



Reach Higher, AMERICA

OVERCOMING CRISIS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

THE FEDERAL CHALLENGE

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ADULT LITERACY

- **The U.S. is falling behind in educational attainment and workforce readiness in international comparisons. The U.S. is also the only country among 30 OECD free-market countries where the current generation is less well educated than the previous one.**
- **80 to 90 million U.S. adults today, about half of the adult workforce, do not have the basic education and communication skills required to get or advance in a job that will pay a family-sustaining wage, according to the National Commission on Adult Literacy in *Reach Higher, America*.**
- **Adult education and workforce skills programs currently enroll about 3 million adults annually, leaving out the millions of Americans needed to fill the higher paying jobs that will drive our nation's economy.**
- **Adults in need of instructional services are beyond the reach of secondary schools.**
- **Investing in our adult workforce will yield huge returns. For example, if we can encourage even 4 million dropouts to earn a high school diploma by 2020, the net fiscal benefit to federal, state, and local governments would exceed \$25 billion annually (expressed in 2008 dollars).**

THE CRISIS: America Must Invest Now In Its Human Capital Infrastructure

As part of any recovery plan to meet the present economic crisis and create the foundation for sustained economic growth, America must invest now in its human capital infrastructure – just as it must invest in its financial and physical infrastructure. Human capital investments are essential to maintain employment and create new jobs, reduce growing unemployment rates, reduce income inequality, and develop the workforce required for new high productivity industries and global competitiveness.

THE NEED: Half the Workforce Needs Basic Skills Upgrading To Qualify for 21st Century Jobs

Among the basic skills needed by half the workforce are: high levels of literacy, math, and English language ability; high school credentials; and the ability to perform a range of essential workplace functions such as problem solving, communication, and team work. Adults who lack these skills are not prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary or job training programs, which are essential for incumbent workers to keep pace with present job demands, for retraining dislocated workers, and for preparing low-skilled potential workers to fill the specialized jobs of the 21st century including those in emerging green occupations. In short, inadequate basic skills are a major barrier to economic recovery and growth, a strong continuing democratic society, and greater opportunity for all Americans.

FEDERAL LEADERSHIP: The New Adult Education and Workforce Skills System

To overcome this barrier, the Commission urges the federal government to lead the way in creating a fundamentally reformed Adult Education and Workforce Skills System. Starting now, its missions would be:

- **To increase substantially the number of adults who receive basic skills instruction – from 3 million annually at present to 20 million annually by 2020.**
- **To create seamless pathways of basic skills instruction that allow adults to progress rapidly and efficiently from the lowest levels of proficiency to readiness for enrollment and success in postsecondary education and job training programs.**
- **To greatly improve the quality of work-related and other basic skills programs – in terms of retention, learning gains, acquiring workplace skills, and accelerated learning.**
- **To break down barriers and silos across federal, state, and local programs through fostering shared goals, links among programs and planners, and communications.**

This System would be funded by an increase in public expenditures of several billion dollars per year beginning in 2009 and reaching \$20 billion (in 2008 dollars) per year by 2020. In 2009, a large infusion of resources should be spent immediately to launch new initiatives in technology for instruction, teacher training, research, and long-term planning, and to expand and improve services in general by hiring more teachers, counselors, and other staff.

A NEW ACT: The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act

To accomplish these goals and create the Adult Education and Workforce Skills System, the Commission calls on Congress to pass a comprehensive new Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (replacing the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act). The major provisions of the Act will:

1. **Develop workforce readiness, increase acquisition by adults of high school credentials, and prepare adults to move along a continuum to enrollment in postsecondary/job training programs as the priority goals** for the adult basic skills programs presently supported by Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA).
2. **Coordinate under the new Act the goals, services, administration, accountability, and resources of employment and training programs presently supported by Title I of WIA (as well as other federal adult education programs aimed at employability such as TANF) with basic skills programs.** All federal programs aimed at workforce development should work in tandem and provide mutual support to meet the nation's human resource needs.
3. **Adopt federal funding formulas that ensure sufficient support and targeting of resources to priority out-of-school populations** and that recognize their needs explicitly. These are immigrants with limited English proficiency and little prior education, incarcerated adults, high school drop outs, displaced and incumbent workers, and caregivers of young children (presently served by family literacy programs).
4. **Create a new program of state grants to implement the missions of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act and its Adult Education and Workforce Skills System.** To receive these new grant funds, states would be required to submit specific plans for implementing their adult basic/workforce skills programs. These plans would be developed under the direction of governors offices and planning agencies, drawing in workforce development entities such as WIBs, representatives of adult education, employment and training, economic development, postsecondary, vocational and human services, business, and the nonprofit sector. Plans would be based on a comprehensive analysis of their workforce needs and the measures required to meet them. Adult education and workforce development would be explicitly linked to economic development goals.
5. **Establish a nationally-anchored data system in which states are expected to track program enrollments and student progress toward specified outcome goals over a period of several years.**
6. **Create incentives for companies to invest in the basic skills training** and further education of their low-skilled workers – through tax credits or grants.
7. **Develop and deploy technology on an unprecedentedly large scale to help provide basic skills** instruction that will increase dramatically the numbers enrolled, improve the quality of service, and reduce costs.
8. **Provide incentives for states to establish the professional qualifications required by adult education instructors and counselors, implement professional development programs, and increase the number of professionals** needed to keep pace with the growing number of adults served.
9. **Establish a vigorous program of research and development** through the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) to develop better methods for achieving the missions of the System and disseminating findings in user-friendly forms, including technical assistance at the state and program levels. As a key element in this program, **return NIFL to its initial exclusive focus on adult learners.**
10. **Encourage business, labor, nonprofit organizations, and philanthropy to support and supplement federal/state programs** to create the needed Adult Education and Workforce Skills System, directly and through contributions to a National Trust dedicated to the purpose.