



Comments on Secretary's Supplemental Priorities and Definitions on Evidence-Based Literacy, Education Choice, and Returning Education to the States

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Thank you for this opportunity. I am an experienced adult education professional now based in Washington, DC after decades of work in basic skills efforts in several states and countries.


I am writing as an advocate for adult foundational education, an umbrella term that encompasses "adult literacy," "GED" (High School Equivalency), "ESOL" (English for Speakers of Other Languages), and special contextualized forms of basic education for adults (e.g., workplace/work-readiness education, family literacy, health literacy, financial literacy, citizenship preparation, correctional education, digital literacy). I realize that the proposed priorities below all focus on K-12 level education, but I want to make the case for how they might apply to basic education for adults -- and vice versa.

Priority #1: Promoting Evidence-Based Literacy

Literacy should indeed be considered an essential skill for all Americans – including the adults who head our families, support our workplaces and economy, pay taxes, and participate in the civic lives of our communities. The U.S. adult literacy field has, since the 1970s, consistently shown how "literacy" is used in different ways in multiple life contexts. Experience and research in workplace literacy, family literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, and other contextualized basic skills programs have demonstrated that the ability to apply reading and other related basic skills (e.g., writing, speaking, listening, uses of digital technologies, research, problem-solving, numeracy) to adult tasks varies greatly depending on the purposes and contexts in which those skills are applied.

While having basic decoding, vocabulary, and other sub-skills is essential, they by themselves don't constitute full literacy but are only components of literacy. Adult literacy programs have also shown that those sub-skills can best be mastered by adults through application to real-world uses of written and oral language that are relevant to them.

The U.S. adult literacy field has since the 1980s been a leader in both basic skills research and practice, but investment in and leadership for such work have declined in recent decades. This is despite the evidence that shows how (a) customized workplace literacy programs can help learners develop basic skills and technical and social knowledge needed for emerging jobs; (b) family literacy programs can help parents master the basic skills and other knowledge required to support their children's success in school; and (c) correctional education can help low-literate



incarcerated individuals succeed in education and employment and integrate positively with their families and communities upon release.

It is indeed important to help children develop basic literacy skills for the future. But it is also vital to help adult workers, parents, and community members develop the basic skills they need to manage opportunities and challenges that they and our communities and nation face now and will face in coming decades. I am currently creating an on-line archive for a national adult literacy organization. It will house policy papers, research, program reports, and other documents published by respected sources who have all previously communicated with Congress. (The sources include the Business Council for Effective Literacy, National Commission on Adult Literacy, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, National Institute for Literacy, National Workplace Literacy Program, Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, and others.) All of these sources support the above-described perspective on the purposes and components of basic skills education for adults and out-of-school youth. I am happy to share those resources with Congressional staff who are interested in supporting this vital but often overlooked aspect of literacy education.

Priority #2: Expanding Education Choice


Since the later 1990s, the numbers and types of adult literacy programs have declined in the U.S. This decline is likely due to a reduction in public and private sector supports and to the narrowing of adult basic education's focus to "job-readiness." While "employment" is in fact an important goal for many adult learners and for our society as a whole, this focus has likely had the unintended result of scaring many potential adult learners who might need literacy for other purposes away from enrolling in a basic skills program.

My point here is that funders – including the U.S. Congress and its Education and other federal departments and agencies (as well as state and local governments) – should consider a more comprehensive, multi-purpose, customer-oriented strategy for adult literacy. The good news is that there are good models of workforce basic skills, family (multi-generational) literacy, civic literacy, and other forms of contextualized basic skills education that have already been developed. These have been based in a wide range of adult education and other institutions such as workplaces, health centers, K-12 schools, correctional facilities, and multi-purpose community agencies.

These models can be learned from and updated into multi-purpose, multi-venue adult education initiatives at national, state, and local levels. In providing communities with a menu of adult education options, relevant to a fuller range of community needs and accessible in more settings, our federal, state, and local governments can – in partnership with other public and private sector stakeholders – expand adult education choice for U.S. adults.

Priority #3: Returning Education to the States

In the 1980s and 1990s, there were significant efforts in the U.S. to build state support for adult literacy. These efforts were encouraged by the National Governors Association, the Gannett Foundation, the Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies, the Education Commission of the States, state officials, business leaders, labor unions, and others. The results were positive: large numbers (about 60 percent) of states created planning bodies, wrote adult literacy plans, funded initiatives related to workforce and family literacy, and created professional development opportunities and resource centers for adult educators. Such state level supports for the kinds of



high-quality adult basic education described above have many potential benefits for adult learners, their families, and the communities they participate in. But state efforts need to be efficiently planned, led, and supported. This might be done through a new version of the state adult education initiatives described above, with help from federal leaders. (Note that leaders of those state initiatives consistently made the case that federal leadership and support for state-level work were vital.)

In sum: (1) More effective adult foundational (literacy, basic) educational systems can help our communities better manage the many challenges and opportunities they are now facing; (2) Adult foundational education should thus be recognized and supported as a vital component of lifelong learning in the U.S. that supports other forms of education and multiple policy goals; (3) We should and can learn from evidence already developed about how to better support high-quality adult basic educational systems.

Feel free to contact me if I can provide further information.

Best wishes as you seek ways to build a better future for our Nation.

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