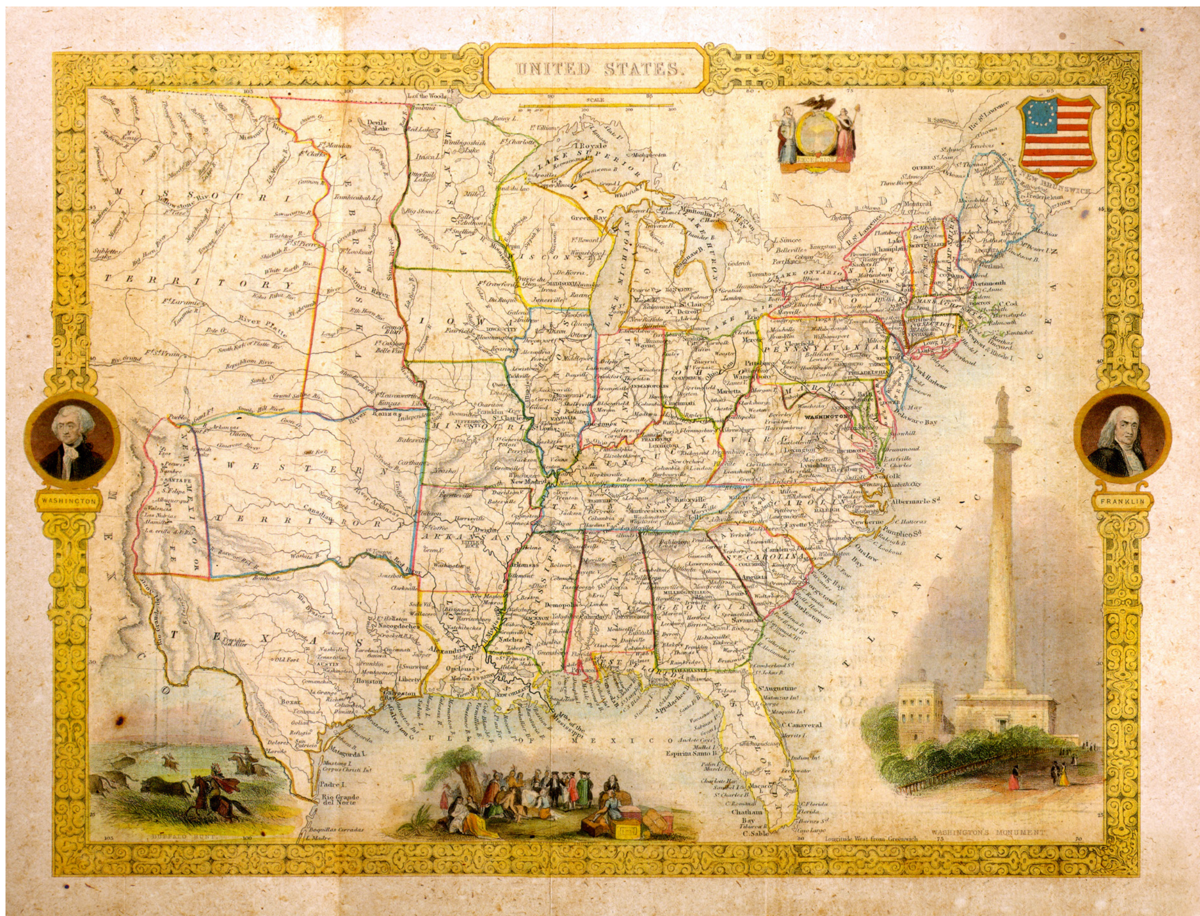
ProLiteracy®

FIRST THINGS FIRST:
RE-MAP "THE U.S. ADULT LITERACY PROBLEM"

By Paul Jurmo | www.pauljurmo.info

APRIL 2022



FUNDED WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM THE RICHARD H. YEARICK FOUNDATION.

CONTENTS

Abstract 3

Adult Basic Skills: Important but Under-Supported 4

Why We Need to Re-Define "the Adult Literacy Problem" 4

Limits of How "the Adult Literacy Problem" Is Commonly Defined 5

Questions to Consider When Developing an Alternative "Problem Statement" 5

How Might Our Field Develop a Better "Problem Statement"—and What Might It Look Like? 12

Conclusion 14

References 15

Appendix 17

Abstract

This document was written for supporters of adult basic/foundational skills efforts in the United States. It is written at a time when the adult education field has been developing innovative tools and advocating for resources to better serve adult learners.

It makes the case that, to use those tools and resources effectively, the field needs a stronger vision and plan for how adult education can – with other partners -- transition into more effective systems of supports for adult learners.

As a first step toward such systems reform, advocates need a better way of defining the problems that adult learners and adult educators are dealing with. A more comprehensive, accurate and positive (actionable) "problem map" can guide further planning, implementation, and continuous improvement at national, state, community and institutional levels.

This document describes limitations of how "the adult literacy problem" has been commonly defined in the United States. It then presents four questions for supporters of adult education to consider:

- What skills are we talking about? And what should we call them?
- Who are the potential partners who can benefit from adult basic/foundational skills services?
- How has the adult basic skills problem been quantified and presented?
- What are the implications of these skills limitations for both basic-skills-challenged individuals and the social contexts/institutions they interact with?

It concludes with suggestions for how advocates might move forward with developing a better problem statement and provides a draft statement for advocates to consider and adapt.

Adult Basic Skills: Important but Under-Supported

The United States is now impacted by a particular, potent mix of economic, social, health, educational, environmental, criminal justice, and other challenges with both longer-term and more recent roots. Intertwined with each of these challenges is another phenomenon that is largely overlooked: the large numbers of U.S. adults who lack basic communication and problem-solving skills (i.e., written and oral English, numeracy, digital literacy, and others) required to carry out work, family, civic, and lifelong learning functions. These basic skills limitations are both a result of and a contributor to the other national problems referred to above.

While significant good work has been done for decades by adult educators and other partners to provide education and other supports to basic-skills-challenged adults, adult education services have historically been under-supported and not sustained. This is despite adult education's demonstrated ability to support the success of both adult learners and their families, communities, employers, and other stakeholders.

Why We Need to Re-Define "the Adult Literacy Problem"

From 2018 to 2022, there has been a continued interest in supporting adult basic (or "foundational") skills education in the United States[1]. This interest is visible in the ongoing development and sharing of strategies and tools for instruction, partnerships, professional development, and research and in active advocacy for supportive policy and funding. This interest has also been seen in how adult educators have creatively responded to COVID-19 and to increased concerns about social justice issues.

While this ongoing interest and activity in the field are in many ways encouraging, we as an adult education field need a stronger vision and plan for how to more effectively use the resources we are generating. More specifically, we should be working together to transition to more effective systems of supports for adult learners. Such systems reform will require creative and collaborative thinking and action, building on past valuable experience and research and on more recent innovations, guided by positive values and principles.

As a first step to systems reform, we need a better way of defining the problems that adult learners and adult educators are dealing with. A more comprehensive, accurate, and positive problem statement – an up-to-date "map" of the problems we face – can provide us with a foundation for further planning, implementation, and continuous improvement of more effective systems at national, state, and local levels. (The author is working with colleagues to develop additional documents that will focus on how to respond to the problems identified here.)

1 Because these and other terms continue to evolve, this document will use "basic skills" and "foundational skills" interchangeably, as well as the related terms "adult basic (or foundational) education" and "adult education."

Limits of How "the Adult Literacy Problem" Is Commonly Defined

Since at least the 1980s, discussions of "the adult literacy problem in the United States" have often focused heavily on—and in some cases been hung up on—the question of "How many 'illiterates' are there?" While it is important for stakeholders in the field to understand the magnitude of the problem they are trying to respond to, narrowly trying to come up with a supposed "number of U.S. illiterates" tends to push discussions to a limited source of data (i.e., the latest national study) and just one (reading) of the basic skills that adults need. Such discussions also often leave out other important dimensions of the problem, including:

- the diverse mix of adults and stakeholders challenged by basic skills limitations;
- the factors that contribute to those limitations;
- how basic skills are important for individuals and the stakeholders (e.g., their families and communities, employers, healthcare providers) and societal functions (e.g., the economy, public health, public safety) they are intertwined with.

This narrow focus is sometimes inadvertent (e.g., due to stakeholders' lack of the background knowledge, analyzing skills, or time required to understand this complex issue) or intentional (e.g., when stakeholders want to avoid complicating discussion of or action related to the problem). While these are understandable limitations, advocates for the under-resourced adult education field need to invest in better understanding of and communicating about the problems we need to respond to.

Questions to Consider When Developing an Alternative "Problem Statement"

The "problem of adult literacy in the U.S." has multiple roots, manifestations, and potential solutions. To develop a more comprehensive, accurate, and positive understanding of the problems that adult learners and adult educators are dealing with, we should take the time to answer the following questions:

1. **What skills are we talking about? And what should we call those skills?**

   While the term "adult illiteracy" is still commonly used to describe the problem that adult basic skills education efforts try to solve, many experts and practitioners see it as an overly narrow and anachronistic term that doesn't accurately describe the skills we should be focusing on. Alternative terms such as "basic skills," "foundational skills," and others are now commonly used to capture the broader range of skills (i.e., oral and written language [speaking and listening, reading and writing], numeracy [applied basic mathematics], digital skills, research, collaboration, and other abilities) that adults need to communicate and solve problems in their roles in work, family, community, and lifelong learning contexts.[2]

2 See how the National Institute for Literacy defined 16 adult basic skills in Stein (2000) Chapter 3. More recently, the Open Door Collective has adopted the term

Focusing solely or primarily on "reading" and using the term "literacy" tends to skew discussions of the problem in inaccurate, misleading directions. Such a narrow concept of basic skills doesn't reflect the actual needs of basic-skills-challenged adults and of the other stakeholders they live and work with or decades of research in the field.[3] Discussions of the broader range of "adult basic skills" should also make it clear that there are multiple levels of ability (e.g., novice, intermediate, advanced) within each of those foundational skills that learners might need to develop.

2. Who are the potential partners who can benefit from adult basic/foundational skills services?

Designing any customer-focused system should be based on a clear understanding of who that system is intended to serve (or "who are our customers?"). Given the large numbers of stakeholders who have—or might have—an interest in the basic skills of U.S. adults, the partners of adult basic skills services might be divided into two major categories: primary partners and other partners, as outlined below:

Primary partners: Basic-skills-challenged adults and out-of-school youth with diverse backgrounds, life challenges, interests, roles, and strengths

- People from diverse demographic backgrounds, including:
  - Ages: Youth (mid-teens to mid-20s) and adults (the latter of whom can include older adults who face special life challenges);
  - National origins: U.S.-born and immigrant;
  - All gender identities;
  - All racial/ethnic groups;
  - All religious perspectives;
  - Educational backgrounds: Though basics-skills-challenged adults tend to have lower levels of educational attainment, some have relatively high levels of education. (For example, there are many U.S.-born high school graduates who struggle with math or writing they need for college or jobs. There are also significant numbers of foreign-born professionals who arrive in the United States with university degrees and strong technical skills but have limited English fluency.) While many basic-skills-challenged adults are not enrolled in a formal educational institution, some do participate in technical training (on and off the job), college-level developmental education and other kinds of courses, and high school equivalency programs.
  - Income levels: Though basics-skills-challenged adults tend to have lower levels of income and economic security, some have higher levels.

3 See "How has the adult basic skills problem been quantified and presented?" below.

- Employment status: Full-time and part-time employed, unemployed, under-employed, and retired;
- Locations: Residents of rural, urban, or semi-urban locations.

- People with particular life challenges and interests, including:
  - People with physical and/or mental health challenges;
  - People with learning and other forms of disabilities;
  - Individuals with criminal records;
  - People dealing with homelessness, food insecurity, lack of transportation or digital access, unsafe living conditions, and other challenges to basic human needs.

- People with diverse life roles, including:
  - Individuals with particular occupational interests (e.g., getting a job; mastering particular job skills; managing benefits and wages; participating in a labor union; dealing with health, environmental, safety, or other workplace challenges; preparing for job loss or retirement);
  - Adults performing leadership roles in their families (e.g., caring for children, elderly, or family members with disabilities or health problems; managing family finances; participating in community activities; managing transportation, housing, or legal issues);
  - Individuals trying to integrate into their communities and form positive social relationships (e.g., after moving from another location inside or outside the U.S. or after release from incarceration);
  - People wanting to participate in democratic institutions (e.g., through informed voting; participating in local civic organizations; or supporting or becoming a candidate for elective office);
  - People wanting to participate in post-secondary education and/or occupational training.

- Individuals with valuable personal strengths, including:
  - Technical abilities (to contribute to work, family, and community roles);
  - Social skills (e.g., knowledge of particular communities and other languages and social practices [such as cooking, music, arts, crafts]);
  - Social support systems (e.g., family, ethnic/racial, and religious communities);
  - Credentials (e.g., driver's licenses, technical and industry-endorsed certificates, green cards and U.S. citizenship);
  - Positive motivations (e.g., self-efficacy belief, desire to succeed for self and family, desire to "give back" to society).

The above descriptors demonstrate the diversities of backgrounds, life challenges, interests, roles, and strengths of basic-skills-challenged U.S. adults. Customizing services to these individuals requires significant expertise and material resources. "One-size-fits-all" approaches don't work[4].

Other partners: Groups and individuals who have an interest in an adult population that has necessary basic/foundational skills.

Adult education providers, of course, are on the front lines of basic skills efforts, providing multiple direct supports to learners themselves while also generating and organizing additional supports from other stakeholder partners. But there are many other groups and individuals from other walks of life who also have active or potential interest in ensuring that U.S. adults are equipped with the basic skills and other strengths (e.g., technical and social skills, support systems, credentials, motivations) required to perform particular roles and tasks in society. These stakeholders might and sometimes do collaborate or partner with adult education programs in various ways. Examples include:

- Healthcare providers might recognize that basic-skills-limited adults in their community find it difficult to benefit from particular healthcare services (e.g., related to healthy diets, exercise, care of newborns, or a chronic disease). Those healthcare providers might invite local adult education programs to design and implement specialized "health literacy" programs that help learners develop relevant basic skills, health-related content knowledge, and connections to healthcare providers who themselves are prepared to serve basic-skills-limited adults.

- Employers might be concerned that some of their employees lack the specific reading, writing, math, or digital literacy skills needed to use new technologies, work procedures, or professional standards or participate in technical training programs. Those employers might work with adult education specialists to design and implement a customized education program that helps workers develop those skills.

- Prisoner re-entry centers might recognize that returning inmates often lack foundational skills and/or a high school equivalency diploma, which can make it hard for them to get employed, succeed in post-secondary education and training, and otherwise successfully transition to life outside prison. Such centers might work with a local adult education program to design and deliver relevant education services delivered at the re-entry center. Such customized education would focus on the particular skills and social-emotional strengths that returning inmates need to get a job; manage health, family, housing, transportation, and other personal challenges; and earn a high school equivalency certificate and pursue post-secondary education.

4 See Holland (2019) for an example of a more comprehensive way of looking at the employability skills of job seekers.

Other potential (and, in many cases, actively-involved) adult education partners include employment centers, labor unions, supporters of environmental sustainability, universities and community colleges, and other organizations and government agencies that provide various kinds of supports (e.g., economic development, public health, legal services, housing, voting rights, transportation, food security, childcare and eldercare) to the populations of adult learners described under "Primary partners" above. (Many of those service-providing stakeholders might fall under the headings of "social justice," "civil rights," and/or "poverty reduction" organizations.)[5]

Such collaborations can have multiple benefits for the adult learners and other stakeholders involved. The collaborations can take the forms of designing and implementing of joint educational activities (e.g., education that integrates work-readiness and basic skills); cross-training of staff from the partnering organizations; joint awareness-raising, advocacy, and fundraising; and/or collaborative research. (Joint research might, for example, help adult education programs better understand the health needs of their learners or equip healthcare providers to better understand and respond to the basic skills needs of their clients.)

3. How has the adult basic skills problem been quantified and presented?

Prior to the 1970s, estimates of the "adult literacy" rates of communities were typically based on self-reports on the U.S. Census (i.e., answers to the questions of "Can you read and write?", "Have you graduated from high school?", and "Can you speak English?")

Since the 1970s, a number of national studies of the functional literacy of U.S. adults and youth have been carried out. These are summarized in the Appendix and have the following elements:

- A focus on contextualized uses of basic skills: The studies generally measured how well Americans were able to use reading to carry out tasks performed in typical work, consumer, civic, and health-related roles. (Examples included reading and interpreting prose in newspaper articles; using information in forms, tables, charts; applying numerical operations to information contained in a menu, checkbook, or an ad.)
- Measuring levels of basic skills: The assessments typically assigned Americans to a very low (e.g., functionally illiterate), moderate (marginally literate), or acceptable level of literacy. For example, a 1977 study (University of Texas at Austin, 1977), said that 27 million adults (20 percent) were "functionally illiterate" while a 1993 report (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993) stated that 21-23 percent (or 40 to 44 million individuals) were at the lowest level of literacy.

While potentially helpful if used properly, these studies have also sometimes led to confusion. For example, the use of different measures and levels of literacy has made it difficult for stakeholders to understand whether American literacy abilities were improving or decreasing over time. The

5 See Open Door Collective's Can-Do Guide series for examples of partnerships between adult education programs and six stakeholder groups (e.g., supporters of public health and environmental sustainability, universities, prisoner re-entry services, labor unions, and employers) at https://www.opendoorcollective.org/workforce-basic-skills-resources.html.

studies might also be interpreted in overly simplistic and misleading ways. As stated in Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins & Kolstad, 1993, p. xv:

> *Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of "illiterates" in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.*

In an attempt to make these figures easy to understand for lay audiences, there has also been a tendency in the field – and by the news media – to equate adult literacy levels with primary school "grade levels." However, use of such concepts is misleading, as stated by the Business Council for Effective Literacy in its widely-respected newsletter (April 1987, p.4):

> *In 1975 the University of Texas Adult Performance Level Study (APL), funded by the U.S. Department of Education, rejected the use of school-grade completion levels as the measure of literacy (it is not a meaningful measure) and developed instead specific competencies needed for a person to function (i.e., tasks to be performed in everyday living and working), regardless of his or her level of academic achievement. The point was and is that literacy is not so much the ability to decode words and read textual material as it is to process the information contained therein, derive meaning from it, and apply it to specific tasks that need doing in specific contexts. The 1986 study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress of the skills levels of 21-25 year olds stresses the same point.*

As Archie E. Lapointe, Executive Director of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, put it in the opening of Kirsch and Jungeblut (1986, p. iii):

> *Setting standards in America is a marvelous, informal, dynamic process that usually brings us to some consensus. Still, defining a single, clear literacy goal for our heterogeneous population with its mosaic of cultures and lifestyles is well-nigh impossible. It's not that simple!*

The use of such studies thus needs to be approached carefully. Each of these (and similar) reports on their own can provide useful evidence to help us understand the range of basic skills needs of various segments of the U.S. population. When combined in thoughtful ways, they can provide a robust set of indicators to guide informed planning and policy making.

4. **What are the implications of these skills limitations for both basic-skills-challenged individuals and the social contexts/institutions they interact with?**

    - For individuals, gaps in basic skills can make it difficult to carry out important functions for work, family, civic, and lifelong learning. Though many of these adults do "work arounds"—carrying out tasks by using existing skills with the help of friends, family members, or various tools (e.g., electronic devices, dictionaries, etc.), many of these individuals also avoid those tasks altogether as too frustrating or embarrassing. Either way, basic skills limitations can inhibit those individuals' ability to secure and perform family-supporting

jobs; manage family finances or healthcare; participate in community and electoral functions; and/or participate in training and education.

- For society, the presence of basic-skills-challenged adults in a community can limit:
  - employers' ability to hire, train, and promote employees to perform a wide range of functions;
  - the efficiency of healthcare providers to help patients protect their health and that of family members and navigate complex healthcare systems;
  - efforts to break the cycle of criminal behavior and re-incarceration and ensure public safety;
  - the ability of schools to help parents support their children's literacy development and overall academic success;
  - economic development agencies' efforts to attract employers and family-sustaining jobs to the community;
  - democratic institutions' (e.g., boards of elections, legislative bodies, mayors' offices, political parties, advocacy organizations, and labor unions) abilities to communicate with and serve their communities;
  - retailers' ability to interact with customers;
  - media companies' ability to reach potential audiences.

5. What factors contribute to these basic skills limitations?

The multiple factors that contribute to adults' basic skills limitations can be broken down into two categories:

- Factors that block adults from developing basic skills in childhood: U.S.-born basic-skills-challenged adults might have had limited access to quality schooling, lived in home and community environments not sufficiently supportive of academic success, had undiagnosed and untreated learning disabilities, had to make work or other activities a priority over education, or had other types of disabilities that made it difficult to participate and succeed in school. Foreign-born adults who have basic skills limitations in English might have been impacted by challenges in their childhoods similar to those described above for U.S.-born adults. In addition, they might simply have grown up developing literacy skills in a non-English language (and in some cases not mastered the Latin alphabet), making them essentially illiterate in English when they arrived in the U.S.

- Factors that block adults from developing necessary basic skills in adulthood: Basic-skills-challenged U.S.-born or non-U.S.-born adults who might be interested in participating in adult basic education programs can face a number of personal and systemic obstacles that make participation difficult or impossible, including:

Personal obstacles such as:

- a lack of awareness of where to find an appropriate program;
- a remote location, a lack of transportation, or a lack of access to digital technologies, any of which can make access to a suitable program difficult;
- a health problem or disability;
- having to prioritize other duties for work or family;
- a negative history with an adult education program or with education during their younger years, making them less willing to try to re-engage with adult education;
- family or societal attitudes and structures that discourage potential learners from trying to do something about their basic skills limitations.

Systemic obstacles within adult education such as:

- At the program level: Even if adults are willing and able to enroll in an adult education program, existing programs might not be able to serve those individuals. Programs might have long waiting lists, operate at times and locations not convenient to learners, not offer the particular types of basic skills services that the individuals need, or use educational and other practices that are simply not of adequate quality and/or intensity to help learners succeed[6].
- At policy and funding levels: Even when learners and programs are in sync, programs might not receive the funding and other supports they need to deliver and sustain quality services. Programs too often have to cut staff or hours, close locations, or stop providing particular services that learners need. Too often, policies support quantity of services over quality and don't provide adult education staff with family-sustaining wages and benefits and a viable career path.

How Might Our Field Develop a Better "Problem Statement"—and What Might It Look Like?

This article is a brief overview of (a) why adult education might develop "a more comprehensive, accurate, and positive problem statement" and (b) some questions to consider when doing so. To make this happen, a new national adult education commission or task force might be created or a work group formed within an existing body. Using the above kinds of questions as a framework, members might draft a problem statement for consideration and adaptation by others in the field. Such a statement could serve as a working document to guide development of a vision and plan for a reformed system of educational and other supports for adult learners[7].

6 See Patterson, Rasor, & Hunt (2020) for factors that can block or support learner participation in adult education programs.
7 The author welcomes further dialogue about how to move forward with such systems reform work.

A draft problem statement might look something like this:

> *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.*

Conclusion

There are multiple factors that contribute to the "adult basic skills problem" in U.S. communities. All of these need to be taken into account in the planning of an effective system of educational and other supports for basic-skills-limited adults. Defining the problem by merely stating a broad estimate of the overall population of adults with foundational skills limitations doesn't provide enough detail for service providers, policy makers, and other potential partners to work with. Before we move forward , we need to develop an up-to-date map – a more comprehensive, accurate, and positive problem statement – to guide our efforts to build better systems of supports..

And as we develop that map, we need to remember that adult education programs cannot by themselves eliminate all of the obstacles that adult learners and adult education programs face. Collaborative partnerships must be a key element of effective systems of supports for learners. Such collaborations can help learners to build on their strengths and understand and deal with obstacles they face.

So equipped, learners can more effectively participate in—and be rewarded for—their roles as important partners in our national learning community.

Acknowledgment: The author thanks Laureen Atkins, Brian Holland, David J. Rosen, Federico Salas-Isnardi, and ProLiteracy staff for their input and support.

References

Business Council for Effective Literacy. (June 1993). *Basic skills in small businesses.* Author.

Business Council for Effective Literacy. (September 1984). *A Newsletter for the Business Community.* Vol. 1.

Business Council for Effective Literacy. (April 1987). *A Newsletter for the Business Community*, Number 11.

Carnevale, Gainer, & Melzer. (1990). *Workplace basics: The essential skills employers want*. American Society for Training and Development. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED319979.pdf

Chisman, F.P. (1992). *The missing link: Workplace education in small businesses.* Southport Institute for Policy Analysis. https://www.worldcat.org/title/missing-link-workplace-education-in-small-business/oclc/757684549

Crayton, A. & Neusteter, S.R. (2008). *The current state of correctional education*. Prisoner Reentry Institute, John Jay College of Criminal Justice. https://www.prisonlegalnews.org/news/publications/pri-crayton-state-of-correctional-education/

Holland, B. (May 2019). "The design and uses of an employability index to evaluate the vertical workforce development process" in *New Horizons in Adult Education & Human Resource Development*. 31(2), 41-59.

Jurmo, P. (September 2019). *Strengthening public health and the healthcare workforce: What U.S. health partners and adult basic skills programs can do together.* Open Door Collective. https://www.dropbox.com/s/kjzrvif4rc38v47/ODC%20Health%20Partners%20Can-Do%20Guide%209-30-19.pdf?dl=0

Kirsch, I.S. & Jungeblut, A. (1986). *Literacy: Profiles of young adults: Final report.* National Assessment of Educational Progress. Educational Testing Service. https://www.ets.org/research/policy_research_reports/publications/report/1986/aesy

Kirsch, I.S., Jungeblut, A., Jenkins, L., & Kolstad, A. (1993). *Adult literacy in America: A first look at the findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey.* Educational Testing Service. https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=93275

Kurtz-Rossi, S. (2020) *Issue brief: Health literacy.* "Teaching Skills that Matter" series, American Institutes for Research. https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/TSTMHealthLiteracyBrief-508.pdf

National Center for Education Statistics. (2003). *National Assessment of Adult Literacy.* https://nces.ed.gov/naal/

Patterson, M.B., Rasor, A., & Hunt. T. (2020). *"When you are pushing, you're going to want somebody's help:" Support systems for adult learners.* Research Allies for Lifelong Learning. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/560d5789e4b015789104a87e/t/5f6e0e5ce48da91b8b389cc6/1601048157210/Support+Systems+Paper+8-27-20.pdf

Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). *Highlights of PIAAC 2017 U.S. results.* National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/current_results.asp

Sarmiento, A. & Kay, A. (1990). *Worker-centered learning: A union guide to workplace literacy.* AFL-CIO Human Resources Development Institute. https://eric.ed.gov/?q=sarmiento&pg=3&id=ED338863

Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills. (1991). *What work requires of schools. A SCANS report for America 2000.* U.S. Department of Labor. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED332054

Stein, S. (2000). *Equipped for the Future: What adults need to know and be able to do in the 21st century.* National Institute for Literacy. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED437557.pdf

University of Texas at Austin. (1977). *The Adult Performance Level Study: Final report.* Author. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED185113

APPENDIX

Some Estimates of the Literacy Abilities and Needs of U.S. Adults: 1970s to Today

- The Adult Performance Level (APL) Study of 1977 (University of Texas at Austin, 1977) measured U.S. adults' abilities to use basic skills ("reading, writing, computation, and problem solving") to perform tasks related to "occupationally-related knowledge, consumer economics, government and law, health, and community resources." It found that "27 million adults (one in every five adult Americans) are 'functionally illiterate'. Another 45 million are only marginally literate. And the pool is growing by about 2.3 million persons each year (high school dropouts, immigrants, refugees)" (Business Council for Effective Literacy, September 1984, p.2). These numbers and the concept of "functional literacy" were used extensively during the major growth in adult literacy efforts (including the PLUS Campaign, a national adult literacy awareness initiative led by PBS and the American Broadcasting Company) beginning in the mid-1980s through the early 1990s.

- In 1986, *Literacy: Profiles of Young Adults: Final Report of the National Assessment of Educational Progress* was issued by the Educational Testing Service. It summarized a 1985 assessment of the abilities of U.S. young adults (ages 21 to 25) to perform prose, document, and quantitative literacy tasks (e.g., "reading and interpreting prose, as in newspaper articles, magazines, and books; identifying and using information located in . . . forms, tables, charts, and indexes; and applying numerical operations to information contained in . . . a menu, a checkbook, or an advertisement . . .") (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986, p. 3). The study found that while the overwhelming majority of young adults adequately perform tasks at the lower levels on each of the three scales (for prose, document and quantitative literacy), sizable numbers appear unable to do well on tasks of moderate complexity. Only a relatively small percentage of this group is estimated to perform at levels typified by the more complex and challenging tasks." (Kirsch & Jungeblut, 1986, p. 4). The study recommended greater emphasis on teaching the use of diverse forms of printed information in schools, especially for low-income children who face multiple barriers to educational success.

- In 1993, *Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Findings of the National Adult Literacy* Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins & Kolstad, 1993) was released by the National Center for Education Statistics. Like the Adult Performance Level Study of the 1970s, this survey assessed adults' "performance across a wide array of tasks that reflect the types of (prose, document, and quantitative) materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives" (p. xv). Examples included totaling an entry on a deposit slip, finding information on a form, and identifying information in a brief news article. The study found that 21 to 23 percent (40 to 44 million) of

the nation's 190 million adults demonstrated prose, document, and quantitative skills at the lowest skill level. Another 25 to 28 percent (or 50 million adults) were at the next highest level of proficiency. The remaining third (about 61 million) were at Level 3, which meant they were able to perform more complex tasks. The study noted—not surprisingly—that adults who face various social and other challenges tend to demonstrate lower skill proficiency.

- In 2003, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003) followed up on the similar National Adult Literacy Survey of a decade earlier. The 2003 version measured the prose, document, and quantitative skills of over 19,000 U.S. adults. It found that 14 percent of adults (30 million) were at a "below basic" level of prose literacy (which it defines as the ability to "search, use, and comprehend continuous texts"—as opposed to charts, tables, etc.); 29 percent (63 million) were at a "basic" prose literacy level; 44 percent (95 million) were at the "intermediate" level; and 13 percent (28 million) were at the highest ("proficient") level of prose literacy.

- In 2012 to 2017, the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)[8] found that for U.S. adults:
    - 18 percent have literacy skills at the lowest levels of a 6-level scale;
    - 28 percent have numeracy skills at the lowest levels of that 6-level scale;
    - 23 percent have digital problem skills at the lowest level of a 4-level scale.

In addition to the above national studies, reports from employers, healthcare providers, and other sources have identified particular types of adult basic skills needs. Examples include:

- In 1990, the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) issued "Workplace Basics: The Essential Skills Employers Want" (Carnevale, Gainer, & Melzer, 1990). It identified 16 "workplace basics" skills (e.g.., learning how to learn, reading for the new workplace, writing with impact, computation in a technological workplace, oral communications, listening skills, resourcefulness, creative thinking, self-esteem, motivations and goal setting, career development, understanding organizational culture, sharing leadership). Workers needed these assets to navigate changing technologies, performance standards, and work procedures in emerging workplaces. The book provided guidelines for employers who wanted to establish a worker education program responsive to those needs.

- In 1991, the U.S. Labor Secretary's Commission on the Achievement of Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified key "workplace know-how" skills that young workers need for changing workplaces. This "know-how" had two elements: competencies and foundation skills. The report gave scenarios from five sectors: manufacturing, health services, retail, accommodations and food service, and office services. It showed that the five competencies (resources, interpersonal, information, systems, and technologies) and three foundation skills (basic skills, thinking skills,

8 To learn more about PIAAC, visit http://piaacgateway.com

and personal qualities) interacted in complex ways. The Commission proposed establishing five levels of proficiency (preparatory, work-ready, intermediate, advanced, and specialist) for U.S. schools to structure workforce education around. It also recommended that the nation's schools reorganize themselves as high performance organizations to ensure student success.

- In the later 1980s and early 1990s, labor unions became strong advocates for basic skills education for incumbent workers. They argued that basic skills were vital not only for worker productivity in workplaces with changing skill demands, but for the job security and general well-being of workers and their families and communities (Sarmiento & Kay, 1990).
- In the early 1990s, a number of publications pointed to the particular challenges that small businesses faced in responding to the basic skills limitations of employees. The reports pointed out that small businesses represent 99 percent of U.S. companies, account for more than half of private sector employment, and generate nearly half of the U.S. gross national product. They also tend to employee workers who have less job experience and more significant basic skills gaps than employees in larger companies. Small businesses also have fewer resources to commit to employee training programs, including basic-skills-related training (Business Council for Effective Literacy, June 1993; Chisman, 1992).
- Healthcare providers have reported (Jurmo, September 2019; Kurtz-Rossi, 2020) that many patients lack basic "health literacy" abilities needed to understand, perform, and communicate about health-related topics.
- Correctional studies report that, when compared to the general population, incarcerated individuals have lower levels of quantitative literacy skills (39 percent vs 21 percent), are less likely to have completed secondary school (34 percent vs 18 percent), and have higher incidence of learning differences (17 percent vs 6 percent) (Crayton & Neusteter, 2008, pp. 4-7).