

PAUL JURMO, ED.D.

522 14th Street, S.E., Washington, DC 20003 | 410-598-3374 | pjurmo@comcast.net | www.pauljurgo.info

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Senator Patty Murray (Chair) and Senator Richard Burr (Ranking Member)
Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (HELP) Committee
United States Senate
Washington, D.C.

Dear Senator Murray and Senator Burr,

Thank you for this opportunity to provide input into your committee's discussions of how to support, update, and expand workforce training, apprenticeship, and related programs.

I am an adult education professional who has focused on integrating basic skills education with workforce and economic development and other areas that include public health, prisoner re-entry, immigrant and refugee integration, environmental sustainability, and democratic leadership development.¹

Joining me in shaping and signing this letter are respected colleagues from multiple segments of the United States adult basic education field. We are writing to urge you and other federal decision makers to broaden the purposes of adult basic education in the U.S. and to support the creation of a new, multi-purpose national system of adult basic skills development opportunities. This system would use current (WIOA Title II, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act) and possibly new funding sources. It would be more inclusive in who is served, more relevant to users, more effective in the strategies and practices used, and of sufficient duration and intensity to have a substantial impact.

Now is a time of both great challenges and opportunities for our nation. We are confronted by a pandemic; a decline in employment and economic security; social divisions; a growth in

¹ I have played multiple roles in diverse projects for federal, state, and county agencies; community colleges and universities; labor unions and employers; and community-based organizations. I currently chair the Labor and Workforce Development Issues Group of the Open Door Collective. My international work includes a recent five-year assignment heading a national literacy education reform project for Peace Corps in the Pacific. (Visit www.pauljurgo.info for more about this work.)

hunger and homelessness; closed educational institutions; inadequate digital access; and an increasingly endangered natural environment. More positively, there has also been a growth in awareness of and actions to resolve these problems. We strongly believe that a strengthened and expanded adult basic skills development system can play significant roles in addressing these challenges and building a more equitable, healthy, environmentally sustainable, democratic, and productive society.

To create a new and improved adult basic skills system, those with the responsibility for federal policy and funding should:

1. Understand who can benefit from adult basic skills supports.

Potential learners are the estimated 43 million individuals who lack basic skills in English and/or a high school diploma or equivalency credential.² These individuals include out-of-school youth and adults and both immigrants and native-born citizens. While they can possess multiple strengths (e.g., technical knowledge, family and community support systems, and positive motivation), they can also face significant personal and situational obstacles (e.g., related to health, financial security, digital access, discrimination, remote location). Having basic skills limitations can block their ability to build on their strengths and manage challenges. Currently fewer than 3 percent of these individuals are served through programs supported by Title II of WIOA and matching state funds.

Other important stakeholders can also benefit from working with adult basic skills programs. These include governmental and non-governmental providers of services related to public health, workforce development, poverty-reduction, civil rights, corrections and public safety, disabilities, environmental sustainability, and immigrant and refugee integration. Other potential partners include forward-thinking employers and labor unions representing most industries, as well as private-sector funders. These stakeholders can benefit from having clients, employees, and community members who are equipped with the skills and credentials they need to be successful workers, family members, and community members. Through partnerships with adult education

² Comings, J., S. Reder, and D.J. Rosen (February 22, 2021). *An Open Door Out of Poverty*. Open Door Collective.
<https://www.dropbox.com/s/pptgbl4kltns2qk/An%20Open%20Door%20Out%20of%20Poverty%20Feb%2022.2021.pdf?dl=0> .

programs, these stakeholders can also help adult educators better respond to the diverse needs of program participants.

2. Be clear about the potential benefits of basic skills supports.

Basic skills (now sometimes referred to as “foundational” skills and previously as “SCANS” skills and similar terms) include a diverse mix of abilities (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, numeracy, digital skills, problem-solving, teamwork, research, and planning) that adults need when performing communication and problem-solving tasks in their work, family, civic, and academic roles.³ Those roles and responsibilities will vary among learners depending on their life goals and the contexts they operate in.

Basic skills programs can help learners better manage their personal, family, and civic responsibilities (e.g., ensuring good health; managing income and benefits; helping their children succeed in school; dealing with housing, legal, transportation, immigration documentation, childcare, and eldercare needs; being informed and active community members). Basic education programs can also help learners succeed in family-sustaining employment and as advocates for their rights as workers. These functions are typically interwoven (e.g., employees need to know not just how to perform particular job functions but also how to maintain their health and juggle family responsibilities if they are to be available to work and participate in apprenticeships and college-level education). Basic skills demands are in many cases on the rise in emerging family-sustaining jobs and uses of on-line technologies for learning, work, personal finances, and health.

3. Understand the components of effective basic skills development systems.

As with any professional field, adult education providers need to use effective practices to carry out their work. They must be able to use (1) needs assessment, planning, and monitoring procedures, (2) strategies for building effective partnerships with relevant stakeholders, (3) engaging curricula customized to learner needs, (4) facilities, technologies, and schedules that are welcoming and convenient to busy

³ 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.

adult learners, and (5) efficient financial management. With the help of adult education specialists, other stakeholders (e.g., healthcare facilities, workforce centers, correctional programs, employers) can make their facilities and services more user-friendly for adults who have basic skills limitations.

4. Consider the supports that such a system requires.

Creating, operating, and sustaining high-quality adult basic skills services require trained professionals and, where appropriate, well-equipped para-professionals. (Adult educators can include former program students.) A new system should prioritize the creation of more full-time positions, professional-level salaries, and benefits for adult educators. Programs also need reliable and adequate funding and relevant, user-friendly monitoring, evaluation, and research. Financial and in-kind supports can come from traditional federal, state, and local governmental sources. Additional resources might be provided by other governmental and non-governmental stakeholders such as employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, correctional agencies, universities, and others who have an interest in a well-equipped adult population.⁴

5. Make strategic investments to strengthen current services while expanding and re-organizing them to build a system that is more inclusive, relevant, efficient, research-informed, and sustained.

With support from a multi-stakeholder national-level task force, relevant government agencies (i.e., those responsible for education, labor, and other priority areas such as health, criminal justice, civil rights, immigration, small business development, and environmental sustainability) can:

- a. Broaden the range of allowable outcomes of adult education to include relevant work, family, civic, and lifelong learning goals (as described above);
- b. Fund existing programs whose action plans demonstrate how they will use evidence-based strategies to help learners achieve relevant outcomes;
- c. Fund demonstration projects (and related professional development and research) to strengthen adult education's capacities to serve diverse learner populations and learning goals. Projects can draw on both prior research and new ideas to build resources for workforce basic skills for diverse industries, health literacy, basic education for currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, family literacy, digital literacy, and environmental education.

⁴ Such collaborative integration of basic education with other services is a central feature of the "U.S. Government Strategy on International Basic Education." (<https://www.usaid.gov/education/usg-strategy>)

Special initiatives can target various adult learner populations who face specific challenges, including individuals with disabilities, residents of rural communities, and people historically under-represented in particular careers. These efforts can adapt prior demonstration project models such as the National Workplace Literacy Program, the Equipped for the Future basic skills systems reform initiative, industry-specific initiatives developed by trade associations and labor unions, and more-recent career and college pathway projects and the Teaching the Skills that Matter initiative.

- d. Monitor the results of a., b., and c. to inform future strengthening and expansion of adult basic skills development systems. This continuous improvement and expansion might be supported by a national research and professional development network that adapts the best elements of the former National Institute for Literacy; National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy; Educational Resources Information Center for Adult, Career, and Vocational Education; and regional, state, and local adult literacy resource centers.

Thank you for your consideration of the above ideas. We welcome the opportunity to communicate further.

And thank you for your leadership on this important question of how to equip our diverse adult population for the challenges and opportunities we face -- as we try to form a more perfect Union.

Sincerely,

Paul Jurmo

Paul Jurmo, Ed.D. with

- Laureen Atkins: Vice President of Strategic Initiatives, The Literacy Cooperative, Cleveland, OH
- Alisa Belzer, Ph.D.: Professor, Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, NJ
- Carol Clymer, Ed.D.: University Park, PA
- Jose L. Cruz: CEO, San Diego (CA) Council on Literacy
- Marcia Drew Hohn: Consultant in Health Literacy, MA
- Michele Ericson: Executive Director, Wisconsin Literacy, Inc.
- Marty Finsterbusch: Executive Director, VALUEUSA, PA
- Rev. David Hendricks: President, VALUEUSA, CT
- Brian Holland: American University & BLH Technologies, Inc., Washington, DC
- Erik Jacobson: University Professor and Board Member of the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning
- Aricles "Wulf" James: CEO/Founder of Anchochaba Consulting and Executive Director of Arbuckle Literacy Leadership, OK and KS

- Leicester Johnson: CEO, Academy of Hope Adult Public Charter School, Washington, DC
- Barbara Krol-Sinclair, Ed.D.: Director of Adult Learning, Intergenerational Literacy Program, Chelsea (MA) Public Schools
- Elizabeth McKiernan: Director, Abisi Adult Education Center, Lowell, MA
- Judy Mortrude: Senior Technical Advisor, World Education, Inc., Washington, DC
- Rodney L. Nyland, Ph.D.: Program Director, Sienna Literacy Center, Detroit, MI
- Janet Ohene-Frempong, MS: Plain Language and Cross-Cultural Communications, J O Frempong & Associates, Inc., Philadelphia, PA
- James Parker: National Workforce Education Program Coordinator (retired), U. S. Department of Education, Kent Island, MD
- David J. Rosen, Ed.D.: President, Newsome Associates, Jamaica Plain, MA
- Federico Salas-Isnardi: Director, Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy, Houston, TX
- Lisa Soricone, Ed.D.: Senior Research Director, JFF, Boston, MA
- Sondra Stein, Ph.D.: (former) Senior Research Associate and National Director, Equipped for the Future, National Institute for Literacy, Durham, NC
- Stephen J. Steurer, Ph.D.: Re-Entry/Education Advocate, CURE National
- Anthony Tassi: CEO, Literacy Partners, New York, NY