

## From PIAAC to Policy Solutions: Promoting Postsecondary and Economic Success for Low-Skilled Workers

November 2013 | By Marcie Foster and Kisha Bird

A just-released international assessment of adult skills, the [Survey of Adult Skills \(PIAAC\)](#) shows that a large portion of the U.S. population has low skills, impeding their ability to achieve economic success and build stronger families. Findings illuminate that the U.S. continues to struggle with improving the skills of our nation’s adult workforce, particularly among disadvantaged and minority workers. Data reveal:

<b>18%</b>	<b>Adults with low literacy skills<sup>1</sup>.</b> Moreover, nearly one-third (30%) of U.S. adults have low numeracy (basic math skills). Adults with low basic skills earn lower wages, experience higher unemployment rates, and rely more on federal and state benefits than their higher-skilled peers.
<b>20%</b>	<b>Adults with a high school diploma who have only beginning literacy skills.</b> In addition, more than one-third (35%) of adults with this level of education have only beginning numeracy skills. Today, graduating from high school does not guarantee that one has the skills needed to compete for family-sustaining jobs, which often require higher-level skills and postsecondary credentials.
<b>14%</b>	<b>Young adults (ages 16-24) who have low literacy skills.</b> Almost one-third (30%) have low numeracy skills. More young adults in the U.S. are low-skilled compared to the international average (11%). Without targeted education and skills training focused on the unique needs of this population, the long-term mobility of these workers will be compromised and the future economic vitality of the U.S. workforce will be endangered.
<b>Over 35%</b>	<b>People from minority and underrepresented groups have the lowest literacy levels in the United States.</b> The rate of low literacy among black adults is two times higher than it is among all adults generally (35% v. 18%). This gap is even higher among Hispanic adults: 43% have low levels of literacy and 56% have low numeracy skills.

These new data—the first to examine adult basic skills in over a decade—point to the need for a stronger, more comprehensive approach to educating adults and youth in the United States. Educating workers, both young and old, and helping them get on a path to postsecondary credentials provides them with individual economic mobility and strengthens the U.S. economy and state budgets.

PIAAC findings present a significant opportunity for the nation’s education and training systems, which were not designed to meet the needs of today’s growing, high-skilled economy. Strengthening pathways to postsecondary credential and economic success will require state and federal investments in education and training for low-income, low-skilled workers, as well as a fundamental rethinking of policies and service delivery models. Strategies to achieve these goals include:

- **Shifting the focus of the federal adult education program to focus on college and career success.** Existing services focus too strongly on preparation for high school equivalencies or basic literacy. Today’s workers need higher level credentials—*postsecondary* credentials—in order to achieve economic success and career advancement. Through the use of [models that “bridge” adult education and postsecondary education](#), using strategies such as dual enrollment, integration, and contextualization, states and the federal government can vastly improve the ability of adult education students to improve their basic literacy and numeracy while gaining new, marketable job skills.
- **Developing pathways to college and career opportunities for America’s English language learners, including new immigrants.** English language services provided through the adult education system experience similar shortcomings as traditional adult education programs, focusing almost entirely on English language acquisition rather than developing connections to postsecondary education and careers. Developing bridge and career pathways models for current English language learners, as well as expanding the capacity of the system through comprehensive immigration reform, would strengthen the nation’s global competitiveness and accelerate our economic recovery.
- **Strengthening investments in adult education and workforce development.** Adult education services, which include Adult Basic Education and English Language Services, reach only six percent of the population that could benefit from services. [Federal and state investments are currently insufficient to meet the demand](#); per-student expenditures range from \$700-900, compared to \$10,000 for students in K-12 systems. The nation’s current workforce system serves a fraction of the eligible youth and adult population that require intensive services and skills development. [In 2011, just over 224,000 youth were served through the WIA Youth Activities program](#), far below the eligible youth population that would benefit from education, job-training and employment.
- **Supporting innovation in the growth of high school equivalencies.** While postsecondary credentials remain the goal, existing policies and programs often require students to earn a high school diploma or equivalency prior to enrolling in college or receiving federal aid. With federal and state budgets shrinking and more low-income youth and adults in need of education than ever before, states should re-examine the breadth of their secondary school equivalency options to ensure that students have and retain access to a number of pathways to secondary credentials and postsecondary education.

- **Implementing a *career pathways approach* to delivering education and training for workers at all skill levels.** A lack of coordination among K-12 education, higher education, and workforce education services—as well as a disconnect between traditional programs and employers’ workforce needs—often results in workers failing to access postsecondary options, complete postsecondary credentials and obtain good jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage. The career pathways approach deepens collaboration and coordination among agencies, institutions, and organizations at the federal, state, and local levels to ensure education, training, and employment services are aligned to meet the unique needs of each participant. This approach maximizes public and private dollars to create a stronger workforce and economy. CLASP’s state-led initiative, the [Alliance for Quality Career Pathways](#), seeks to provide a common understanding of high-quality career pathways systems and programs.
- **Addressing inequities in access and enrollment to college preparatory coursework for high school age youth of color.** People of color are among the fastest growing population segment of America's workforce, yet they have some of the lowest levels of education attainment. Secondary education school reforms that focus on racial inequity are essential to strengthening the nation’s workforce. Nationally, only 65 percent of high schools with the highest enrollments of African-American and Hispanic students offer Algebra II, compared to 82 percent of low-minority high schools. To close these gaps, school reforms should include an annual school-level analysis of middle and high schools college preparatory course offerings, an analysis of gaps, disaggregated and cross-tabulated by race, gender, socioeconomic, and disability status; data-informed action plans to address issues and set school and district-level benchmarks for closing gaps for youth of color and [improving college readiness](#) for all students.
- **Expanding opportunities for disadvantaged and disconnected youth and young adults to gain basic skills and earn secondary and post-secondary credentials.** Recent research suggests a [correlation between state and county economic opportunity and its percentage of disconnected youth](#). There are 6.7 million youth ages 16-24 who are out of school and out of work; over 3.4 million have had no attachment to school or work since age 16. Yet there is no single federal program or policy designed to address their education, training, and social needs. Federal [workforce, secondary and higher education policy and resources should be aligned](#) to prioritize this population group and promote shared outcomes focused on postsecondary and employment success.

For more information on CLASP’s policy solutions to improve postsecondary and economic success for low-income and low-skilled workers, visit [www.clasp.org/postsecondary](http://www.clasp.org/postsecondary).

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<sup>1</sup> In this analysis, "low levels of literacy and numeracy" is defined as functioning at or below *Level 1*.