

Wanted: Leadership for Adult Literacy

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Since the mid-1980s, a steady stream of voices — researchers, employers, workforce development specialists, policymakers, labor leaders, and representatives of community groups — has pointed to the vital role of adult literacy and adult education for our nation's future.

- Employers continually cite the need for a better-prepared workforce, one that has a broad range of “basic skills” (now defined as not just the traditional “3Rs” but also oral English, problem-solving, research, teamwork, and other skills). Workers need these skills to deal with the new technologies, work processes, and higher standards required by virtually every industry.
- Advocates for families and children point out the need for adults who are equipped to help their children succeed in school, ensure their own health and that of their family members, and otherwise build strong families that are at the core of a healthy society.
- Those concerned about the strength of our democracy and the safety and vibrancy of our communities likewise emphasize that we need an adult population able to participate in an informed way in the many institutions of our society — volunteer groups, religious bodies, the electoral system.

By now it should be clear that, to sustain the economic and social well-being of our nation, we need a well-educated adult populace. But researchers are also now pointing to the harsh reality that many adults are not prepared for these demanding roles of active, informed, thinking workers, family members, and citizens. The sources of this problem of an undereducated, underprepared adult population are not being eliminated. Rather, they are increasing, as school dropout rates remain high (particularly in low-income communities), school reform isn't reaching all schools and schoolchildren, and immigration is at its highest levels in our history (bringing in more and more people with limited English skills and perhaps limited education in their home countries). This is compounded by the fact that the skills demands placed on workers, parents, and citizens continue to increase and become more complex.

The good news is that, in the past 15 years, the adult basic education field has developed potential solutions to these problems. Highlights include:

- We have recognized the need to expand the definition of “basic skills” to incorporate the broader range of skills for which employers and others — including adult learners themselves — have been asking.
- The field has moved significantly toward adoption of instructional methods based on research, to help learning be more suited to the special needs and interests of adults.
- Computers have steadily moved into the adult education classroom, thereby enabling adult learners to simultaneously develop both an array of “basic” skills and the computer skills which adults need for their multiple roles as workers, family members, consumers, and citizens.
- Some states and communities have begun using quality management methods to build local- and state-level adult education systems. These systems are integrated with workforce and community development services, and supported by an infrastructure of high-quality planning, professional development, evaluation, and other components.
- Adult learners — including both former and current adult education students — have begun to be recognized for their leadership potential. They are getting involved in giving something back to their education programs and communities, by recruiting new adult learners; giving those new learners peer support to encourage them to persevere and succeed; educating policymakers, funders, and the public; and getting involved in their communities’ schools.

These efforts to build a high-quality, modern adult education system are being carried out by creative, committed adult education professionals, volunteers, and adult learners, with support from federal and state governments and private funders. We need to recognize these efforts, commend them, and support them.

But they are simply not enough. Despite some increases in public money and some leadership at the federal level (e.g., the National Institute for Literacy’s Equipped for the Future initiative), the future of adult education now is not clear. There appears to be a shift toward seeing “literacy” purely as an “early childhood reading” issue rather than recognizing the need for greatly expanded services for the many adults upon whom those children and our economy and communities depend. This would be *a major step backward*, to a period 20 years ago when few had ever heard of “adult illiteracy in the United States” and none of the above-described resources had been developed.

We need a renewed leadership for the cause of adult literacy and adult

education. This is required at the highest level of federal and state government, and within the private sector, as well. We are now engaged in struggles to rebuild our communities and economy after the September 11 attacks. Key to all these efforts — getting people back to work, using technology wisely, building trust and communication among all segments of our population, making our communities more secure — will be an educated adult populace.

Our leaders need to recognize that education cannot just be limited to children. As a nation, we need to invest in a system of lifelong learning which ensures that adults continue to educate themselves, so they can be active players in creating a strong nation, with liberty and justice for all.