

## Issue #10, August 24, 2010

Each issue of the E-News reports on CAAL's programs and publications, including follow-up activities related to the National Commission on Adult Literacy. Occasional feature articles are offered, along with news about complementary work by other groups.

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**Invitation to Readers:** If you want to comment on any material presented in the E-News, please direct your message to [gspangenberg@caalusa.org](mailto:gspangenberg@caalusa.org)

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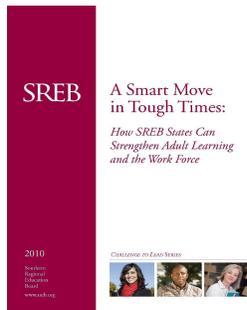
### NEWS IN BRIEF

▶ Status of WIA Reauthorization -- Recent conversations between CAAL and Congressional staff suggest that WIA reauthorization is not likely to occur in 2010 but is more apt to take place next spring. In the meantime, Senator Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio), who joined Senator Jim Webb (D-Virginia) in introducing the Senate version of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act, has moved over to the Appropriations Committee. He is expected to remain actively engaged in advancing the AEEGA and WIA reauthorization. Senators Harkin (D-Iowa), Enzi (R-Wyoming), Murray (D-Washington), and Isakson (R-Georgia) have been working hard on a bipartisan basis on the Senate's version of WIA for several months and the bill is approaching "public comment" status. On the House side, Representatives Miller (D-California), Hinojosa (D-Texas), Kennedy (D-Rhode Island), Guthrie (R-Kentucky), Kline (R-Minnesota), and Tierney (D-Massachusetts) are engaged and committed as well, though Rep. Kennedy will retire from the House in the fall. Following the election, the Congress will return for a lame-duck session. It is possible, if not likely, that Congress

will take up WIA in the lame-duck period.



On July 19, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1855, the SECTORS Act of 2010, and referred the bill to the Senate. [SECTORS = Strengthening Employment Clusters to Organize Regional Success Act.] The bill aims to help key industries in a region address local skill shortages by bringing employers together with education, labor, workforce, and other groups to plan and provide training geared to that region's economic needs. The SECTORS Act was introduced by Rep. David Loebsack of Iowa and had 21 cosponsors. For information go to [www.thomas.gov](http://www.thomas.gov) and enter the bill number.



## FEATURING SREB: A Smart Move in Tough Times

An excellent new report from the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) is both sobering and challenging. *A Smart Move in Tough Times: How SREB States Can Strengthen Adult Learning and the Work Force* (24 pp, August 4, 2010) is part of SREB's Challenge to Lead Series. The SREB region embraces 16 states (AL, AR, DE, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX, VA, WV). SREB compared adults aged 25 and older in the region according to various criteria. They found that enrollment of young adults in adult learning programs declined between 2005 and 2008 in all SREB states. Moreover, only a small percentage of young adult enrollees actually earn a GED, although the pass rates have increased slightly. (In four states, enrollment declined in ALL types of adult education programs.) The report notes that while SREB states "have struggled to improve high school graduation rates, students in the South continue to graduate from high school at rates lower than their counterparts nationwide."

In 2005, SREB called upon its states to give more attention to educational service for working adults without a high school credential. It also called for more adults without high school diplomas to complete the GED or a comparable diploma as a "springboard to postsecondary education and further training." The states apparently showed some signs of progress in some states between 2005 and 2008, and SREB is taking seriously the analysis and challenge of the National Commission on Adult Literacy.

SREB states as a group have been losing ground, according to the report's analysis, and the problem is made all the worse by the current economy. "Why should adult learning be a priority when so many issues in education demand our attention," asks SREB President Dave Spence in introducing the report. "Quite simply," he says, "the economic well being of our region is at stake if we allow the growing group of less-educated, working-age adults in SREB states to expand further. Their low levels of education contribute to higher health-care costs and unemployment rates, diminish tax revenues, and hinder economic developments. Where better trained workers live, good jobs will follow."

Although SREB's findings are not good, [A Smart Move in Tough Times](#) offers a set of concrete recommendations to help SREB states turn things around. They emphasize attainment of a GED or alternate high school diploma, and movement along pathways to further education. The report indicates that a modest investment by the states in adult learning programs can have a huge payoff in terms of employment and healthy state economies.



## POINT OF VIEW: What We Don't Know Will Hurt Us

by Eunice (Nickie) Askov  
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The National Coalition for Literacy recently held blog discussions of each of its recommendations for reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). I responded about the need for restoring an independent national center for research in adult education, literacy, and workforce skills. My comments drew several excellent responses, all of which may be read on the [NCL blog](#).

The Institute for Education Sciences (IES) of the U.S. Department of Education funded a national research and development center in adult education/literacy at Harvard University's National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) for 11 years. It was discontinued in 2007. Previously, IES funded a similar center at the University of Pennsylvania's National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL) for six years. These two centers, their partners, and other research institutions, spent 17 years developing a community of scholars, sufficient theory to begin testing interventions, and models for rigorous research as well as more effective professional development and service models to better serve adult students.

NCSALL's funding was discontinued despite the need for strong ongoing research to support the planning and delivery of services. IES claimed that adult education research would be conducted along with its other work, but this decision to withdraw funding for research by Harvard's national center dealt a severe blow to researchers, practitioners, and planners throughout the field. Now the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), in another step backwards, is also being closed by the federal government.

NCSALL's former director, John Comings, detailed some of the important research and professional development projects terminated as a result of discontinuing NCSALL (see [NCL blog](#)). He noted that K-12, higher education, and early childhood education have whole departments at

almost every education school around the country. In fact, he noted, almost all of IES's funding goes to support them. Obviously, this allows academic networks to develop in ways that are impossible in adult education. Common sense alone tells us that federal funding is needed to build a comprehensive, independent, and well-funded national research center -- for those who plan, research, and otherwise deliver and develop adult education and workforce skills services. This research need has been widely recognized by many others in the field.

In May 2009, the NCL surveyed the field about services of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). In the largest response ever to any NCL survey, nearly 800 adult education tutors, teachers, program and project managers, adult learners, professional development pros, state staff, librarians, and others, weighed in on what they valued as the most critical services of NIFL. One clear conclusion, as NCL's blog posting indicates, is the importance of maintaining an independent research center apart from any federal administrative agency so that it is not guided by the mandates of one department. Their responses indicated that this independent center should collaborate with federal, state, and local government agencies and with other national organizations that have a vested interest in issues pertaining to adult education, literacy, and workforce skills. And, they said, it should build partnerships in the public and private sectors to advance work in these areas.

Researcher Heidi Silver-Pacuilla of the American Institutes of Research (AIR) has pointed to the importance of seizing the present moment to increase access to postsecondary education and make sure that adults with low skills are recognized as part of the cohort (see [NCL blog](#).) As more adults are encouraged to enroll in postsecondary and job training programs, we really need to understand how best to move them along pathways to enrollment, which methods and models work best for whom, and how to help them persist in college and job environments. Heidi is "right on" in making that observation!

Another researcher, Edward Gordon of [Imperial Consulting](#), recently stated in a talk given to the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank that a careful examination of the current job market reveals that the majority of the growing millions of long-term unemployed are unskilled or semi-skilled adults. He said that unless they are rapidly educated/trained with additional literacy and career skills for a STEM-based economy (science, technology, engineering, math), long-term unemployment will continue to grow. He stressed that policy research is vital to help business and government reorganize the education-to-employment system so that they can better prepare and integrate low-skill and high-risk adults into an advanced technology-based economy.

We must find a way to recover from the loss of the one last national, independent research center we had. NIFL has gone, but the need for research hasn't. Hopefully, when WIA is reauthorized, it will recognize the need for a NIFL-type entity, as the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act does. We must speak with one voice about the importance of funding research in adult education and workforce skills development, and on the need for translating that research into practice. Only then can we make the most effective use of the scant resources we have.

[Ed. Note: In October 2009, CAAL published a discussion paper, by Forrest Chisman and Gail Spangenberg, to help adult educators, government officials, and philanthropic groups consider a NIFL-type organization for the future. The work is titled [REBUILDING NIFL TO MEET FUTURE NEEDS: A New and Innovative Agency with a Broader Mission.](#)]



## REFORMING THE NRS

by Gail Spangenberg  
President, CAAL

A key goal of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act is for adult educators and workforce skills developers to work much more closely together at all levels. This will increase the likelihood that underskilled adults, whether potential or incumbent workers, can be moved, efficiently and effectively, along pathways to postsecondary education and job training, and eventually qualify for current and emerging jobs. One of the keys to revamping services and better achieving 21st century outcomes is to reform certain elements of the National Reporting System (NRS). National and state leaders, and local providers and even students, are well aware of the need for NRS reform as we work to move out-of-school adults down learning pathways to a family-sustaining future.

On August 4-5, the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) of the U.S. Department of Education held a two-day meeting to discuss the implications of implementing a few reform proposals OVAE is currently considering for NRS. They are changes that can be implemented independently of WIA or legislative action. The proposals were based on comments gathered by OVAE in a series of "community listening sessions" -- from some 500 adult educators, researchers, and local community leaders and students. Participating in the two-day meeting was an assemblage of invited state ABE directors and staff. A few national organizations observed (including CAAL, CASAS, CLASP, GED Testing Service, the NCL, and Proliteracy).

The National Commission on Adult Literacy's report, [Reach Higher. America](#), lays out the case for connecting the dots between WIA I and II. Thus, although the OVAE meeting focused naturally on the state ABE directors, it would be good for leaders in workforce skills development, and other stakeholders, to also weigh in on the proposed NRS changes. After it analyzes and incorporates input from the August 4-5 meeting, OVAE is expected to publish its recommendations in the Federal Register and invite public comment on them. CAAL will alert its readers in due course, though we'd suggest you keep an eye out, too. In the meantime, the NRS program and its activities are highlighted at the [NRS website](#).

According to CAAL's Jim Parker, who attended the August 4-5 meeting, the discussion focused on six issues and their related OVAE recommendations:

**Issue 1: Identifying Learner Cohorts for Employment-Related Outcomes.** The question posed was: Should OVAE change current NRS policy to collect employment measures only for unemployed students who set a goal of employment? OVAE Recommendation: Automatically designate all students who are unemployed and in the labor force as the cohort for which "entered employment" must be tracked, and automatically designate all students who enter the program employed as the cohort for which "retained employment" must be tracked. Probability of Implementation: Based on pros and cons expressed in the discussion, CAAL's impression is that this recommendation has a HIGH probability of implementation.

**Issue 2: Identifying Learner Cohorts for Postsecondary Education Follow-Up.** Question Posed: Should

OVAE change NRS policy to measure entry into postsecondary education only for students who set this as a goal of participation? OVAE Recommendation: Automatically designate all students who have earned a GED, have a secondary credential, or are enrolled in a class specifically designed for transitioning to community college (e.g., bridge program, college readiness), as the cohort for which "entry into postsecondary education" must be tracked. Probability of Implementation: Based on the discussion, CAAL's impression is that this recommendation has a LOW probability of implementation at present, and that further consideration of data collection, definitional issues, and common identifiers is needed.

**Issue 3: Identifying Learner Cohorts for Secondary Credential Follow-Up.** Question Posed: Should OVAE change the policy to measure attainment of a secondary credential or passing the GED tests only for students who set this as a goal of participation? OVAE Recommendation(s): Match GED test records for all students who take tests during the year to calculate a pass rate. For states with adult high schools, report the number of students in high ASE who obtain a high school diploma. For states with an External Diploma Program, report the number of students enrolled in the assessment phase who obtain a high school diploma. The "total students" included would be all students studying for the GED test, enrolling in adult high school credit programs, or enrolling in the EDP. The performance measure would be the number of students who passed the GED tests, or received their high school diplomas, divided by this total. Probability of Implementation: Based on the discussion, CAAL's impression is that this has a HIGH probability of being implemented.

**Issue 4: Using Additional Measures of Educational Skill Gains.** Question Posed: Should OVAE develop additional methods of measuring educational gain that may provide more detailed measures? OVAE Recommendation: None at the present time. The issue will be investigated further.

**Issue 5: Refining NRS Outcome Measurement for GED Prep Students.** Question Posed: Should OVAE create a new GED prep track for students at the adult secondary level? OVAE Recommendation: Create a separate level for GED prep students that includes all students who score at the secondary level on any NRS-approved test battery. Educational gain is not reported for these students, and they are not counted in calculation of education gain for any NRS level. The only reportable NRS outcome for these students is attainment of a secondary credential. Probability of Implementation: Based on the discussion, which was mostly positive, CAAL's impression is that implementation is UNCERTAIN.

**Issue 6: Exploring Progress and Success in Postsecondary Education.** Question Posed: Should OVAE require programs to track postsecondary outcomes beyond students' entry into postsecondary education; and if so, under what conditions should progress and success be tracked? OVAE Recommendation: Require programs with IET (Integrated Education and Training) models to track progress toward and completion of a credential in the program of study in which the student is enrolled. Probability of Implementation: Based on a generally negative discussion, CAAL's impression is that the probability of implementation is LOW.

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In the 10 years since we began, we have published more than three dozen major reports,

sponsored over a dozen task force and Roundtable meetings (on ESL, community college transitions, workforce readiness, and other topics), and spearheaded the National Commission on Adult Literacy. We remain dedicated to ensuring that the recommendations in *Reach Higher, America* translate into legislation, new thinking, and innovative projects across the country. Like all nonprofits we depend solely on grants and individual donations.

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