



# Free and Friendly Advice for AFE Advocates


What Advocates Can Do to Move Beyond the Limits  
of Current Adult Foundational Education Policy and Funding

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To their credit, advocates for U.S. adult foundational education (AFE) are developing advocacy strategies for building support for AFE at national, state, and local levels and within various stakeholder groups. But too often these efforts remain stuck in worn-out ways of thinking about: (a) what more effective forms of AFE would look like and require and (b) how advocacy can help public- and private-sector decision makers and funders transition to better AFE system models. Here is some free and friendly advice for AFE advocates in all levels and segments of our field and within diverse stakeholder partners AFE can work with.

1. **Re-think what we are advocating for.** Rather than continuing to focus advocacy so heavily on preserving the current limited model of AFE that has evolved in the era of WIOA (federal Workforce Investment and Opportunities Act), we should now base advocacy on a broader vision of how AFE can build stronger communities. Since its rollout in the later 1990s, WIOA-funded AFE has produced some positive results for learners and other stakeholder groups (e.g., employers) and generated tools and expertise that AFE providers and other stakeholders can use. But the WIOA model also has had significant limitations in its reach, resources, requirements, and relevance.<sup>1</sup> The AFE field itself is now faced with significant challenges (e.g., uncertainties about funding and leadership, dismantling of LINCS, a decline in investments and leadership by other federal agencies and community stakeholder groups). And the learners and communities we serve are also now dealing with multiple economic and social obstacles. For these reasons, we should now advocate for strengthened and expanded AFE systems at national, state, and local levels that (a) build on the strengths both WIOA-funded and other AFE programs developed with little or no WIOA funding and (b) provide high-quality, well-equipped, integrated AFE and other supports that are more responsive to the broader range of interwoven needs of adult learners and the community institutions they are part of. This is not a new idea. For decades, AFE advocates have been arguing for such a multi-purpose, high-quality approach to AFE that provides work-related education as well as other important forms of AFE such as family literacy, health literacy, civic literacy, and more.<sup>2</sup>
2. **Acknowledge the vital role that federal policy and funding have played and must continue playing in strengthening AFE. But offer models and strategies for federal, state, and local policy that can be developed alongside current WIOA-type models.** These models can be developed through demonstration projects that create transferable system models and tools for (a) preparing various populations of incumbent workers and job seekers for family-wage opportunities within diverse industries (including small businesses); (b) helping families manage the multiple demands and opportunities (e.g., related to health, education, housing, employment, finances, technology, environmental sustainability, legal issues) that family members – including children, elders, and those with disabilities – face; (c) helping diverse basic-skills-challenged populations (e.g., people with disabilities, individuals with criminal records, out-of-school [“disconnected”] young adults, refugees and immigrants, residents of remote communities) develop the basic skills, technical knowledge and tools, credentials, life plans, and support systems they can use to integrate into productive, rewarding roles in their communities. Such concrete demonstrations



can (a) help learners and their communities; (b) strengthen local AFE systems; and (c) inform and inspire public- and private-sector decision-makers and funders to better understand what U.S adults need to be “work-ready” and to otherwise be effective builders of effective communities. “Private-sector decision-makers and funders” might include businesses (which can provide targeted financial and in-kind supports) and employer associations, labor unions, family service providers and K-12 schools, healthcare providers, libraries, corrections and public safety agencies, digital access services, community organizations (including faith-based groups), and foundations and individuals that have a stake in well-equipped communities. There are many existing resources on these types of public and private partnerships that AFE advocates can learn from and adapt.<sup>3</sup> Maybe pick a few stakeholder groups to work with initially and then build from there.

3. **While broadening the message of “what AFE can do for your communities” is important, it is also vital to avoid overly-simplistic messages about how AFE can respond to diverse social and economic and other community needs.** AFE can’t do all of these things by itself, especially with the limited funding and other supports (e.g., research, professional development, access to evidence-based, effective instructional and administrative practices) that most AFE programs have historically received. Stress that AFE can help communities manage diverse challenges and opportunities but requires both adequate financial and in-kind supports and partnerships with relevant stakeholder groups willing and able to work with AFE to solve local problems.
4. **Be realistic about what this type of revisioning and advocacy work will require.** In years past, at the national level this kind of advocacy and policy-development work was done by funded and staffed national organizations like the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL), National Commission on Adult Literacy (NCAL), Southport Institute for Policy Analysis (SIPA), and others. This is something that one or more foundations and other sources might now support. (Then-recently-retired McGraw-Hill Chair Harold McGraw Jr. provided seed money for BCEL, which was matched by dozens of companies, foundations, and other sources. Dollar General was a major supporter of NCAL. [Its CEO David Perdue was its Chair.] Gannett Foundation funded state-level policy and advocacy work carried out by the National Governors Association.) Similarly, in the 1980s and 1990s many states developed adult literacy commissions (aka, task forces, councils, etc.) through governors’ offices or other agencies that created plans, policies, funding, and demonstration projects to build the capacities of AFE programs to respond to their states’ economic and social needs.<sup>4</sup>
5. **Involve adult learners<sup>5</sup> and other stakeholders in the creation and dissemination of advocacy messages and related media coverage.** Don’t rely too heavily on marketing firms – which typically have limited understanding of the AFE field -- to create messages for you. Build on successful advocacy strategies already developed at national, state, and local levels and within stakeholder groups like the business community, while updating them to reflect current policy-making and community realities. And find public- and private-sector “champions” who substantively understand the potential of AFE and are willing and able to support your advocacy work and take ownership for it. (Such potential champions are “out there,” waiting to be shown how they might target their resources to support the institutions and communities important to them.) Here is an example of a core “can-do” advocacy message that might be adapted for multiple audiences, using various media:



**Basic (foundational) skills remain a challenge for individuals and the communities they are part of.** In U.S. communities, significant numbers of adults and out-of-school youth are challenged by inadequate written and oral language, numeracy, digital literacy, research, or other foundational skills they need to perform rewarding, meaningful work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles. Those adult basic skills limitations can have a variety of roots, including disabilities, health problems, inadequate schooling, difficult life circumstances, or other systemic factors. Limited basic skills can have negative implications for those individuals and their families and communities. This is especially true if basic skills challenges are coupled with gaps in (a) required academic (e.g., high school equivalency) diplomas or occupational credentials or in (b) subject-matter knowledge, social-emotional strengths (e.g., self-efficacy, social confidence), and/or support systems. Many of these adults also have limited ability to access adult education services, due to where they live, lack of transportation, work demands, family care-giving responsibilities, lack of digital tools for remote learning, or disabilities.

**Learners possess significant strengths that can be built on.** Despite these challenges, these adults often also possess significant strengths (e.g., technical and cultural knowledge, language skills, creativity and positive motivations, and family and community support systems) that they bring to their lives and society.

**Well-designed and -supported adult foundational education (AFE) programs can be a vital resource for U.S. communities.** With adequate financial and other supports, adult education services—including programs that partner with healthcare providers, employers, labor unions, employment centers, prisoner re-entry agencies, and other stakeholders—have demonstrated their ability to help adults develop the basic skills and other assets they need. **However, AFE services are themselves challenged** – by inadequate funding, long waiting lists, and a lack of recognition as a vital resource for our nation.

**AFE programs – in partnership with other stakeholders – can help communities better manage both current and future challenges and opportunities.** Potential adult learners and the adult education partnerships that serve them thus face multiple, often-interwoven challenges. Overcoming those challenges will require collaborative planning, implementing, and sustaining of systems of high-quality educational and other supports for adult learners. Such systems can build on valuable past work and more recent innovations in adult education. **Informed, forward-thinking, courageous leadership is now needed from multiple sectors – at local, state, and national levels -- to create AFE partnerships that build stronger communities.**

6. **In sum**, as we now move forward to create and implement more effective advocacy strategies, **we need to be smart (informed, strategic, open to new ways of thinking and acting), organized, collaborative, and courageous – a model of human intelligence that our nation can learn from.**

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of both the strengths and limitations of current AFE, see “Our Adult Foundational Education Report Card”: Book 2 in the 5-volume series *In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about*

*U.S. Adult Foundational Education*: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/CO%20Book%202%20Jurmo%20FINAL%2010-28-23.pdf?ver=1764705784215>

<sup>2</sup> See “Vision and Voices for Multi-Purpose, Collaborative, Empowerment-Focused AFE”: Book 3 in the 5-volume series *In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education*: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/CO%20Book%203%20Jurmo%20FINAL%2010-28-23.pdf?ver=1764705784215>

<sup>3</sup> For example, see the COABE “Policy for AFE,” “Business Partnerships,” and “Workplace Learning” special collections here: <https://adulthoodresource.coabe.org/program-level/archive-of-special-collections/>

<sup>4</sup> See the Fall 2025 *COABE Journal* for articles about how states can support AFE. Here is one article about past state-level AFE initiatives: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/7e77b543-4e98-4265-a3c2-cb2d9c3d26bf/Then%20%26%20Now%2C%20Jurmo%2C%20COABE%20Journal%2C%20fall%202025.pdf?ver=1764705783990>

<sup>5</sup> See *Learners as Leaders for Stronger Communities: Renewing Participatory Learning, Learner Leadership, and U.S. Adult Foundational Education*: <https://img1.wsimg.com/blobby/go/4b259097-f77f-4c70-813c-4cff11dc6161/downloads/Learners%20as%20Leaders%20final%20-Jurmo%203-27-23.pdf?ver=1764705784282> and *Learners, Educators, and Communities as Problem Solvers* at <https://adulthoodresource.coabe.org/program-level/archive-of-special-collections/>