



The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act: Toward a Modern Adult Education System and a More Educated Workforce

The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (AEEGA) was introduced in the House of Representatives in June 2011 by Rep. Ruben Hinojosa (TX-15)¹ and in February 2012 in the Senate by Sen. Jim Webb (VA).² The Act (H.R. 2226 and S. 2117) would amend the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) to encourage the use and availability of career pathways for low-skilled adults, strengthen the focus of adult education on postsecondary and career success, increase the number of adult education students receiving marketable postsecondary credentials, and modernize the adult education system to meet the needs of 21st century jobs. Although AEEGA could substantially improve WIA—particularly the Title II provisions that govern adult education—it could be strengthened by incorporating stronger provisions that promote better alignment between WIA Titles I and II, including a shared system of accountability.

Raising Expectations for States, Education Providers and Adult Learners

By 2018, economists predict that 63 percent of jobs will require a postsecondary education, yet, today, only 55 percent of adults have at least some college education. The nation's ability to meet the demand for a higher-skilled workforce depends on increasing the education levels of adults currently in the workforce. If we do not, economists predict the U.S. will face a future labor shortage of at least three million workers. A growing wage gap between higher- and lower-educated workers also increases the urgency of helping workers access further education and training. Lower-educated workers are more likely to earn lower wages, be unemployed, have children who do not go to college, and have health problems that impact their longevity and economic well-being.

AEEGA addresses these challenges by raising expectations for the adult education system from one that simply helps adults gain basic literacy or a secondary school diploma to one that helps adults get on a sustainable path to postsecondary and career success. It shifts the goals and purpose of adult education from a focus on receipt of a high school diploma or GED to a focus on postsecondary access and success. To fulfill this new purpose, AEEGA focuses on improvements in four main areas.

AEEGA strengthens the focus on postsecondary “transition and success” for students at every basic skill level.

Under current law, the most prevalent model of adult education focuses on the attainment of a secondary school diploma or its equivalent as the ultimate goal. Yet studies show that students with only a secondary school credential are not well-prepared to get a family-sustaining job or enter postsecondary education. Adult education programs should be supporting longer-term, postsecondary goals rather than simply having an end goal of obtaining a secondary school credential with little labor market payoff. The GED[®] is the most commonly-known secondary school equivalent credential and research on GED[®] test-passers shows that it does not denote college

¹ The House bill (H.R. 2226) is co-sponsored by Rep. Robert C. Scott (VA-3), Rep. Silvestre Reyes (TX-16), Rep. Jared Polis (CO-2), Rep. Donald Payne (NJ-10), Rep. Grace Napolitano (CA-38), Rep. Ben Ray Lujan (NM-3), Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (TX-18), Rep. Mike Honda (CA-15), Rep. Raul Grijalva (AZ-7), Rep. Chaka Fattah (PA-2), Rep. Danny K. Davis (IL-7), Rep. Yvette D. Clarke (NY-11), Rep. Judy Chu (CA-32).

² The Senate bill (S. 2117) is co-sponsored by Sen. Sherrod Brown (OH) and Sen. Jack Reed (RI).

readiness—only nine percent of GED[®] passers actually end up receiving a postsecondary credential.³ AEEGA puts incentives in place to help ensure students in adult education are well-prepared for postsecondary education, not just receipt of a GED[®] or a secondary school credential. The Act also supports and encourages the use of instructional models that accelerate progress toward a student’s postsecondary goals, even for those students at the lowest skill levels.

- AEEGA modifies the goals of adult education to include *transition and success* in postsecondary education, a key change from existing law which only sets goals of improved literacy, receipt of a secondary credential, and development of educational skills that will help participants find employment or become self-sufficient. This change reflects that, in today’s economy, adults and youth now need postsecondary education and credentials to achieve and maintain self-sufficiency.
- AEEGA recognizes that, to best and quickly prepare them for college-level work, adult education students must be taught using innovative models that accelerate student progress and help them reach college and career readiness more quickly. The bill:
 - Supports the use of instructional models at the state and local levels that have shown promise toward these goals, including Integrated education and training (IET), an instructional model that contextualizes basic skills instruction or English language services to a particular occupational area, and; Dual Enrollment (or “Concurrent Enrollment”), which can help near-college ready students make progress more quickly by allowing them to enroll in both credit-bearing postsecondary level classes in the same quarter or semester as their basic skills courses.
 - Allows adult education national leadership funds to be used on national demonstration projects that include the use of dual enrollment and IET models.
- AEEGA eliminates the sequence of service provisions in Title I that require individuals to progress through various “levels” of service before receiving training. Eliminating this required sequence of service will improve the ability of programs to work together to develop cross-system programs for students at all levels, including bridge programs that help low-skilled students seamlessly transition (or “bridge”) from one system to another.

AEEGA encourages the use and availability of career pathways for low-skilled adults.

For many low-skilled adults, the journey to a postsecondary credential requires navigating several different public and private programs in workforce, adult education, postsecondary, and health and human services systems. These systems are often disconnected, making it difficult for a student to quickly progress to successively higher levels of education, regardless of his or her beginning skill level. AEEGA encourages the use and availability of “career pathways” that connect education, training, and social services to help learners advance over time in a specific occupational area.

³ Patterson, Margaret, Zhang, J., Song, W., and Guison-Dowdy, A. Crossing the Bridge: GED Credentials and Postsecondary Educational Outcomes, American Council on Education, April 2010.

AEEGA encourages the development of career pathways by:

- Explicitly defining the core elements of a career pathways framework. Though many states, such as Arkansas, Oregon, Minnesota, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin are pursuing career pathways approaches, the term is not defined formally in WIA. Establishing a common definition is a significant step toward ensuring that career pathways nationwide are sufficiently robust to enable students to earn credentials and advance over time in occupations with high regional demand. The definition states that students in career pathway programs should be provided with support services—an essential component for student success, particularly for adult students with many outside work and family responsibilities.⁴
- Allowing states to use adult education state leadership funds in Title II for the development of career pathway models and the Administration to use national leadership funds to support demonstration projects that promote the use of career pathways.
- Building on current authority in annual appropriations bills to provide local areas with the flexibility to contract for training directly with colleges and eligible providers. In Title I of WIA, the current focus on training primarily through ITAs unnecessarily discourages contract training, which can be an effective way to design programs that are tailored to the needs of low-skilled individuals like bridge programs.
- Expanding the list of possible demonstration and pilot projects in Title I to be implemented by the Department of Labor. Additions include a) projects that assist low-skilled and Limited English Proficient (LEP) workers acquire new skills through integrated education and training programs; and b) projects that test various career pathways strategies that meet the skill needs of regional employers and help workers advance through education and training quickly and receive postsecondary credentials.

AEEGA improves the likelihood that adult education students and individuals in workforce training will earn credentials as a result of their program.

The value of postsecondary degrees such as bachelor's and associate degrees for labor market success is well-documented, but new research finds that even long-term sub-baccalaureate certificates are also linked to increased earnings. Existing adult education programs, however, are not well connected to programs that help students access these credentials.

⁴ AEEGA defines a career pathway as “...a system of educational and social services connecting education, training, and support services, including adult basic skills, English language instruction, General Education Development (GED) credential preparation, and noncredit and for-credit occupational certificate and degree programs, to enable youth and adults to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in a given industry or occupational sector and that: (A) align[s] adult education, job training, postsecondary education, or occupational training to create a pathway to attaining a recognized postsecondary education credential that will qualify an individual for career advancement in projected employment opportunities identified in the State plan...; (B) include[s] advising and career navigation to support the development of individual education and career plans; and (C) lead[s] to a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent (for individuals who have not completed secondary school), a postsecondary degree, a registered apprenticeship or another recognized occupational certification, a certificate, or a license in demand industries.

AEEGA emphasizes the importance of adult learners earning postsecondary credentials by:

- Requiring state plans for adult education assure every region in the state contain at least one program offering students without a high school diploma and unlikely to earn one in the short-term multiple options to earn a credential with value in the local labor market. Students, including those at lower-skill levels, need more options to connect more quickly to education and training that leads to better jobs. The bill states this may require partnerships with other local providers, including community college and workforce training programs.
- The addition of a performance accountability measure to track the attainment of nationally- or industry-recognized credentials by adult learners in the adult education system.

AEEGA modernizes adult education delivery systems to align with 21st century technology and skill demands.

Knowing how to use technology has become a key tool for finding a good job. An individual's ability to access education, find available jobs, apply for jobs, and apply for public benefits increasingly requires the ability to navigate the internet and interpret online tools. Technology can also be used to expand course offerings to a greater number of students in a more cost-effective way. At least 160,000 adult education students are currently on waiting lists due to lack of funding at the federal, state, and local levels. Infusing new delivery systems, such as online and hybrid learning, into adult education would help programs serve more students in need of services.

AEEGA modernizes adult education by:

- Establishing a new title, *21st Century Technology and Skills for Adult Learners*, which includes funding for states to expand access to adult education through the use of technology, make services more cost-effective, improve the professional development of teachers, and assist adult students in developing technology literacy.
- Encouraging states and local providers to use new technologies for the delivery of adult education, including distance and hybrid learning.
- Requiring programs to report student gains in technology literacy by including a “technology literacy” indicator. A new indicator of technology literacy will make programs accountable for helping students improve their digital proficiency. Research shows that workers who use technology on the job are likely to earn 14.5 to 27.5 percent more than similarly-educated peers who do not. By improving the digital literacy of adult workers, programs can help students better access higher-paying jobs.

AEEGA also establishes tax credits for employers who invest in adult basic education and workplace skills for their employees, sets a minimum appropriation level of \$850 million for adult education services offered until Title II of WIA, and increases access to corrections education.

Strengthening the Bill: A Greater Focus on Cross-System Alignment

Although AEEGA would make significant improvements to the Workforce Investment Act, it could be further strengthened by:

- **Developing a shared system of accountability across workforce and education programs.** The current accountability systems established in WIA do not support efforts to develop policies that better meet the education and training needs of students, employers or local labor markets. Furthermore, existing performance accountability measures serve as a disincentive for programs to work together. AEEGA could be further improved by instituting a system of shared accountability that would support the provision of services to a wide range of learners, including those at the lowest skill levels.
- **Reforming the accountability system to incentivize postsecondary and career success.** Regardless of the goals established in the AEEGA, program decisions on the local level are dictated by how their success is measured. The Act should take a stronger stance on reforming the accountability system to better incentivize high-quality, innovative programs that help students make more progress, faster.
- **Encouraging and incentivizing better alignment between education and training systems through the use of shared state plans and other provisions that incentivize collaboration.** Better alignment between systems would make it easier for workforce training and adult education programs to work together and jointly assist students to meet their goals. It would also facilitate easier access for adult learners, who often must navigate complex systems to obtain a postsecondary education. Though AEEGA calls for alignment between the state workforce and adult education plans, it does not require that these plans be jointly developed or carried out. Without a set of appropriate shared accountability measures, alignment between systems is likely to only exist in theory, not in practice.
- **Modifying the explicit reference to the GED[®] to include a broader array of secondary school equivalencies.** In some places in the Act, the GED[®] test is explicitly referenced as an alternative to a high school diploma *to the exclusion of* other secondary school diploma alternatives. Such reference is included in the definition of career pathways, and requirements for the state plan. While the GED[®] is the most widely-used equivalency option, there are a variety of other choices available to students seeking an alternative to the high school diploma, including state high school equivalency degrees (HSEDs) that are widely used in some states. The Act should use a more comprehensive term found elsewhere in the bill—“secondary school diploma or its equivalent”—instead of only recognizing one option.

The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act provides a framework for a new vision of adult education—one that better prepares adult students to access and succeed in postsecondary education, earn credentials that employers value, and obtain 21st century skills. Together with a comprehensive reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, provisions in AEEGA could go a long way toward ensuring low-skilled adults can access the education and skills training they need to build careers in a changing economy.

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