

# MAKING THE CASE

Adult Education & Literacy:  
Key to America's Future

**April 2002**



**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy**

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## INTRODUCTION

A strong federal commitment to adult education and literacy has persisted for decades, through both Republican and Democratic administrations — ever since the U.S. Department of Education's pioneering Adult Performance Level Study of the 1970s. That commitment has taken the form of strong legislative action and substantial funding that, while far from sufficient, has nevertheless continued to grow over the decades. Forward-thinking programs, often mutually reinforcing and designed to cut across shared interests, have been carried out by the Departments of Education, Labor, Health and Human Services, and other federal agencies.

We have been firmly on the path to building a solid adult education and literacy system. The federal role has been buoyed by incremental gains in applied and basic research, new insights gained through ongoing service provision, and increased understanding of the hot connection between possession of the basic skills and such issues as welfare reform, workplace preparedness, and overcoming poverty and racism. Moreover, federal officials have recognized that the steady stream of new immigrants to our shores is expanding greatly the pool of Americans needing both English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction and help to bring their reading, writing, math, and oral communications skills to a functional level.

We adult educators have taken the federal commitment for granted. Even when taking issue with the wisdom of a new federal direction or a particular strand of funding, we have understood the path we were on. We took responsibility to keep working on program development, research, outcome assessments, resource development, and effective planning — not just to provide more and better services to a large unmet need, but to guide further legislative planning, action, and funding. It was in this context that last year's National Literacy Summit took place.

But then something unexpected began to occur:

As the new administration settled in, and as new leadership took root at the U.S. Department of Education, it seemed that a major shift was in the making. Adult educators felt themselves to be struggling with a fundamentally-changed federal environment. They weren't sure what all the new signals meant, and they were deeply concerned.

For instance, the President's recent budget recommendations and rationale for adult education and literacy would, if unchanged, result in significantly less future funding for essential components of the education and literacy system. The future program direction of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) seems uncertain. Though NIFL is chartered as an *adult* literacy body, ten childhood-reading specialists were recently nominated to its board, none experienced in the interests and content of adult education and literacy. More and more, Department of Education officials speak of adult basic skills solely in terms of reading, and of an increased role for phonics in reading instruction — much narrower concepts of how to meet adult learner needs than either research or legislation support. At the same time, Department leaders are questioning the nature and quality of adult literacy services. They seem to be asking for proof that adult education and literacy should remain a key national education goal.

As concern spread throughout the field, I decided to convene an invitational meeting at CAAL. Present at the meeting — held on March 2, 2002 — were several recognized national leaders:

Robert Bickerton, Forrest Chisman, Alice Johnson, Garrett Murphy, James Parker, David Rosen, Robbin Sorensen, and Archie Willard. The group was asked to consider the future of adult education and literacy, of NIFL, and of the Division of Adult Education and Literacy itself. In a candid, neutral environment, we discussed trends and the federal role, strategies to work with the new NIFL board, and what could be done to help reenergize other key players and professionals in the field generally. When the meeting ended, there was a sense that it was just a start and that similar meetings should be planned for the future. CAAL intends to do this.

**Advocacy.** Because of its critical importance to the future of adult literacy, the subject of advocacy received a good deal of attention on March 2. Indeed, in preparation for the meeting, the attendees — and several other adult educators as well — were asked to contribute a short statement making the *case* for adult education and literacy. They were asked to think as though the life of the field depended on it. They were to consider why policymakers should care about it and why it should have a continuing high-priority status among America’s top education goals.

The case statements received were sufficiently compelling to share them in this published form. They are offered as an advocacy tool for the field. They are not necessarily representative of the field as a whole. They do not pretend to capture every important point and every argument. But they are cogent — filled with insight, knowledge, and passion.

It is obvious to me that the case for continuing to build American’s adult literacy and education system is based in both principle and fact. Forrest Chisman noted in CAAL’s recently-published *Adult Literacy & The American Dream* that: “Any case for adult education and literacy — any rationale for why it matters and why the federal government, the states, and ordinary citizens should care about it — must be based squarely on mainstream American principles and the American experience.” He went on to say that “the cause [of adult education and literacy] is not driven by traditional liberal concerns for the plight of the disadvantaged or traditional conservative concerns for self-reliance. It is driven by the inalienable right of all Americans to be free and equal.”

The facts — many contained in the following case statements — support the need not only for *continued* priority attention to adult education and literacy, but for *expanded* attention.

One especially powerful fact has to do with severe underfunding of the field. The adult education and literacy enterprise is often judged as though it is funded on a par with other forms of education, but the mean average federal expenditure per adult literacy student each year, including those in ESL and high-school-equivalency (GED) programs, is a paltry \$200, with many states not even matching that. This supports up to 100 hours of instruction on very low instructional pay, and is not adequate to move an adult up even one grade-level equivalency. Depending on where adult learners enter, it is estimated that 500-1000 hours of instruction would be needed to move them up to just 9th-grade equivalency, a foundation on which higher levels of adult education can be built. In short, judgments about quality in adult literacy programs need to be tempered by the reality of their underfunding.

Finally, and this is *always* the bottom line: we are presently reaching only about one in every ten adults in need of help with their basic literacy skills. We can and we ought to do much better.

# COLLECTION OF CASE STATEMENTS

## Elsa Auerbach

Associate Professor

English Department (specializing in ESL & Adult Literacy)

University of Massachusetts (Boston)

**Adults who have had limited education or who struggle with literacy are a huge, untapped national resource.** They have a wealth of knowledge and experience which could strengthen the nation economically, socially, and politically. I think of their potential as unreleased energy: given the possibility of developing their abilities, there is no doubt that the force of their contributions on both community and national levels would be immense. Many low-skilled immigrants and refugees come to this country with life experience and knowledge that could be invaluable in our communities, but because of lack of access to English language education, they are relegated to jobs which do not draw on this expertise or experience.

**It is to the advantage of the whole populace to support the education of those who, for reasons beyond their control, have been unable to acquire the skills or knowledge necessary to fully participate economically and politically.** Without adequate adult education, we do not benefit from their potential contributions, and, in many cases, they remain dependent and unable to adequately support the next generation. This leads, in turn, to even greater challenges for public elementary and secondary education, for social services, and for other areas of the public sector. It creates resentment and divisiveness among those who see this dependence as a drain on the national economy. The best response to those who argue that unskilled people are a drain on national resources is to provide education that can enable those who need it to become more self-sufficient; it is unrealistic to expect that people can become self-sufficient without a basic education that includes English and literacy proficiencies. In the long run, supporting them supports everyone.

**Informed civic participation is central to the democratic ethos on which this country was founded.** An active and educated populace is the best insurance for a healthy community. Denying access to education not only undermines the democratic process, but engenders despair and disengagement which, in turn, can erode community. It robs people of hope and dignity which are essential for the human spirit. To deny hope to anyone in our community is to attack the most basic human rights.

The history of our country has shown over and over that, with education, those who have been marginalized can become creative, productive, and active community members. A well-resourced and stable adult education system that supports the development of their potential is a cost-effective way of building on the strengths of our populace. ■

## Robert Bickerton

Director, Adult Basic Education

Massachusetts State Department of Education

In the past, attempts to make a strong case for adult literacy to policymakers, elected officials, and the public have been undermined by merging too many goals into a single document. I recommend that we agree to the following purposes and means of structuring our case:

- ◆ There has been confusion between “marketing” and establishing a “common vision.” It is impossible to galvanize the broadest cross section of our field around marketing arguments that appear disconnected from what might constitute our common vision. We need to do the hard work of articulating the core essentials of our common vision and then construct our case for adult basic education and literacy around it.
- ◆ We must be clear about our primary audience. I believe it must be policymakers and elected leaders.
- ◆ We must present a compelling argument, supported by the literature, research, and state performance data. Papers that attempt to combine the two within the same text diminish their “punch” for many readers. As a strategy, why not use an attachment (perhaps referenced via endnote citations rather than page-by-page footnotes) as the means of assuring the subset of readers who care that our case rests on a solid foundation.
- ◆ We must acknowledge that papers written exclusively for the policy arena fail to connect with (i.e. motivate, galvanize) much of our own core/internal constituencies. Hence, I suggest that we organize the narrative in two major sections, either of which could be presented first depending on the audience. One section would be addressed to policymakers and elected leaders, the other would present the case to our own field. It should be possible to construct this in a way that is neither redundant nor contradictory.
- ◆ The policy section should be in the form of a “white paper” which is familiar to this constituency. In this section, we would articulate the need, the response, and what can be accomplished consistent with our common vision, but using the idioms of today’s hot-button public policy debates (such as integration of a rapidly growing immigrant population into our communities and economies, competing in a global economy, increasing our children’s success in school, and preventive health care).
- ◆ The other section, primarily targeted to the field, would be organized by “walking” **students** with different needs and characteristics through an ABE/literacy program that resembles the future we seek to create. Here, we should drop the “deficit” language to which many practitioners and students object and address issues that can be an awkward fit for policy purposes. Further, a less formal approach for the field would complement the more formal



construction of the policy section and give life the new realities we seek to create for those willing to read the entire document.

◆ Finally, I believe we must present our case without apology or restraint — sometimes referred to as being “practical” and “pragmatic.” It has been my experience that while most adult educators resist applying a deficit model to our students, they nevertheless have difficulty thinking beyond the environment of scarcity in which we operate. Our case must be based on achieving an effective system of services that delivers what undereducated and limited-English-proficient adults need and deserve, not what we might be able to “get” this year or the next in terms of funding. Our case is an imperative not only for these individuals, but for the success of their families, their communities, the economy, and our society, i.e. as the “infrastructure” and foundation for achieving and sustaining the American dream.

This last challenge has for the past three decades occupied my own dreams and aspirations for the important work that we do. I have come to believe that we need a vision (goal) that goes beyond “give us more money to do more of the good work that we do.” Even the articulation of behavioral/numeric objectives related to serving more students and achieving more impressive results fails to break free of this paradigm. Yet, at the core of our common vision is a principle so fundamental and breathtakingly obvious that we either overlook it or avoid it.

We can use the concept of “social contract” to refer to a small number of commitments for which there is near universal agreement and support across our society. In the United States, a limited number of such commitments beyond our Bill of Rights make it into the social contract. Access to public education through high school is the most notable commitment, but even this was not always the case. It took an extraordinary confluence of interests across diverse constituencies at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries to firmly establish education within our nation’s social contract. Business, labor, clergy, fraternal organizations, and others came to the conclusion, first separately and then together, that there were compelling reasons for our population to become literate and possess a stronger educational foundation.

The “industrial era” articulation of a more educated populace was satisfied with half the population achieving this educational foundation. The social contract for public education would cease when our youth reached their teen years at which time compulsory free public education would end. It was acceptable and useful that many youths would not achieve a strong educational foundation by this age, because a large number of jobs at the lowest end of the workforce continuum needed to be filled.

It has become clear that many elements of this “construct” are no longer satisfactory or adequate for the same diverse constituencies that lifted public education into our nation’s social contract in the first place. In fact, with the advent of “education reform,” first in the states and now nationally, the only remaining element of the “old” public education social contract that is discernible is the age limit. *The blindingly obvious unifying vision for adult education is*

*to shift the universal education social contract from a commitment to a range of ages to a foundation of skills -- regardless of age!*

There are many good reasons for this shift. Even if “education reform” achieves a greatly improved and effective educational system, enormous numbers of children will be left behind. For one thing, recent developments in developmental psychology dictate that a significant number of children will *not* achieve a solid educational foundation within the age span and/or grade-level structure principles we use. For another, the intergenerational forces that influence academic achievement will continue to compromise many of the most promising interventions available for pre-K to 12 education.

In other words, reform of the K - 12 system, despite our best efforts and regardless of what it achieves, will leave an unacceptably large number of children behind. When these youths cannot qualify for a high school diploma, new champions for education beyond the current age of compulsory attendance will join leaders from business, labor, and community life who already understand the importance of doing so.

Changes in the social contract take decades to achieve. But there is no time like the present to start. Adult educators need to join forces with our allies and be the catalyst for generating the dialogue that will eventually include adult basic education and literacy as an essential component of our nation’s social contract. The pragmatists among us must come to understand and accept that making our case this way, a long-term challenge, can and must be compatible with the short- term gains we need to achieve. Joining our arguments in the manner I am suggesting can help ensure that each small step we take will be along a path to achieving our vision. ■

# Forrest Chisman

Author, *Jump Start*

Human Resource Development Specialist

CAAL Board Member, Senior Consultant

**Adult education and literacy includes much more than reading.** As defined by Title II of The Workforce Investment Act, it is, “An individual’s ability to read, write and speak in English, compute, and solve problems, at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society.” In other words, in addition to reading, adults need basic mathematics and a host of other skills (including the special requirements of a growing number of immigrants) to function in 21st century America.

**For the past 40 years the federal government has been committed to providing adult education and literacy services as set forth in Title II.** This commitment has taken the form of Adult Basic Education, Adult Secondary Education, and English-as-a-Second Language programs. *It has been based on extending the principle of equal educational opportunity to all adults and the belief that educational opportunity should not be the exclusive prerogative of the young.* As a result, programs have been established in every state and locality in the United States.

**Tens of millions of adults need service.** Each year about 3 million adults are served in adult basic education (ABE) programs supported by federal and state funds. At least one million more are served by community colleges, local school districts, volunteer groups, libraries, proprietary schools, prisons, and other groups. In short, we have a good handle on the problem already — anchored in the federal-state ABE program, but augmented by other sources. *But, by best estimates, 10 - 20 million adults need to be served at basic levels (not the 90 million often misstated by the media and a few other sources.)* And many more need service to help them make the transition to job training and postsecondary education. Who are these Americans? They are school dropouts, products of inferior schools, people with learning disabilities, and immigrants (the fastest growing part of the population in need). *There is no reason to doubt that these people can learn as much and as well as other Americans. Indeed, in high quality adult education and literacy programs, they do. And they want to learn.* The problem is that these high-quality programs have long waiting lists, and that millions of persons representing latent demand are not on *any* waiting lists. The numbers are not likely to decrease because dropout rates show no sign of improving, and immigration is increasing.

**Tragically, the federal commitment to adult education and literacy made 40 years ago has never been fulfilled.** The chief reason is that funding for this field of education has always been inadequate to support high quality service and to reach the full population in need. Current federal funding is \$575 million/year — less than \$200 per student served. The fact is that if adequate funding *were* provided, and *properly channeled*, the nation’s adult education and literacy system is fully capable of serving the population in need. The numbers in need of service need not be daunting.

**Federal funding on the order of \$2-3 billion a year should be the goal.** This would enable the system to (a) expand service to the full population in need, (b) provide better instruction, (c) improve management, (d) achieve economies of scale, (e) create strong links to postsecondary education and job training, and (f) invest in more research to help perform these functions most effectively.

**We need research but should not wait on it to move ahead.** Program expansion and program improvement must proceed simultaneously. We know enough now to help many more millions than are presently being served, but we do not have *the means* to reach them all or to provide them all with state-of-the-art instruction.

**We should make a commitment to place adult education and literacy on a parity with other forms of education.** We must demand the same scope and excellence from adult education and literacy that we demand from other forms of education — and we must provide the resources to make this possible.

**The same arguments for expanding our investment in education for children apply to expanding education for adults.** Children are the workers, citizens, parents, and community members of tomorrow. Adults are the workers, citizens, parents, and community members of today. Their children's needs are in the future; theirs are immediate. Today's adults will determine the educational future of today's children.

**The immediate priorities for an expanded federal commitment to adult education and literacy are:**

- ◆ Maintain federal support for all the forms of education service encompassed by the broad definition of adult education and literacy that has been developed through decades of domestic and international understanding and experience.
- ◆ Increase federal funding in the present fiscal year to at least \$750 million with increases in succeeding fiscal years to reach \$2 - 3 billion in five years.
- ◆ Support the National Institute for Literacy — the national leadership organization in this field — to ensure that it has the necessary resources and a leadership that is both expert and committed to adult education and literacy.
- ◆ Elevate adult education and literacy to a high priority at the U.S. Department of Education.
- ◆ Develop immediately (via the Department of Education, the National Institute, and others) a detailed national plan to expand and improve adult education and literacy services and strengthen links with job training and postsecondary education.

- ◆ Adopt the goal that every adult should have the opportunity to receive adult education and literacy service that will allow him/her to easily transition to postsecondary education.
  
- ◆ Invest in the necessary research to help achieve these goals as quickly and cost-effectively as possible.

All of the above is consistent with the Bush administration's strategic plan for education. It emphasizes expanding access and opportunity, as well as improving quality. The administration has pledged to "leave no child behind." It also should pledge to "leave no American behind." ■

# Sherrie Claiborne

President

# Gail Lawson

President-Elect

Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE)

The Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) is a 1500-member professional organization of adult education professionals who work with private and public partners to advance literacy. As an organization, COABE represents adult educators and adult education organizations and advocates for the broad field of adult education. It provides opportunities for professional development and growth through a combination of regional and national conferences. Its mission is to articulate a vision for the field of adult education and communicate that vision to all interested constituencies in order to assure that adult education services and programs are accessible, of high quality, and properly resourced. We hold the following beliefs:

Adult education is a necessary component of the current administration's national agenda of "no child left behind." In order for all children to reach high standards of academic performance and in order to close the achievement gap that exists between high-income community schools and low-income and/or minority community schools, parents must be able to support their efforts. In order for that to occur, those parents who lack the literacy skills necessary to participate in their children's education must be provided with opportunities to complete their education or improve their skills. To that end, it is imperative that the Administration assure that all state departments of education *adequately* support and fund adult education programs. It is our belief that federal action is necessary to address the glaring inequities that occur among the states as regards the support, both fiscal and programmatic, in the provision of adult education services to low literate adults. It is our belief that current legislation governing and funding K-12 education and programs — such as 21st Century Learning Centers, Technology Centers, and programs for the disabled and vocational education — must mandate the provision of adult education services and specify the required state level of support for such programs.

While the provision of services to parents of school age children is critical to the success of the national education agenda, it is important to recognize that not all adults in need of improved skills are parents of school age children. We believe that the economic health of our country is dependent upon a literate citizenry, a literate workforce, and a commitment to lifelong learning. Thus, adult education programs must provide services to all who need them without regard to parental status. Relatedly, we believe that all education initiatives of this and any administration should address the provision of literacy services to adults in need.

The administration should support the continued development of a professional cadre of adult educators. To achieve this goal, we believe that it should continue to support the certification or licensure of adult educators in a manner comparable to the certification of K - 12 educators, and

it should encourage and leverage state departments of education in this area. Further research as to effective adult education practice must be nurtured, with appropriate support provided for dissemination of such research.

There is much work to be done in improving adult education practice. The attention once paid to standards-based education in the K - 12 arena must now be directed to standards-based education in adult education. Further, research focusing on how adults learn best and how to motivate the “reluctant learner” is critical to our efforts.

For too long the most critical element in the equation for the success of literacy programs — the adult educator — has been ignored. Professional adult educators must be “at the table.” We must speak with a powerful and unified voice, as do our K - 12 counterparts. We must accept nothing less than a full partnership with the administration, state departments of education, and our K - 12 colleagues.

We believe that the provision of effective and cost-efficient adult education services must become a priority of the administration, education departments across the country, institutions of higher education, and local education authorities. Moreover, adult education must be marketed so that the importance of a literate adult population and of adult education services are clearly understood and supported by all. ■

# George Demetrion

Manager, Community-Based Programming  
Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford, Connecticut

## Literacy for Life

*You are going to teach; but as you teach, you are going to learn much more than you can possibly teach, and in the end, you will feel as grateful to your students as those students feel to you for the dignity that you created together.*

— Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America*

According to national literacy researcher Thomas Sticht, in 1998 over 4.2 million adults nationwide participated in adult basic education programs. In that same year, according to Sticht, “the K-12 system served some 46.8 million enrollees while the post-secondary, higher education system enrolled about 14.6 million.”<sup>1</sup> Sticht’s point is that, as indicated by the number of enrollees, adult basic education is far from a marginal aspect of this nation’s total education system. In drawing our attention to these numbers, Sticht’s intent is to move adult basic education from the margins to the mainstream in the public’s eye. As a veteran adult literacy educator, I heartily embrace Sticht’s vision.

Individuals participate in adult literacy programs for many important reasons. Most desire general language (reading, writing, speaking, listening, critical thinking) development. In an increasingly print-based society that depends on effective communication, this is clearly a valuable goal in itself. Closely related in importance among students is the sense of confidence and personal dignity, self-esteem, and enhanced competency adults experience as they expand their language communication skills. Although hard to measure, this somewhat intangible impact cannot be overestimated. As one study puts it:

*Students do not necessarily have a concrete goal in mind, an instrumental view of literacy tied to some specific task or aspiration. More than anything, they want to feel that there are possibilities for the future, that there are choices and potential for change.*

Current research on literacy states that language development is most fully acquired when it is learned through living contexts that people identify as important. This becomes more the case after students have participated for some time and obtain a better sense of what they might learn

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1. Sticht, T.G., *The Adult Education & Literacy Systems (AELS) in the United States: Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream*, El Cajon, CA (2000).



and how long it will take. Thus, instead of learning to read and write or speak and understand English first, say through workbook exercises, one develops such skills through direct application in real-life situations and interests. This may be through interesting stories in the newspaper, a church bulletin, correspondence from a child's school, work-related instructions, the *TV Guide*, stories from other adult literacy learners, as well as short fiction and other culturally derived material. In programs like Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford's Community Literacy Initiative, students and tutors work on long-range planning and goal setting to help connect specific learning with broader life projects. Our student-centered approach not only makes learning fun and interesting for the student and the tutor, but makes it relevant to the lives of adult students. This, in turn, fuels the motivation to stay engaged in learning for the year or more that it often takes to make significant progress.

Let's look at one student — call him Ed — who entered a literacy program with very limited reading skills. Ed was motivated by practical concerns. As he put it, "what I need now is filling out applications, stuff like that." With help from his tutor he learned to fill out money orders and how to pay his rent and insurance. He drove, but couldn't read signs, so he limited his driving only to known areas. So-called friends that he depended upon to write money orders kept the money for themselves. What troubled Ed most about not being able to read was feeling trapped in situations over which he had no control. As he put it:

*I thought about it, but you're not comfortable with it. You know you have limitations to what you can do. So, I'm stuck. It's not like I can go out there and get a job doing something else because I don't have the ability for it. So you have to settle for what you can get, most of the time.*

Things were not easy for Ed. He felt shame in asking his girlfriend for help. Certain coworkers referred to Ed as mentally retarded because he could not read. Ed's need to bolster a precarious self-esteem was perhaps nowhere more poignantly stated than in the following sentence: "I live by myself, so I have to be motivated because I don't have anybody to do anything for me."

As Ed participated in the program he was able to master some of these areas through the caring support of his sensitive tutor, Jane, one of the unsung heroines of our field. He also learned to read by studying stories of other students in the program and became inspired. As he said it:

*It motivates you, you know? It makes you want to keep going to learn something for yourself. Sometimes you don't think you can learn until you see other people do it. So that motivates you a little bit. Well, a lot, I might say, a lot.*

Ed's progress has been slow. He has made good progress, but still needs a lot of help with his reading and may never gain total fluency. Still, he is learning and applying what he has learned in his personal life, at work, and particularly in the adult literacy community where he is still active. His confidence has improved a great deal which gives him courage to face new challenges.

Sondra Stein of the National Institute for Literacy points out the importance of “literacy for life” rather than for any single purpose. She says, “while the specific tasks, roles and responsibilities vary from context to context, adults seek to develop literacy in order to change what they can do, how they are perceived, and how they perceive themselves in specific social and cultural contexts.”<sup>2</sup> For Ed, the change has been slow rather than dramatic, but profound on the cumulative impact of his life.

Ed’s story is paralleled by another student, Pat, who grew up in the Canadian backwoods. Pat, who never learned to read in either his native French or English started to learn to read for the first time in his 40s. The following describes in a more compelling way than anything I ever could the impact of literacy on Pat’s life:

*Now if I go into a restaurant, I don’t have to pretend I’m reading the menu; I really read it. My wife used to read it to me. I hated when people were with us or around us because they know that I can’t read and may think that I am a dummy. But now I can order my food myself.*

As stated by Hanna Fingeret at the conclusion of her massive 1990 study of students at Literacy Volunteers of America - New York City, “The impact [of literacy] is profound, touching every aspect of their lives.”<sup>3</sup> In short, literacy is for life. It opens doors in many different ways for individuals in family, community, and workplace settings and has an incalculable impact on self-esteem. It is for this reason that I embrace Tom Sticht’s vision of moving adult literacy from the margins to the mainstream. ■

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2. Stein, S., *Equipped for the Future: A Customer Driven Vision for Adult Literacy and Lifelong Learning*, National Institute for Literacy, Washington, D.C. (1995).

3. Fingeret, H.A. and Danin, S.T., *“They really put a hurtin’ on my brain”: Learning in Literacy Volunteers of New York City*, Literacy South, Durham, N.C. (1991).

Note: This essay was first prepared in 2000 for the National Literacy Summit.

# Daphne Greenberg

Associate Director, Center for the Study of Adult Literacy  
Georgia State University  
Moderator, NIFL-WomenLit ListServ

## Introduction

An educated American, as outlined in *America 2000*<sup>1</sup>, is one who “possesses the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.” As information and technology have increasingly shaped our society, the skills we need to function successfully have gone beyond reading, writing, and speaking. Unfortunately, many Americans have difficulty functioning at needed levels of proficiency.

As noted by the National Institute for Literacy, there are many adults with low literacy skills who lack the foundation to find and keep decent jobs, support their children’s education and participate actively in civic life. According to the National Adult Literacy Survey, approximately 22 percent of the adult population cannot read well enough to fill out an application, read a food label, or read a simple story to a child. Another 27 percent of the adult population cannot compare, contrast, or integrate pieces of information in material that requires reading and problem-solving skills. These adults all lack a sufficient foundation of basic skills. The extent of these adults’ difficulties is more severe than the difficulties of adults in many other industrialized countries. For example, the International Adult Literacy Survey (1997) compared the literacy skills of adults in Australia, Belgium, Canada, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The U.S. was shown to have more adults functioning in the lowest levels of literacy than any of the other countries except Poland.

## Why we should care?

Many argue that we should not focus on adults. Instead, we should focus on prevention and place all of our money on children’s education to prevent literacy problems in the future. Although we all know that children’s education needs money, this should not be at the expense of adult programming. Here are some reasons why:

### 1. Security concerns

After the events of 9/11, it is clear that heightened security is of critical concern. As has become apparent, many employees entrusted with the security of the American people do not have the skills necessary to meet the new security demands. For example, the recent discussion over the baggage inspectors at airports points to the need for workplace literacy training NOW. This cannot wait for the next generation to grow up.

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1. *America 2000: An education strategy*, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., 1991 (p. 19)

## 2. Civic responsibility

During the recent Presidential election, we learned that many individuals had difficulty understanding and correctly engaging in their civic right to vote. This obviously is not an issue specific to only this election; it has been prevalent in all past elections. To truly engage in a democratic process, individuals must be equipped NOW with the necessary literacy tools. No one wants to go through another election where the Supreme Court is brought in to make the final decision.

## 3. Health costs

One of the areas where low literacy hurts us as a nation is health delivery. For example, Williams and his colleagues<sup>2</sup> found that over one-third of English-speaking patients at two public hospitals showed inadequate functional health literacy. In other words, they were unable to understand information regarding medication, medical appointments, and informed consent. In another study, Williams and his colleagues<sup>3</sup> found that the literacy skills of patients with diabetes, hypertension, and asthma were the strongest correlates of knowledge about their illness and disease-management skills, even after statistical adjustments were made for other socio-demographic variables. It has been estimated that low health literacy skills increase annual health care costs by \$73 billion<sup>4</sup>. As a society, we cannot afford to ignore these costs while waiting for a new generation to grow up.

## 4. Children

According to Sticht, “better educated adults produce better educated children.”<sup>5</sup> He states that studies have shown that: “the variable that has remained most influential in children’s participation and success in school is parental education levels.” Therefore, if we want to increase children’s literacy skills, it is critical that we address the literacy skills of their parents.

## **How much have we really focused on adult education to date?**

Some may argue that, in the 1990s, our nation spent enough money and effort on adults. The argument is made that since we have already “tried and failed,” we need to take away the adult focus. The proposition that we have already spent enough money and effort on adults is a myth.

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2. Williams, M.V., Baker, D.W., & Parker, R.M., Parikh, N., Pitkin, K., Coates, and Nurss, J.R., Journal of the American Medical Association, 274, 1677-1682 (1995).

3. Williams, M.V., Baker, D.W., Parker, R.M., Nurss, J.R., *Relationship of functional health literacy to patients’ knowledge of their chronic disease: A study of patients with hypertension or diabetes*. Archives of Internal Medicine, 158, 166-172 (1998).

4. Kilker, K., *Low health literacy skills increase annual health care expenditures by \$73 billion*, Health Literacy Toolbox: 2000, <http://www.prenateled.com/healthlit/hlt2k/script/index.html>.

5. Sticht, T., *Beyond 2000: Future Directions for Adult Education*, U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Washington, D.C. (September 1999)

### 1. Money spent on students

According to Sticht, by the late 1990s, dollars spent on each adult education student decreased. Specifically, “using constant 1995 dollar values, spending per participant dropped from about \$274 to \$73 in actual value by 1998.”

### 2. Meeting the need

Adult literacy programs reach only approximately 10 percent of the adult learner population. Although there are many reasons for this, one is lack of program availability. The majority of adult education programs have long waiting lists of students looking for an opening in a class or tutorial arrangement.

### 3. Research

There has been very little research on effective reading instruction for adults with limited reading skills. The situation today is not very different from the late 1980s when Bristow and Leslie<sup>6</sup> stated that “practitioners . . . currently have little research-based information regarding instructional techniques effective with . . . [the adult literacy] population.” More than ten years later, a literature review indicates that reading instruction for adults continues to lack a theoretical and developmental research-based approach to reading acquisition. One of the major reasons that research has not been conducted in this field is that the necessary financial support from grant administering institutions (such as NIH) has not been available.

## Conclusion

Even if we find the perfect answers to children’s education, there will always be a need for adult education for groups of all kinds, including those noted below:

1. Immigrants.
2. Individuals who missed a lot of school due to childhood illnesses, frequent moves, etc.
3. People who need to learn a new skill not acquired while in school (for example, computer literacy, mathematical skills, writing skills, reading skills). ■

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6. Bristow, P.S. and Leslie, L., *Indications of reading difficulty: Discrimination between instructional- and frustration-range performance of functionally illiterate adults*. Reading Research Quarterly, 23, 200-218 (1988).

## Alice Johnson

Coordinator, Child Watch/Wednesdays in Washington  
The Children's Defense Fund  
(formerly Associate Director for State Policy,  
National Institute for Literacy)

*Literacy is a powerful determinant of an individual's life chances and quality of life. The same holds true in the wider context of countries: Overall literacy has a demonstrable effect on the well-being of economies and societies. . . The rates of return to education and literacy. . . suggest that what countries, communities, employers, and workers spend on literacy should be seen as investment with a long-term pay-off, rather than simply as a cost. . . Higher levels of literacy are needed now more than any time in the past. And the demand for literacy in the future can only increase.*

— *Literacy for the Knowledge Society: Further Results from the International Adult Literacy Survey*

In the increasingly knowledge-based world of the 21st century, adults need a solid foundation of skills more than ever before. Individuals' knowledge and skills have a profound impact on their lives at home, in their community, and on the job. In the workplace in particular, expectations of what people need to know and be able to do are continually increasing across occupations — and the stakes have never been higher for those with low skills. Gone are the days when one could earn a good living from manual labor without regular use of reading, writing, and numeracy skills. To survive and prosper in a world of rapid change, adults need to continuously improve their knowledge and skills through a lifetime of learning.

As the demands of adult life and the skills needed to function in society have evolved over the last century, so too has the definition of literacy. The term “literacy” is frequently considered to be a simpler set of skills than is the case. In the early part of the 20th century, literacy was defined as simply knowing how to read and write. In the 21st century, reading and writing skills are no longer enough. Negotiating the complexities of daily life requires adults to sift through vast amounts of information, understand it, think critically about it, and *use* it. Until recently, literacy was defined in binary terms: a person was considered either “literate” or not, with an arbitrary line between the two. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) of 1992 fundamentally changed that view. Instead of drawing a line between “literate” and “illiterate,” it portrays literacy as a continuum, with everyone falling somewhere along it.

According to the NALS, one in five adults — over 40 million Americans — has pressing literacy needs, and the magnitude of the problem far exceeds the current capacity to address it. Fewer

than 10 percent (3 million) of those identified as needing to improve their skills participate in federally supported adult education and literacy programs. Many have learning disabilities that went undiagnosed when they were children. Others dropped out of school for family or personal reasons. The need can be broken down as follows:

**ESOL.** Over 10 percent of the total U.S. population, or 28 million adults, are immigrants. Many enroll in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) programs upon arrival, and many more are put on waiting lists, often for months or years at a time.

Over 12 million adults — or about 5 percent of the population — speak a language other than English as their primary language at home, and many of this group need to improve their English language and literacy skills.

**Work.** Individuals with high levels of literacy are more likely to be employed, work more weeks out of the year, and earn higher wages than those demonstrating lower proficiencies. The income gap between adults with and without a high school diploma has steadily widened over the past two decades. In 1997, high school graduates earned 42 percent more than those with less than a high school education, and this gap continues to grow. (Earnings average \$16,124 for those with less than a high school diploma, \$22,895 for those with a diploma, and \$40,478 for those with a bachelor's degree.) The workforce turns over at a rate of about 3 percent per year so much of the workforce of the future is, in fact, the workforce of today. Due to time and cost constraints, many adults with literacy needs are not likely to improve their skills outside the workplace, and more workplace literacy programs are needed to provide opportunities for these adults to improve their skills and advance professionally.

The connection between literacy and economic well-being has many ramifications. For instance, the amount of time families spend on welfare is closely related to the education level of the parent. Welfare recipients with low education skills stay on welfare the longest, and those with stronger education skills become self-sufficient more quickly. In fact, over 60 percent of those who spend more than 5 years on welfare enter with less than a high school education, while over 65 percent of those who have a high school education become self-sufficient within two years.

**Community.** Stronger literacy skills allow adults to become more active in their own community through civic activities, such as joining the local PTA or voting. Adults with solid literacy skills are also better able to understand health-related information — for themselves and their children. Recent research has established a strong connection between literacy and health status, and there is clear evidence of a link between low literacy, poor health, and early death. Low literacy skills can result in poor prenatal care and low birth weight, which increases a child's risk of developing health, learning, and behavioral problems.

**Family.** The cycle of low literacy is often intergenerational, and family literacy models are designed to break that cycle. In fact, helping parents with their own skills is one of the most effective ways to help their children succeed academically. Educational attainment of a parent is

one of the strongest predictors of a child's school achievement. According to researcher Tom Sticht, "An investment in the literacy education of adults provides 'double duty dollars.' It improves the educational level of adults and simultaneously improves the educability and school success of the adults' children."

Finally, literacy skills are closely related to poverty. Nationwide, 70 percent of adults with the lowest literacy skills are unemployed or work in part-time jobs, and over 40 percent of adults at the lowest NALS level were living in poverty, compared to 4 - 8 percent of those at the highest two levels. One of the best ways to ensure that no child is left behind is to ensure that all parents have the basic skills they need to provide for their families. ■



## Paul Jurmo

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Consortium for Worker Education

### Wanted: Leadership for Adult Literacy

Since the mid-1980s, a steady stream of voices — researchers, employers, workforce development specialists, policymakers, labor leaders, and representatives of community groups — has pointed to the vital role of adult literacy and adult education for our nation’s future.

- ◆ Employers continually cite the need for a better-prepared workforce, one that has a broad range of “basic skills” (now defined as not just the traditional “3Rs” but also oral English, problem-solving, research, teamwork, and other skills). Workers need these skills to deal with the new technologies, work processes, and higher standards required by virtually every industry.
- ◆ Advocates for families and children point out the need for adults who are equipped to help their children succeed in school, ensure their own health and that of their family members, and otherwise build strong families that are at the core of a healthy society.
- ◆ Those concerned about the strength of our democracy and the safety and vibrancy of our communities likewise emphasize that we need an adult population able to participate in an informed way in the many institutions of our society — volunteer groups, religious bodies, the electoral system.

By now it should be clear that, to sustain the economic and social well-being of our nation, we need a well-educated adult populace.

But researchers are also now pointing to the harsh reality that many adults are not prepared for these demanding roles of active, informed, thinking workers, family members, and citizens. The sources of this problem of an undereducated, underprepared adult population are not being eliminated. Rather, they are increasing, as school dropout rates remain high (particularly in low-income communities), school reform isn’t reaching all schools and schoolchildren, and immigration is at its highest levels in our history (bringing in more and more people with limited English skills and perhaps limited education in their home countries). This is compounded by the fact that the skills demands placed on workers, parents, and citizens continue to increase and become more complex.

The good news is that, in the past 15 years, the adult basic education field has developed potential solutions to these problems. Highlights include:

- ◆ We have recognized the need to expand the definition of “basic skills” to incorporate the broader range of skills for which employers and others — including adult learners themselves — have been asking.

- ◆ The field has moved significantly toward adoption of instructional methods based on research, to help learning be more suited to the special needs and interests of adults.
- ◆ Computers have steadily moved into the adult education classroom, thereby enabling adult learners to simultaneously develop both an array of “basic” skills and the computer skills which adults need for their multiple roles as workers, family members, consumers, and citizens.
- ◆ Some states and communities have begun using quality management methods to build local- and state-level adult education systems. These systems are integrated with workforce and community development services, and supported by an infrastructure of high-quality planning, professional development, evaluation, and other components.
- ◆ Adult learners — including both former and current adult education students — have begun to be recognized for their leadership potential. They are getting involved in giving something back to their education programs and communities, by recruiting new adult learners; giving those new learners peer support to encourage them to persevere and succeed; educating policymakers, funders, and the public; and getting involved in their communities’ schools.

These efforts to build a high-quality, modern adult education system are being carried out by creative, committed adult education professionals, volunteers, and adult learners, with support from federal and state governments and private funders. We need to recognize these efforts, commend them, and support them.

But they are simply not enough. Despite some increases in public money and some leadership at the federal level (e.g., the National Institute for Literacy’s Equipped for the Future initiative), the future of adult education now is not clear. There appears to be a shift toward seeing “literacy” purely as an “early childhood reading” issue rather than recognizing the need for greatly expanded services for the many adults upon whom those children and our economy and communities depend. This would be *a major step backward*, to a period 20 years ago when few had ever heard of “adult illiteracy in the United States” and none of the above-described resources had been developed.

We need a renewed leadership for the cause of adult literacy and adult education. This is required at the highest level of federal and state government, and within the private sector, as well. We are now engaged in struggles to rebuild our communities and economy after the September 11 attacks. Key to all these efforts — getting people back to work, using technology wisely, building trust and communication among all segments of our population, making our communities more secure — will be an educated adult populace. Our leaders need to recognize that education cannot just be limited to children. As a nation, we need to invest in a system of lifelong learning which ensures that adults continue to educate themselves, so they can be active players in creating a strong nation, with liberty and justice for all. ■

# Catherine B. King

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## THE RELATIONSHIP OF EDUCATION TO DEMOCRACIES

Democracy locates political power in **The People** — the *demos*. All adult citizens of the United States constitute the *demos*, The Enfranchised People. If **The People** are illiterate or undereducated, they are not equipped to (1) use their franchise or (2) choose well if they do. If **The People** do not know their franchise, then they do not have it — they are *de facto* disenfranchised. Therefore, stewards of a healthy Democracy are *constitutionally obliged* to create and constitute the conditions for (1) enfranchising the electorate *in fact* — **The People** who constitute our communities, and (2) educating **The People** continually to exercise their franchise from a position of knowledge and wisdom rather than illiteracy, ignorance, or poverty.

## ADULT EDUCATION: ESSENTIAL TO ALL TAXPAYERS

Adult continuing education is not a gift from taxpayers or a remediation of an earlier failure. Neither does it require a proximate return on investment. Rather, education is the responsibility of all citizens who want to maintain a vibrant and healthy democracy based on community, public dialogue, tolerance, love, and peace *for all diverse citizens*.

## ADULT EDUCATION: JOBS AND POLITICS

The authentic driving principles of capitalism, business and corporations become social evils when allowed to usurp the driving principles of a democratic commonwealth. Job skills are essential; however, as our businesses and corporations grow, so must the educated voice of the corporate worker to allay corporate oversight and to maintain the power relationship between individual corporate and collective commonwealth interests. Beyond teaching job skills, programs in adult education have a political responsibility to educate our citizens to understand their own voices in a democratic culture.

Democracy includes self-government manifested politically as voting. Our Constitution says *Of-By-For* the people, but it does *not* add “*only* the people who can afford to prepare themselves to participate,” or “*only* the people who are clever enough to own a stock portfolio or a computer, or who just got lucky”, and it does *not* say “*only* for those who care to take an interest.” “The People” means every single citizen of the commonwealth.

Deciding to vote, having the apparatus available to vote, and having the education to understand the complex issues and nuances of the various arguments and platforms, are all aspects of exercising our franchise. A person's education is directly linked to the question, "On what basis do I vote?" Behind the momentous act of voting stands everything we have ever understood, and everything any teacher ever taught us. On that collective act our democratic commonwealth stands or falls. The more we educate our adults, the less likely we are to fall.

### **THE UNITED STATES: LEADER AS A MATURE DEMOCRACY**

The electorate is not born with social or political wisdom. Education begins in the family and continues in our educational institutions. With rapid change over the last two centuries and the globalization of thought in the past 50 years, requirements of literacy and general education for self-governing adults have expanded. Hence, we need to rethink available education as *not just for children* but as essential and continuing support for a healthy civil society. Only by continuing the education of our electorate may we become the authentic leaders of a mature democracy as we claim we are on the world scene.

Adult education and democracy are connected in four ways. First, we can teach *about* democracy in our government, civics, social studies, and political philosophy courses. Second, formal curricular knowledge is continually transferred, creating knowledgeable voting adults. Third, the unwritten curriculum of peaceful collaboration in a multicultural arena strikes at the heart of xenophobia in monocultural, monoclass settings. Fourth, the unwritten curriculum includes the deeper connection to the vibrant ground of public dialogue and peaceful *association* of **The People** in a changing culture. Freedom of speech means little without intelligent practice in civilized settings.

When adult education in the United States is understood in its relationship to "the democratic experiment," we can see the broad outlines of what is at present a national embarrassment of Dickensian proportions. What is most essential to a democratic system — adult education — is, at present, marginalized and seen in economic terms alone. The existence of undereducated adults devoid of dialog and political acumen and, therefore, powerless to act precisely because they are undereducated adults, is the greatest irony existing in the world's oldest democracy — *and renders it decadent*.

A mature and vibrant democracy should know itself. It depends on its citizens to act knowledgeably and wisely. The more complex the world is, the more crucial is the ongoing education of our adults. The more power corporations and technology have, the more politically educated our citizenry must be to temper the potential for hubris in both. The more we want to be democratic leaders in the world, the more we must show how important the voices of our own entire electorate are.

A strong infrastructure for adult education is essential to the United States' *authentic* leadership as a democratic nation. ■

# Garrett Murphy

Policy Analyst

National Adult Education Professional

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*Literacy is the stream that flows through all the fields.*

— Barbara Tornholm

**Its contribution to the workforce.** Adult education is crucial in helping the unemployed qualify for work or training. Adult education programs also help keep America competitive by assisting the employed to master new skills and meet the demand for continuous improvement. Adult education's role was deemed so important by the Congress that the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act was made a title of the Workforce Investment Act.

But adult education is important to many more domains than just the workforce. It has an important role in:

**Programs for welfare recipients.** Many among the one third of the national caseload who were not able to find jobs through a direct placement approach will need basic skills upgrading to obtain employment. Moreover, many former welfare recipients now find themselves among the working poor and will need education to advance to true self-sufficiency.

**Programs for immigrants and refugees.** America continues to be a magnet for people from other lands. English-as-a-second-language and civics programs are essential to help this population find work, prepare for citizenship, and participate more fully in the lives of their communities.

**Public health.** The cost to America runs to tens of billions of dollars each year in paying for illnesses that are the result of inability to follow instructions, read prescriptions, provide proper prenatal care, or recognize early symptoms before illnesses become more serious.

**Incarcerated.** Although early recidivism studies have been challenged because of unscientific process, later, more careful studies show a significant drop in recidivism as a result of adult education that more than pays for itself in reduced costs of incarceration.

**Family.** Those who believe that the literacy problem in this nation can be solved by writing off the older generation and concentrating solely on improved education of children will soon find

that, without consistent family support and involvement, the hoped for improvement may never materialize. Family literacy programs that instruct parents, and children and their family members together, build a powerful commitment to education that yields impressive gains for all generations.

**Adults with a learning disability.** Now that learning disability is recognized as a true disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, adult education programs nationwide must provide the appropriate accommodations and specialized instruction needed by learning disabled Americans to reach their true potential.

If our nation is to meet all of the above challenges, as well as strengthen our communities through greater civic participation, it needs to invest in adult education by putting in place a high quality set of services that would be recognized as being on a par with K - 12 and postsecondary education, but that would retain the openness and spontaneity that sets this system apart from the more formal systems.

- ◆ It would have a vibrant program of professional development and be outcome-oriented — looking at the outcomes judged important not only by the system but by the participants.
- ◆ It would be a system characterized by substantial investment in research and evaluation, translating that research, whenever possible, into improved practice.
- ◆ The system would offer its clientele a variety of schedules and locations designed to meet their needs and feature truly responsive guidance and counseling geared up to attract the support services necessary for learners to meet their goals.
- ◆ It would make available the technology needed to reach out to populations hitherto unserved, make traditional classroom instruction more powerful, and offer practitioners high-quality professional development.

Within the very limited resources available to it, the adult education and literacy programs in the United States have worked hard to institute such a system. To fully realize this goal, the system not only needs resources, but also the attention of the stake holders and policymakers who are in a position to nurture and strengthen this burgeoning educational system. ■

## David Rosen

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Moderator: NLA Policy ListServ

The United States, once an economy driven by agriculture and manufacturing, now increasingly depends for its growth and continued high standard of living on the ability of American workers to process information. Recognizing this change, the elementary and secondary education reform effort has raised school standards, and demanded that high school diplomas certify not only significant background knowledge but also critical thinking and information-processing skills. This makes sense. However, since the majority of those who need these skills are already in the workforce, not in K - 12 schools, and since it will take 50 years for schools to have an impact on the majority of the workforce, education reform is not enough.

We should invest in an adult education and literacy system that will provide free elementary and secondary level education to adults, leading to an adult diploma, with standards that are equivalent to successful secondary schools. Some pieces of this system are in place now, but they are not integrated and, at best, the system now serves fewer than 10 percent of those in need. If we do not make this investment, we can expect countries like England, Canada, and Australia, which have invested in adult literacy, to make economic gains at our expense. Americans will have to adjust to a lower standard of living. And a growing population of retirees may be disappointed with the pool of low-income workers supporting their social security.

The President of the United States has announced that we must “leave no child behind” and that all American children will be able to read and write by third grade. This is a worthy goal, but to achieve it we need a robust adult education and literacy system. Reading readiness is the responsibility of parents and early childhood educators. Yet, too many parents, and too many early childhood educators, either cannot read and write, or are not comfortable enough in their own literacy skills to engage children in reading readiness activities. These children will go to school unprepared to learn to read and, therefore, will often be left behind.

Poor adult reading skill — to take just one of the basic skills — results in heavy costs to individuals’ health and to the United States health care system. Adults who cannot read well often do not take their medicine as prescribed. Home health care aides who cannot read well, may make mistakes. Adult education and literacy programs focused on older adults and health care workers would greatly improve health and reduce costs substantially. This is why the American Medical Association Foundation has made health literacy a top priority — although that awareness has not yet resulted in the added resources needed to provide adult basic skills services.

Millions of American immigrants do not speak English. They are not well integrated into the broader culture and have difficulty navigating transportation, health care, legal, school, and other systems, all of which they need to be able to do to succeed in this country. These immigrants understand this in the most painful way, and they wish to learn English. Yet, in many parts of the country there are long waiting lists for such services, in some urban areas up to several years. Free basic English language classes which help immigrants to acculturate are in everyone's best interest. ■



## Mary Dunn Siedow

Literacy Resource Center

North Carolina Community College System

Twenty years ago a rush of reports proclaimed the need for extending our educational expectations in preparation for expanded societal demands. As adult literacy spokespersons, we used these reports to argue for literacy programs that would move adults through high school equivalency and beyond.

As is often the case with predictions, we find ourselves facing a reality that differs from the future others predicted. We are involved in a revolution that may well outstrip the power of the Industrial Revolution to change society. The Knowledge Revolution of the 21st century demands new and heretofore unimagined skills from all adults, skills that cannot be described simply as additional years of schooling.

Adults in the 21st century will operate in multiple arenas concurrently. They will connect the work that provides a living with family obligations and participation in community activities. They will read and write and do math, of course, but they will also speak and listen and learn from observation. They will guide others, advocate for causes and respect the values of others. They will use constantly changing technologies and will take responsibility for their own learning. And they will construct all of this in the multiple contexts of their daily lives.

The 21st century demands more, not less of us than the 20th century. We can no longer be satisfied with an adult education system that seeks to develop basic reading and writing skills or even to assist with high school equivalency. We must look for ways to broaden the scope of adult education programs, increasing the range of skills adults can learn and making it possible for adults to learn and demonstrate accomplishment of those skills in life contexts.

My belief is that we should not argue for continuation of the adult literacy system that is familiar to us today. A focus on basic literacy and GED will not help adults faced with new demands. In fact, telling adults that these are the only skills they need does them a significant disservice.

It is incumbent on us to argue for a qualitatively different system, one in which adults come to literacy programs not for remediation but for broad expansion of their knowledge and abilities.

We have the makings of such a system available to us in the Equipped for the Future initiative. The EFF standards, role maps, purposes, and common activities comprise a solid foundation for the kind of education all adults will need in the near future. The emerging assessment framework will ensure that adults meet the standards in meaningful ways. Most important, the EFF quality model ensures that curriculum, instruction, and assessment occur in a manner that is purposeful and contextual.

My involvement in the EFF initiative means that I am not unbiased in these remarks, but it also means that I speak from personal conviction. I believe that we should look to Equipped for the Future as the model for framing new work and new legislation in adult literacy. ■

## Robbin Sorensen

National Literacy Summit Action Agenda Initiative 2002

National Coalition for Literacy

I believe we have a huge make-up game to play if the field of adult education is to have any presence in this administration's policies and their implementation. In the most base political sense, we struggle with a transfer of power. It's not so much the presidential transfer as it is the specific federal appointees/leaders who now are in charge of our field, but who have little background in it — a special sort of crisis. Of course the two are related.

Our field is ill-equipped and unprepared for this. We can't draw from an equivalent experience, because there isn't one. But, as Samuel Johnson said, "when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."

If we ever had the luxury of using the field's resources to convey the importance of adult education to the public and policymakers in the broadest sense, we no longer do. Not right now, anyway.

We need to use our limited capacity to reach very targeted people/groups. We need to educate and befriend them. We need to ask them to take very specific policy-related actions. This is the focus most needed now. The broader public will have to wait to get the good news about adult education.

To accomplish this, we need to figure out how to make and deliver compelling specific cases, maybe a number of them, that are carefully crafted and very means/action oriented (what we want the listener to *do*) and directed to very specific audiences over time, and with persistence.

My remaining remarks are more about *how* we should make the case than what the content of that case should be. No matter how we say it, we need to invest more time in laying out well-considered strategies for delivering a message to achieve effectiveness. Our field spends a lot of time figuring out how to say why adult education and literacy are important, and it has done a pretty good job. Yet, for some reason, we are faltering and have concluded that if only our words were better, our results would be better, too.

In short, we have pretty good words, but our delivery tactics, focus, and persistence are weak. Here are some thoughts about how to work on that with the present administration:

## **EACH CASE SHOULD BE MADE WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THIS ADMINISTRATION'S EDUCATION ASPIRATIONS**

This administration, like all before it, wants to demonstrate how it *reinvents* (the Clinton administration term) or *transforms* (the Bush administration term) government. It will strive to make this public impression by any means. The impression may or may not be accompanied by correspondingly sound federal policy and reform. As a result, the system of adult education and literacy must make its case for continued high-priority attention as a national education goal within the context of this administration's stated education priorities. We must use their language, reference their goals, and credit their agenda to make every case.

In a sense, there is only one case, and that is *their* case. We need to demonstrate how the current adult education and literacy system (AELS) and its goals fulfill their Strategic Plan. And with the improvements brought about by their strategic plan in accountability and in research, our implementing them, which we stand ready to do and have been begging to do, will help them achieve even more success.

## **USE THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION'S STRATEGIC PLAN**

Secretary Rod Paige recently provided us with a list of the administration's educational priorities by releasing the Department of Education's new "Strategic Plan." He echoed the administration's intent to "transform" by saying, "To implement this law, the No Child Left Behind Act, [will result in] the most fundamental reform of federal education policy in over 35 years."

The plan has six strategic goals:

1. Create a culture of achievement.
2. Improve student achievement.
3. Develop safe schools and strong character.
4. Transform education into an evidence-based field.
5. Enhance the quality of and access to postsecondary and adult education.
6. Establish management excellence.

Parts of all goals would be bolstered by better-prepared adults. To that end, the aims for adult education are specifically stated in Goal 5. The plan should be carefully reviewed by adult educators and a well-considered strategy devised for making our case within theirs.

## **CASE-MAKING IDEAS**

The following case-making suggestions or strategy suggestions may not be "deal breakers," but they may come to be part of an effective argument:

**A. Bear in mind and use Republican leadership history.**

President Reagan announced a National Literacy Initiative in 1983.

Former President Bush signed into law the National Literacy Act of 1991.

The Strategic Plan of the current President Bush's, as described by Secretary Paige, includes adult literacy in its Goal 5: *Enhance the quality of and access to postsecondary and adult education*. This inclusion appears to endorse, or can be argued to endorse, President Bush's intentions to continue to build and improve education priorities advanced by past Republican administrations.

Strategically, the "go to" argument should not emphasize the President's mother's adult literacy advocacy during his father's term. The President, like all children, does not want to live in his parents' shadow. I see harkening backward to past policy, Reagan's initiative, and the 1991 National Literacy Act, as more productive.

**B. Encourage a more detailed discussion of the administration's plans for those children who will not make it through the series of tests and other education improvements that are the goals of the Strategic Plan.**

It will be no spot on this administration's record that the goal of "no child left behind" cannot be 100 percent achieved. The Strategic Plan, 2002 - 2007, does not even hold that ambition (which is detailed in performance measure tables contained in the plan). However, it does not say much about those who will still be left behind.

The question to pursue or a case to make might include some of the following: what are the plans, or, how can we work together to make them, for, say, youth between the ages of 16 - 24 who will not experience the direct benefits of this administration's education plan during the 2002 - 2007 period? Currently, 37 percent of those who participate in the adult education and literacy system are aged 16 - 24.

Should we, for example, urge the creation and support of a more robust "alternative" school system to serve this age group?

Should we press for all states' K - 12 systems to use K - 12 dollars to provide education through age 19 (as Minnesota does)? Presently, most state's K - 12 commitment ends at age 16.

Should we bolster the current adult education and literacy system that serves this age group by pushing for a larger Federal appropriation to help the President achieve his education goals?

Alternatively, or at the same time, should K - 12 money follow the 16 - 24 year-old student who drops out of high school into an ABE/GED/language classroom/tutorial? Serving this group was

only alluded to in the Strategic Plan. The help of adult educators and seasoned planners on this matter might wind up being considered because there does not seem to be a plan for them, currently.

**C. As a near-term priority, a more thorough analysis of the plan and development of a thoughtful response to it are needed.**

The *Jump Start* report, the authorizing legislation for The National Literacy Act of 1991, the Action Agenda from last year's National Literacy Summit, and perhaps even earlier documents such as the Adult Performance Level Study of the Department of Education, should be among the benchmark reports used to guide this effort. They will demonstrate consistency, persistence, and clarity about the needs of the field and its goals. The objective is to define and describe how the field's needs and goals are consistent with, correspond to, support, enhance, or augment those of the President.

**D. Take advantage of the fact that the Department of Education's Strategic Plan is dedicated to more and better research.** We don't have to argue that case.. We do need to consider specific actions that we ought to carry out to be certain our field receives and benefits from the intended federal research support. For years we have shared the idea that more research is needed. Indeed, several national literacy organizations have well-developed research agendas and ideas to share if the Administration is interested.

**E. Leverage fully the Department's apparent predisposition to favor language education.** Due to a rapid increase in demand throughout the nation, meeting ESL literacy needs is the most pressing adult basic education challenge of the past decade. Moreover, "a live dog is better than a dead lion," and bolstering language education resources might be our biggest gain in the near term.

It's time to walk softly, and strategically — and to devise ways to live to fight another day. ■

## Archie Willard

Adult Learner

Founder & Chairman Emeritus, VALUE

A population with low literacy skills and low education levels is costly to a country in so many ways: higher welfare rolls, higher crime rates, overcrowded prisons, lower tax revenues, to name a few. It would seem to be a given that a strong adult literacy/ABE system is the best bargain around. Because of our ever-changing, fast-paced, hi-tech world, the need today is greater than ever for a strong adult education and literacy system in our country. Lifelong learning is necessary for everyone, not just people with literacy problems. The opportunity of adult education and literacy in this country should be free and accessible to people of all ages. We do not all develop in the same way, and we do not all learn at the same pace or in the same way. Many people find themselves left behind for any of a variety of reasons and need help at different stages of their lives, so there is a great need in our society for people to have a second chance in life.

I received a second chance because of an adult literacy program, and my life was changed forever. It has helped me to fit in and to find happiness. In my early 50s the meat packing plant where I had worked as a laborer for 31 years closed its doors. It was the only job I had ever had. The pay and benefits were good and I did not need to know how to read well, but I now needed a new job to support my family. I interviewed with an insurance company and was hired to work as an insurance adjuster. As a dyslexic, a low-level reader, and a poor speller, I was very concerned that things would not work out. I knew that if I were to succeed I would have to find help and develop an outside support system. I found an adult literacy program and told them my problem. Two times a week I worked one-on-one with a tutor on reading and spelling. I slowly made improvement. We also worked on things I needed to do to function as an insurance adjuster. We role-played, filled out insurance forms, and worked on the spelling of insurance words. This is the most important thing I did to survive on my new job. The program's help, guidance, and encouragement built the confidence in me to be able to do the job.

Because I was able to function on the job, as time passed my reading and spelling got better and better. After two years in the literacy program, I was ready to work on my own. Since leaving the program, it has always been there for me if I needed any help. All this time I kept my literacy difficulties hidden from my employer until near the end of my career. I worked as an insurance adjuster for 14 years, retiring at age 64.

The past few years I have worked on the national, state, and local levels to encourage other adults with literacy problems to seek help and make improvements in their lives. I have found:

- ◆ There are more people who need a second chance than we realize. People are good at hiding their reading problems, so facts and figures will understate the number of those who need help.

- ◆ Adults with literacy problems who improve their reading skills and enhance their lives can inspire children with reading problems.
- ◆ Strong adult education and literacy programs give people the opportunity to make positive changes in their lives. They have much to contribute. If given the opportunity they can find a place where they feel they belong and they will give back to society. For every tax dollar spent, two or three dollars will return to the economy, thus benefiting every part of society.

Our biggest problem is that we have worked so hard in other areas of literacy that we have forgotten to publicize adult literacy's successes. There is nothing more moving than to talk to or see someone who has benefited from adult education. Our President, Congress, society, and our children need to know adult learners as real people, not just statistics. Among other things:

1. Adult learners should be appointed to advisory boards throughout the literacy field.
2. Literacy jobs should be created for adult learners so that they can demonstrate to society the potential of this untapped resource. The new Laubach/LVA organization could be the leader.
3. VALUE (Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education) should be supported. It is the national organization founded to give adult student learners and achievers a voice. Its very existence shows that tax dollars spent on adult education and literacy are not wasted. VALUE especially needs financial help. If it can no longer function for lack of financial support, the adult education and literacy system will lose over and over again.

VALUE's members inspire other adult students and children with literacy problems to not give up. They also bring a human side to literacy and show that we are not just facts and figures, but real people who have gone through adult literacy programs.

Adult learners' voices need to help shape the future of adult education. State directors of adult education, NIFL, and other groups need to team up with adult learners to find a common direction in which to move. They should know personally some of the adult students in their states and work with them to help develop student leadership, and then they should use this leadership. ■