool for incenting and documenting continuous improvement, especially toward effective practices for helping students achieve career and postsecondary goals more quickly. Because the NRS strongly influences how states spend Title II funds, if a new goal is set for Title II of increasing the rate at which all students attain career and postsecondary success, then the NRS must also be revised to incent and support changes in state policy and local practice to reach that goal. Currently, the primary focus of the NRS is on academic learning gains, as this is the default measure for students who have not specified a goal; all other core measures are tracked only for students who report a goal related to the measure. Transitions from adult education into employment or postsecondary, for example, are only measured for those who report having such goals when they enter an adult education program. Since few students enter adult education seeing themselves as college material, the number of students for whom transitions are measured is quite small, which has the effect of making postsecondary enrollment rates look much higher than they actually are.

We recommend a phased approach to changing the NRS, starting with changes to the current performance accountability provisions in Title II and over the long run, revamping the system and embarking on an effort to develop common performance measures and standards for the federal programs authorized under the WIA and career and technical education programs authorized under the Perkins Act. (See CLASP's Recommendations on Cross-Program Performance Accountability.^{ix})

The NRS should be revised to ensure that federal adult education accountability is focused on objective, measurable, evidence-based indicators of student progress toward credentials of value and success in the labor market.

- Measure all core outcomes (educational gains, entered employment, retained employment, receipt of secondary school diploma or GED, and entered postsecondary education or training) for all Title II participants. This will establish a performance baseline. Programs should continue to be required to work with students to establish educational and employment goals, but these goals should not be used in the NRS to establish the denominator for measuring performance on core outcomes.
- Simplify current NRS learning gains measures from the current educational functioning levels to the number of students who make statistically significant educational gains on nationally recognized tests, and require states to report these numbers. This will incent more programs to serve lower-level learners, whose learning gains are not adequately captured by current NRS functioning levels.
 - To ensure that gains are significant and not just reflecting practice effects, a panel of experts should be convened to determine the best protocol for such testing and to recommend ways to align testing practices between adult education, colleges, and the workforce development system.
- Rather than simply measuring enrollment in postsecondary education, add a measure or measures of postsecondary success, such as completing the equivalent of one semester of occupational training or college-level math or English, or earning a credential of demonstrated value in the labor market. The addition of such measures is consistent with the legislative definition of one of the core adult education performance measures, which requires “placement in, retention in, or completion of, postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement.”
 - The Departments of Education and Labor should convene experts on performance management and representatives of key stakeholders to define the measures and the methodology for capturing this information, including whether to extend the follow-up period for this measure to at least two years after exit from the adult education program.
- The joint Education-Labor expert panel should consider whether to revise measures of career success to track total quarters of employment and earnings over time, instead of current employment measures that examine employment during particular quarters.
- Given the federal government’s desire for states to build robust longitudinal performance management data systems, the Department of Education should provide guidance clarifying the authority of states to match administrative records to longitudinally track adult education students into the labor market and across postsecondary education and training services and require all states to convert to Student Unit Record (SUR) tracking of adult education students within five years.

These recommendations were produced by CLASP’s Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success. For more information, contact: Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield at aduke@clasp.org or Evelyn Ganzglass at eganzglass@clasp.org.

ⁱ President Barack Obama's State of the Union Speech, February 24, 2009.

ⁱⁱ U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement from Cheryl Keenan, Director of Adult Education and English Literacy, Office of Adult and Vocational Education, U.S. Department of Education, at a February 16, 2009 hearing of the House Education and Labor Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness. <http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/ae-testimony-ovae-090224.pdf>

^{iv} Tamassia, Claudia *et al.* *Adult Education in America: A First Look at Results from the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys*. 2007. Educational Testing Service: Princeton, New Jersey. Table 1.7.

^v For more background on federal adult education services, see Julie Strawn. *Policies to Promote Adult Education and Postsecondary Alignment*. 2007. NY: National Commission on Adult Literacy, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy.

<http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/0537.pdf>

^{vi} Jenkins, Davis *et al.* Educational Outcomes of I-BEST Washington State Community and Technical College System's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program: Findings from a Multivariate Analysis. May 2009.

http://www.sbctc.ctc.edu/college/abepds/multivariateanalysis_workingpaper16_may2009.pdf

^{vii} Comings, John P. "Persistence: Helping Adult Education Students Reach Their Goals," in the *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*. Vol. 7, Ch. 2, 2007. http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/ann_rev/comings-02.pdf

^{viii} SPR Data Book PY 2007 – "Services Received by Adult Exiters, Trends Over Time" p. 50.

^{ix} CLASP Recommendations on Performance Accountability in the Workforce Education and Training System. July 7, 2009.

http://www.clasp.org/admin/site/publications/files/CLASP_RecommendationsPerformanceAccountabilityReportingFinal_070609.pdf