



Basic Skills: A Key to Advancing the Workforce

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The Purpose of this Paper

This Open Door Collective [\[i\]](#) paper makes the case for investing in adult basic education as a tool for helping adults who have limited basic skills to more effectively participate in the workforce. We recognize that most enrollees in adult basic skills programs come with employment-related goals. We also understand that employers are concerned about the basic skills of many current and potential workers. We argue that well-designed and -supported basic education programs can help both workers and employers create a well-equipped workforce while enabling motivated workers to secure fair wages and benefits and advance in meaningful careers. Doing so is in the interest of both workers and employers and in keeping with the missions of labor unions; providers of adult education, occupational training, and other services for workers; workers' families and communities; public policy makers; public and private funders; and workforce investment boards. (See the Appendix for examples of work-related basic education initiatives in a variety of industries.)

The Open Door Collective

The Open Door Collective (ODC) is dedicated to dramatically reducing poverty and economic inequality in the United States and increasing civic engagement in the building of a stronger society and economy. ODC members are professionals working in adult basic skills, social services, poverty reduction, community health, workforce development, and other areas. ODC members have expertise in helping adults develop the basic skills they need to navigate opportunities and challenges related to employment, healthcare, and legal, family,

and social services. We advocate for including adult basic skills, i.e. English language, basic literacy and numeracy, high school equivalency preparation, college readiness, and digital literacy and technology skills, as an integral part of a national effort to move us closer to a just, productive, democratic society. <http://www.opendoorcollective.org>

Terminology Used

In this paper, the term *Career Pathways* refers to a system of structured and connected education programs, support services, and job opportunities that enable students, over time and often while they are working, to advance to better jobs and higher levels of education and training in various industries.^[ii]

As used here, *adult basic education* (or, sometimes, *adult education* or *adult basic skills*) refers to services that provide instruction and other supports to help adults develop English language, literacy, math, digital literacy, and other skills they need to participate effectively in work, family, and civic roles.

The Adults Who Have Limited Basic Skills and the Economic Challenges They Face

According to the most recent international survey of adult skills, there are 36 million adults in the United States who read at or below a third grade level. The same survey indicated that 63 percent, or 24 million of those low-literate adults were employed.^[iii] Low-literate adults may know how to “make do” with their basic skills deficiencies, but their low skills keep them unemployed or underemployed and stuck in low-wage, often dead-end jobs and unable to participate in job training that might otherwise help them move to more fulfilling employment.

Digging deeper, we see that these aggregate numbers represent people from many segments of the American workforce. They include employed and unemployed women and men from a wide range of demographic groups, industries, and locations. These individuals can bring with them both particular forms of expertise and positive motivation, as well as various types of challenges (e.g., limitations in their work-readiness, health, housing, transportation, support systems, and legal status).

Adult Basic Education (ABE) as a Component of the Nation’s Workforce Development System

State- and federally-funded adult basic education programs and adult

schools comprise the core of what is commonly referred to as the U.S. Adult Basic Education (ABE) system. This system serves adults who are at least sixteen years old who have left high school without graduating -- or in some states who have completed high school but have low basic skills or who may have limited English language skills. Each year, about 1.8 million adults participate in programs funded by federal and state governments under Title II, Adult Education and Family Literacy, of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA Title II focuses primarily on preparing adult learners for post-secondary education, occupational training, and employment to career pathways. These programs are hosted by public schools, community colleges, public libraries, and community-based organizations, and they sometimes work in partnership with employers and organized labor.

Impacts of ABE on Income and Other Workforce Goals

State data provided to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) on ABE program impacts^[iv] affirm that adult basic education programs support participants' advancement in basic skills and other important areas. In 2014, the DOE published several research briefs by adult education researcher, Stephen Reder, in which he analyzed data from the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning.^[v]

The results of this research are clear. Three different methods . . . all show statistically significant and financially substantial impacts of ABS (adult basic skills) program participation on earnings growth. Individuals who participate in programs have higher future earnings as a result of participating, income premiums are larger with more intensive participation, and minimal levels of participation do not produce statistically significant premiums. [vi]

In addition to ABE's impact on participant earnings, work-related basic skills programs in the past three decades have demonstrated that contextualized basic education programs can help workers prepare for, succeed in, and advance in employment. Well-designed programs can help workers develop basic skills needed for the performance of technical tasks (e.g., reading work documents, recording information, performing calculations); communicating and working with fellow workers, supervisors, and customers (especially important in increasingly diverse workplaces); following safety procedures; maintaining their health; participating in job training and other promotional opportunities (e.g., occupational exams); using employee benefits (e.g., health and savings plans); protecting their rights as workers; transitioning to other employment or into retirement; and managing personal responsibilities (e.g., housing, transportation, legal) that can make or break workers'

abilities to get to work. These programs can also help those who wish to run their own businesses. These positive outcomes for workers have, by extension, potentially positive impacts on workers' families and communities.

How Policy Makers, Charitable and Corporate Foundations, and Other Stakeholders Can Target Their Investments in Adult Basic Skills

Education and Workforce Development Providers

WIOA Title II reinforces what many adult education researchers and practitioners have long known: many workers need to strengthen their basic skills if they are to attain, and succeed in, a family-sustaining job and advance along a career pathway.^[vii] This legislation requires a closer relationship between ABE providers (Title II programs) and the workforce training system (Title I programs).

WIOA encourages Title II providers to incorporate integrated education and training models that provide “adult education and literacy activities concurrently and contextually with workforce preparation activities and workforce training for a specific occupation or occupational cluster for the purpose of educational and career advancement.”^[viii] Title I funding can be used for these activities when Title II providers partner with occupational training providers. If Title I and Title II programs work together as intended by WIOA, there is greater opportunity for more participants to be served and to be lifted out of poverty. No matter which door participants enter first, career services or adult basic skills education, a blended, seamless process should prepare them for the workforce and enable the service providing organizations to meet their goals. These education and workforce partners should draw upon each other's expertise and other strengths and co-enroll participants to get the best results.

Employers

Employers have supported basic skills-related services (e.g., technical English, math, and computer skills) for their employees, through sponsoring of in-house or contracted education programs, tuition assistance for enrollment in external education programs, career guidance, and other activities, often in collaboration with local community colleges or other service providers. (Some of these education supports are provided through agreements with labor unions.) Employers also can play vital roles in informing education providers about the specific kinds of basic skills and other technical skills their current and future employees need. In addition, employers can provide financial and other incentives to workers to improve their skills.

Organized Labor

Some labor unions have a long history of supporting work-related English, math, test-preparation, and computer education services for members, sometimes through joint labor-management education programs. Unions see this as a way to ensure member advancement, wage security, safety, rights, and general well-being. This is especially important in a time of loss of traditional jobs, changing labor pools, and growth in new jobs requiring different kinds of skills. At the local level, partnerships between unions and basic skills providers are symbiotic: unions facilitate educator access to employers and workers, and they provide educators with industry-specific knowledge and classroom space. Unions also can negotiate wage increases and promotions for learners as they improve their skills, while adult educators provide a valued service for union members, and strengthen the union through member skills development.

Public and Private Sector Funders

Funders can play key roles in providing leadership, guidance, and resources to support the continuous development of effective service models. This work should build on lessons learned, promote forward-thinking collaboration, focus on emerging needs and opportunities, and reward meaningful innovation and high-quality work.

An Opportunity to Think and Act Differently, to Renew Our Workforce and Economy

The workforce basic skills gap is not new. Many employers continue to report challenges with filling job vacancies, and many middle-skill, middle-wage jobs remain unfilled. At the same time, occupational training programs often struggle with enrollment because potential participants do not meet the basic skills requirements for training.

These ongoing realities demonstrate the need to provide effective basic education services to workers who have gaps in their basic skills, to help them qualify for jobs and training, perform the range of responsibilities common to most jobs, and continue to grow as working members of society.

In the past, policies, funding, turfism, and habits artificially segregated adult basic skills and workforce development services. But now government policies, research, and years of experience point to why and how adult basic education should and can be working in partnership with workforce development, employer, labor, and community stakeholders.

Forward-thinking individuals and organizations now have an opportunity to come together in a coordinated, well-informed advocacy effort.

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ENDNOTES

[i] <http://www.opendoorcollective.org>

[ii] http://www.careerladdersproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Pathways_def_CLP.pdf

[iii] PIACC, Skills to Pay the Bills Retrieved 1.2,2018 from <http://piaacgateway.com/infographics>

[iv] The National Reporting System measures states' progress in meeting their adult basic education goals. The results are reported publicly, by state, on a U.S. Department of Education website: <https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/tables/index.cfm>

[v] Reder and his colleagues conducted the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning in Portland Oregon over nearly a decade with a random sample of adults who had dropped out of school, only some of whom had participated in adult basic skills programs. <http://sites.ed.gov/octae/2015/03/>

[vi] Reder, S. [The Impact of ABS Program Participation on Long-Term Economic Outcomes](https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ABS_EconomicOutcomes.pdf), p. 5 https://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ABS_EconomicOutcomes.pdf

[vii] Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 [Public Law 113-128], [107(b)(2)(C)(i)]

[viii] WIOA Sec. 203. Definitions. (11,16)

A P P E N D I X

Examples of Work-Related Basic Education Programs for Employed and Unemployed Workers

BEST Hospitality Training (in Boston, Massachusetts) is a collaboration between UNITE HERE Local 26 and hotel employers that offers training for incumbent workers and new hire candidates. Classes are offered in contextualized English language learning, citizenship, ServSAFE, and computer skills. In 2015, BEST became a Department of Labor-registered housekeeping pre-apprenticeship program.

On the day after the September 11th attacks in New York City in 2001, the **Consortium for Worker Education** began pulling together a worker education and job placement program for the thousands of workers whose jobs disappeared in the destruction and closing down of Lower Manhattan. In the subsequent months, former workers in hospitality, garment, and other industries came to the CWE's mid-town office to get job search assistance and training in job-interviewing skills, computer skills, and English as a Second Language.

Building Futures (in Providence, Rhode Island) prepares low-income men and women in urban areas for careers in commercial construction by providing pre-apprenticeship training for the construction trades.

Beginning in the early 2000s, the National Retail Federation Foundation built a nationwide network of training centers that provided customer service and related training (e.g., appropriate workplace attire) to workers in the retail industry. These programs were carried out by community colleges, shopping malls, a national drug store chain, and other institutions. The curriculum focused heavily on oral and written English needed by customer service personnel, along with career awareness of the many job opportunities within this major industry. This program has continued to grow in subsequent years and now collaborates with a number of major national retail companies.

In the period of 2002 to 2006, **the Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the New York Metropolitan Transit Authority** created a \$10 million jointly-operated education program for the 35,000 TWU members who worked in the subway and

bus system of New York City. This was based on a study of the challenges and opportunities that were emerging for workers as a result of the introduction of new electronic technologies. TWU's education team quickly began planning and implementing a series of educational activities focusing on skills that the workforce needed to qualify for emerging jobs and manage increasingly sophisticated technologies. Activities included a series of test preparation courses to help members succeed in the Civil Service Exams required for promotion to new jobs. Those courses were in many cases essentially customized reading comprehension courses designed to help test-takers quickly and efficiently read sample passages from tests for conductors, train operators, and other desired positions and then efficiently answer multiple-choice questions related to those passages. In another course, workers upgraded the technical math skills required to move into college courses that prepared participants for higher-paying positions as electronic-repair technicians.

In 2005-2010, **Union County College** in New Jersey operated a number of career pathway programs for individuals seeking jobs in high-demand local industries, including home health care, transportation/logistics/distribution, and retail. Oral and written communication with customers and co-workers was reinforced in each program. In another UCC program (funded by a private foundation and run in collaboration with a prisoner re-entry agency and county re-entry task force), recently-released inmates from state prisons developed computer, writing, oral communication, and job-search skills while also getting help with legal, health, transportation, housing, and other challenges typically faced by former inmates.