

THEN AND NOW: STRENGTHENING STATE SUPPORT FOR ADULT FOUNDATIONAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

This article presents three examples of efforts to help states to build more effective adult foundational education (AFE) systems: (1) state planning, coordination, and funding for adult literacy services; (2) state workplace education initiatives; and (3) state roles in Equipped for the Future. These occurred from the mid-1980s to early 2000s, a period of significant growth in interest and investment in AFE. The examples describe who was involved, what they did, resources they used, what they produced, and factors that supported or blocked their success. This article is based on a review of literature from this era, especially reports from national organizations covering those state initiatives. (A key source was the Business Council for Effective Literacy's *A Newsletter for the Business Community* which from 1984 to 1993 reported on developments in the U.S. adult literacy field. This newsletter and many of the other sources cited in this article will be included in a new Archive of Special Collections on the COABE website.) The author concludes with actions that states might now take to build more relevant, effective, multipurpose AFE systems. This is particularly relevant now, when federal support is uncertain.

Keywords: state, adult literacy, workplace, BCEL, EFF

THEN: THREE EXAMPLES OF STATE-LEVEL INITIATIVES FROM THE MID-1980S TO EARLY 2000S

These examples of efforts to help states to build more effective adult foundational education (AFE) systems occurred from the mid-1980s to early 2000s, a period of significant growth in interest and investment in AFE. The term *adult foundational education (AFE)* encompasses the mix of services sometimes called “adult literacy,” “adult basic education,” “adult secondary education” (or “GED/HSE preparation”), “ESL/ESOL,” and contextualized education for workforce/workplace literacy, college preparation, citizenship preparation, family literacy, financial literacy, and other applied uses of basic skills. This term helps distinguish the field from for-credit higher education and other activities that might fall under the heading of “adult education.”

This article is based on a review of literature from the mid-1980s to early 2000s, especially reports from national organizations documenting those state initiatives. The article concludes with actions that states might now take to build more relevant, effective, multipurpose AFE systems. This is particularly relevant now, when federal support is uncertain.

Example 1: State Planning, Coordination, and Funding for Adult Literacy Services

In the mid-1980s, several interwoven efforts were raising public awareness, building business-sector and labor-union support, and otherwise bringing attention to the issue of adult literacy (Jurmo, 2023). In that climate, in 1987 the National Governors Association (NGA) created six task forces to develop strategies to improve the nation's long-term economic growth and break down barriers to full human development. These were summarized in *Making America Work: Productive People, Productive Policies* which the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) called an “eloquent call to action with practical suggestions” (Business Council for Effective Literacy [BCEL], 1987b, p. 3). Chaired by Missouri Governor John Ashcroft, NGA's Task Force on Adult Literacy focused its February 1987 meeting on effective use of federal resources, workforce basic skills, use of volunteer tutors, and building effective state coalitions (BCEL, 1987a).

Other entities like the U.S. Department of Labor, Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies, and Education Commission of the States were likewise issuing reports and/or hosting conferences or roundtables related to workforce basic skills. This came at the same time that Congress set aside \$9.6 million for national demonstration projects in workforce literacy (BCEL, 1988c).

In 1988, NGA cosponsored the second National Conference of State Literacy Initiatives, attended by 200 people from 41 states. Sessions on workplace literacy and formula aid were heavily attended (BCEL, 1988d). By 1988, family literacy was also getting attention from Congress in the forms of proposed Even Start and Family Security Act legislation. NGA and others were also recognizing the need for collaboration among agencies serving lower skilled adults. An NGA representative said, “In most states, those people (in government services related to health, human services, labor, and education) don't talk to each other, don't understand each other's programs, and tend to guard their turf. Our job at the governors' level is to ensure that this comes to an end” (BCEL, 1989, p. 7).

Private-sector support for state literacy leadership and planning was now also coming from the Gannett Foundation. In 1986 it announced a 2-year \$2 million grant program to “tackle one of the nation's most pressing needs—promoting state leadership and planning for adult literacy.” Grants of \$40,000 to \$100,000 would help states “launch or expand statewide adult literacy coalitions, multi-agency activities, or state government efforts.” BCEL called this a “highly significant new development” (BCEL, 1986a, p. 7). All awarded projects had the goal of establishing lasting mechanisms for supporting literacy services. Some focused on special issues like bilingual education, rural education, learning disabilities, and strategies for overcoming social and economic barriers (BCEL, 1988a).

Another major private-sector supporter was the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL), whose newsletters were a primary source of information for this article. BCEL was launched in 1983 as a nonprofit national adult literacy policy and information organization with a \$1 million donation from Harold W. McGraw, Jr., who had recently retired as chair of publishing company McGraw-Hill. It donated space in McGraw-Hill's headquarters in Manhattan, BCEL assembled a small staff led by Gail Spangenberg, a former program officer at Ford Foundation, and other foundations who had special expertise and interest in adult

literacy (BCEL subsequently received support from multiple companies, foundations, and other sources). For 10 years, BCEL provided guidance and information to support adult literacy policy and investment by businesses, government, and other stakeholders like labor unions, family education providers, healthcare providers, and correctional agencies. In a predigital age, BCEL published quarterly newsletters (sent to a mailing list of 10,000) and other publications that became key sources for AFE and its supporters. Staff also made conference presentations; testified before Congress; and fielded calls from news media, employers and unions, adult educators, federal, state, and municipal government staff, and others looking for reliable information about adult literacy. BCEL particularly stressed the importance of state support for adult literacy (Spangenberg, 1993).

By 1988 the above efforts were demonstrating both the potential and requirements of statewide AFE planning and coordination. An estimated 60% of states had some form of statewide planning body. About 40% operated a toll-free hotline to provide information and referrals for potential learners and others. About 18 major cities had citywide planning mechanisms. Reports from the Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies, Education Commission of the States, and the State Literacy Initiatives Network (an informal network of national and state AFE leaders) cited the following issues:

1. The purposes of state initiatives varied (and were evolving) but typically included public awareness, mapping of AFE services, and building coordination among providers. But not enough had yet been done to increase the funding providers needed to respond to increased demand for services resulting from increased public awareness (governors were encouraged to step up)
2. Most states had not adequately clarified the needs of various learner populations.
3. “Literacy” was being defined differently across states.
4. Interagency rivalries blocked collaboration.
5. Most states had not developed plans for involving businesses.
6. Funding for most state bodies was “soft” (reliant on start-up funds that would not necessarily be continued).
7. About 40% of states did not have a statewide planning body due to budget limitations, shifting priorities in state government, and/or lack of interest from high-level leaders (BCEL, 1988b).

States received a boost in 1991 when the National Literacy Act authorized the U.S. Department of Education to fund a network of state and regional adult literacy resource centers. These would serve as a link to the new National Institute for Literacy and provide information, technical assistance, research, and training for their states’ AFE efforts (BCEL, 1993a).

Example 2: State Workplace Education Initiatives

Beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing through the 1990s, many states created some version of a “state workplace education initiative.” Though these varied in who was involved,

what they did, investments made, and results, they generally were multiparty, collaborative efforts of governmental and nongovernmental stakeholders designed to strengthen the basic skills (e.g., literacy, numeracy, oral English, problem-solving, teamwork) that incumbent (already-employed) workers needed to attain, perform, retain, and advance in their current and/or future jobs.

While a small number of states were early adopters of this idea of a collaborative statewide effort to improve worker basic skills, interest in this idea significantly took off nationally beginning in about 1986–1987. This surge in interest was in response to a combination of interacting factors:

- creation of the state planning bodies described in Example 1
- multiple reports (e.g., from American Society for Training and Development [Carnevale et al., 1990], Hudson Institute [Johnston & Packer, 1987], National Center on Education and the Economy [Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, 1990], U.S. Congress [Office of Technology Assessment, 1990], U.S. Department of Labor [Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991]) citing the need for a better prepared workforce to manage new workplace technologies, policies, and procedures
- research (Mikulecky & Lloyd, 1985; Philippi, 1991; Sticht & Mikulecky, 1984) presenting guidelines for contextualized instruction
- leadership and advocacy for workplace education from leaders in business, labor, and government
- adult literacy public awareness campaigns that particularly focused on workplace literacy as a priority for the field
- new investments from state and federal agencies and from individual businesses and industry associations
- forums organized by the Education Commission of the States, National Association of Private Industry Councils, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, and National Alliance of Business
- Congressional support in the form of \$9.6 million for national demonstration projects that began in July 1988.

From these varied influences emerged a recognition that states had special roles to play in generating and coordinating supports for work-related AFE relevant to workers, employers, unions, and communities. Business leader Harold W. McGraw, Jr. introduced the April 1988 BCEL newsletter as follows:

Activities to address this (workplace literacy) major aspect of the adult literacy problem are definitely on the increase. While significant attention is being given to workplace illiteracy by public and private-sector groups of all kinds and at all levels, some of the most varied and exciting work is taking place at the state level. (McGraw, 1988, p. 1)

The following state workplace education initiatives emerged between the mid-1980s and early 2000s:

1984–1988: Early Adopters

Massachusetts. In the mid-1980s, Massachusetts had a large increase in displaced workers, many lacking basic skills needed for emerging jobs. The state allocated \$300,000 to create a new Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative (MWEI). Its goals were to raise awareness of the costs of inadequate worker basic skills, provide instruction to help workers move into better jobs, and develop partnerships among employers, unions, and adult education providers. Classes began in six workplaces from diverse industries. They were seen as opportunities to develop replicable models of partnership building and customized instruction in English language and other basic skills required for workers' current and future jobs (BCEL, 1986b).

This work was supported by a Massachusetts Workforce Literacy Plan, developed at Governor Dukakis' request by experts from adult education and government agencies, with input from labor and business leaders. The plan would double the number of individuals served annually in adult literacy programs over 5 years (from 45,000 to 100,000). This was based on an analysis of the changing skills demanded of workers as the economy shifted from manufacturing to service jobs. BCEL (1988c) said:

The plan is groundbreaking in several ways. It is one of the first long-range planning models that links literacy to clearly defined job market needs. It recognizes that literacy is part of a broader picture that includes a whole range of social problems such as teen pregnancy, substance abuse, incomplete schooling, and poverty. It recognizes the need to provide literacy service in a form and in places suitable to the total life circumstances of the people to be served. Literacy instruction will not be given in isolation but closely linked to specific job goals and supported by such essential services as counseling, childcare, and transportation. The plan also has an evaluation component so that service providers and planners will know what learning approaches and techniques work best. (p. 4)

BCEL described the plan's promising features: involvement of all key stakeholders in its preparation; expansion of existing services in vocational training, supported work and intergenerational family learning; support from MWEI in the form of funding for demonstration projects sponsored by the state offices of economic affairs, labor, and education, coordinated by an Interagency Literacy Task Force; targeting of key populations of adult learners with skills from basic to postsecondary levels (e.g., immigrants and refugees, AFDC recipients, mothers of young children, young male high school dropouts, and workers who have been or are at risk of being displaced).

Illinois. In April 1988, BCEL stated: "Under the leadership of Secretary of State and State Librarian Jim Edgar, Illinois has been a model of comprehensive statewide planning since 1984. The state is now moving strongly into workplace literacy as a major component of its overall effort." The plan "advocates programs that bring educators directly into the workplace" (1988c, p. 4).

According to Secretary Edgar, "It is a lot easier to motivate someone to read if they can see direct practical benefits in their day-to-day work." The diverse 36-member Illinois Literacy

Council undertook a “massive statewide public awareness and fundraising campaign for local workplace literacy programs” (BCEL, 1988c, p. 4). This led to over 400 businesses providing financial and in-kind support for such programs. The secretary’s Literacy Grant Program also generated \$10 million to support partnerships between businesses and local AFE programs. Food processing, manufacturing (automobiles, tires, electronics), and nursing home companies set up programs customized to their particular workforces and workplace conditions, as did two city governments. BCEL (1988c) noted:

As with Massachusetts, one of the notable features of the Illinois workplace literacy effort is the range of different organizational types involved, creativity in forging new linkages, and an understanding that the basic skills are best provided in a context that has direct meaning to people in their everyday lives. (p. 4)

New York. In the mid-1980s, New York State employers were reporting that job applicants and employees were lacking “the basic skills needed to implement the organizational and technological changes required” (BCEL, 1988c, p. 4) to be competitive. In response, the state legislature provided \$2 million in early 1987 for a new Workplace Literacy Program to support local projects. This grew from the state education department’s longtime support for adult basic education, especially for economic development. Eleven collaborative projects—all involving labor unions—received initial grants ranging from \$50,000 to \$950,000. Examples included one-on-one tutoring for workers with learning disabilities and consortia of employers, unions, and education providers in Syracuse and New York City. Auto manufacturers provided release time and other in-kind resources for programs in their plants. Some companies and unions then paid for “specific occupational skills training once workers have mastered the basic skills” (p. 4). This initial round of activities was seen as a first step in building a system of supports (e.g., additional funding from federal and other sources, professional development, curriculum design) for workplace basic skills programs (BCEL, 1988c, p. 4).

1988 to mid-1998: The NWLP Years

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Education launched the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP), using funds allocated by Congress. It would provide funding for workplace basic skills projects run by partnerships of employers, adult education providers, labor unions (where unions existed), and other stakeholders. In 1988 and 1989, \$21.4 million in NWLP grants were awarded to 76 projects. They operated on company premises and/or in other locations off-site, in manufacturing, electronics, healthcare, and hotel companies. Forty percent involved a small business. Eleven percent helped workers use new technologies, while half provided English for speakers of other languages supports within an overall employee skills upgrading program (BCEL, 1990).

Funding for NWLP continued for 10 years at \$18–\$19 million annually. Some \$130 million supported 300 projects (Parker, 2007). State workplace education agencies often advocated for such federal funding and, in some cases, received grants for coordinated, multisite projects within their states. For example, from 1994 to 1997, the New York State Education Department used NWLP funds to manage a “Collaborative Learning for Continuous Improvement” project

in eight manufacturing companies. Each site focused on basic skills workers needed for tasks identified by a site project team. Examples included math for statistical process control in an auto plant, technical report writing for machine operators, and financial literacy/numeracy to help workers manage salaries and benefits (Jurmo, 1998). States hosted workplace education conferences (BCEL, 1993b) and otherwise supported local programs with technical assistance and professional development.

With this combination of state and federal resources and leadership, as well as a flood of reports, curricula, and other resources from states, universities, and other sources (BCEL, 1992), workplace basic skills efforts grew and produced results for participating employers and unions; models of planning, partnership building, contextualized curricula, and evaluation strategies; and networks of experienced workplace educators. These efforts created a foundation for stakeholders to learn from and build on (Jurmo, 1992; Jurmo, 1996).

1998 to Early 2000s: The Post-NWLP Years

NWLP funding ended in 1998, around the time that the U.S. Department of Education was shifting AFE's focus to job preparation for unemployed job seekers in keeping with the newly instituted Workforce Investment Act. States were now encouraged to create state boards that would coordinate workforce preparation and job services for both adults and K–12 schools, as well as higher education. Though some states were still actively developing strategies to support workplace education for incumbent workers, this was becoming a lower or nonexistent priority for most states. This was despite evidence that such programs had produced valuable results for both workers and employers, as well as models that could be built upon. This decline in active interest in workplace education was attributed by workplace education advocates to a number of factors (Jurmo, 1996):

- employers needing to focus on more immediate issues like downsizing, converting to new technologies, or closing operations and moving elsewhere
- the availability of adequately qualified workers willing to work for low wages
- worker skills being seen as not lending itself to quick fixes and might be attended to later
- unions that might once have seen basic education as an important service for members and as a way to attract and retain members, now scurrying to survive in a period when membership in unions was declining
- state policy makers likewise under pressure to reduce public expenditures and “re-organize” or “consolidate” rather than expand agencies
- a push for states to pay attention to K–12 reform and “getting people off welfare”
- the perception that NWLP's discontinuation was a sign that federal interest in this issue was over
- a lack of continuity in policies due to frequent changes in state administrations
- growth in the U.S. of “anti-government” perspectives
- a lack of understanding among policymakers about what “workplace education” is, possibly due to lack of evaluations of past programs and reliance on irrelevant measures of program effectiveness

- the ineffectiveness of some former workplace education programs, leaving such programs with a negative reputation
- unrealistic expectations for worker education programs, given the reality that education alone can not solve many problems of worker performance and retention
- cumbersome requirements for securing, managing, and reporting on state funding
- lack of coordination among relevant government agencies
- reluctance of some workers to participate in worker education out of fear that doing so will reveal their “weaknesses.”

Despite the apparent decline in states’ interest and the above factors, some states continued to hold conferences, create networks of employers and unions that provided advocacy and shared effective practices for workplace education, and support research and policy papers to bolster worker education (Parker, 2007). Lessons learned in these programs also directly or less directly informed subsequent national efforts like Equipped for the Future and career pathway programs like those supported by the National College Transition Network (2025) and the U.S. Department of Labor’s WIRED Initiative.

Example 3: State Roles in Equipped for the Future

Equipped for the Future (EFF) was a 10-year (1994 to 2004) collaborative effort of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and other partners to develop a new model of adult literacy and lifelong learning (referred to here as “adult foundational education”). EFF was designed to be “customer-driven” (informed by input from adult learners and other stakeholders) and as a way to help the nation meet National Education Goal 6 set by President George H. W. Bush and the National Governors Association at a meeting in Charlottesville, Virginia in 1989: “By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.”

In the legislation establishing NIFL, Congress assigned it responsibility for measuring progress toward that national goal. NIFL could not measure progress without a clear definition of what achievement of the goal required, so as a first step, NIFL turned to learners across the country to help develop a learner-driven vision of what achievement of the goal would look like. Starting from this vision, and guided by decades of research that supported the use of contextualized instruction (Spangenberg & Watson, 2003) relevant to learners’ lives, teams of EFF researchers, practitioners, learners, and subject-matter experts undertook a multiyear iterative process of collecting information through interviews, surveys, literature reviews, and field experience (Merrifield, 1999; 2000) and learning from it to produce a series of documents that were summarized in a 2000 report (Stein, 2000).

The EFF team dug deeply to clarify common roles that U.S. workers, adult family members, and citizens performed and common skills and knowledge required for those roles. EFF also generated “research-to-practice” guidelines for engaging, contextualized activities that AFE programs could use to help learners develop personally relevant versions of those skills. The model developed professional development activities that could help instructors,

administrators, and others design, implement, and continuously improve those activities. Recognizing the vital need for adequate, well-targeted, and sustained support for this new kind of AFE, EFF also developed guidance for stakeholders (funders, agency administrators, policymakers, and others) who could provide such support.

Operating on a modest budget for 7 years, by 2002 this collaborative effort and the materials it was creating were producing real results: 600 AFE programs in 38 states were in some way using EFF, and 18 states were adapting it as a model for their state adult education systems. National organizations like the National Center for Family Literacy, ProLiteracy, National Urban League, National Retail Federation, Adult Literacy Media Alliance, and others were also in various ways using EFF (Spangenberg & Watson, 2003). Writing in 2003 for the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, Spangenberg and Watson said:

... this bold EFF initiative had achieved wide and deep consensus on what constitutes a valid and appropriate set of standards for teaching, assessing, and improving adult literacy programs. The resulting framework does not proscribe an actual program or curriculum; it spells out proven critical ingredients for adult educators and students to follow as they design curricula and assess outcomes that relate to the needs of students in their multiple roles as parents, workers, and citizens.

EFF Director Sondra Stein describes the program's standards (all directed to the skills of reading, writing, math, oral communication, and problem solving) as a set of goals for learners that have been set by Congress and adult learners themselves. She notes that the standards are a powerful tool to improve results since they not only make clear what the goals of instruction should be, but provide a way to align curriculum instruction, assessment, and accountability. They provide the essential "starting point for system reform." (2003, p. 2)

Recognizing that for EFF to be relevant to, used by, and sustained by states and their local programs, EFF staff purposely reached out to states to invite their input, collect information, host professional development activities, and generate funding and policy to enable AFE providers to use EFF. Key adult literacy agencies and organizations in 13 states (including both state adult education offices and others like the California state library system, the Ohio Adult Literacy Resource Center, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Arizona) supported the development of EFF. They helped with the initial data collection that clarified key functions that adults typically carry out as workers, family members, and citizens, as well as the skills and knowledge that those functions required. State leaders subsequently hosted training sessions for AFE instructors and administrators in which participants helped create engaging learning activities designed to help learners develop relevant skills and knowledge. These collaborative research and professional development activities enabled participating staff to have ownership for the learning activities that they generated (Stein, 2007; personal correspondence and interview, April–May 2025).

By 2003, not only were 18 states using EFF to improve the quality of their own adult learning systems, but some states were helping to develop EFF resources for the nation as a whole. For example, EFF's training center (initially based in Maine and then at the Center for Literacy

Studies at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville) provided training, guidance, networking, and a growing library of materials to build the capacities of interested users nationwide. Several states also participated in the creation of an EFF version of a Work-Readiness Credential for use nationally.

This EFF development work came to a halt in 2005 when a new federal administration arrived and shifted NIFL's focus to K–12 education. Nonetheless, many of the features of EFF can still be seen in the field. For example, contextualized basic skills curricula to equip learners for relevant roles are common focal points for the professional development courses (such as the Teaching Skills that Matter in Adult Education model), discussion groups, and resource collections of LINCS (the Literacy Information and Communication System initially created and operated by NIFL and subsequently run by the U.S. Department of Education). Similar concepts and practices are also found in publications, conferences, and webinars provided by national organizations like COABE, ProLiteracy, and the Adult Numeracy Network.

Current uses of EFF-related concepts and practices and the past work of EFF could be assembled into a new version of AFE systems improvement efforts at national, state, and local levels and within various stakeholder groups (e.g., industry associations, labor unions, public health, correctional education). Interested states, local communities, and stakeholder groups could take the lead in creating such models relevant to their contexts, interests, and strengths.

NOW: WHAT WE CAN DO TO REDEVELOP STATE SUPPORT

This is written when federal supports are in jeopardy for AFE and other services for the individuals and communities who have historically benefited from AFE. While this might change, in the meantime, states should—and can—provide important leadership to maintain existing AFE services and build better ones. Space here does not permit a detailed proposal for how that might be done, but forward-thinking leaders in state government and the private sector (foundations, businesses, unions, and providers of valuable social and economic services) should now consider what might be done to redevelop the kinds of state initiatives described above. They might start by familiarizing themselves with past state-level efforts and more recent related work. They might also consider arguments that have been made—for decades and now—about why and how to build more effective AFE systems that better serve more individuals and community stakeholders (Jurmo, 2025a; 2025b).

This is a time for well-informed new thinking and well-organized action. ☿

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