



# National Coalition For Literacy

Testimony of  
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On Behalf of the National Coalition for Literacy  
Before the  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies  
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit the views of the National Coalition for Literacy on appropriations for adult education and family literacy, under the Workforce Investment Act, Title II.

The National Coalition for Literacy represents 24 national organizations concerned about adult education and family literacy. We request a significant increase in funding and investment for adult education and family literacy to at least \$750M in order to address critical, immediate needs, such as:

- **Clear waiting lists.** It would cost at least \$160M to clear existing waiting lists for instruction.
- **Increase access to adult English language learning programs.** We need to create opportunities for more than eleven million immigrants to learn English.
- **Increase access to professional development.** Adult education practitioners need increased access to professional development in order to ensure quality services.
- **Improve professional quality of the adult education workforce.** 80% of teachers are part time; thousands are volunteers. We must create the conditions needed to attract and retain a full-time workforce.
- **Create a National Center for Adult Education, Literacy, and Workforce Skills<sup>i</sup>.** A Center would address the continued need for research and innovation in our field.

These critical, urgent needs require scaled investments that will provide adults important opportunities to acquire the skills they need to find family sustaining work.

## **Need and Demand for Adult Education**

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy found that there are approximately 93 million adults in the United States who do not have the literacy skills to reach their full potential. 30 million adults have such low levels of literacy that it impedes their ability to fully function at home, at work, and in society. One in seven adults in our nation can barely read a newspaper, a job application, a prescription label, or an election ballot<sup>ii</sup>. Many live in poverty, experience complex health problems, and have extreme difficulty supporting their children's education. Eleven million adults cannot communicate in English.

Taking into consideration all federal state and local and philanthropic funding, the adult education system serves only 2.5 million of 93 million adults each year who would benefit from literacy and English language instruction. Despite this, adult education has been nearly flat funded for a decade. An increase in FY09-10 was a one time adjustment to correct for a funding calculation error that occurred from 2003-2008.

According to this year’s Congressional Justification, the Administration built its budget request on 2006 waiting list data.<sup>iii</sup> However, the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education has since published a March 2010 report, demonstrating that waiting lists and wait time have doubled in the last two years, during this economic crisis. Seventy-two percent of the programs reporting, from 50 of the 51 states and territories, confirmed waiting lists. Approximately *160,000 adults* want to access services but cannot.<sup>iv</sup> Additionally, community-based and volunteer literacy programs around the country report increased demand for services while traditional sources of funding are becoming more scarce.

The Congressional Justification also cited 2000 census data demonstrating an 11% dropout rate nationwide. Adult education programs serve as a key pipeline for these dropouts, keeping them on course to a high school equivalent and post secondary education or job training. Adult education provides a last resort for helping these youths get back on track.

**Investing in Adult Education is a Workforce Investment**

We commend the Administration for proposing to invest more through the Workforce Innovation Fund. Adult education and job training can underpin economic recovery and open opportunities for low skilled workers by helping today’s workforce develop the skills they need for both work and community life. As literacy and educational attainment rise, so do adults’ income and chances of stable employment.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, unemployment decreases as education levels increase<sup>v</sup>:

Unemployment rate in 2008 (Percent)	Education attained	Median weekly earnings in 2008 (Dollars)
2.0%	Doctoral degree	\$1,561
1.7	Professional degree	1,531
2.4	Master's degree	1,233
2.8	Bachelor's degree	1,012
3.7	Associate degree	757
5.1	Some college, no degree	699
5.7	High-school graduate	618
9.0	Less than a high school diploma	453

Note: Data are 2008 annual averages for persons age 25 and over. Earnings are for full-time wage and salary workers.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that by 2013, 90% of the fastest-growing jobs, 60% of all new jobs, and 40% of manufacturing jobs will require some form of postsecondary education. However, only 2% of this need can be met by high school graduates.<sup>vi</sup> 94% of today's workforce will still be in the workforce in 2013; we must increase the skills of the *current adult workforce* for these high-demand jobs. Adult education is an important re-entry point for unemployed and underemployed adults who wish to raise their basic education skills or improve their English. However, the adults who want to become job and career-ready for these high-skilled, high-demand jobs are unable to get into instruction<sup>vii</sup>.

### **Meeting the President's College Graduation Goal**

The President has articulated a goal of the United States having the highest proportion of college graduates in the world by 2020. Even if every state reached the same levels of high school graduation and college enrollment for high school graduates as the highest performing states, we would not reach this goal without a substantial effort to bring adult education students into the pipeline.

### **English Language Acquisition**

We must create opportunities for immigrants to learn English and civics by building and enhancing the capacity of current adult education programs. Between 1970 and 2005, the U.S. foreign-born population tripled to an estimated 35.8 million individuals, accounting for 12.4 percent of the country's population. At least 67% of the growth in the U.S. workforce in the past three years is comprised of new immigrants. It is estimated that between 2010 – 2030 first and second generation immigrants together will account for all the growth in the U.S. workforce<sup>viii</sup>. According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates, nearly 1 in 5 adults in the U.S. speaks a language other than English at home, and more than 17 million speak English less than "very well."<sup>ix</sup>

### **Investing in Quality**

Increasing funds to clear waiting lists is a start. But if the adult education system is to help prepare adults for 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs, transition adults to college, and meet or exceed performance goals, we must invest in quality of the profession as well as the numbers of learners served. The 21<sup>st</sup> century adult educator needs to:

- Prepare adults to be digital age learners using existing and new technologies.
- Prepare adults with the basic adult literacy and critical thinking skills they need to be competitive in the 21st century workforce.
- Teach adults with learning and other disabilities to close the life outcomes gap.
- Prepare adults to transition into postsecondary and vocational credit-bearing classes.
- Instruct a linguistically diverse classroom to improve their language proficiency.
- Increase political literacy and civic participation among our nation's adults.
- Strengthen programs to be scalable and flexible to meet new demands in communities.

Only one in five adult education teachers are full time; thousands are volunteers; most are funded on year-to-year grant programs. Stable job status that facilitates a dedicated, professional workforce is critical to raising student achievement outcomes. Career ladders are virtually non-existent in adult education; a national credential in adult education does not exist. Many

practitioners are not paid to attend professional development opportunities in order to meet these demands upon them. Developing the professional quality of the workforce is vital if we are to help adult learners achieve. We must increase access to professional development, provide credentialing and career advancement opportunities, improve working conditions, and conduct research in professional development. Increasing appropriations will allow the field to do that.

### Return on Investment

Adult education is a good investment. On January 21, 2010, the United States Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that there was a \$9,828 wage differential for full time workers with a high school diploma (or GED) over those who did not graduate.<sup>x</sup> The following is the potential return on investment for adults in 2008-2009 who received a GED in adult education programs. Over a 5 year period, the original \$39,164,868 spent on the 165,637 GED students shows a potential return on investment of \$1,220,910,325 (3,017%).

Number of GEDs achieved in 2008-2009:	165,637 <sup>xi</sup>
Average dollars invested in student:	\$236.45
Total:	<u>\$39,164,868</u>

Number of GEDs achieved in 2008-2009:	165,637
Income differential:	<u>\$9,828</u>
Total increase in taxable income per year:	\$1,627,880,436
Federal tax rate:	<u>15%</u>
Potential return on investment per year:	\$244,182,065
One year return on investment:	523%
Potential 5 year return on investment:	\$1,220,910,325



The current levels of funding have not and will not allow the field to grow to serve more adults, to improve and innovate practice, and meet existing and increasing demands. For these reasons, we strongly urge the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies to support a significant increase for programs provided by the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, to at least \$750 million or more.

<sup>i</sup> NCL Proposal for a National Center for Adult Education, Literacy, and Workforce Skills [http://www.ncladvocacy.org/NationalCenterPolicyPrinciples\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ncladvocacy.org/NationalCenterPolicyPrinciples_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> ProLiteracy [www.proliteracy.org](http://www.proliteracy.org)

<sup>iii</sup> Congressional Justification for Career, Technical, and Adult Education 2010 <http://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget11/justifications/n-careered.pdf>

<sup>iv</sup> 2009 – 2010 Adult Student Waiting List Survey <http://www.ncladvocacy.org/2010AdultEducationWaitingListReport.pdf>

<sup>v</sup> Education Pays, Bureau of Labor Statistics [http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep\\_chart\\_001.htm](http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm)

<sup>vi</sup> US Census [www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)

<sup>vii</sup> Investing in the Adult Workforce <http://www.ncladvocacy.org/StateAlignmentInitiativesVolumeII/InvestingInTheAdultWorkforce.doc>

<sup>viii</sup> Kirsch, I., Braun, H., Yamamoto, K. (2007) *America’s Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation’s Future*. Princeton, NJ: Education Testing Service

<sup>ix</sup> U.S. Census Bureau (2003). *Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000*. Washington, DC: Author

<sup>x</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics (January 2010). Retrieved February 16, 2010 from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/wkyeng.nr0.htm>

<sup>xi</sup> Office of Vocational and Adult Education reporting website. Retrieved February 16, 2010.