

Basic Skills for Economic Security:
How Adult Educators, Adult Learners, and Anti-Poverty Organizations
Can Work Together

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The Open Door Collective

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Overview

This paper describes why and how anti-poverty organizations and adult basic skills programs can collaborate to help individuals who have basic skills-related challenges (e.g., lower levels of literacy, English language, and numeracy skills needed for work, family, and civic roles; lack of a high school credential; learning disabilities) to improve their economic security and that of their families and communities. In so doing, these partnerships can also contribute to the building of a more equitable, efficient, and sustainable economy. The paper identifies steps that these two stakeholder groups might take to understand and build on existing collaborative models to create new partnerships.

ODC's Mission and Work

The Open Door Collective (ODC) was formed in 2014 by a small group of adult basic skills educators and researchers who (1) were concerned about the problem of poverty in the United States, (2) saw adult basic skills education as a tool for improving economic security, (3) recognized that this was in keeping with adult basic education's historic role in earlier social justice movements, and (4) understood that, to effectively help reduce poverty, adult basic education needs to partner with other groups whose mission includes reducing poverty and income inequality.

Since then, ODC's members have issued a series of Make the Case papers and Can-Do Guides and have made conference presentations showing why and how adult educators can work with other stakeholders in a number of ways to reduce poverty. These other stakeholders can include public libraries; community health centers; and organizations involved with workforce development, digital inclusion, criminal justice reform, public health, immigrant and refugee advocacy and integration, safety net services, housing, disability rights advocacy, environmental sustainability, and other issues. (Visit <https://opendoorcollective.org> to see ODC documents and other resources.)

We define “anti-poverty partners” broadly as organizations and individuals that have as a primary or secondary goal the protection and improvement of the economic security of low-income people. These could include public and private bodies that:

- provide education and other supports (e.g., workforce preparation, legal advice, financial services, health services, housing, resettlement, transportation, childcare, or eldercare) to low-income individuals, to help them enhance their own economic well-being and that of their families and communities;
- create, fund, research, evaluate, and provide technical supports for the above kinds of anti-poverty services;
- advocate for public policy solutions to the problem of income inequality in American life;
- work to remove barriers to economic security (e.g., discrimination, unfair laws and practices, poor education, inadequate healthcare, incarceration and criminal records) for low-income individuals; or
- in other ways support the economic security of low-income individuals, their families, and their communities.

Adult basic skills programs are operated by local, state, and national organizations that seek to strengthen the basic skills that adults and out-of-school youth need for work, family, and civic roles. These skills include reading, writing, speaking, listening, numeracy, problem solving, digital literacy, and other fundamental skills. Providers include community-based organizations, public schools, community colleges, libraries, volunteer literacy organizations, employers, labor unions, and correctional facilities.

Who Are the Adults with Basic Skills Limitations? How Is their Economic Security at Risk?

An estimated 36 million or more adults in the United States have limitations in their basic skills. They represent a diverse mix of:

- demographic backgrounds (e.g., age, gender, race/culture, national origin);
- locations (all states, urban, semi-urban, and rural communities);
- family roles (e.g., parents of school-age children, caregivers for elderly or disabled family members or for grandchildren, primary breadwinners, stable and unstable marital relationships); and
- occupational experiences and interests.

These individuals can include: employed workers and unemployed job seekers, older career-changers or individuals preparing for retirement or already retired, parents who want to support their children’s learning and development, out-of-school youth and adults, people with disabilities, and current and former inmates. Immigrants and

refugees (who can have various levels of English fluency and basic skills in their native languages) are a major segment of the adult basic skills student population.

These adults can face a number of obstacles to employment and financial well-being:

- Finances: Low incomes and limited or no benefits (e.g., healthcare, retirement), little or no savings or other assets, limited financial literacy (i.e., knowing how to manage one's resources), debt and bad credit;
- Employment: Limited history of family-sustaining jobs;
- Education: Limited educational credentials (e.g., high school diploma or equivalency certificate, post secondary credentials) and broader knowledge, skills, and self-confidence;
- Health problems and disabilities;
- Homelessness;
- Legal problems: (e.g., criminal records, lack of legal immigration status);
- Personal and family challenges: Difficulty managing other responsibilities that can impact employability (e.g., housing, transportation, childcare, eldercare);
- Impacts of discrimination (based on color or ethnicity, gender, first language, disability, age, appearance);
- Migration challenges (e.g., trauma from war or civil conflict, inability to verify credentials earned in another country, lack of U.S. work experience); and
- Isolation (social and geographic).

Any of these problems might make it difficult for the average individual to be economically secure (i.e., succeed in family-sustaining jobs and efficiently manage income, savings, benefits, and other responsibilities). But these challenges can be exacerbated for those with basic skills challenges.

How Basic Skills Programs Have Helped Learners Enhance their Economic Security

The adults who enroll in basic skills programs often do so with the hope that they will be better able to perform their current jobs better, get a better job, manage their finances, or otherwise improve the economic well-being of themselves and their families. In response, local adult basic education providers use a number of strategies, including:

- offering basic skills instruction geared to the particular employment and financial-management (“financial literacy”) goals of learners;
- providing educational advisement to help learners understand and weigh education and career options;
- helping learners attain credentials they need for occupational or academic advancement (e.g., earn a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate, pass an English for Speakers of Other Languages test, acquire U.S. citizenship, pass a technical or occupational exam);

- helping learners access other supports necessary to succeed in the workplace and in their personal lives (e.g., job counseling, legal or financial services, healthcare, housing, transportation, childcare or eldercare for family members);
- preparing learners for success in post-secondary education.

Some employers and labor unions, separately or through joint labor-management programs, provide basic skills services customized to the literacy, language, digital literacy, or math skills their workers need. Learners can use these skills to perform particular job tasks efficiently and safely, manage salaries and benefits more efficiently, qualify for promotions or further education and training, or prepare for retirement,.

Why and How Anti-Poverty Groups Might Partner with Adult Basic Skills Programs

By working with adult basic education programs, anti-poverty organizations might be better able to serve populations having basic skills challenges. Similarly, adult educators can better help their low-income learners by tapping into the expertise and other resources of anti-poverty organizations. Here are nine ways these two kinds of organizations might collaborate:

- Consumer and civic education to help adult learners develop knowledge and skills they can use to tackle issues (e.g., employment, low wages, financial management, healthcare, housing, immigration) that can impact their economic security;
- Work-related education to help low-income learners secure, retain, and advance in fair-wage jobs, understand and protect their rights, and manage their salaries and benefits;
- Work-related supports for adult learners (e.g., job counseling, healthcare, legal services, housing, transportation, childcare, eldercare);
- Helping anti-poverty groups to better serve clients with limited basic skills (e.g., by showing how to write documents more clearly, use interpreters, speak clearly and listen carefully);
- Helping adult basic skills programs to better serve low-income learners (i.e., by ensuring that adult education staff understand the economic challenges of low-income clients and provide supports that make it easier for them to participate);
- Service learning activities in which adult learners -- through reflective, volunteer community service -- learn how to deal with economic justice issues that affect them, their families, and communities;
- Planning and advocacy in which diverse stakeholders identify pressing economic issues, plan joint strategies, advocate for learners and communities, effect necessary policy change, and generate new resources for struggling families;
- Research and evaluation through which partners (including adult learners) collaborate to identify needs and resources related to the economic well-being of adults and youth with basic skills challenges, monitor activities and their

- impact, and otherwise generate useful information to guide decisions and policies;
- Joint professional development for staff of anti-poverty and adult basic skills organizations (to build expertise and collaborative relationships).

Building Effective Partnerships

Effective partnerships require good planning and continuous communication and improvements to ensure that joint efforts meet relevant needs of participating organizations and the clients they serve. To get started, anti-poverty and adult basic skills programs should do initial background research about how social justice stakeholders have worked with adult basic skills programs. (See the “ODC Papers” and “Resources” sections of the ODC web site <<http://www.opendoorcollective.org>> for more information about joint efforts.) For example:

- Adult literacy education was a key focus of the early days of the American civil rights movement. Organizers established “Freedom Schools” to help African-Americans develop the literacy skills they needed to succeed on the “literacy tests” that a number of states required blacks to pass to qualify for voter registration.
- Large percentages of currently and formerly incarcerated individuals in the U.S. have low basic skills levels and lack high school diplomas. These basic skills challenges – when added to poor health, lack of job experience and vocational skills, social stigma, and other limitations – make it very difficult to succeed in family-sustaining employment, pursue higher education, and otherwise find a positive life path. Exacerbating this is the fact that children of inmates are also at high risk of poor academic performance, engaging in criminal activities, arrest and incarceration, and poverty. In response, prisoner re-entry services have worked with adult basic skills agencies to provide basic skills services to incarcerated individuals and those who have left prison. Curricula are typically customized to help learners develop skills they need for employment, further education, parenting roles, financial management, and positive life choices.
- Many adult basic skills programs recognize that the individuals they serve are at risk of poor health and unhealthy behaviors. (Being able to care for one’s own health and that of family members is tied to employability, higher income, and ability to engage in higher education.) These programs collaborate with public health partners in creative ways to help clients develop the “health literacy” skills they need to understand health problems, navigate healthcare systems, engage in healthy behaviors, and serve as health resources to their families and communities.
- Environmental justice advocates often help adults who have lower levels of basic skills to understand and deal with environmental challenges in their homes and families, advocate for environmental justice in their communities, and move into career-pathway employment in the emerging green economy. Adult basic skills

programs are now recognizing the value of working more closely with environmental stakeholders to help adults who have basic skills challenges to respond to environmental challenges and opportunities.

- Labor unions have a long history of providing educational opportunities to members, including basic skills-related education (e.g., English language for immigrants; computer, math, and literacy skills for jobs and higher education). This education helps workers retain unionized employment, qualify for promotions, manage their salaries and benefits, and stay safe and healthy on the job.
- Immigrants and refugees are served by adult basic skills programs all over the U.S. They come with multiple needs, strengths, and interests related to work, family, and community integration. Adult basic skills programs are working with immigrant service providers to offer specialized job training (e.g., helping immigrants move into in-demand jobs and use occupational expertise they bring from their home countries), family education and supports, and citizenship education. These efforts are providing a new workforce and new life for many struggling communities and employers.

Informed and inspired by such models, anti-poverty organizations and adult basic skills programs should reach out to each other, to explain their respective missions and services and identify how they might collaborate to enhance the economic well-being of economically-insecure adults with basic skills challenges. Partners can then map out a plan for an initial round of joint activities. As these initial activities get underway, partners should monitor what is being achieved and learned and use the resulting knowledge to guide further related efforts.

In Conclusion

Anti-poverty and adult basic skills organizations have much in common in terms of their missions and the populations they serve. Through new, informed, and creative partnerships that build on past and current efforts, these stakeholders can help more individuals who have basic skills challenges -- and their families and communities -- to improve their economic security and contribute to our common good.