



# National Coalition For Literacy

February 1, 2012

Dear Conference Committee Member:

On behalf of the National Coalition for Literacy, a coalition of 28 foremost national and regional organizations dedicated to advancing adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition, I am writing to express our concerns about a provision that congressional negotiators are considering for legislation to extend the payroll tax cut through the end of 2012. We are specifically concerned about a proposed amendment to the Social Security Act called for in Section 2122 of H.R. 3630. This amendment would deny Unemployment Insurance (UI) benefits to individuals who lack a high school diploma unless they are enrolled in a class leading to the attainment of a high-school diploma, a GED, or another “state-recognized equivalent.” Moreover, they must also demonstrate “satisfactory progress” in those classes to remain eligible.

While we strongly support adult education for such workers, we believe UI eligibility should continue to be driven by loss of employment and employer payments into the applicable unemployment insurance trust funds on behalf of their employees. In addition, Section 2122 is flawed in several ways:

- First, this new requirement fails to take into account that there are not nearly enough adult education classes available in the U.S. right now to meet the current demand. There are approximately 160,000 people on waiting lists for adult education services in federally funded adult education programs in the U.S. alone.<sup>i</sup> Many states have cut funding for adult education over the last year.<sup>ii</sup>
- Second, it is not clear what kinds of classes qualify as “leading to satisfaction” towards a diploma or a GED under this proposal. Some workers without a high school credential lack the basic literacy skills to participate in a GED class. For these workers, an adult literacy program may be more appropriate, but it is unclear from the language proposed whether these workers would retain UI eligibility if enrolled in such a program.

In addition, a large proportion of adults successfully prepare for the GED through independent self-directed learning instead of enrolling in adult education programs.<sup>iii</sup> This bill would disqualify those individuals from receiving UI benefits.

- Third, the new restriction mistakenly assumes that attainment of a high-school diploma or GED is the most efficient and effective strategy towards reemployment. In fact, industry-recognized credentials and certificates may be a better pathway to a good job. Attainment of such credentials does not necessarily require a GED. Under this bill, however, it is not clear whether workers enrolled in such programs would not be able to receive benefits.

Similarly, for older workers, who make up a disproportionate number of the unemployed,<sup>iv</sup> re-training may be a better option than returning to high school or studying for a GED.

- Fourth, even for those enrolled in classes that are deemed to qualify, it is not at all clear by what is meant by “satisfactory progress” in paragraph (B) (iii), or how it is to be demonstrated. State offices responsible for determining UI eligibility are unlikely be qualified or have the capacity to make such determinations.
- Finally, while paragraph (C) does allow a state to waive this requirement if it is "unduly burdensome," there are no standards guiding this waiver. More importantly, it is only an option to waive the requirement—nothing in the bill would require a state to make a determination of whether such a burden exists, or actually waive the requirement if one is found.

Workers with low skills have been the most dramatically affected by the recent recession. (Currently the unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma is 13.2%, well above the national average.<sup>v</sup>) H.R. 3630 will prevent many of these workers from collecting benefits through no fault of their own, without providing them with the education and training resources they need. We recommend, therefore, that the GED/High School diploma requirements in Section 2122 should be removed from the final agreement—as well as any language that would allow states to impose the same kinds of restrictions.

Because we appreciate policies that help improve adult literacy rates in the U.S., we would be happy to discuss alternative legislation that could help those on UI to complete high school and prepare for new work. Feel free to contact me ([office@valueusa.org](mailto:office@valueusa.org)) or our Advocacy Chair, Jackie Taylor ([Jackie@jataylor.net](mailto:Jackie@jataylor.net)), if you have questions or would like to meet to discuss these matters further.

Sincerely,



Martin Finsterbusch  
NCL President 2011-2012

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<sup>i</sup> Adult Student Waiting List Survey, National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, <http://www.national-coalition-literacy.org/advocacy/2010AdultEducationWaitingListReport.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Foster, M. (2011) Cuts to Adult Education Would Harm More Than Just Students. Center for Law and Social Policy, [http://www.clasp.org/issues/in\\_focus?type=basic\\_skills\\_and\\_workforce\\_training&id=0021](http://www.clasp.org/issues/in_focus?type=basic_skills_and_workforce_training&id=0021)

<sup>iii</sup> Reder, S. & Strawn, C. (2001). Program Participation and Self-Directed Learning to Improve Basic Skills. *Focus on Basics*, 3(D), National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. See: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=287>

<sup>iv</sup> According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities half a million workers age 50 or over who received unemployment insurance in 2010 lacked a high school diploma. See: [http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3652#\\_ftn2](http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3652#_ftn2)

<sup>v</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment,” Dec. 2, 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empst.t04.htm>