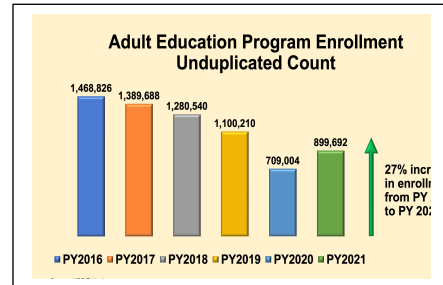
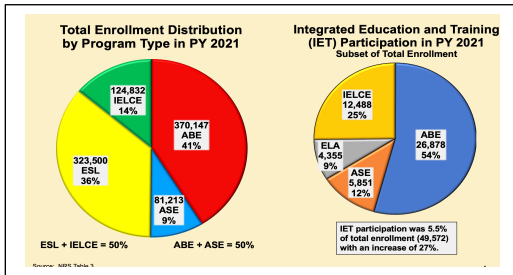


In Community, Strength

Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education

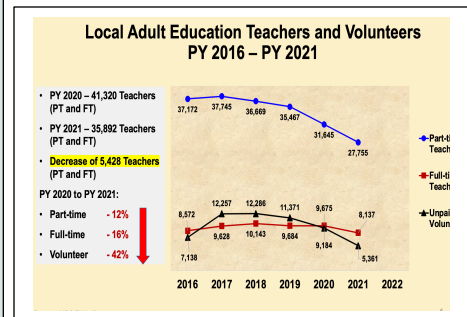


**AFE
REPORT CARD**

Please grade each below:

1. Relevance: A B C D F
2. Reach: A B C D F
3. Requirements: A B C D F
4. Resources: A B C D F
5. Results: A B C D F

Signed: _____



Book 2

Our Adult Foundational Education Report Card

A Resource Book Series
by Paul Jurmo
www.pauljurmo.info

October 28, 2023

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Summary of Book 2

(Parts 2.a. & 2.b.)

Book 2 and all other parts of this resource book series draw on a literature review, notes from discussions in multiple adult foundational education projects, national experts' responses to a survey, and written comments from reviewers. Book 2 briefly describes the types of services provided by adult foundational education in the United States and then identifies what documents and experts have said are strengths and limitations of those services.

Since the mid-1980s, U.S. adult foundational education (AFE)¹ has had the following strengths and limitations:

Strengths

- Learners have developed the following types of strengths they need for work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles:
 1. foundational (basic) skills, other types of skills, and content knowledge);
 2. credentials/certificates/licenses;
 3. social-emotional strengths (e.g., self-efficacy, social skills, self-discipline, resourcefulness, perseverance);
 4. life and career plans;
 5. access to practical tools (e.g., digital technologies, hand tools);
 6. support systems to provide emotional and practical guidance.
- Other stakeholders (e.g., employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, criminal justice agencies, and others) have been helped to fulfill their respective goals/missions.

¹ See the Glossary in the Appendix for definitions of *adult foundational education (AFE)* and *community-oriented*. AFE is also explained in Part 2.a. below.

- Infrastructures of material and human resources have been produced. Material resources include policies, funding, curricula, evaluations, research, assessments, guidebooks, and technologies. Human resources include AFE providers, advocates, administrators, funders, policy makers, and other stakeholders. (These were created through AFE collaborations with various stakeholders, with support from diverse funders and other sources.) These resources can be learned from and used to support future AFE efforts.

Limitations

Despite the above encouraging accomplishments, AFE also has significant limitations of reach, relevance, requirements, and resources:

- Insufficient Reach
 - Small numbers of potential learners participating, persisting, and succeeding in AFE programs. Estimates range from 2 percent to 10 percent of potential participants.
 - Limited involvement in AFE services by other stakeholders beyond traditional/expected funders and policy makers. Employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, correctional services, and other potential stakeholders thereby don't benefit from partnering with AFE services. AFE programs and learners likewise don't get the supports that those stakeholders can provide.
- Inadequate Relevance and Requirements
 - Insufficient understanding of the populations of potential adult learners (i.e., their goals and roles in life, how lack of foundational skills and other assets can impact their ability to meet those goals.)
 - Limited understanding of the contexts ("communities") that learners operate in and of how those contexts can affect learners' abilities to successfully carry out meaningful work, family, civic, and lifelong learning roles.

- Inadequate understanding of potentially valuable service models developed in AFE and other fields.
- Limited relevance of existing services and funding requirements to the multiple needs and interests (i.e., not just “get a job,” as important as that is for many learners) of the diverse populations of potential and actual AFE participants.
- Underdeveloped Resources
 - Insufficient professional staffing and infrastructure (facilities, technologies) needed to develop and use effective practices for the multiple components of effective programs (e.g., program planning, partnership building, instruction/learning, assessment, program evaluation, research, professional development, and uses of technology).
 - Inadequate sustained financial and in-kind support from diverse public policy makers, funders, and other stakeholders for high quality, sustained AFE systems and for the adult learners who are or could be served by AFE.
 - Limited acknowledgment of and support for AFE as a profession that can support many social and economic improvements in U.S. communities

If we are to better serve more adult learners and strengthen the quality and reach of AFE services, we need to systematically plan and advocate for a new AFE systems reform effort that builds on previous and recent experience – both positive and less-positive -- and research in our field. This effort should begin with a new “problem-statement” that better defines AFE’s current strengths and needed improvements.

Subsequent books in this series will present a vision for a new, community-oriented AFE system and actions that advocates and supporters might take to make that vision real.

PART 2.a.

The ABCs of AFE:

What Is “Adult Foundational Education” in the U.S.?

Since the 1980s, adult foundational education (AFE)¹ in the United States has continually evolved in response to changing public policies, funding opportunities, evidence from research and experience, economic and social conditions, technologies, and stakeholder demands and leadership. AFE now encompasses a range of services for diverse populations of adults and out-of-school youth who face various kinds of basic-skills-related challenges. These services include instructional, counseling, and other supports related to these overlapping areas:

- **Transferable strengths**
 - Transferable foundational (basic) skills (oral and written language, numeracy, digital literacy, and other basic communication, problem-solving, and learning skills)² and content knowledge customized to the needs of individuals who are:
 - fluent in English;
 - not fluent in English (aka, English for Speakers of Other Languages [ESOL]).
 - Transferable social-emotional abilities (e.g., self-efficacy, social skills).

¹ See the Glossary in the Appendix for more about the meaning, purpose, and origin of the term *adult foundational education (AFE)*.

² See the Equipped for the Future “skill wheel” for a list of sixteen basic skills (i.e., EFF Content Standards) that adults need for work, family, and civic roles in Stein (2000, p. 21).

- **Specialized application of transferable strengths to help learners prepare for particular life roles and functions**, including:
 - passing of the high school equivalency exam and other exams to attain academic and/or occupational credentials;
 - citizenship preparation (preparing for the citizenship exam and otherwise integrating into U.S. society and democracy);
 - workforce preparation (to obtain, perform, retain, and advance in jobs);
 - health literacy (to maintain good health for oneself, family members, and others);
 - financial literacy (to manage financial and in-kind resources);
 - family literacy (to maintain the well-being of one’s children and other family members);
 - civic literacy (to participate in U.S. civic institutions).

- **Additional supports to succeed in various life roles (e.g., ongoing education, careers, family, civic participation, personal enrichment)** including . . .
 - securing credentials (e.g., high school equivalency diploma, occupational certificate and license, driver’s license, U.S. citizenship, clean legal record, documents for admission to post-secondary education);
 - development of life and career plans;
 - access to relevant support systems/networks;
 - access to relevant tools (digital and other).

AFE services are provided in diverse settings, including public schools, multi-service community-based organizations, community colleges, correctional institutions, public libraries, workplaces, labor union facilities, among others. AFE is sometimes carried out in collaboration with other stakeholder groups (e.g., employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, correctional agencies, immigrant and refugee agencies, family services, technology centers, agencies serving people with disabilities, programs for out-of-school youth, and public housing.) (Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023).

AFE programs vary in how they are funded. In PY 2023 about 1635 programs (Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023, p.3) receive at least part of

their funding from the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) Grant Program (Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act). Programs receiving AEFLA funds are also required to receive additional matching investments from their states, and such state resources often makes up a significant portion of those programs' budgets. (However, note that states may satisfy their match in ways other than cash – such as by providing in-kind services (National Commission on Adult Literacy, June 2008, p. 11). AEFLA programs are administered by the Division of Adult Education and Literacy of the U.S Department of Education. Other programs rely only on other non-AEFLA sources of funding, including foundations, corporations, individual donors, and other non-AEFLA federal, state, county, and municipal government sources.³

In the past four decades, federally-funded AFE programs have shifted toward employment (aka, workforce preparation) as a major focus. This shift was influenced by calls from public officials and others to decrease costs of public assistance and to improve the competitiveness and productivity of the U.S. economy and workplaces (U.S. Congress, November 22, 1989).

Lessons learned in the workplace literacy programs of the later 1980s and early 1990s (which were intended to strengthen the basic skills of incumbent workers) also informed the employment-focused instructional models that were supported in new federal AFE initiatives. Those workplace literacy programs received considerable resources and attention in workplace literacy initiatives of federal, state, and local governments; employers and employer associations; organized labor; and other stakeholders. Those workplace education initiatives supported collaborative projects carried out by AFE providers, employers, labor unions, and other workforce and economic development stakeholders. They generated better-trained workers, reports, curricula, assessment and evaluation tools, and experienced resource persons that could be built on for further such work (Jurmo, Spring 2020. Also see the discussion of “Employer Support for Workplace AFE” in Part 5.c. of Book 5).

³ See Book 5 for more about AFE funding sources.

By the mid-1990s, motivated by the above advocates and guided by workplace AFE models, workforce preparation was adopted as a key focus of federally-funded AFE programs more generally. This shift was supported by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA, P.L. 105-220, the replacement for the Job Training Partnership Act)⁴ (Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023; John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, November 1999) and by the Workforce Investment and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA, P.L. 113-128). Title II of WIOA, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), specified that AFE programs receiving this funding were to focus on helping unemployed or underemployed job seekers move into career pathways in a variety of industries and into post-secondary education. Title II was to also support (a) adult family members to help their children succeed in their education and to improve their families' economic opportunities and (b) non-native-speaking immigrants and other adults to improve their English and mathematics skills and their understanding of U.S. government, individual freedom, and responsibilities of citizenship.

To demonstrate their effectiveness, AEFLA-funded programs need to show improvements in the following six indicators:

- i. The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program;
- ii. The percentage of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the fourth quarter after exit from the program;
- iii. Median earnings of participants who are in unsubsidized employment during the second quarter after exit from the program;
- iv.
 - A. The percentage of those participants enrolled in an education or training program (excluding those in on-the-job training [OJT] and customized training) who attained a recognized postsecondary credential or a secondary school diploma, or its recognized equivalent, during participation in or within 1 year after exit from the program.

⁴ For the wording of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, visit <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-105publ220/pdf/PLAW-105publ220.pdf>

- B. A participant who has attained a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent is included in the percentage of participants who have attained a secondary school diploma or recognized equivalent only if the participant also is employed or is enrolled in an education or training program leading to a recognized postsecondary credential within 1 year after exit from the program;
- v. The percentage of participants who, during a program year, are in an education or training program that leads to a recognized postsecondary credential or employment and who are achieving measurable skill gains, defined as documented academic, technical, occupational, or other forms of progress, towards such a credential or employment. Depending upon the type of education or training program, documented progress is defined as one of the following:
 - A. Documented achievement of at least one educational functioning level of a participant who is receiving instruction below the postsecondary education level;
 - B. Documented attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent;
 - C. Secondary or postsecondary transcript or report card for a sufficient number of credit hours that shows a participant is meeting the State unit's academic standards;
 - D. Satisfactory or better progress report, towards established milestones, such as completion of OJT or completion of 1 year of an apprenticeship program or similar milestones, from an employer or training provider who is providing training; or
 - E. Successful passage of an exam that is required for a particular occupation or progress in attaining technical or occupational skills as evidenced by trade-related benchmarks such as knowledge-based exams.

vi. Effectiveness in serving employers.⁵

Some AFE programs have elected not to apply for AEFLA funding because of philosophical differences and the difficulties of complying with the Department of Education’s reporting requirements (Reder, Spring 2020; Yankwitt, Spring 2020). These non-AEFLA-funded programs are more free to focus on learner goals that may or may not be employment-related. Those programs might, for example, help learners better manage such responsibilities as personal and family health, child-rearing and eldercare, supporting their children’s success in school, personal and family finances, returning from incarceration, integration into a new culture and acquiring U.S. citizenship, transportation and housing, or environmental sustainability.

In sum, adult foundational education in the United States is a mix of federally-funded (AEFLA) and non-federally-funded programs. (Many programs rely on both AEFLA and non-AEFLA funding.) The federally-funded programs adhere to the above-described performance measures (which focus primarily on employment and academic outcomes); the non-federally-funded programs may or may not focus on such measures and outcomes.

⁵ For more about the adult education provisions of WIOA, visit <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-IV/part-463>

PART 2.b.

AFE's Strengths and Limitations

The following discussion of AFE's strengths and limitations summarizes what AFE writers have said, responses to surveys and interviews I conducted in 2021 to 2023 (inviting input for this and other related documents), feedback from reviewers to drafts of this resource book series, and notes from a number of related projects I have worked in, especially in the period of 2018 to 2023, all of which were related to themes discussed in this resource book series.⁶ This summary is not offered as the final word about AFE's strengths and limitations (or necessarily as my own personal view) but as food for thought for those willing and able to seriously consider why and how AFE might be improved.

AFE's Strengths

In the AFE programs described above, considerable good work has been done by AFE providers and partners to serve incumbent workers, job seekers, and other populations of adults and out-of-school youth performing diverse roles in a variety of contexts. This work is often carried out with limited supports and with learners who face significant challenges.

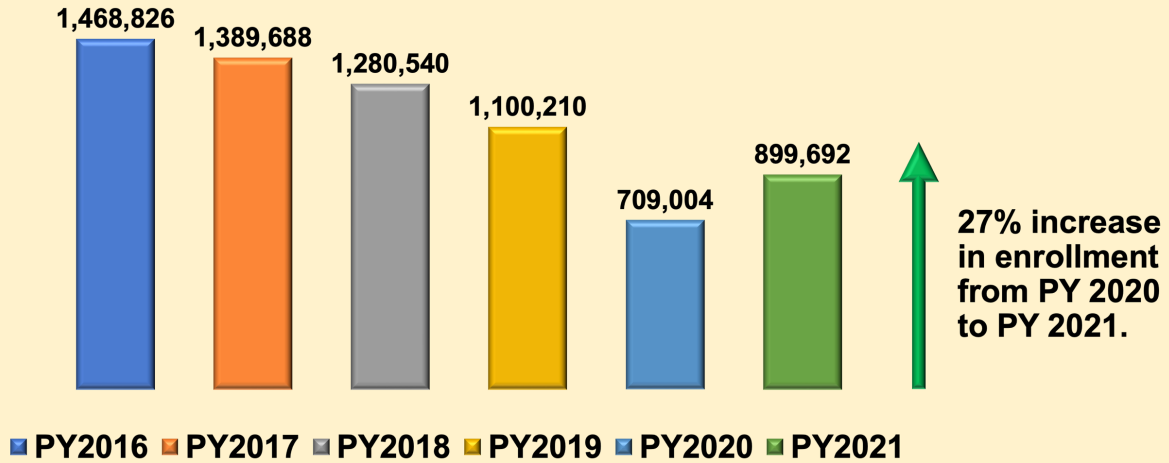
Strength #1: Diverse Individuals Are Being Provided with Several Types of Services

For Program Years 2016 through 2021, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education reported the data for AEFLA-funded programs shown in the charts below:⁷

⁶ Visit www.pauljurmo.info for examples of documents produced in 2018 to 2023.

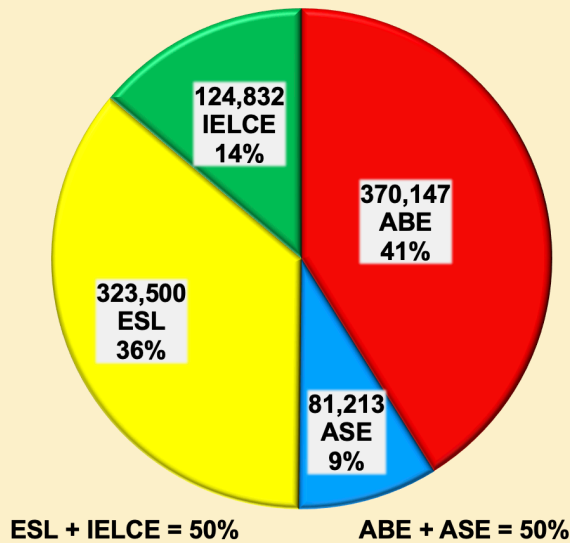
⁷ Data presented by OCTAE staff at meeting of National Coalition of Literacy, October 5, 2023.

Adult Education Program Enrollment Unduplicated Count



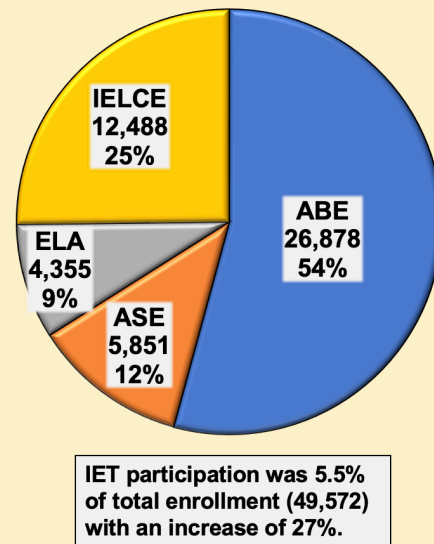
Source: NRS Table 1

Total Enrollment Distribution by Program Type in PY 2021



Source: NRS Table 3

Integrated Education and Training (IET) Participation in PY 2021 Subset of Total Enrollment



4

The above data show that:

- For the period of Program Years (PY) 2016 through 2021, an average of 1,141,326 individuals participated in AEFLA-funded programs, with 899,692 being serviced in PY2021. (Note: The Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) estimated⁸ that, in PY 2021, 1,125,137 learners were served in AEFLA- funded and non-AEFLA-funded AFE programs [Coalition on Adult Basic Education, 2021]. This suggests that in that year approximately 225,445 individuals participated in non-AEFLA-funded programs [or 5 percent of the overall total of 1,125,13]).
- In PY 2021, 50 percent of learners participated in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) while 50 percent were registered in either ABE (Adult Basic Education) or ASE (Adult Secondary Education). This reflects the proportionately greater participation in AFE programs by non-English-fluent individuals relative to English-fluent adults. AFE programs also are increasingly helping learners to access and use digital technologies that are critical in work and other roles. These increased supports for immigrants and digital literacy and access reflect AFE's ability to respond to new opportunities and needs that arise (Belzer et al, July 2020; Belzer et al, 2022).
- In PY 2021, 5.5 percent of participants in AEFLA funded programs participated in IET (Integrated Education and Training).

Strength #2: Other Stakeholders Also Benefit

Employment-focused AFE programs (whether supported by AEFLA or other sources like government- and employer-funded workforce education initiatives) have produced benefits for multiple stakeholders with whom AFE programs might interact. Examples include: (Jurmo, October 1998; Jurmo, Spring 2020; Parker, September 4, 2007).

- Workers can secure employment, income and benefits, and career advancement.

⁸ No source was given by COABE for this number. It was also not stated what types of AFE services were provided and who the service providers were.

- Employers can get better-equipped employees, improved job performance, and funding, expertise, and tools they can use to better support employees.
- Workforce development agencies can access funding, expertise, tools, and networks to better serve clients, along with clients who are better equipped to benefit from workforce services.
- Labor unions can develop expertise in worker education; build connections with other unions, employers, and other stakeholders; and get better-equipped union members able to attain, perform, retain, and advance in employment while also participating more effectively in union activities.
- Learners' families and communities can benefit from having economically secure, contributing family members, residents, and taxpayers.

AFE programs customized to other learner life roles have helped those learners support their children's educational success, care for their health and that of their families, and/or return from incarceration. While doing so, they have also enabled related stakeholders (e.g., K-12 schools, healthcare providers, prisoner re-entry agencies) better carry out their respective missions (Clymer, Grinder, & Sauder, January 2017; Peyton, September 2007; Rudd, 2002; Spangenberg, February 2004).

Strength #3: AFE Infrastructure Is Being Developed

AFE initiatives have produced an infrastructure of professional and para-professional staff, stakeholder partners, knowledge, facilities, and funding that is now being adapted – or could be adapted -- by current and emerging AFE efforts. These resources include:

- Professionals and para-professionals (including volunteers) who have experience in AFE, including AFE program staff, researchers, professional development specialists, policy makers, funders, and partners (representatives of employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, immigrant and refugee organizations, correctional service providers, and other stakeholders).
- Knowledge about. . .
 - the AFE-related needs, interests, and capacities of learners, service providers, employers, unions, and other stakeholders;

- program models, practices, and tools (e.g., curricula, assessment and evaluation methods, partnerships customized to various stakeholder partners and learner populations, advocacy, policies, funding, and professional development resources).
- Facilities and technologies including. . .
 - facilities for instructional and other supports, administration, and professional development;
 - technologies for instruction, administration, professional development, and advocacy.

In sum: Overall, the above-described AFE programs and AFE supporters have thus developed a variety of services that respond to multiple learner and community needs, serve diverse learner populations and communities, and produce valuable knowledge and tools that can be used now and in the future. AFE efforts have also generated dedicated, experienced teachers and administrators (both paid and unpaid), as well as other resource persons (e.g., career coaches, mentors, assessment and evaluation specialists) whose experience can be learned from and built on (Alamprese & Cheng, December 2020).

AFE's Limitations

From about the mid-1990s, when adult education funding became more directly focused on employment-related outcomes (or was perceived to be so), concerns have been raised about both employment-focused AFE and the field more generally. Those concerns include:

Limitation #1: Insufficient Reach

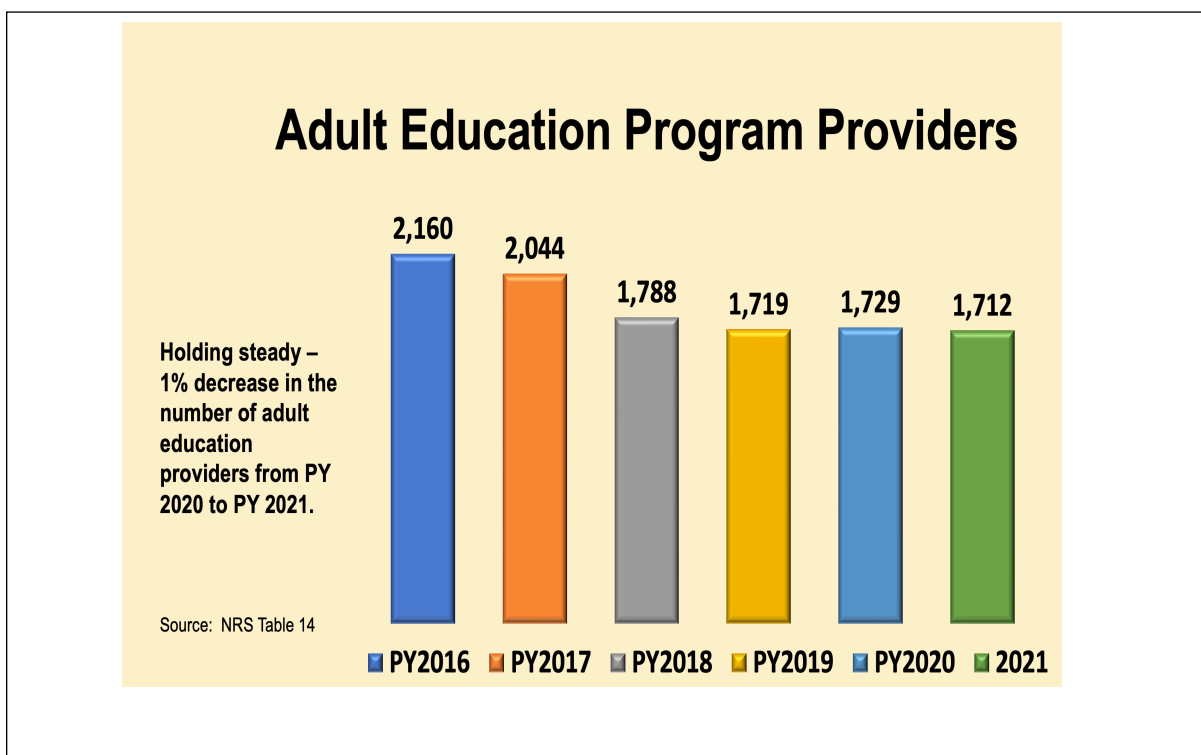
Concern #1: Many types of AFE programs and the overall numbers and types of learners served have declined.

A number of AFE advocates (including Gordon & Ramdeholl, Winter 2010; Pickard, Summer, 2022; Reder, Spring 2020; Yankwitt, Spring 2020, and respondents to our 2022-2023 surveys) have stated that, since the above-described shift of federal and other AFE supports that occurred with the advent of WIA and WIOA, many previous community-based, volunteer, and other types of AFE programs have closed,

merged, downsized, or otherwise reduced their services. This has possibly contributed to reductions in enrollments, especially of the lowest-literacy-level learners that those programs served.

Declines in AEFLA-funded programs

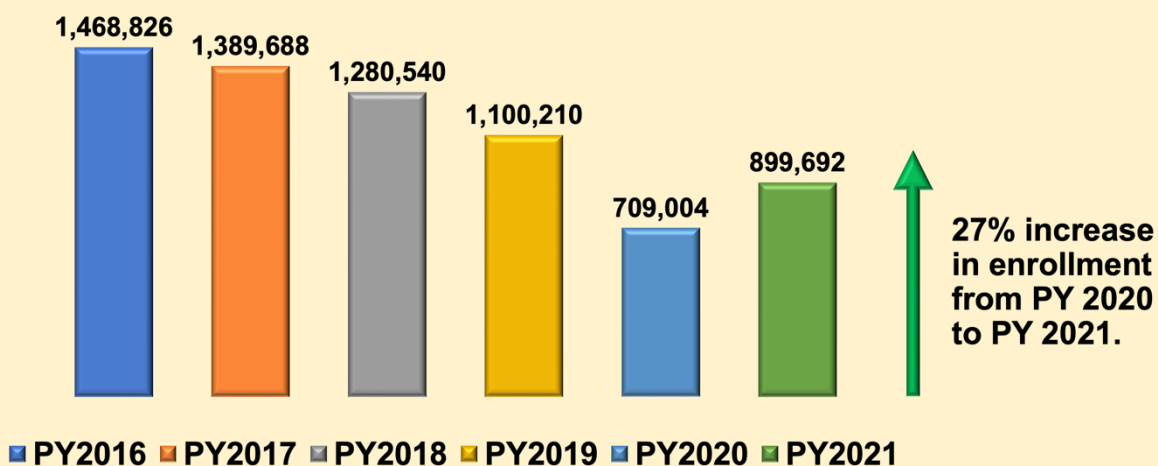
The following chart shows a decline of 21 percent (i.e., 448 programs) in the number of AEFLA-funded programs between PY 2016 and PY 2021.



Declines in learner enrollments in AEFLA-funded programs

The following chart shows a decline of 40 percent (i.e., 599,134 unduplicated enrollments) in AEFLA-funded programs between PY 2016 and PY 2021. (Note: Much of this decline might be attributable to the multiple impacts of COVID-29. There was also a promising “rebound” 27 percent increase in enrollments between PY 2020 and PY 2021.)

Adult Education Program Enrollment Unduplicated Count



Source: NRS Table 1

Using data from state performance and financial reports, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education (December 2005) stated that “Nearly 2.7 million adults enrolled in AEFLA-funded programs during FY 2003 . . . English literacy programs had the largest enrollment (44 percent), followed by Adult Basic Education (40 percent), and Adult Secondary Education (16 percent).” This 2.7 million total enrollment is 2.36 times the average AEFLA enrollments of 1,141,326 for PY 2016 through PY 2020 (described above under “Strength #1.”).

Though OCTAE staff explained⁹ that the above numbers for FY 2003 were likely not fully accurate because of problems with data collection in those earlier years of AEFLA, the data nonetheless suggest that annual enrollments in AEFLA-funded programs have dramatically declined in the past two decades. That decline could be either 66.6 percent (i.e., 1,800,308 learners) if we measure against the PY2021 enrollments of

⁹ OCTAE staff presented National Reporting System data at a meeting of the National Coalition for Literacy on October 5, 2023.

899,692. Or it could be 58 percent (i.e., 1,558,674 learners if we use the PY2016 – PY2021 average enrollment number of 1,141,326.)

What factors might be contributing to declines in programs and learners?

Some attribute the reduction of programs and learners to hard-to-achieve or irrelevant performance measures and onerous reporting requirements (described under Part 2.a. above) which have made it difficult or impossible for programs to qualify for funding (Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023; Pickard, Summer 2022). (As one long-time program director reported: some programs must hire and assign additional staff and/or acquire new technologies to do the tracking and paperwork and/or provide additional supports to learners that funders now require.)

Some program closures might also have been due to the fact that the educators who wanted to be more learner-centered (i.e., customizing learning to the particular needs and interests of learners) felt that, under the new funding requirements, they could no longer focus on the types of learning goals and content learners could benefit from (Gordon & Ramdeholl, Winter 2010; Reder, Spring 2020; Yankwitt, Spring 2020).

Some (Adult Foundational Education Digital Library Group, February 2023) have argued that the quality of AFE programs has been undermined by the closing of AFE research and professional development institutions. In the first decade of the 2000s, the National Institute for Literacy, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, and ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult Continuing and Vocational Education closed down. They each, in various ways, had supported AFE programs that responded to a broader range of learner goals. Their closing might have made it more difficult for AFE providers, policy makers, funders, and other potential partners to provide high quality AFE services and thereby attract learners.

Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic has made a difficult situation even worse, as AFE programs closed their doors and many learners were not able to pivot to on-line learning and lost the personal supports that their AFE programs had provided to them (Belzer et al, July 2020; Belzer et al, 2022).

As Pickard (Summer 2022, p. 40) states in her discussion of this issue of declining enrollments:

So many factors potentially influence the decline in enrollment in federally-funded AE programs that pinpointing a single explanation is likely impossible. Nonetheless, taking clear stock of this decline and its potential causes is imperative. . . Without further information, it is impossible to know to what degree declining enrollment can be attributed to policy, funding, or other factors.

Concern #2: Other stakeholders are not benefitting from partnering with AFE.

AFE advocates and funding sources have, for decades, argued that community workforce stakeholders like employers, small businesses, labor unions, and economic development agencies should collaborate more effectively with AFE in workplace education programs for incumbent workers and in partnerships between AFE and local and state workforce development systems (Alamprese & Limardo, November 2012; Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023; John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, September 2004; Jurmo, October 1998; Jurmo, Spring 2020; Parker, September 4, 2007).

AFE advocates (Cacicio, Cote, & Bigger, 2023; Clymer, Grinder, & Sauder, January 2017; McHugh & Doxsee, October 2018; Morgan, Waite, Diecuch, March 2017; Peyton, September 2007; Rosen, October 5, 2021; Rudd, 2002; Spangenberg, February 2004; Yankwitt, Spring, 2020) have also made the case that other types of stakeholders should partner with AFE and have created models of collaborations such as:

- family literacy programs (involving K-12 schools and various family services);
- health literacy initiatives (involving various types of public health supporters);
- coordinated, multi-service supports customized for particular populations such as immigrants and refugees, currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, individuals with disabilities, older adults, out-of-school youth, and other populations with basic skills-related challenges.

Such collaborations can take multiple forms and benefit participating learners and the other stakeholders involved. For example, employers – including small businesses -- can get better-qualified employees. Unions can better serve their members and build member involvement through hosting of member AFE programs. Healthcare providers can improve their access to populations of people at risk for health problems. And K-12 schools and their students can benefit from having families who better know how to help their children succeed in school and life.

To support such collaborations, special initiatives have been carried out at national, state, and local levels. (See Part 5.c. of this series for more examples.) Summarized below are several such initiatives currently underway (in October 2023):

- The National Center for Families Learning and the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Pennsylvania State University support family literacy services nationwide (Clymer, Grinder, & Sauder, January 2017).
- The Institute for Healthcare Advancement and states like Florida, Wisconsin, and Delaware have health literacy initiatives that facilitate collaborations between health and AFE organizations (Open Door Collective, March-May 2021).
- The Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) offers a “Behind Every Employer” podcast to increase employers’ use of AFE services in their communities.
- The Open Door Collective’s Evidence-Based Adult Education System (E-BAES) Task Force is at this writing researching models of effective cross-sector AFE partnerships (Rosen, October 5, 2021).
- New York City’s Literacy Assistance Center is spearheading a Literacy & Justice Initiative to build partnerships between AFE and organizations supporting social justice in various ways (Yankwitt, Spring 2020).
- The National Skills Coalition and World Education’s EdTech Center are encouraging AFE programs to collaborate with digital access initiatives funded by the Digital Equity Act (National Skills Coalition, Spring 2022).

While these and other examples might be producing some useful results and can be built on further, funders and other potential stakeholders need to be more pro-active in creating and investing in cross-stakeholder AFE partnerships. Such collaborations can benefit learners, AFE providers, and the other stakeholder partners involved. Past major workforce education initiatives like the National Workplace Literacy Program, the U.S. Department of Labor’s WIRED (Workforce Innovation in Regional Economic Development) project, the outreach of the Small Business Administration to U.S. small businesses, the worker education initiatives of the AFL-CIO and other national labor organizations, and the collaborations that the National Institute for Literacy had with healthcare and retail industries no longer exist or are greatly reduced. (See Part 5.c. for more about such collaborations between AFE and employers and labor unions.) There is currently little or no discussion about resurrecting such national initiatives in the U.S AFE field.

The decline in investment in cross-sector collaborations is resulting in those other stakeholders not being able to benefit from partnering with AFE. The limited active collaborations of employers with AFE are particularly troubling, given that federal adult education’s shift toward employment-related outcomes was often done to make adult basic education relevant to and worthy of the support of the business community (Chisman, February 2002).

Limitation #2: Inadequate Relevance and Requirements

Concern #3: “Getting a new job” is not always relevant to learner interests and realities.

Not all adult learners see “getting a job” as their primary need or goal – for various reasons (Cacicio et al, June 2023; Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, April 2002; Gordon & Ramdeholl, 2010; Gowen, 1992; Jones & Belzer, December 2021; Jurmo, April 2021; Kallenbach et al 2021; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Mortrude, Spring 2020; Patterson & Song, May 2018; Reder, Spring 2020; Rosen, October 5, 2021; Vanek et al, Spring 2020; Yankwitt, Spring 2020.)

- Some are satisfied with their current jobs or with not being formally employed.
- Some are preparing for retirement or already retired.

- For many adult learners, opportunities for reliable, family-sustaining employment are limited or nearly non-existent. (This would be true regardless of their basic skills levels.) This lack of access could be due to the location where learners live (e.g., one that is distant from workplaces and/or one where transportation is unavailable), a lack of investment by employers and other stakeholders in job creation, and/or inequitable or inefficient hiring practices. In such situations, learners might not see a benefit in pursuing jobs that aren't available to them in their communities.
- Many learners have life responsibilities (e.g., childcare, eldercare) or other personal situations (e.g., health problems, disabilities, a criminal record) that make preparing for and pursuing a job difficult or of low priority.
- Many learners have other reasons for wanting to improve their foundational skills. (These might include helping their children succeed in school, managing household finances and benefits, dealing with health issues, feeling comfortable in social situations in a new community, understanding current events.)

Research by the National Institute for Literacy¹⁰ and other sources (See Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002 and the "Voices" section in Part 3.b of this series) indicate that instructional content needs to be personally meaningful for learners if they are to persist and succeed in mastering that content. Some proponents of "contextualized AFE" correctly make the case that learners can better master basic skills by practicing authentic applications of those skills as they are used in real-world literacy task. But those proponents of contextualized ("functional") literacy instruction sometimes overlook the equally important need for those real-world tasks to be purposeful (important,

¹⁰ The Equipped for the Future system reform initiative of the National Institute for Literacy produced a series of "Research to Practice Notes" that described research-informed principles of effective basic skills instruction: (1) Learning needs to be purposeful and transparent for learners; (2) Instruction should focus on helping learners master applications of basic skills they face in authentic real-life contexts; (3) Learning should build on learners' prior knowledge and skills; and (4) Learners should continually monitor their learning and adjust it as they proceed. See Gillespie (2002 and October 2002) for the EFF Research to Practice Notes focusing on "purposefulness" and "contextualization."

personally meaningful, motivating) for learners rather than imposed on them.

Concern #4: Expected outcomes and timelines of many work-related basic skills programs are not feasible for some learners and programs.

The work-related outcomes and timelines that funders expect are sometimes not realistic because . . .

- Many adult learners might have low foundational skills levels, have limited or no access to in-person or distance learning opportunities, and/or face other significant life challenges such as childcare that make preparing for a new job difficult (Belzer et al., July 2020; Belzer et al, 2022; Jacobson, Fall 2020; McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Patterson & Song, 2018).
- AFE programs often lack the staffing, expertise, and others resources required to provide the intensive, customized instruction and other supports that many learners require.
- Tracking employment-related outcomes is often difficult, especially for under-resource programs (Cronen, Diffenderffer, & Medway, March 2023).

Concern #5: Discourse about adult learners and adult literacy is sometimes disrespectful, uninformed, and/or simplistic.

Public discourse about “adult illiteracy” has sometimes suggested that adults with foundational skills limitations are:

- “outsiders to be feared, rather than neighbors offering important social and economic contributions” (Vanek et al, Spring 2020, p.41);
- fairly helpless or mere “cogs in the wheel” who just need to be “adjusted” with a foundational skills program, when they in fact often have significant strengths such as technical and cultural knowledge, support systems, and positive motivation (Kazemek, November 1988); and/or
- responsible for a variety of economic and social problems when in fact those problems are likely due to many factors including the policies and investments of employers and government agencies.

(These other factors also need to be understood and dealt with if we are to have an effective workforce development system in the U.S.) (Sarmiento & Schurman, April 1992).

Concern #6: Proposed solutions to the “illiteracy problem” too often reflect incomplete understanding of what adult learners need to be work-ready and economically secure and what AFE programs can do to help workers reach those goals.

Public declarations about the “U.S. adult literacy problem” and its solutions too often don’t reflect what decades of experience and research have said about those topics (Beder,1994; Chisman, 1989; Fingeret, 1992; Harman, 1985; Jurmo, April 2022; Kazemek, November 1988; Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills, 1991; Stein, 2000; University of Texas at Austin, 1977; Wrigley & Guth,1992). Two examples are shown below:

How “AFE for work-readiness” is described and responded to: Research suggests that workforce education has to be tailored to each learner’s needs, strengths, goals, and workplace and life contexts (Soifer et al.,1989; Stein, 2000). But many workforce education programs focus on helping learners to perform only a limited range of technical work-related tasks (e.g., skills required to fill out a job application, succeed in a job interview, and/or perhaps perform a few workplace functions). While those skills can be helpful for many workers, often overlooked are the skills and other strengths (e.g., background [content] knowledge, educational and occupational credentials, social-emotional abilities, support systems, tools) workers need to carry out personal responsibilities. These responsibilities can include caring for one’s own health; managing financial and in-kind resources; dealing with legal, transportation, and housing issues; and caring for children, elders, and other family members.

How workers manage those responsibilities can determine whether they can attain, perform, retain, receive further training for, and advance in employment. Rather than seeing these personal management (aka, “life”) skills and tasks as separate from work-readiness, workforce educators should consider how helping learners manage those life functions might be integrated into a package of supports that can be adapted to each worker’s abilities, needs, and situations (John J.

Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, September 2004). Employers and unions are often already sensitive to such complexities, as reflected in how life issues are acknowledged and responded to in human resources and training policies and in labor-management contracts. But AFE service providers have historically too often been led to focus on “improving learners’ basic skills” (as measured on a standardized test) as the key to learner work-readiness rather than a more holistic response to learner needs (McHugh & Doxsee, 2018; Mortrude, Spring 2020).

How adult illiteracy’s numbers, costs and solutions are described: The estimates of the numbers of U.S. adults who “can’t read,” are “functionally illiterate,” or otherwise affected by adult illiteracy vary considerably. Shown below are examples taken from the websites of several AFE organizations in September 2023:

- “Approximately 32 million adults in the United States can’t read, according to the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy.” (Note that there is/was no such thing as a “National Institute of Literacy.” The National Institute *for* Literacy did exist but closed in 2010. This statement typically doesn’t cite a specific source other than the two agencies mentioned.)
- “130 million adults in the U.S struggle to read basic sentences.”
- “One in five U.S adults struggle to fill out a form.”

Similarly, descriptions of the “costs of illiteracy” take many forms, stating or implying that low literacy contributes to crime and incarceration, low workplace productivity, and children’s poor performance in school. While adult illiteracy can be associated with such problems, it is misleading to suggest that illiteracy is the primary or sole cause of such multi-dimensional problems or that AFE by itself can solve them. Here are several versions of a statement that has been around for decades:

- “Low literacy costs American businesses and taxpayers more than \$225 billion annually, through lost wages, unemployment, welfare and other government assistance.” (Some version of this might have been used as early as the late 1980s or early 1990s in testimony to the U.S. Congress and in Jonathan Kozol’s widely-read 1985 book *Illiterate America* (Kozol, 1985). At that time, a

team of people at the Business Council for Effective Literacy tried to track down the source of that statement and were never able to do so.)

- “Low literacy costs American businesses and taxpayers more than \$225 billion a year in lost productivity.” (This was seen on an adult literacy organization’s website on September 22, 2023.)
- “These (illiteracy) figures translate to at least \$225 billion lost annually in the United States because of unemployment, lack of workplace productivity, and crime.” (This appeared on www.smallbusiness.chron.com, a Hearst Newspaper online publication, in September 2023).

Proposed solutions to the literacy problem likewise vary, as seen in the following examples:

- To eliminate illiteracy, “All you need is a degree of caring” (This was a slogan used in a national adult literacy awareness campaign of the early-mid 1980s.) (Kazemek, November 1988);
- “Literacy is the key to solving healthcare, poverty, crime rates, unemployment...” (This appeared on the website of a national adult literacy organization, September 2023.)

The above statements, once issued and rooted, often take on lives of their own and get widely circulated (sometimes for decades) without questioning their sources, accuracy, and reliability. Use of overly-simple, sensationalistic, degrading, and otherwise questionable language might be due to a lack of understanding of a complex problem and of work already done to try to solve it. Use of such messages might also reflect questionable assumptions, naïve and/or condescending (“charity”) thinking (Kazemek, November 1988), or a desire to “sell” AFE without doing the due diligence of making sure that public statements are accurate. Some AFE proponents can also succumb to the temptation of chasing “shiny objects” (aka, magic pill solutions) that periodically are floated in the field, attract a lot of excitement, might have potential but are not adequately given a chance to be developed, and then fade away before they are replaced with other latest things.

Concern #7: AFE stakeholders are often unclear or timid about what activities and outcomes funders will allow them to use funds for.

Some AFE advocates contend that AEFLA is fairly flexible in what activities are “allowable” for programs to use but not everyone understands or uses that flexibility.¹¹ As stated below in a paraphrased version of comments submitted by one of the national experts who responded to our 2023 survey:

Some program administrators have a “mindset” that “focuses on the ‘better safe than sorry’ approach that puts too much emphasis on compliance and too little on innovation (e.g., very few state directors and local administrators really optimized the COVID flexibility to do provisional placement into EFL¹² instead investing in tons of remote testing vouchers which were completely unworkable).”

Such a narrow interpretation of AEFLA can undermine AFE providers’ creativity and responsiveness to particular learner needs and opportunities that emerge organically in interactions with current learners or new students who might arrive with different backgrounds, life needs, and opportunities.

Policy should instead be guiding and incentivizing innovations like “more competency-based high school diploma education; more multiple measures accountability” (with instructor-created measures that focus on the particular learning objectives they and learners are focusing on rather than using standardized literacy).

Policy should also be providing “more funding to hire and support a more professional workforce” who would have the expertise,

¹¹ This was a point raised by at least one participant in discussions of the Re-imagined Adult Education System Working Group in 2021 (Rosen, October 5, 2021).

¹² “EFL” refers to the Education Functioning Level on the National Reporting System required for AEFLA programs.

time, and other resources to work within AEFLA in the innovative ways described above.

This phenomenon of risk-adverseness at the program and policy levels would need to be dealt with in any effort to expand and strengthen U.S. AFE.

Concern #8: Too often AFE ignores the larger realities that learners face which can limit their motivation and ability to enroll and persist in AFE services, use what they learn in their programs, or benefit from using what they learn.

Some advocates (Comings, Parrella, & Soricone, December 1999; Patterson, February 2018; Patterson, June 2018; Patterson & Song, May 2018; Patterson, Rasor, & Hunt, August 2020; Quigley, 2017) have pointed out that learners are less likely to enroll, persist, and succeed in an AFE program if. . .

- there are few if any family-sustaining jobs available in a community that match learners' interests and abilities;
- learners have health problems and lack access to appropriate healthcare for themselves;
- learners lack access to childcare, eldercare, or other similar supports for family members and need to play those roles themselves;
- learners have multiple (typically low-paying) jobs and aren't available to participate in AFE programs which occur during their work hours;
- learners live in locations that are distant from AFE program facilities (and lack public or private transportation to travel to and from those facilities) and/or lack access to and ability to use remote learning technologies;
- learners have had negative experiences earlier in their lives in adult education programs and/or in K-12 school systems or have other challenges related to self-efficacy and social-emotional skills, making them less confident in the idea of "going back to school;"
- learners lack support systems of AFE staff and fellow learners to provide encouragement and guidance related to persisting in AFE.

Limitation #3: Underdeveloped Resources

Concern #9: Limited – and difficult to track and measure -- investment by traditional funding sources

AFE advocacy understandably focuses heavily on generating public funding from federal (especially AEFLA) and state sources. Tracking whether such funding is keeping up with the need is not easy, as it depends on what funding numbers are used and how the need is defined and measured. Shown below are some examples of what advocates have said over the past four decades about the question of funding needed for AFE:

- **In 1989, in *Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy*, Forrest Chisman** (January 1989, p. 5) said:

At most 3-4 million people are served each year, and the average expenditure per learner is less than \$200. Compare that with an average expenditure of more than \$4,000 per year for every public school child in the United States. Moreover serving 3-4 million adults barely makes a dent in the problem, because by most estimates at least 1-2 million people leave school with deficient basic skills each year, and at least one million new immigrants enter the United States. In short, the national effort is not even remotely commensurate with the national need. Moreover, the national effort is unlikely to improve very greatly without major changes in the basic skills field.

- **In 1994, in *The Current Status of Adult Literacy Education in the United States*, Hal Beder** (1994, p. 18) dug into the federal budget for AFE for the period of 1980 to 1994 and found that, while funding did increase by about 48 percent in that period, (a) the numbers of learners served had increased by 87 percent and (b) 30 percent of the 1994 funding was set aside for correctional education, program administration, and demonstration projects, leaving only 60 percent for direct services to learners. He also noted that state funding for AFE in that period

had increased substantially but most (55 percent) of that increase was from just two states (California and Michigan).

- **In 2008's *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, the National Commission on Adult Literacy** (June 2008) called for a five-fold increase of federal funds (**to \$20 billion annually**) to create a new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System by 2020. This would be "similar to such great historical achievements as the original GI Bill and the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. . . Additional funding must come from corporate and private philanthropy. The Commission also recommends that Congress establish a National Trust or National Training Fund." This expanded system would serve "20 million adults annually by the year 2020" (p. vi). The report continued:

- Although 88 million adults aged 18 to 64 have a high school diploma or less, or limited English proficiency, funds provided by the U.S. Department of Education for Title II adult education and literacy services have been less than \$500 million annually since 2006. . . Total state funding for adult education and literacy in 2008 is about \$1.6 billion, approximately three times the federal grant amount. That number is deceptive because state appropriations vary widely, resulting in uneven services across the country (p.11).
- Overall enrollment in U.S adult education programs has declined . . . only 2.4 million adults were enrolled in 2006-2007. That is a decrease of 10 percent since 2001, and a fraction of the 88 million adults with at least one educational challenge. . . enrollment is highest for ESL, with 1.1 million adults accounting for 46 percent of total enrollments in 2006-2007. Demand for ESL continues to outstrip capacity, with several states reporting waiting times up to three years for classes in some locations . . . many adult education programs are not equipped to deliver support services, such as counseling, to the many people who need them, thus reducing persistence and movement toward college and job training readiness (p.12).

- **The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education** (2022) of the U.S. Department of Education stated that 2021 appropriations for AEFLA programs were \$688,667,00 (i.e., \$674,955,00 for State-Administered Basic Grants and \$13,712,000 for National Leadership Activities.
- **For 2022, ProLiteracy** (2022) **reported that their “Programs indicated they saw a decline in federal funding in 2022.** With 75% of programs operating on thin budgets of less than \$200,000 annually, federal funding accounted for just 15% of their overall funding source, down from 22% a year prior. ‘Historically, adult literacy has been underfunded. Without federal money for adult education, programs are left to patch together other sources of funding to be able to continue to serve their students,’ said ProLiteracy President and CEO Mark Vineis.”
- **In an October 2023 email to the field, the National Coalition for Literacy** reported that it and other AFE organizations (e.g., the Coalition for Adult Basic Education) were working with federal legislators to make changes in the AEFLA component of WIOA. They made the case that “43 million adults are low-skilled in literacy.” A proposed new Adult Education WORKS Act would have the following components:
 - **Increase the authorized funding for adult education by 2029 to \$1.35 billion.**
 - Ensure that adult education providers are represented on workforce and other boards and are part of the workforce planning process.
 - Support the professionalization of the adult education field by strengthening state certification policies, encouraging full-time staffing models, and expanding professional development opportunities and career pathways for adult educators.
 - Incorporate digital and information literacy into adult education and workforce development programs.
 - Provide support for college and career navigators at public libraries and community-based organizations.

- Strengthen coordination and leverage resources between adult education and workforce development programs.
- Expand the role of public libraries in the one-stop delivery system for workforce development.
- Encourage innovation through pilot projects to test new approaches to measuring performance and ensure WIOA performance metrics capture the full range of skills gains supported by adult education programs.
- Promote the provision of integrated education and training concurrently with other adult education activities and services.

Such messages are, on one hand, informative. On the other, they can be confusing because (a) they use different numbers and sources to define the “literacy problem” (i.e., how many people have what types of basic skills and other education challenges); and (b) whether the amounts of federal and other investments are keeping up with the numbers of potential learners, the evolving social and economic conditions that learners live in, changing concepts of what constitutes effective AFE, and inflation. These statements often don’t make clear what the funding will actually be used for (i.e., to support existing service models or develop other, potentially-more-effective ways of responding to learner needs and realities.)

Concern #10: Lack of investment by other stakeholders

As stated under Concern #2 above, the involvement of other potential partners (e.g., employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, et al) in AFE efforts is limited. This not only prevents those stakeholders from benefitting from such partnerships but reduces the investments of financial and in-kind supports that those stakeholders could provide to AFE efforts. For example, if employers or labor unions aren’t willing or able to partner with AFE providers, adult learners will be less likely to access career opportunities that those stakeholders provide. Similarly, if agencies that could help learners deal with health, transportation, childcare, eldercare, legal issues, and other needs do not collaborate with AFE programs, adult learners are less likely to be able to access the resources that those stakeholders provide. In both cases, both adult

learners and the AFE programs that are trying to help them are left with fewer resources.

This lack of stakeholder involvement and investment could be due to a number of factors, including a simple lack of understanding by those stakeholders about why and how they might collaborate with AFE programs, a prior negative experience when trying to collaborate with AFE organizations, or other factors such as a difficult economy or a lack within the stakeholder institution of the leadership, staff, or other resources necessary to work with an AFE organization. Stakeholder involvement can also be reduced if AFE programs don't feel they have the flexibility to use their funding to develop partnerships with other stakeholders and therefore don't attempt to do so (Alamprese, 2016; Alemprese & Limardo, November 2012).

The limited active involvement of employers is particularly troubling, given that federal adult education's shift toward employment-related outcomes was often done to make adult basic education relevant to and worthy of the support of the business community (Chisman, February 2002; Imel, 2003). (See "Example 8: Private-Sector Support for AFE" in Book 5, Part 5.c for more about this issue.)

Concern #11: Too often AFE providers and supporters don't think of themselves or act as a "system" but effectively operate as collections of uncoordinated programs, funding sources, and stakeholders.

Survey respondents and other sources (Alamprese, 2016; Alemprese & Limardo, November 2012; Folinsbee & Jurmo, 1994a) state this lack of coordinated identity and action among AFE and other stakeholders could be due to the following factors:

- Each AFE program and other stakeholder is busy trying to keep itself afloat, carry out its operations, and respond to the often-complex needs of the individuals and communities they serve. For AFE programs, trying to get to know other potential partners and working with them to plan coordinated actions might be seen as "a nice idea" but difficult or impossible to do within the limits of time and other resources available. (Developing collaborations requires

time and expertise of all the AFE programs and other stakeholders involved. Budgets must be able to cover such costs.)

- Collaboration is further undermined by the fact that many AFE programs need to compete against each other for the same (often shrinking) state and/or federal funds. This creates what one administrator refers to as a “frenemy” environment among peers who are otherwise expected to collaborate.
- Each AFE program might have particular types of funding requirements, program philosophies, clients, and other variables that are significantly different than those of other stakeholders. While AEFLA-funded programs are encouraged to have partnerships with workforce partners like One-Stop Centers and occupational training programs, the idea of cross-stakeholder coordination with workforce or other types of stakeholders might nonetheless be foreign and/or difficult—and in some cases not worth the effort -- to figure out and implement
- The idea of multi-stakeholder collaboration and solidarity might be foreign to some AFE programs and other stakeholders who have been conditioned by prior experience (in less-collaborative bureaucracies or in other parts of their lives) to be more individualistic, defensive, overly competitive, and/or turf-oriented in how they approach their work. (Put another way, AFE stakeholders are human, which means they [i.e., we] can be imperfect. It also means they can change – especially if given encouragement and other supports to do so.)
- AFE practitioners and other stakeholders might simply not have had much if any prior, positive experience working in collaborative partnerships. They might need training, resource material (e.g., guidebooks), mentoring, and seed funding for them to shift to this mode of operation.
- AFE programs now appear to be aiming at “middle-level” learners, with less emphasis on – and resources for -- serving those on the lower and higher rungs of the basic skills level ladder. As observed by Patterson (under review):

In the context of pandemic shifts and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA), ABE and EL levels through National Reporting System (NRS) data (<https://nrs.ed.gov/>) experienced enrollment loss and rebound from 2016-17 to

2021-22 (the first WIOA implementation year and the latest year available, respectively, at time of writing). As shown in Figure 1, ABE Level 1 enrollment, the lowest level of learners tracked in the NRS, remained flat nationally between 2016-17 and 2020-21. Figure 1 shows that in 2021-22, national ABE Level 1 enrollment *decreased* instead of rebounding like Levels 2, 3, and 4. While it is uncertain if these trends will continue, the loss of adults enrolling at the lowest levels of ABE and EL is discouraging, especially since adults at these levels have the strongest needs for numeracy.

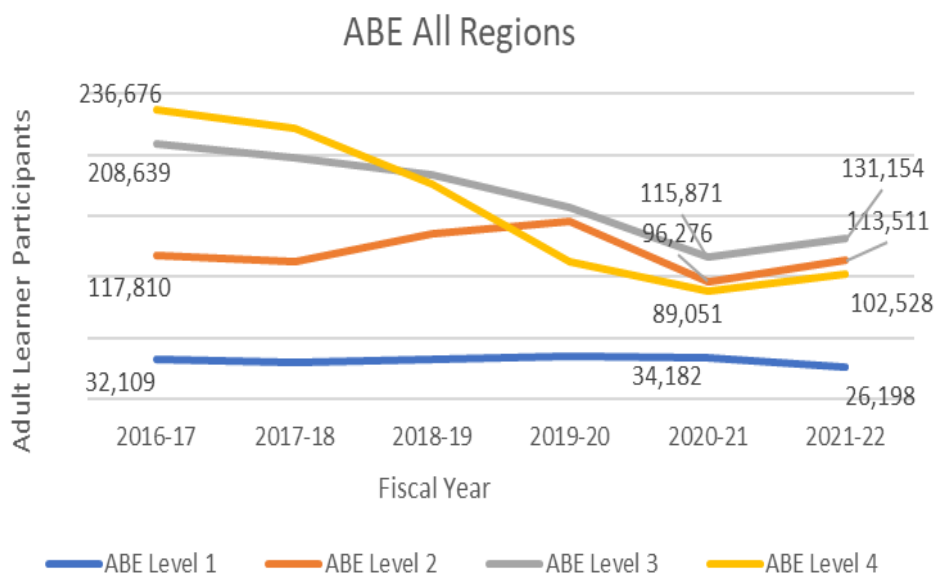


Figure 1
U.S. Adult Learner Enrollment Trends¹³

- While some new funding for digital technologies and digital literacy has become available for AFE programs (e.g., via the CARES Act) – or might become available (e.g., through the Digital Literacy Act), many AFE programs and supporters might not be aware of such resources or understand how the resources could contribute

¹³ Source: National Reporting System Data, 2016-17 through 2021-22

to strengthening AFE services and AFE partnerships with other initiatives (National Skills Coalition, 2023).

Concern #12: Former investments in AFE infrastructure have declined or are no longer known or accessible.

Adult educators are put in the difficult position of trying to do the specialized, demanding work of customizing their services to the needs of learners without the funding and other supports they need to provide high-quality services.

Some of those supports were formerly provided with federal, state, employer, and union investments.¹⁴ However, as has been recognized by advocates since the early 2000s, many of those investments have declined and/or no longer exist, and the trained, experienced personnel and resources (e.g., curricula, assessments, and partnership models, program evaluations) produced with those investments are now forgotten and/or are difficult or impossible to access (Adult Foundational Education Digital Library Group, February 6, 2023; Beder, 1994; Chisman, February, 2002; Clymer, Toso, Grinder & Sauder, January 2017); Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, April 2002; Waite, March 2019). (See Examples 2, 3, and 8 in Book 5, Part 5.c for more about this issue of disinvestments in various segments of the field.)

While some new promising research and professional development initiatives have been introduced that help fill some of the gaps left by the disappearance of previous national, state, and other institutions and investments, AFE efforts are generally limited by a kind of historical amnesia (sometimes inadvertent and sometimes possibly intentional) about past valuable work done in the field. This contributes to AFE providers, funders, policy makers, and other potential partners being under-equipped. Such stakeholders then too frequently have to reinvent the wheel, use ineffective strategies and tools to design and

¹⁴ Examples include the closings of the National Workplace Literacy Program, the National Institute for Literacy (which created models of contextualized work-related basic skills programs for several industries through its Equipped for the Future initiative), and the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education.

implement basic skills programs, and/or rely on “technology” as the primary answer to the multi-dimensional problem of how to provide relevant services to more people.

Concern #13: Some AFE providers are simply not equipped to provide high-quality services to adult learners in their communities, thereby undermining learner participation and potential partnerships.

For decades, research (Balmuth, 1987; Clymer & Frey, May 2020; Lerche, 1985; Mayer, 1984) has shown that “word-of-mouth” is the most effective strategy for recruitment of adult learners. If AFE programs do not provide respectful, effective services that are helpful to learners, those students are themselves less likely to persist or encourage other potential participants to enroll (Patterson & Song, May 2018). Similarly, if AFE programs have not shown they are willing and able to efficiently partner with other stakeholders, those other potential partners are not likely to make an effort to collaborate with the AFE programs or encourage other stakeholders to do so either. Glitzy brochures, websites, student testimonials, and public awareness campaigns are not likely to make up for deficiencies in the quality of AFE services.

Concern #14: AFE is generally not recognized and supported as a profession.

The lack of quality of some AFE programs might be traced to the lack of professional development and financial and in-kind supports that adult educators require to do the demanding work of serving learners and working with other partners (Office of Educational Technology, September 2022; Quigley, 2017; Vanek, Harris, & Belzer, June 2020). While emerging digital technologies have the potential of making it easier for more learners to engage in learning, many of those learners and the programs that serve them will still need various kinds of support from AFE professionals.

However, AFE is not normally talked about or treated as a “profession” in the ways that K-12 educators and other service providers (e.g., healthcare providers, lawyers, engineers, public safety personnel, and

skilled trades) are typically thought of. There are limited jobs for AFE providers – especially full-time positions -- that provide family-sustaining wages and benefits, intensive professional-quality training, and career paths (Crandall, April 1994; Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, December 18, 1992).

The following information illustrates this persistent phenomenon of few full-time, paid AFE staff:

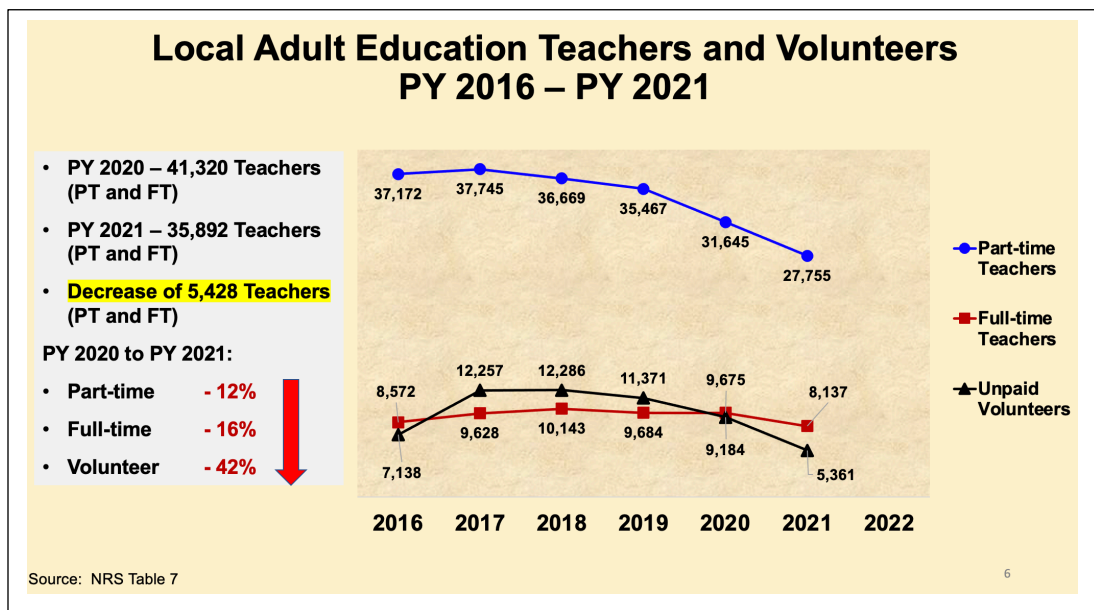
- In a 1990 article titled “Full-Time Staff Declines in ABE,” the Business Council for Effective Literacy (BCEL) newsletter (January 1990a) stated:

In a trend that many literacy analysts find alarming, volunteer and part-time staff in 1988 made up 92 percent of all teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals working in state-administered ABE programs funded under the federal Adult Basic Education Act. This is up from 68 percent in 1980. Full-time paid personnel declined from 32 percent of the total ABE workforce in 1980 to 8 percent, while volunteers increased by 186 percent and part-time personnel by 87 percent.

- In 1994, Hal Beder (1994, p.16) pointed out:
 - While in 1980, part-time instructors constituted 71 percent of the teaching force, in 1991 part-time teachers made up 88 percent of the teaching force (United States Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 1993).
 - In 1989, 11 states required certification in adult literacy, the requirements ranging from the equivalency of a master’s degree in adult basic education to attendance at an annual workshop. Fourteen states required certification in elementary/secondary, but not adult education. Twenty-five states required no certification (Sherman, Kutner, Webb, & Herman, November 1991).
 - Forty-five percent of federally funded AEA programs do not have a single staff person certified in adult education, a

single full-time instructor or administrator, or a directed in-service training effort. (U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993, p. 115).

- The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education (December 2005) reported that, in FY 2003, 80 percent of the 71,764 instructors in AEFLA-funded programs were employed part-time.
- In a September 28, 2023 presentation to the National Coalition for Literacy, representatives of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) showed the chart below. It traced a decline in all categories of teachers (part-time, full-time, and volunteer) in AEFLA-funded programs from PY 2016 through PY 2021.¹⁵ These numbers also show that most AEFLA-funded teachers are either part-time or volunteer, with only small percentages being full-time, paid instructors (16.2 percent in PY 2016 and 19.7 percent in PY 2021).



¹⁵ This and the preceding and following charts were presented by OCTAE staff at meeting of National Coalition of Literacy, October 5, 2023.

When compared to the 41,253 teachers (full-time paid, part-time paid, and volunteer) employed in AEFLA-funded programs in PY 2021, the number of teachers has declined by 42.5 percent (i.e., 30,511 teachers) between FY 2003 and PY 2021.

With few available full-time jobs available, AFE specialists too often find themselves in the position of having to juggle a number of part-time gigs (without benefits) and doing extra work for the field (e.g., serving on task forces, writing and reviewing articles, attending conferences and paying their own conference fees, preparing funding proposals) without pay (aka, "The Pro-Bono Problemo"). Few AFE specialists are represented by a labor union. Proportionately few members of the AFE workforce come from the same racial/ethnic, linguistic, and other social communities (e.g., individuals with disabilities, recently-arrived refugees, formerly and currently incarcerated individuals) as the learners they serve (Business Council for Effective Literacy, January 1993b; Harrison, 2021).

Unpaid volunteers (who could include current or former adult learners) can play valuable roles as para-professionals in AFE efforts and could be candidates to become paid AFE professionals. But they – like paid professionals – need appropriate training; mentoring; user-friendly instructional resources; and appropriate, carefully-thought-out roles (e.g., as assistants to qualified instructors, as helpers with administrative tasks, as mentors to students) if they are to both help the program and have a personally-rewarding experience (Kangisser, 1985).

While some adult educators are willing and able to overlook these limitations, many others who might like to do this important work – and bring valuable strengths to it -- are not able to do so beyond a few years or at all. This lack of a sustained, professional AFE workforce undermines the quality of services (Kazemek, November 1988; Quigley, 2017).

Book 2 Wrap-Up

We Need a New AFE Problem Statement, Vision, and Strategies

Adult foundational education (AFE) is a mix of educational and other services, provided to diverse populations, geared to various kinds of learner and community needs, and supported by a mix of government and non-governmental sources. This mix of services is producing positive results for individual learners, community stakeholders, and the AFE field itself. But the current AFE services also have significant limitations in terms of the numbers of learners and communities served, quality and capacity of services, and supports received.

If we are to better serve more adult learners and strengthen the quality and reach of AFE services, we need be guided by a “problem statement” that better defines the current field’s potential and needed improvements. This statement might read something like the following (Jurmo, April 2022, p. 13):

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.

In addition to a better “problem statement,” we will need a corresponding vision and strategies to plan and advocate for a new AFE systems reform effort that builds on previous and recent experience and research in our field. Following in Books 3, 4, and 5 are a vision and voices for an expanded and strengthened AFE system and actions that advocates and supporters might take to make that vision real.

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A P P E N D I X

Glossary

Adult Foundational Education (AFE)

This term was introduced by the Open Door Collective (ODC) in 2022, to provide a name that more fully captured the diverse types of services provided in adult literacy/basic skills, English for Speakers of Other Languages, high school equivalency (“GED”), and other related programs (e.g., workplace/workforce basic skills, citizenship preparation, health and family literacy programs). For more about how the ODC defined this term, visit <https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/2022/05/adult-foundational-education/> and https://docs.google.com/document/d/1BTroPf5NCwcQIy_drWO5pzd44GE2fbmWNP71VyrqZCc/edit

Because I have long agreed that our multi-dimensional field needs a more comprehensive and accurate way of describing itself, I have adopted this term “adult foundational education” (“AFE”) and use it throughout this resource book series, adding my own interpretations of the term. (See a more detailed description of “AFE in the U.S.” in Part 2.a.)

I also recognize that others in the field might not want to use this term and use other terms like “adult literacy education,” “adult basic education,” “English for Speakers of Other languages education,” “high school equivalency education,” or simply “adult education.” I hope that this discussion of “What do we call ourselves?” is not a source of confusion, distraction, and division. I hope that this discussion instead helps us better understand the learners and communities we serve, what we can do to better serve them, and how talk about our field internally and externally.

In Part 2.a. of this series, I present my own interpretation of this term, based on my years of study and work in AFE and related fields. Though it does not use the exact wording used by ODC, I believe that how I describe AFE is in keeping with the general sense and spirit of ODC’s definition. ODC itself has also encouraged the field to help to further develop this term.

In a nutshell, I'm saying that *adult foundational education (AFE)* refers to the diverse types of instructional and other services that help U.S. adults and out-of-school youth to (a) strengthen their "foundational skills" (e.g., oral and written language, numeracy, digital literacy, problem-solving, collaboration, and others); (b) build social-emotional strengths; (c) develop content knowledge; and (c) develop credentials, personal plans, support systems, and other tools they need to perform work, family, civic, and academic roles. AFE services are based in multiple institutions and communities, serve diverse populations of adults and out-of-school youth, and often involve other stakeholder partners.

Community-oriented adult foundational education

This is an approach that focuses AFE services on helping learners participate effectively in the various *communities* (social contexts) they operate in. *Communities* are not limited to geographic neighborhoods but can include settings like workplaces, families, healthcare facilities, prisons, clubs, religious institutions, social services, and other social contexts where learners use foundational skills to communicate and solve problems with others. The term *community-oriented* is borrowed from Hanna Arlene Fingeret (1992)¹⁶ who used it in a 1992 ERIC monograph and from the *community-based* adult literacy movement of the 1980s and 1990s. As used in this document, *community-oriented* AFE programs often work with other stakeholders who provide supports that help learners manage particular life issues they are concerned about. Such an integrated, collaborative, community-oriented approach can, in turn, also help those other stakeholders be better able to work with basic-skills-challenged adults and the AFE programs that serve them. In these ways, *community* is both a venue and resource for, and a product of, adult foundational education.

¹⁶ Fingeret, H.A. (1992). *Adult literacy education: Current and future directions: An update*. ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED354391>