



Let's Raise Our Voices for Adult Foundational Education

by Paul Jurmo

March 31, 2025

www.pauljurmo.info

Good things happen in adult education or -- to be more precise -- in adult *foundational* education.

What is AFE? Adult foundational education (AFE) is the profession that encompasses services that help adults develop foundational skills like reading, writing, oral communications, math, and digital skills relevant to their lives. Learners also develop background knowledge; self-efficacy; academic, occupational, and citizenship credentials; support networks; and other assets. Learners go on to use those strengths to communicate and solve problems -- manage opportunities and challenges -- that they face in work, family, and civic roles important to them. In the process, those individual learners not only benefit themselves but strengthen the social communities and institutions they participate in -- their families, their workplaces, and public health, public safety, community cohesion, and democracy, among others.

Learners are key for effective AFE. AFE service providers have for decades demonstrated their potential as a source for good in our nation. But they cannot do this work alone. For one, AFE providers depend on the adult learners who show up at the door. These are individuals who are taking a risk, trying something new, persevering in a humble and dedicated way to work with others to improve themselves. They build on and share the many strengths they bring with them and work with their AFE programs and fellow learners to help all in their collective learning community to succeed.

Other community partners are also vital. AFE also benefits from collaborations with other community stakeholders who see the importance of having a well-equipped and forward-thinking adult populace. Those stakeholders understand that well-equipped adults can contribute to strong families, family-sustaining economies, safe and healthy neighborhoods, and a well-informed, productive democracy. Stakeholders can include K-12 schools and higher education, employers and labor unions, public libraries, and supporters of public health, public safety, digital access, democracy, disability services, immigration, and environmental sustainability. AFE providers and stakeholders can and should adapt creative models of collaboration that our field has already developed. Partners can also include policy makers and funders -- from both public and private sectors -- who can provide financial and in-kind supports targeted to creating and sustaining relevant, high-quality AFE service systems.

New thinking and advocacy are needed. When well-planned, -implemented, and -supported, AFE -- in partnership with learners and other community stakeholders -- can do great things for learners and their families, and for other communities that learners are part of. But generating investments in this kind of collaborative, empowerment-focused, community-oriented AFE will require advocates who can communicate effectively with learners, community partners, and policy makers and funders. Forward-thinking AFE advocates should articulate a new vision for how AFE partnerships can better serve more learners and communities if they have supports that such AFE systems need if they are to be developed, sustained, and expanded over time.

We can all be leaders and advocates. Developing and delivering such messages will require leadership from existing national, state, and local-level coalitions, which should include



mechanisms for adult learners to play meaningful roles. But all of us who support AFE should make advocacy a part of our “job descriptions” and demonstrate the kinds of problem-solving mindset and skills that we hope learners will develop.

Advocates can include “veterans” and relative newcomers to our field and individuals and groups representing diverse communities and stakeholders. We can and should— in thoughtful, well-informed, forward-thinking, strategic, and courageous ways – raise our voices in support of high-quality AFE as an important, positive force for adult learners, their communities, and our nation.