



Gail Spangenberg Remarks
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AIR Leadership. I was on the National Definition Committee of the very first adult assessment, the NALS. So I've been interested in watching assessments unfold for at least two decades and I know that nothing like this conference happened after either the NALS or the NAAL. This research project and the conference are terrific, and so is AIR's PIAAC website, at www.piaacgateway.com. I urge everyone to check it out.

The longer we can keep PIAAC findings and analysis alive, the better. So far it's being done in a classy way. It's one of the best tools we have to inform action and keep the pressure on. I hope AIR will stay at it, keep being proactive, and continue to customize its findings for specific communities of interest.

Congratulations to everyone involved. You're doing such an impressive job.

Big Issue Thoughts To Expand and Improve Policy and Service – Taking Future Action: CAAL recently posted a long blog with recommendations from some 30 national adult education and workforce skills leaders regarding national and state policy and planning. Some of the contributors are at this conference. Their ideas pretty much cover the waterfront—

distance learning and technology, ESL and immigrant issues, workplace and workforce skills, incumbent worker training, paths to college, professional development, you name it. So I won't repeat them now. There's a handout on the table outside for those who haven't seen the blog. Or you can find it online, *Past Gains, Future Goals*, at blog.caalusa.org.

On the train down, I got to thinking about a couple of experiences I had on the Hill on the path to enactment of WIOA. Enough time has passed that I think I can share them, before I turn to my top priorities for substantially increasing service in the U.S.

Elephant in the Room: CAAL was on Capitol Hill quite often during the years following the work of the National Commission on Adult Education and as part of advancing the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (AEEGA). AEEGA was incorporated into the provisions and language of the reformed Workforce Investment Act (WIA). In the months just preceding Republican takeover of the House, Rep. George Miller's office had one of the key House leadership roles in enactment of an updated WIA. The House Democrats had crafted an outstanding new WIA bill that enjoyed the support of everyone in Adult Education and Workforce Development. If it had been passed by the House we would have had a stronger deeper bill than we have with WIOA, although the latter is very good.

One day, to check the status of expected action, I phoned a policy aide in Rep. Miller's office to ask how the day's meeting had gone. Her response was: Adult Education and WIA were an elephant in the room! I was stunned by her candor and characterization.

You Had Your Chance. Some months later, I attended a Hearing of the Education and Workforce Committee, which was considering the Republican version of WIA. Leaders throughout the field thought it was a bad bill. The committee chair was now held by Rep. Virginia Foxx instead of Rep. Miller. At one point in the Hearing, Rep. Miller objected to some provisions in the Republican version of the bill. I recall thinking that he was right on the merits. Without losing a beat, Rep. Foxx turned and looked at Rep. Miller and said: We won't amend this as you're suggesting; you could have passed your version of WIA when you were in this seat! She was right! We would have had a better bill if Adult Education and WIA had been deemed important by Rep. Miller's office. I consider Rep. Miller to be one of our great Democratic leaders, and he retires this year with a high record of achievement, but in this particular instance he failed us.

Moving now to what I think it'll take to expand the reach and quality of services—

As you know, with WIOA's passage, Adult Education (Title II of WIOA) is now expected to devote a larger part of its mission to upgrading adult skills and moving adults toward work and college. In fact, WIOA calls for one-fourth of the required state planning to be from Adult Education. **But the best policy, planning, and program development, AND implementation, won't mean much if we don't tackle the funding problem. FUNDING IS OUR TOP PRIORITY.**

There's great skepticism around the country about whether the same thing will happen with PIAAC that happened with NALS or NAAL. In my view, our country will be in great jeopardy if that happens. **We've got to overcome the funding challenge to prove them wrong.**

Here are a few other "big picture" challenges:

FIRST: The PIAAC story is primarily about **ADULTS, not kids**. In the past, we've taken the attitude that if only we work on K-12, that'll take care of the adults. It hasn't, and it doesn't! **More than anything else, PIAAC data supports the need for ADULT skills upgrading, and on an unprecedented scale.** Our target clientele should be the many millions of adults 16 and over who will make up our workforce for decades to come.

A program director from Pittsburgh sent me an email on this topic saying “It has been one of my great frustrations that any talk about the need for adult and English language literacy always leads back to ‘fixing’ K12—which...is irrelevant for the adults who need to build skills now.”

By the way, yesterday someone characterized our education system as K12 and Higher Ed. Actually, our system is more a 3-legged stool: K-12, Adult Education, and Higher Education. The Adult Education System is not as clearly defined as the other two parts, because it includes a variety of provider types: community based organizations, employment programs, churches, community colleges, libraries, employment settings, and certain school settings. But ABE is an essential component of our system, and it is **the first line of service for low-skilled adults.**

SECOND: Adult Education needs a much stronger voice in the political arena. And it needs to elevate its profile — especially in our dealings with Congress, and with the Department of Education and other federal agencies. Communication with your state legislators and those you elect to Congress is essential, too. Use of PIAAC data can help make the case on every front.

In this regard, keep in mind that Adult Education is a nonpartisan issue, even if it doesn't yet have a very powerful voice of its own in the political arena. We need to be working with both Democrats and Republicans on the Hill. Jack Reed and Ruben Hinojosa are two champions of Adult Ed and we can count on them. They get it! And so do a few others in both parties. Republicans Lamar Alexander and David Perdue are definitely "could-be" allies. As Secretary of Education, one oversaw implementation of NIFL when it was enacted. The other, the new senator from Georgia, chaired the National Commission on Adult Literacy and has a passion for Adult Education and Literacy.

In sum, WIOA gives us Opportunity. **But it is largely an unfunded opportunity.** A weak Adult Education presence on the Hill won't get us much beyond where we are now! We'll just keep tinkering at the edges...and doing research for its own sake!

THIRD: Our low service level is shameful. Despite decades of evidence, we haven't even begun to scratch the surface in meeting the skills upgrading needs of adults, **especially low-skilled adults.**

PIAAC data reveals that 35–45 million U.S. adults tested at the lowest end of the skills spectrum, yet **we're reaching only about 1.4 million adults in Department of Ed funded programs today**, and the number keeps dropping. Even if we added a few hundred thousand more for the adult education programs of other federal agencies, the number would be minuscule. We might have been too ambitious, but **the National Commission on Adult Literacy, in 2008, called for serving 20 million adults by 2020 at a funding level of about \$20 billion**. We've got a long way to go!

FOURTH: We need to better understand the **BARRIERS to serving low-skilled adults**. CAAL and others press all the time for attention to the needs of low-skilled adults. But the fact is that creaming is easier and cheaper and faster, and higher-skilled adults are more apt to show up at the door for services. To serve more low-skilled adults, it isn't just a matter of having the funds and the programs and opening the doors.

We haven't really done all that much to identify the full range of cultural barriers that impede the participation and learning of low-skilled adults. This stands as another priority. Especially barriers that are **affective** in nature. Low-skilled adults are often unable to see the value of participating.

Here's an example of the kind of barrier I mean.

In doing some work for UNESCO's Lifelong Learning Institute, I recently became aware of a **strong connection between prolonged abuse and lack of caring in childhood and the capacity of low-skilled adults with such backgrounds to seek or value and then succeed in further education services.**

In a 3-year ethnographic study of a very large cohort in Ireland, this link has not only been established for the first time but it has all sorts of implications for designing programs, support services, and instruction.

Service providers learned that they must **recognize** the impact of childhood abuse and engage in activities to gain the trust of the adults whose skills they want to upgrade—in order to establish a positive learning environment. The low-skilled adults in the study were motivated to **want** to discuss painful childhood experiences so that all partners to the learning experience could understand and take account of them.

In short, persistent abuse and lack of love and caring of kids in their formative years leaves profound emotional scars that if not addressed at some later point, and addressed sensitively, will significantly reduce learning. **Why does this matter?**

Because it's very likely that many low-skilled adults have such backgrounds.

The title of the book if you want to check it out: *Learning care lessons: Literacy, love, care and solidarity*, by Maggie Feeley.

FIFTH: Partnerships and collaboration. Getting all stakeholders to the table is vital for comprehensive planning and evaluation, and also for tapping into all available funding resources, including sources we're not used to thinking about.

Adult Education cuts across the agenda of nearly every federal and state government agency. By working together and coordinating, we'll get better outcomes. Adult education isn't just an activity for the Department of Education, but for immigration, agriculture, corrections, justice, security, and others. The same point applies to comparable state-level entities.

We all need to regularly engage other groups, too, such as business associations (WIBS, chambers), employers, mayors and governors at the national and state levels, private and corporate philanthropy. Student groups and national groups (such as CLASP, TESOL, the Center for Applied Linguistics, and the National Skills Coalition, and others) need to maintain a strong leadership role.

SIXTH: FUNDING IS A MATTER OF CHOICE— even in this time of sequestration. One of the ground rules in Washington these days is “no more money.” Government officials can’t visibly call for more funds. But we can! Keep in mind that **Congress makes choices all the time.** A top Labor Department official pointed that out to me at the very first PIAAC roll-out event.

We’re starving programs now and they’ll be starved even more if we don’t all step up to the funding challenge.

The PIAAC findings should scare us all into action. We manage to find funds for many less important things. If we want Adult Education to get the funding it needs, **those who control the purse strings will have to make trade-offs in deciding funding priorities on the Hill and elsewhere.** The funding challenge can be met if Adult Education is really valued by Congress and state government, by White House staff, by philanthropy, and others. That’s a tall order, but we need to persevere.

A Roundtable of the sort CAAL convenes could explore new paths and generate new ideas for funding. And maybe it’s time to give serious thought to the Commission’s recommendation for a National Trust. One of CAAL’s research projects urged programs to consider charging fees for service,

being careful not to impose burdens on those who can't afford it. This is another idea worth pursuing!

Back to my two personal experience stories: Here's my take-away: 1) We can't always count on our allies, and 2) We've got to work with both parties. It takes perseverance.

Many of us were deeply disappointed not to have achieved the House Democratic bill, which was truly excellent, but by regrouping and continuing to advocate and provide analysis, we got WIOA, less than perfect but a sound, visionary bill.

By the way, it's worth noting that the president's Employability Goals can't be met without a strong Adult Education enterprise! Especially if we get serious about serving low-skilled adults.

What's at stake? Our nation's productivity and global competitiveness. And the very foundations of our democracy.

A RECOMMENDATION TO AIR

The conference papers help flesh out some of the PIAAC findings and are very stimulating. But their heavy use of jargon and qualifying terms like "it may mean," "it's possible," or "suggests that" lead more to further research, rather than to

inform policy and resource development. **It's hard to find the call to action in them!**

Qualifiers like “log odds” and “ordinal logistic regression models” mean a lot to statisticians but not to the generalist or policy maker.

We need adult skills upgrading now, based on the best evidence we have, expressed in the simplest language possible.

I'd like to urge AIR to hire someone to write a short summary document in lay language of the papers, with emphasis on the findings that don't need qualification—and there are many of them—so as to inform action as well as further research. Most busy action-oriented professionals won't take the time to dig them out—a summary would help a lot.

Thank you.