



Responding to Immediate Threats while Renewing Adult Foundational Education for the Future: Strengths, Challenges, and Actions for Advocates to Consider

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U.S. adult foundational education (AFE) is now dealing with significant challenges to our field and to the learners and communities we try to serve. Here are some observations for advocates about our recent accomplishments, challenges we still face, and actions we might take as we move forward:

Strengths

- WIOA funding has been released after a six-month, legally-questionable “review process.” This release has allowed WIOA-funded AFE services to continue in the short term.
- AFE supporters have rallied in a major national effort that (a) demonstrates the potential of well-organized, collaborative advocacy and (b) provides a basis for further -- strengthened and expanded -- advocacy work.
- AFE advocates have also recognized the importance of broadening advocacy to focus not only on federal sources but on supports from state and local governments and private-sector partners. (Some of those non-federal sources have likewise recognized the need for them to step up and support AFE.)
- Though the status of their jobs is fragile, many AFE supporters have become more aware of (a) the importance of getting actively involved as advocates and (b) the social-economic-political forces that are now impacting our field, learners and communities.
- AFE has already established on-line communication networks that can be used to support ongoing advocacy efforts.
- The result of cuts to other federal services might now be presenting AFE with an opportunity with multiple potential benefits: AFE might now strengthen its own workforce with an infusion of the expertise, vision, energy, and connections of recently-unemployed professionals from federal agencies like the U.S. Department of Education, USAID, Peace Corps, and other governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations.
- AFE advocates might look at this unprecedented current situation as similar to the impacts that COVID-19 had on our field beginning in early 2020. Though the pandemic ultimately had many negative impacts on AFE, learners, and communities, it also provided AFE with opportunities and motivation to (a) re-think how it delivered services and the content of basic skills instruction and (b) find new sources of funding (e.g., federal Digital Equity Act) and partners to work with (e.g., digital access organizations).

Challenges

- Though it’s important that already-allocated WIOA funds have been released, there is in the current political climate no guarantee that federal support for AFE will continue in the future, what forms it takes, and who will manage it.
- AFE has long been a low priority for federal funders and policy makers. This is evident in the relatively meager funding that AFE receives and in the limited interest in re-thinking




the overly-narrow and out-of-date WIOA model that federal funding supports. AFE advocacy has too often taken the form of plugging holes in a steadily-leaking ship. (This is despite decades of calls from the field for more-comprehensive, relevant, and efficient AFE models). This situation might worsen in the current, divisive, and distracted political climate without new forms of advocacy and action by forward-thinking champions for AFE within government and within non-governmental stakeholders.

- AFE has long been challenged by the lack of investment in family-sustaining, professional positions within our field. With the ongoing threats to AFE funding, this situation might worsen as current professionals look for work elsewhere. Professionalism of the field has also taken a recent major hit with the reduction in LINCS staff and services.
- Though recent advocacy efforts by AFE organizations and individual AFE practitioners are to be applauded and encouraged, former leadership and policy development for AFE provided by governmental and non-governmental entities has steadily declined over the past 2-3 decades. For example, government-funded agencies and projects like the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Advancement of Adult Learning and Literacy, the National Center for Adult Literacy, the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education, and the National Workplace Literacy Program no longer exist. And non-governmental entities like the Business Council for Effective Literacy, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, the National Commission on Adult Literacy, the adult literacy supports provided by the AFL-CIO, *Focus on Basics* Magazine, the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, and the Voice of Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUEUSA) no longer operate or are otherwise not active in the field. With few exceptions, those entities have not been replaced with equivalent institutions. This leaves the burden of advocacy almost exclusively on the shoulders of already-strained AFE organizations, practitioners, and learners, with little or no material and political support that other stakeholders formerly provided. (Those other stakeholders include Congressional representatives, business organizations, organized labor, foundations, public health agencies, and organizations that advocate for various populations that historically have benefited from AFE.) Further exacerbating this situation, impacts of government policies on those potential other supporters might force them to make support for AFE a low priority.
- Similarly, the negative impacts of government policies on other aspects of learners' and communities' well-being (e.g., public health, legal services) might reduce the ability of many potential learners to enroll in AFE services.

Possible actions AFE advocates might take as we move forward

- We should take a minute to encourage and care for ourselves and our fellow AFE supporters. But we should avoid too much over-praising each other for basic advocacy work. Doing so runs the risk of "virtue signaling," over-reliance on platitudes (e.g., the need for "good trouble"), and the reinforcement of "mutual admiration societies."
- Rather than reinventing the wheel, we should study and adapt the useful advocacy strategies and resources that have been developed in AFE and other fields in recent and previous years. ("Other fields" include civil rights movements, organized labor, international development, public health, business leadership groups, and others who in various ways have supported AFE as a tool for social-economic development.) We should use effective strategies to advocate not only at the federal level but within the state, local, and organizational levels we operate in.
- While continuing to deal with the current significant emergencies facing AFE and the learners and community stakeholders we try to serve, we should also be looking to the



future. Well-organized and coordinated task forces should be developing a new, well-informed vision for AFE and strategies for making that vision real. An AFE reform initiative can build on lessons learned in both past and more-recent efforts to improve and strengthen the field. In so doing, we can be inspired and guided by the hope, models, and tools that a more-comprehensive, -relevant, and -efficient -- and better-supported -- version of AFE can provide our nation.

I am happy to point interested readers of this message to resources they might learn from. Many of these are being loaded into a new "Archive of Special Collections" on the COABE website (See a sample at <https://adultedresource.coabe.org/program-level/archive-of-special-collections/>) and other online locations.