

Adult Education: A Crucial Foundation for Middle-Skill Jobs



Adult education gives individuals vital foundational skills that help them to succeed economically. Investing in federal programs and policies that support high-quality adult education will improve access to family-wage jobs for Americans with limited basic skills. Adult education practitioners play a critical role in communicating the value and contributions of adult education in helping communities to realize their full economic and social potential.

The United States Has Strong Demand for Middle-Skill Workers

More than half of all jobs (54%) in the US today are middle-skill jobs that require more than a high school diploma, but not a four-year degree. Many of these jobs pay family-sustaining wages and are in growing fields. Yet only 44% of workers are trained to the middle-skill level. Millions of other Americans could be candidates for these jobs if they were able to access high-quality adult education to remedy their skill gaps.

Adult Education is a Key On-Ramp for Workers to Reach Middle-Skill Jobs

Results from a rigorous international survey known as the PIAAC show that there are 36 million working-age Americans who have limited skills in key foundational areas such as reading, math, or English.¹ Two-thirds of these individuals — 24 million people — are already employed, but often in low-wage jobs that provide limited opportunity for advancement. Adult educators can help these workers build their skills through adult basic education, high school equivalency, and English language classes.

Proven Models Can Ensure Effective Adult Education

Adult education can function in two ways:

- As a sequential building block that prepares individuals for the next step in their education and training
- As a simultaneous model that allows people to build basic skills and participate in occupational training at the same time.

What is Adult Education?

Adult education refers to instructional programs provided to adults who did not complete their K-12 education, or who possess a high school diploma or equivalent but nevertheless have gaps in basic skills such as reading, math, or spoken English.

In the United States, adult education is provided by a broad variety of organizations, including community-based nonprofits, adult secondary schools, community colleges and school districts, among others.

Both approaches can be effective if implemented in a high-quality manner that allows for sustained engagement by participants. A longitudinal study of adult education participants found that participation in at least 100 hours of adult education was correlated with a \$9,000 increase in annual earnings.²

While sequential approaches have long been dominant, the past decade has seen a rapid increase in the adoption of simultaneous models, often referred to as “integrated education and training.” Perhaps the best known of these is the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) approach pioneered in Washington State.³

Evaluation results from I-BEST⁴ have shown that participants

¹ Time for the US to Reskill? (OECD, 2013.) Viewable at: https://web.archive.org/web/20140124230940/http://skills.oecd.org/Survey_of_Adult_Skills_US.pdf

² The Impact of ABS Program Participation on Long-Term Economic Outcomes (Portland State University, 2014.) Viewable at: http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ABS_EconomicOutcomes.pdf

³ Learn more about I-BEST: www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-best/

⁴ See evaluation results: www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/basic-education-for-adults/beda-research.aspx



earn more academic credits and ultimately higher wages, resulting in a 12.4% annual return on investment (ROI) for participants and a 4.1% annual ROI for state taxpayers.⁵ These results have helped to persuade stakeholders in a number of other states to implement their own varieties of the program.⁶ In addition, the 2014 reauthorization of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) requires states to implement integrated education and training as part of their adult education services.⁷

Smart Federal Policies Can Expand Access to Adult Education and Increase Success

There are a number of federal policies that support the provision of adult education. Stakeholders can advocate for these policies to be implemented in a way that facilitates individuals' access to and success in adult education. Below, we highlight four of the most influential policy levers:

- **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).** This federal law provides more than \$500 million in funding to support adult education services nationwide, serving more than 1.5 million participants a year. Stakeholders can strengthen WIOA's ability to serve adult learners by supporting its alignment with other federal education and workforce policies;⁸ advocating for effective implementation of its requirements around career pathways and integrated education and training; advocating for adult educators to be included in the state and local WIOA planning processes,⁹ and supporting the provision of high-quality professional development to adult educators.¹⁰
- **SNAP Employment and Training (SNAP E&T).** This program serves a subset of the adults who receive benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. SNAP E&T supports education and training services that enable individuals to find employment and move off of public benefits. There is a significant need for these services, as 40% of SNAP recipients do not have a high school diploma. Crucially, state, local, and philanthropic investments in SNAP E&T services can be used to access additional

federal dollars beyond the formula grants that all states receive for SNAP E&T. Stakeholders can encourage policymakers to align SNAP E&T with other federal education and workforce investments,¹¹ draw on resources from the federal Center of Excellence for SNAP E&T,¹² and advocate for the replication of promising practices.¹³

- **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.** This program provides support for low-income families, including through the provision of education and training to help adults find employment and move off of public benefits. Advocates interested in how TANF can help support skill-building opportunities can review the nationally recognized Arkansas Career Pathways Initiative, which provides a broad range of support to assist low-income individuals in obtaining in-demand credentials and employment, and Accelerating Opportunity Kansas (AO-K), which uses TANF funds to provide scholarships for TANF recipients enrolled in qualifying career pathway programs.¹⁴
- **Community Development Block Grants.** This funding is provided to urban areas across the United States, and can be used for a wide variety of activities. Notably, funds can be used to assist low- and moderate-income individuals with education and training to prepare for employment. Advocates interested in using CDBG funding to support adult education may wish to review information about communities that have already done so, including Seattle and Chicago.¹⁵

Adult Educators Can Be Powerful Advocates

Among the stakeholders best-positioned to advocate for the importance of adult education as part of the pathway to middle-skill jobs are adult educators themselves. Practitioners can draw on their on-the-ground experience and deep knowledge of adult learners' assets and barriers to educate policymakers and others about role of adult education. Perhaps just as importantly, adult educators can gain visibility and traction for their efforts by establishing or strengthening their relationships with workforce and higher-education partners.

5 See summary of ROI findings: www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/programs-services/basic-education-for-adults/InvestmentsinI-BESTPrograms.pdf

6 Among the states where some version of I-BEST has been implemented are Colorado, Connecticut, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, and Texas.

7 Learn more about WIOA's IET requirements: www.nwlincs.org/mtlinco/opi/wioa/Integrated_Education_and_Training_Statutory_Overview.pdf

8 Learn more about alignment: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/2015-06-aligned-by-design-WIOA-adult-ed.pdf

9 The WIOA statute requires that the local planning process is led by the local Workforce Development Board.

10 Adult educators working in WIOA-funded programs are disproportionately likely to be volunteers (23%) or part-time staff (55%). Among instructional staff who are paid, only 62% hold some form of certification. "Throwing Down the Gauntlet for PD," (OCTAE, 2015.) Viewable at: <http://sites.ed.gov/octae/2015/09/24/throwing-down-the-gauntlet-for-pd/>

11 See more about alignment: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/2015-07-Aligned-by-Design-WIOA-SNAP-ET.pdf

12 Visit the Center of Excellence: www.seattlejobsinitiative.com/innovations/snap-et-bfet-resource-center/

13 See brief on replicating success: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/file/Washington-SNAP-brief-web_FINAL.pdf

14 Learn more about Arkansas's program here: <http://tinyurl.com/ArkansasCP> and Kansas's efforts here: www.dcf.ks.gov/services/ees/Pages/Accelerating-Opportunity-Kansas.aspx

15 Learn more about Seattle's efforts here: www.nationalskillscoalition.org/news/blog/ready-to-work-seattle-creates-new-on-ramp-for-immigrant-english-learners and about Chicago's work here: wire.cjc.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/CDBG_Baracus.pdf