



Business Support for Adult Foundational Education

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How businesses have supported AFE

Businesses have played many important roles in U.S. adult foundational education (AFE). They have:

- Provided financial and in-kind supports to AFE services.
- Supported AFE planning, policy, awareness, and advocacy efforts.
- Provided AFE-related supports to their own workforces.

Major nation-wide efforts in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s developed and documented these business-sector supports for AFE, including:

— National-level leadership by the Business Council for Effective Literacy, a non-profit policy and information center established with a personal donation of \$1 million by Harold W. McGraw, Jr. the recently-retired Chair of the McGraw-Hill, Inc. publishing company. From 1984 to 1993, BCEL both facilitated corporate support for AFE and helped develop AFE public policy and funding. It emphasized that, though businesses can play important roles in AFE, their involvement is not a replacement for public sector leadership, policy, and funding.

— A national adult literacy awareness campaign, Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), led by the American Broadcasting Company and PBS. This campaign received support from national trade associations and individual companies at national and local levels.

— Business leader advocacy for federal government policies and investments for AFE such as the National Literacy Act, National Workplace Literacy Program, services for small businesses, and others.

— Special AFE initiatives by industry associations for small businesses and particular industries (e.g., banking, printing, home building, hospitality, healthcare).


— Corporate funding for state and urban initiatives to support and coordinate AFE services.

— Corporate funding for AFE resource organizations like the National Center for Family Literacy, the Association for Community Based Education, Voice of Adult Learners United for Education (VALUE), and others.

— AFE projects built around collaborations between employers and labor unions.

Lessons we might learn from previous business supports for AFE

AFE advocates who want to work productively with businesses today might learn from those earlier initiatives. Possible lessons include:



1. Individual AFE programs and/or collaborative groups of AFE providers should develop a strategic plan that clarifies why and how you might work with businesses and which individual businesses or business groups to focus on. Keep in mind that there are multiple ways that businesses can work with AFE providers and policy makers. Educate yourself about the range of options rather than jumping too quickly to any one of them. Identify particular needs that your AFE program or network wants to focus on, so that business investments are relevant and useful. And clarify what if any supports prospective business partners have already given to AFE or other community-improvement efforts.

2. Don't overpromise what AFE can do for a business or for the community that the business operates in. For example, while well-planned and -supported AFE programs can help a company's workforce develop basic skills that jobs in that company require, those AFE programs would need to have staff with relevant expertise and other resources to create such customized programs. Consider adapting the following kind of language when reaching out to businesses and other potential supporters:

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.

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. But their basic skills limitations can have negative implications for those individuals and their families and communities. This is especially true if basic skills limitations 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.

Well-designed and -supported 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, such services are themselves challenged – by inadequate funding, long waiting lists, and a lack of recognition as a vital resource for our nation.

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.

U.S. businesses have a stake in both a well-equipped U.S. workforce and the well-being of the communities in which they operate. In years past, U.S. businesses have played multiple, important roles in supporting adult basic skills services. For the good of business, AFE, and the communities they serve, leaders in both the business sector and in the adult foundational education field should now re-visit this idea of business/AFE collaboration.¹

3. Businesses should not be seen as a replacement for public sector leadership, policy, and support. Businesses can, however, help get the attention of public officials and support planning groups (aka, task forces) that develop information and strategies that public policy makers might adapt.

4. Be strategic in the businesses you reach out to for support. Consider focusing on particular segments of the business community that might have an awareness of and interest in the adult basic skills issue. These might include small businesses, particular industries (e.g., banking, retail, healthcare, hospitality [hotel and restaurant]), building trades, transportation/logistics/distribution, manufacturing), and print and broadcast media. All of these segments of U.S. business have in the past supported AFE in various ways.

5. Be informed and strategic about whether and how to work with businesses. Be neither naive nor cynical. Understand both the potential benefits of working with a company, as well as potential imitations (e.g., partnership-building requires expertise and work; there could be ethical trade-offs of working with a company or industry whose policies you might not fully agree with).

For more information about business roles in AFE

To learn more about the above history, examples, and lessons learned, see these resources:

— The new “Business Partnerships” Special Collection recently added to the COABE’s Adult Educators Resources web page: <https://adulthoodresource.coabe.org/subject-area/business-partnerships-special-collection/> (Contact aeradmin@coabe.org if you need help logging in.) This Collection includes the complete set of newsletters and other documents issued by the Business Council for Effective Literacy. (In the coming months, COABE will also be issuing a separate Special Collection on the theme of “Workplace AFE for Incumbent Workers” [aka “Workplace Literacy”], a major area of business-sector collaboration with AFE.)

— “The Role of Corporate Giving in Adult Literacy” by Forrest P. Chisman and Gail Spangenberg (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, March 2006): <https://floridaliteracy.org/pdf-docs/corporategiving.pdf>

-- “Trends in Private-Sector and United Way Funding: Implications for Adult Literacy” by Peter Waite (ProLiteracy, March 2019): <https://www.proliteracy.org/resources/trends-in-private-sector-and-united-way-funding-implications-for-adult-literacy-programs/>

Feel free to contact me with questions and ideas about how businesses can support U.S. adult foundational education.

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¹ This statement is adapted from page 40 of <https://bit.ly/3SIYkMh> .