



# LITERACY UPDATE

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Literacy Assistance Center

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## Creating a 21st Century Adult Literacy System

> Martin C. Finsterbusch, Executive Director, VALUE, Inc.

*The House Committee on Education and Labor is exploring reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, Title II. On May 5, its Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness Subcommittee held a hearing on adult education and literacy. This issue is devoted to excerpts from testimony submitted for that hearing.*

My name is Marty Finsterbusch. I am the Executive Director of VALUE, Voice of Adult Learners United to Educate, the only national nonprofit organization in the US governed and operated by current and former adult literacy students. Our mission is to improve our nation's education system and empower adults with low literacy skills to realize their human potential. Almost all successful for-profit companies use consumer input and feedback to improve their products and services. VALUE helps adult learner leaders, literacy professionals,

and policy-makers do this too. In addition to policy advocacy, we help state-level agencies and organizations develop the capacity to train and support adult learner leaders. We also conduct biennial national adult learner leadership institutes and operate a national resource center on adult learner involvement and leadership.

I come to you today to plead for extensive changes to the current adult basic education system authorized under Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Ninety million adults in our nation have low literacy skills, according to the 2004 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The current adult basic education system is serving fewer than three million of them. The vast majority of the remaining 87 million don't want to seek help from a system that looks like the schools that failed them in the past—and continues to reinforce the stigma of adult low-literacy. Many who do seek help

drop out because they can't achieve their goals in a timely manner. If ever a structure cried out for reform and innovation, the adult literacy system in this country is one of them.

Before I make specific recommendations on reform, let me give you a bit more background on who we low-literate adults are and the very real threats we face daily. First, please put out of your mind the unfortunate stereotypical image of us as being homeless and of low intelligence. For many, adult literacy issues can be traced to undiagnosed learning disabilities, failing schools, and family issues—all having more to do with class, race, gender, and cultural bias than intelligence. As one of our members stated:

"We are your family-members; we are your neighbors; we are your co-workers. We are

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# 21st Century Literacy

> Elyse Barbell, *Executive Director*

It's hard to believe that FY '09 is coming to a close. The weather is still chilly and some funding for FY '10 remains unsecured, yet July 1 is just around the corner. So is WIA reauthorization. Congress hopes to have a bill by August, and the reauthorization process has already opened the door to discussion of policy issues on the national, state, and local levels. To give our readers a sense of some ideas that have emerged, we are devoting this issue of the Update to testimony from around the country that was submitted for a recent House Education and Labor subcommittee hearing in Washington.

We anticipate that one change in WIA will be to encourage more extensive use of new technology. The LAC is already taking its own steps in this direction. We have just completed renovations on our computer lab, with new computers donated by IBM and a new configuration that enhances user comfort and visibility. We are redesigning our website to make it more user-friendly and a better portal to all of our current work. When it is online, we will look forward to getting your feedback on how well we have succeeded.

You can now keep current with the LAC and literacy issues by signing up for Nell Eckersley's Twitter account, at <http://twitter.com/LACNYCnell>. If you have never tweeted before, this is a great way to get started, as well as a chance to enter into a discussion with other Net users throughout the country (and who knows? Perhaps soon throughout the world) who share an interest in our cause. Speaking of causes, you can visit our new cause page on Facebook at <http://apps.facebook.com/causes/278713/60130323?m=6d54c0aa>. The LAC is also preparing a webinar for members of the adult literacy community who would like to learn how to navigate the social networking universe. Stay tuned for further details.

Our fall catalogue, available soon, will include a number of new offerings on information technology, as well as sessions devoted to leadership training, our Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages certificate program, GED instruction, the transition to college network, and the next generation of our health literacy work. This year, our calendar will begin in August. We look forward to seeing you then and throughout the fall. With the help of our ASISTS data management system, we will be able to track professional development participation. By the time '11 rolls around, we hope to be able to offer programs a transcript of all the LAC professional development activities that their staff members and volunteers have attended.

In spite of worsening conditions in the economy at large and in our field, we have somehow continued to perform miracles, persevere, and even thrive. Congratulations to all of us. Keep up the amazing work. ●



PS Please join us at our 24th Annual Literacy Recognition Ceremony to honor eight of your outstanding peers, June 18th from 9:30am to 12:30pm at the Scholastic, Inc. auditorium, 557 Broadway at Prince St. Continental breakfast will be served. To attend, you must RSVP to 212.803.3323 and bring photo ID to the event.

## LITERACY UPDATE

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Editor Jon Steinberg



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## What Research Can Tell Us

> **Stephen Reder**, Chair, Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University

Nearly one-half the adult population of the United States stands to improve their financial health, their physical health, and the well-being of their families by improving their reading, writing, math, computer technology, and English skills. Given the size and importance of the adult education mission, we spend relatively little on research. Think of the many millions of dollars we would save through better utilization of health care services and the economic prosperity that would be generated from increased levels of employment and a more highly skilled workforce—and research suggests that all of these outcomes will result from appropriate investments in adult education. My own research illustrates, for example, how earnings and employment among adults whose literacy skills improve over time rise, and how they fall when the literacy skills of adults decline.

### Issues to research

Research has a vital role to play in helping shape and deliver adult education more effectively. My Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning using a random sample of about 1,000 high school dropouts over nearly 10 years looked at how youths and adults fail or succeed in reconnecting with learning, education, and work. It brought to light many issues that affect their participation in adult education and identified obstacles to their successful learning. I found, for example, that many adults work independently to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED. This includes many adults who never attend a basic skills program. This, along with the long waiting lists that potential students find at many programs, tells us that there is much more demand for services than the system can supply.

The research further shows that many adults engage in periods of “self study” between periods of program participation. This suggests that programs could increase their outreach and enrollment and increase their students’ persistence by connecting self-directed learning activities with traditional classes. Technology could play an important role here, not only in offering distance education, but in connecting different learning modalities and activities over time.

Studies of only those students in programs teaches us little about effective outreach methods and student retention problems, however. We need more longitudinal research that follows both youth and adults who participate in literacy programs and those who do not. We need to discover how to provide services to adults so they participate in learning with sufficient engagement, intensity and duration to reach their goals. We also need to learn much more about how to help the hardest-to-serve learners—those who are at the lowest literacy levels, those for whom English is a second language and who are illiterate in their native language, and those who have learning disabilities. Many of these individuals will require years of instruction in order to reach their learning and employ-

ment goals. We must be able to help them stay the course as they cope with learning setbacks as well as successes, family concerns, and work issues. Building the persistence of learning in adults facing such long trajectories must be a research priority. We need to learn how to build locally connected and integrated delivery systems that allow community-based programs to feed low-level learners into higher-level institutionally-based ESL and adult education programs. And how to help adult education students transition successfully into post-secondary education and training programs. At the same time, we need much more information about how to reconnect dropouts with both education and family-supporting work.

Most literacy and adult basic education programs retain learners for relatively short periods of time. Therefore, we need to develop new types of learning support systems that provide persistent structures for adults to follow. These structures might combine periods in which adults attend programs, use online materials to work independently or with tutors, or receive support services from local community-based organizations (CBOs) and volunteer programs, for example. Grants could encourage and assist local communities to develop cross-sector, long-term adult learning support systems, perhaps utilizing technology to provide shareable information that can be used to foster more learner-centered integration of services to learners and a range of providers and agencies working with them.

**My own research indicates that important program impacts are missed by a system that focuses on short-term outcomes and narrow measures of literacy and skills development.**

We need research to improve the National Reporting System (NRS), the accountability system used in adult education. I support program accountability; however, my own research indicates that important program impacts are missed by a system that focuses on short-term outcomes and narrow measures of literacy and skills development. When we compared program participants and non-participants over time, the evidence of program impact

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# Skills the Jobless Need

> Sherry Drobner, Program Manager, L.E.A.P., Richmond, CA

The Literacy for Every Adult Project (L.E.A.P.) is a community-based literacy program administered by the library through the City of Richmond in California. It began as part of the California Literacy Campaign, a state-wide initiative begun in 1984 to serve the lowest level literacy students—learners who would most likely need individual attention or a non-classroom style learning environment. The library programs served as a bridge for new learners, rather than an alternative to adult basic education schools.

When L.E.A.P. opened its doors, many of our students were older residents born in the South. Due to social conditions of the time, they had little or no formal education. It is important to note that these students, as well as others, came to our programs for a number of reasons, not necessarily because they sought employment. Many of them worked on the docks, in the refinery, or other workplaces that needed low-skilled or manual labor. They had learned how to get their job done with limited reading skills. The research conducted in the 1980's by Hannah Fingeret describes the extensive social networking that adults with limited literacy skills engaged in, suggesting that it enabled them to be successful, self-reliant and employable, despite their limited literacy skills.

In the 1980s, when I administered the literacy program in Alameda County, two out of every five students had enrolled to improve their skills for job-readiness. Now, 20 years later, 100 percent of our students are seeking work, and they see literacy as the threshold to a job interview. It's easy to see why. Candidates for apprenticeships in a building trades union must have a G.E.D. or high school diploma. Applicants to clean animal cages at the Humane Society need one as well.

In Richmond, unemployment is a staggering 15.8%. Each week 40-50 new people arrive at our door; 90% are referred to us by our local One Stop Center (supported by the Workforce Investment Act, Title I), after they are deemed ineligible for a slot in a job-training program.

A third of them are out of work and seek English language help to improve their chances of finding a job or entering a job-training program. The remaining two-thirds are evenly divided between educationally disengaged youth (up to age 26) who dropped out of school, and the older generation, also dropouts, who had managed to enter the workforce and stay employed until the current economic downturn. Both groups have limited literacy skills in reading, writing, and math and hope to find work or spots in training programs that guarantee job opportunities when they finish.

One might say that the One Stop Career Center is a feeder to L.E.A.P.; it also can be said that we are a feeder to the job-training programs, providing basic skills that make it possible for students to take part in the programs—including many adults who have a high school diploma or a G.E.D. Last year, for example, the One Stop asked us to provide a special class in basic math skills for their participants.

Similarly, the East Bay Leadership Career Academy found that a cohort

of single fathers enrolled in its new program offering remedial classes at the local community college came in with reading, writing and math skills below 8th grade level. Attending our program in the morning enables them to keep up in their community college classes. We are also working with several mothers who are sent to us by CAL-LEARN, a state cash aid and services program, to get literacy skills they need to find a job.

None of these agencies compensates L.E.A.P. for its work. Nor do we receive federal or state grant money from the Workforce Investment Act, Title II. We are constantly told that WIA Title I funds cannot pay for the many participants whom we prepare for employment and the job-training programs. We are told that job-training programs don't provide basic literacy tutoring, that they teach a curriculum written at a level that requires specific literacy skills upon entry. For example, enrollees in the Richmond Builds job-training program will be offered a new curriculum on eco-literacy. Will students be able to read the text and, if not, will we see them at our doorstep, even though they have a GED or high school diploma? Community-based literacy programs can and will play a support role to ensure that job-training programs are successful, yet they are not well incorporated into the legislation to give them access to federal support. Between 1984 and 1993, the Business Council for Effective Literacy brought discussion of work place skills to the national arena and raised the need for programs to address critical thinking skills as we approached the 21st century workplace. The 1991 SCANS Report argued that, because of globalization and the expanding use of technology, solid work performance requires a broader set of skills than are included in traditional education.

Federal funding through Community Development Grants could help community programs partner with our One Stop Centers and Community Colleges in the economic development of our community. Modifications to the accountability system that acknowledge the instructional needs of learners at the lowest literacy levels could provide community-based organizations such as ours with a federal funding pathway. If we had the resources, we could build a comprehensive and successful job training program of our own.

The reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act provides an opportunity for Congress to support the critical role L.E.A.P. and other community-based literacy programs play in this country's adult education system. We urge this subcommittee to write legislation that will:

- Create a stronger link between programs receiving WIA Title I and WIA Title II funds so that adults at all literacy levels can find service that meets their needs;
- Provide federal funding for community-based literacy programs that support job-training programs;
- Give community-based agencies access to job training funding; and
- Modify the National Reporting System to reflect the needs of learners at the lowest literacy levels. ●

## Literacy Recognition Awards

The 24th annual Literacy Recognition Awards Ceremony will be held on Thursday, June 18th, from 9:30am to 12:30pm at the Scholastic, Inc. auditorium, 557 Broadway at Prince St. Continental breakfast will be served. To attend, you must RSVP to 212.803.3323 and bring photo ID to the event. Everyone in the field is invited to attend and celebrate this year's outstanding literacy practitioners:

Elizabeth Aderman, *Instructional Facilitator, NYC Department of Education*

Steve Hinds, *Math Teacher/Staff Developer, CUNY*

Michael Hunter, *Administrator, University Settlement*

Suma Kurien, *Administrator, CUNY*

Nancy Nadel, *Staff Developer, BEGIN*

Terry Sheehan, *Administrator, New York Public Library*

Alex Sokol, *ESOL Instructor, CUNY*

Darryl Williams, *Administrator, NYC Department of Education.*

## LAC Seeking RAEN Program Director

The Literacy Assistance Center is looking for a Program Director for the NYC Regional Adult Education Network.

Working under the supervision of the LAC Director of Professional Development, the Program Director's duties will include acting as liaison between local WIA-funded programs and the New York State Education Department; assisting in NYSED monitoring; providing targeted technical assistance to help programs meet NRS targets; and developing and maintaining networks of adult literacy providers to promote workforce development investment areas and the one-stop delivery

systems, as well as the transition to post-secondary activities. Requirements: BA in Education or related field (graduate degree preferred); five years of related program and operational management experience in adult education; strong written, oral, and public speaking communication skills; demonstrated ability to develop, implement, and evaluate a project; knowledge of current trends in the field, including the use of technology in the classroom. Please send your resume and cover letter to [hr@lacnyc.org](mailto:hr@lacnyc.org) with title RAEN Program Director.

To see the complete job description, go to <http://lacnyc.org/about/RAENjobad.pdf>.

## Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages to Adults

The LAC will offer a new series in its Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages to Adults certificate program, beginning Saturday October 3, 2009. This special program based on current theory and best practice will total 36 hours in six courses, accompanied by a teaching practicum. Participants in the program will use the online MOODLE course management system (no experience necessary).

Each cohort is limited to 25 people, and spaces are expected to fill rapidly, once again. An Open House will be held on Wednesday, August 19, 6:00pm-8:00pm.

Applications and information on the course and fees will be posted on the LAC website at [www.lacnyc.org](http://www.lacnyc.org)

Applications are due Monday, Sept 21st, and should be sent to Barbara Sparks, Director of Professional Development, at [barbaras@lacnyc.org](mailto:barbaras@lacnyc.org).

## Advocating for Literacy

The National Coalition for Literacy (NCL) has prepared a new online Advocacy Clearinghouse and Toolkit. The toolkit contains dozens of resources, facts and reports provided by member organizations of the NCL and is a one-stop shop for all advocates interested in improving adult

education. The materials in the toolkit are essential for adult education advocacy efforts on both the federal and state level. The toolkit is available for perusal and downloading at [www.ncladvocacy.org](http://www.ncladvocacy.org).

## The Change Agent Health Issue

The Change Agent has just published a special issue on health: 56 pages of short articles, illustrations, cartoons, math lessons, and quizzes explore students experiences dealing with health challenges and their individual- and community-based responses to those challenges. Learn about the U.S. health insurance industry, student-recommended home remedies, students experiences of health disparities, tips and tricks for being healthy, the connection between mental and physical health and much more. The Change Agent is well suited for a multi-level ABE and/or ESOL classroom.

Bulk subscriptions (25 copies of 2 issues a year) are \$60. Individual one- or two-year subscriptions are \$10 and \$18 at [www.nelrc.org/changeagent](http://www.nelrc.org/changeagent) or calling 617-482-9485.

## CONFERENCE

### June Right to Literacy Convention

A national Right to Literacy Convention will be held on June 13 in Buffalo, New York. The call for the conference declares that the conference will demonstrate how low literacy is an injustice that threatens our democracy, vote on specific resolutions to inform system change, create a Call to Action for a comprehensive lifelong learning system, and sign a Declaration of Literacy and Justice for All. The convention is the culminating event of the National Community Literacy Conference, beginning June 11. More information is available at [www.literacypowerline.com](http://www.literacypowerline.com).

# CALENDAR of events >>

## June 3

### Asists Reports Training

Wednesday, June 3rd, 9:30 am - 1:30 pm

Facilitator: Nell Eckersley

Beginning with a general overview of the tables and reports available on ASISTS, this training will give data managers and other staff members the tools to manage their NRS data throughout the year.

RSVP: [asistssupport@lacnyc.org](mailto:asistssupport@lacnyc.org) or 212.803.3357.

## June 3

### Immigrant Parents on Parent Involvement in Their Children's Education

Wednesday, June 3rd, 9:00 am - 11:00am

Facilitator: Silvana Vasconcelos

A panel of mothers and fathers from the Queens Library family literacy program will discuss how they are involved in their children's education.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 4

### ALECC Module 6, Cohort 2: Indicators of Program Quality

Thursday, June 4, 9:00am - 12:30pm

Facilitator: Marilyn J. Rymniak

In this workshop, participants will develop an understanding of the relevant core concepts and standards in the field of teaching quantitative literacy and numeracy. The workshop will focus on the central importance of problem-solving abilities in mastering practical math skills for adults.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 4

### ALECC Module 7, Cohort 2: Indicators of Program Quality

Thursday, June 4, 1:30pm - 5:00pm

Facilitator: Marilyn J. Rymniak

In this workshop, participants will develop an understanding of the importance of adult education in the Regents P-16 Action Plan and will identify the qualities that make a good adult education and literacy program. The workshop will focus on NYSED Indicators of Program Quality. Participants will develop personal professional development plans for the coming year.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 5

### Family Educators Network:

### Parent Engagement

Friday, June 5, 9:30am-3:30pm

Facilitators: Maricella Carerra, Blair Toso

This is the second session of a two-part workshop providing participants with an overview of literacy and the various existing family literacy programs and trainings. The facilitators will discuss different views of literacy in detail, the reading techniques employed in these programs and the most effective ways to work with parents. Each participant will develop a plan for incorporating some of these techniques into their curriculum. The second session will focus on reviewing how well the plans worked and learning further skills.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 12

### ESOL Teacher Share

Facilitator: Winston Lawrence

Friday, June 12, 2:00pm–4:00pm

In these sessions, teachers have an opportunity to hear and discuss promising and innovative practices that colleagues are pursuing. They will explore various aspects of English language teaching, particularly the teaching of the four skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Individual teachers will bring in materials to share with the rest of the group.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 16

### ASISTS Data Entry Training

Tuesday, June 16, 9:30am–4:30pm

Facilitator: TBA

This training introduces new users to the Adult Student Information System and Technical Support (ASISTS) web-based data system. Topics covered include navigating ASISTS data entry screens; inputting student, class, and instructor information; updating outcomes, tests, and contact hours; and running management and funding reports.

RSVP: [asistssupport@lacnyc.org](mailto:asistssupport@lacnyc.org) or 212.803.3357.

## June 20

### TESLA Certificate, Session 4: Curriculum Development

Saturday, June 20, 9:30am–4:30pm

Facilitator: Marilyn J. Rymniak

This session introduces standards-based curriculum development, syllabus design, and lesson planning for different TESOL contexts.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## June 23

### Leadership Development Certificate for Emerging Leaders

Tuesday, June 23, 1:30pm–5:00pm

Facilitators: Barbara Sparks, Be Jensen

This is the final session of our six-month skill-building workshops with one-on-one coaching. Course sessions are addressing the challenges emergent leaders face while incorporating reflective, context-based activities. Leadership coaches work with the participant to assist them in achieving their self-identified goals.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323

**All LAC events take place  
at 32 Broadway, 10th floor.**

**Building management is now  
requiring that all visitors have  
picture ID and sign in. Please  
leave extra time for this proce-  
dure.**

## June 26

### ALECC Certificate Ceremony

Friday, June 26, 11:00am–2:00pm

Facilitator: Marilyn J. Rymniak

Certificates will be awarded to participants in cohorts 1 and 2 who have attended all seven ALECC modules.

RSVP: [rsvp@lacnyc.org](mailto:rsvp@lacnyc.org) or LAC Reservation Line at 212.803.3323.

## LAC Professional Development Center Open Hours

Every Monday, 1–5 pm

### Computer Learning Center

Visit our 16-station Internet-connected computer lab to explore ways to use computers to enhance instruction. Browse the web for sites that lend themselves to your lessons, or build a project that uses common office software to enhance communication skills. For information, contact Mariann Fedele, 212.803.3325 or [mariannf@lacnyc.org](mailto:mariannf@lacnyc.org).

### Dan Rabideau Clearinghouse

Explore the city's largest collection of materials for adult literacy education, including books, journals, and audiovisual materials on professional development as well as curricular and reading resources for ESOL, ABE, and GED classes. For information, contact Dr. Winston Lawrence, 212.803.3326 or [winstonl@lacnyc.org](mailto:winstonl@lacnyc.org).

on learner outcomes depended on the literacy measure used and the time period involved. According to these findings, the NRS uses too short a follow-up time period for the literacy measures it uses; therefore, the NRS may not help programs put their best foot forward. Perhaps even more problematic, the NRS may not be as useful as it could be for program improvement. A review of the NRS could determine whether changing either the type of literacy measure or lengthening the time period would better support programmatic improvement efforts. Other issues could be examined as well, such as making sure that the accountability system gives due credit to programs for assisting the lowest-level and hardest-to-serve students. In supporting adults and the programs that serve them, we must keep in mind the words of William Butler Yeats: “Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.”

## The adult literacy field needs a comprehensive research and development center

### Putting Research Findings into Practice

To assure translation of research into improved educational practice, increased support is needed for adult education teacher training and professional development. Federal funding once available for State Literacy Resource Centers, for example, is no longer provided and the resources for professional development are highly uneven across states. Research can help us determine the role that technology should play in providing such teacher training and professional development in a cost-effective manner.

### Increasing the capacity of the adult education delivery system

The goal of all this research is to increase both the quantity and quality of programs and services, not just so that programs can serve more adults — although we certainly need to do that — but also so that we increase the persistence of their learning. We want more adults to stay in programs long enough to reach their education, job-training, and family-supporting employment goals. Better coordination of WIA Title I and Title II programs can play an important part in this as long as we do not lose the basic educational focus of the Title II programs. The stimulus legislation that allows Title I Workforce Investment Boards to fund Title II adult literacy providers is an excellent step in this direction, one which I hope the Committee will include in the reauthorization. The knowledge gained through research can help us develop programs that offer a continuum of services across skill levels and life contexts, and engage the full range of resources and capacities in learners’ communities, including full-time and part-time teachers and volunteers, whether working in institutionally-based programs or CBOs. Research can also help us assess the extent to which adult learners are availing themselves of such links to the job training available in their communities. Such a service continuum is vital to addressing the complex issues of adult literacy.

### Increasing our research capacity

In addition to pursuing a systematic research agenda through targeted

grant competitions, the adult literacy field needs a comprehensive research and development center focused specifically on adult literacy and learning. Legislation establishing the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) requires the Department of Education to operate one or more centers that address adult literacy issues. Although the Department of Education established R&D centers for adult literacy that operated successfully for 15 years, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then in a collaborative of universities led by Harvard University, funding for such a center has recently been discontinued. If the leadership at IES is not interested in issuing an RFP for a center for adult literacy and education, it is important for other legislation to establish one. The successful applicant could be a university or network of universities. It should work closely with literacy and adult education providers and focus on conducting basic and applied research, distilling practitioner knowledge, and disseminating results so that practitioners can understand, respond to, and translate research into practical programs.

Wherever such a Center is established, it is essential that it conduct research about how programs can best support the learning of diverse adult learners to help them meet their long-term educational and employment goals. It must be managed in a way that keeps it free from political interference and pressures unrelated to the needs of the adult education system. Along with an advisory board and peer-review processes, it needs the independence to construct and pursue a long-term research agenda based on an appropriate mix of exploratory and confirmatory research methods.

## The successful applicant could be a university or network of universities.

While funding has been provided occasionally for notable research projects, the United States invests little money in research and development that would help us increase capacity and improve the quality and effectiveness of our adult education system. Considering the importance of these services to success in higher education, lifelong learning and economic competitiveness, Congress must commit to supporting systematic research designed to identify proven ways to increase program capacity and effectiveness. I recommend that Congress:

- Immediately reauthorize WIA Title II to contribute to our economic recovery, with a central focus on adults who are not functionally literate;
- Provide for an RFP and funding for an independent research center on adult literacy and education;
- Focus research on building student persistence, reconnecting dropouts, helping the hardest-to-reach learners, and supporting successful transitions of adult education students into family-wage employment and postsecondary education and training;
- Develop learning support systems that provide persistent structures for adults to follow over relatively long periods of time;
- Explore uses of technology to increase delivery system capacity through online and blended instructional programs and to coordinate employment, education and social services; and
- Review and modify the National Reporting System to foster better accountability and program improvement. ●

## 21st Century System *continued*

small-business owners; we are first-responders. We are among the working poor and some of us are even millionaires. Few around us ever know our truth. Because of shame and stigma, we keep it hidden.” And let me add, we are among the millions of people who worked for decades in the industries of America that no longer exist or whose jobs are being relocated to other countries.

Some adults with low literacy skills who publicly admit it lose their jobs—jobs for which they received good performance appraisals up until their secret was revealed; others lose their chance at promotion; they may also lose the respect of their family, friends, and co-workers. As another VALUE member stated:

“When we lose jobs, we are unable to transfer to new jobs and new industries, not for lack of desire, but lack of literacy skills. We are people who can’t get into job training programs or off of welfare, not for lack of desire, but because of a lack of literacy skills. We are also people who want to learn English as the language of our new country, but we can’t because of the learning skills we failed to get in our nations of origin.” Far too few adults with low literacy skills are going to seek help when faced with these very real threats. Especially, they will not seek help from the current system.

My personal experience provides an example of what some low-literate adults experience in our nation’s educational system. As a small child, I suffered from a serious ear infection that caused me to mishear certain sounds. In the course of testing, my family discovered that I have a learning disability. I started out going to public school, but had to stay after school almost every day. I wasn’t learning to read, but my teachers would have promoted me anyway because I was a good kid who tried hard. Instead, my parents sent me to a semi-private special education school with no grade levels and few challenges. The kids in my neighborhood asked, “Why do you go to that retard school?” I graduated in 1982 with a 4th grade reading level and a poor self-image.

After working for two years, I decided I wanted to go to college. I knew I needed to improve my reading so I went back to my former school. They said they couldn’t help me because I already had my high school diploma and referred me to a community-based volunteer program. There, I improved my reading six grade-levels in 14 months. I began taking courses at the community college. Despite getting A’s and B’s in all of my other courses, I kept failing English composition. Documentation of my learning disability didn’t excuse my inability to spell. I was told I could never graduate until I passed my English courses. With this obstacle on top of job and family responsibilities, it took me 10 years to earn my Associates Degree.

During that time period, I decided to dedicate the rest of my life to adult literacy. I started by organizing a student support group in the program that had helped me so much. I became a part-time staff member there before serving on its Board of Directors. Beginning in 1986, I organized a state student network; conducted workshops and conferences at state and national levels; and served on the boards of several national literacy organizations. I have been appointed to the Pennsylvania State Interagency Coordinating Council under three different Governors. In 1999, I was a National Institute for Literacy Fellow, after which I became Executive Director of VALUE, the national adult learner organization I helped create.

I talk with adult learners from around the country continually. They share with me their insights, their frustrations, and promising practices. I continually talk with my colleagues from state and national literacy

organizations too. I feel I am able to share with you a good sense of what works in our system and what doesn’t—from the consumer perspective.

The Model T car, silent movies, and vaudeville have long been outdated, yet the approach to adult literacy we use in this country today is still based on assumptions and practices created before the first Model T rolled off the assembly line, and long before the advent of silent movies. It is no wonder that perhaps as many as 20 percent of learners drop out of adult literacy programs before completing 10 hours of instruction and less than three percent reach their primary goal of earning their GED in three to five years. The system is simply not designed to meet the self-identified and evolving needs of today’s learners and employers in a realistic time-frame—needs that should redefine adult basic education.

VALUE’s Social Change Initiative calls for a consumer-driven redesign of the adult basic education system to help many times more learners achieve their personal goals faster, using 21st Century approaches. To pay for this system modernization and expansion, funding must be dramatically increased. And finally, adult literacy policy must not be dealt with in isolation; it must be integrated with other federal policies and programs.

Many of the recommendations that follow are based on the promising practices of exceptional providers in the adult education and vocational rehabilitation fields that should be implemented throughout the system.

*Adult learners should be taught to use modern technology for reading and writing.* Literacy, as stated in the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) definition, is “the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.” The focus of the current system in the U.S. is on reading and writing. The computer is used mostly as a tool for drill and practice. Technologies that read, write, and translate are already used by the blind, the deaf, diplomats and international business people. In fact, Congress recently added a free software download to its website that enables anyone with limited literacy capacity to “read”—through hearing—all Congressional materials.

Using technology, adult learners could learn how to gain access to information in three to five months, rather than the three to five years it takes for an adult learner to reach the same point by first learning to read. This “virtual learning” approach would enable them to turn their attention to employment and training information much sooner. Essentially, what we’re suggesting is replacing the current adult education and literacy approach with one that looks much more like the vocational rehabilitation model. This would shorten the time required for WIA Title II activities and make it fit better with the Title I timeframe.

*Make case management a core service.* Currently the Act does not require the provision of case management. Due to the complexity of the lives of adult learners, it should be required as a core service in both adult literacy programs and One-Stop centers. Case managers should help adult learners deal with problems in their lives that prevent them from pursuing their education and provide career guidance, making it possible for them to make informed decisions and prepare for future education, a job, and/or job training. Some exemplary programs have a current or former adult learner take on this role, enhancing the rapport between client and staff.

*continued on page 11*

# Effective Family Literacy

> **Roberta Lanterman**, Director, Long Beach Family Literacy Program, Long Beach, CA

All too often, we compartmentalize education – early childhood education, adolescent education, adult education, workforce training. Focusing on the interconnectedness of these issues would lead us to a real, long-lasting solution – educating the entire family.

One of the reasons the home environment is so important is that students spend five times as much time in communities and with their families as they do at school, so educators cannot conquer this challenge alone. “Are L.A.’s Children Ready for School?” a RAND Corporation study conducted in 2004, is one of many showing a direct correlation between the education of the parent, the poverty status of the home, and the likelihood of the child’s success in school. Addressing the needs of the entire family is a powerful community strategy for raising educational levels, improving workforce skills and breaking the cycle of poverty. In 2007, Education Week issued a report that underscores family literacy’s philosophy, “From Cradle to Career: Connecting American Education from Birth to Adulthood.” More than half of the 13 categories used to predict children’s future success were related to parents and other adults. Another category (preschool enrollment) is directly related to parents’ actions and the value they place on education. Family income, parental educational attainment and parental employment were the three leading categories. Successful states had strong results in those categories, which served as a springboard for success in the remaining measures.

Consider Margarita. Her dream was to become a teacher. Obstacles got in the way. She was orphaned. She became pregnant and moved to a country where she did not know the language and had to sleep in the water heater room instead of a bedroom. Her husband’s drinking problem was endangering the children, and she had to work two low-wage jobs. Through family literacy, Margarita learned English, became involved in her children’s education and revived her dream of becoming a teacher. She has become a U.S. citizen, will soon graduate from California State University and is already a certified preschool teacher. But the benefits of her family literacy participation have extended beyond Margarita. One daughter graduated from college and has started her own business. Another is studying to become a paralegal. The third is enrolled in a gifted program in high school, with an emphasis on international business.

The Long Beach Family Literacy Program has been in operation since 1992 and has been lauded as a national example by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Seventy-three percent of our participants are at or below the federal poverty level, and 61 percent have not gone beyond the ninth grade. Our program includes four components: adult education, parent education, parent and child together time, and early childhood education. By addressing the needs of parents and children simultaneously, we are outperforming stand-alone programs. We exceed state benchmarks year after year in adult education proficiency, preschool vocabulary, and preschool alphabet knowledge.

Our most recent adult outcomes show that parents made gains more

than double the state reading proficiency benchmarks. Our children who entered kindergarten increased their English-language skills at rate of 2.5 times higher than the federal benchmark.

Our program ranks in the 90th percentile for attendance and retention because we do not let families fall through the cracks. We know if they come to our program consistently, they will reach their goals. It is that simple, but at the same time, it is that complicated. Take Cecilia, who was coming to our Toyota Family Literacy Program with her young daughter. After leaving her abusive husband, she moved into a domestic violence shelter 30 miles away. The shelter staff wanted her to quit the family literacy program and find immediate employment, but Cecilia and her daughter persevered – knowing the commitment would lead to long-term stability. They regularly took a train to the program. As a result, she received her high school diploma with honors and is attending Long Beach City College to become an art teacher instead of being stuck in a low-wage job. Cecilia still comes to our program – taking two buses just to get there.

Our efforts address the educational needs of children and their parents to create literate home environments and prepare adults to enter the workforce. We continue to implement new measures that ensure innovation and success. In 1998, we joined forces with the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network to integrate family literacy and welfare-to-work programming. The model is still in place. The partnership with our local Workforce Investment Act employment entity is invaluable in bridging the gaps between education and employment for families in need.

Last year, we were one of five programs in the country awarded a grant from Toyota to bring our program to Hispanic families and expand our program to three local elementary school campuses. Created by the National Center for Family Literacy, the Toyota program, brings parents and children together in classrooms and includes culturally relevant programming. Toyota and First 5 Los Angeles provide the funding for our core services, but part of the key to sustainability is that we don’t rely on one or two funding streams. We hold fund-raisers with vendors and apply for grants from community foundations. We also request in-kind services and resources from our award-winning school district and our Workforce Investment Act partner.

The need is great in Long Beach—42 percent of the population is low-income, and the unemployment rate exceeds 10 percent. The good news is the entire community is responding to the success they see. Small business owners realize that educated community members make better employees and consumers. Local McDonald’s operators are opening their doors for Family Mealtime Literacy Nights to provide workshops and meals to help families improve their literacy skills together.

The Toyota/NCFL model has been successfully implemented in both urban and rural settings – from New York, Chicago and right here in D.C. to Shelby County, Alabama; Wichita, Kansas; and Springdale,

## 21st Century System *continued*

Transition from a literacy program to further education, employment, or job training is another area in which a case manager is essential. Figuring out what your options are, what the requirements are for each option, what next steps to take, and how to prepare yourself for the transition can be a bewildering set of tasks; I know it was for me at one point.

Adult education instruction should include workplace essential skills. Currently the Act doesn't address the much needed soft skills including customer/client service, critical thinking/problem solving, cultural sensitivity, leadership, negotiation, personal responsibility, teamwork, and time-management that are essential for the success of all workers. These skills are needed by those of us who pursue higher education as well as those who take part in job training.

*Measure performance differently.* The use of measures such as standardized test scores is inconsistent with a consumer-driven system and completely inappropriate given the complexities of adult lives in the 21st Century. Learners stay in adult education programs as long as they see the connection between instruction and their personal goals. Instead of being based on a "deficit model," instruction should be based on a "wealth model" that helps adult learners realize their own strengths and knowledge and use them as a basis for further learning.

*Share leadership with adult learners.* One of VALUE's core beliefs is that just as most successful for-profit companies rely on consumer input and feedback to improve their products and services, adult learners should be part of the planning, delivery, and supervision of adult education services and research at every level. As recipients of adult education services, they have a unique, important, and all-too-often overlooked perspective regarding what does and does not work. By and large community-based programs have been the most willing to embrace an advisory role for adult learners, and in many programs a governance role. The Act should specifically require the integration adult learners into program operation and governance at all levels.

During the upcoming intergovernmental conference on adult education to be held later this month in Brazil, UNESCO will consider an International Adult Learners' Charter. In addition to affirming adult literacy as a human right, this charter states that adult learners have the right to a central role in policy development for adult and lifelong learning systems.

UNESCO officials anticipate that the charter will be approved.

*Change participation requirements.* Because research shows that learners make greater learning gains with increased participation, participation requirements were established for publicly funded programs. While they may be fine for adults without significant job or family responsibilities, they pose a barrier to some who seek help and cause others to drop out when they find they just can't fit the required level of participation into their busy lives. Additionally, a significant number of community-based adult literacy programs forego public funding because they primarily serve adult learners who can't meet the participation requirements. The Act should expressly permit the flexibility needed so these programs don't have to forego public funding in order to serve adult learners with one or more jobs and family responsibilities.

*Design adult education policy and outreach efforts to minimize the personal shame and the societal stigma attached to low literacy, which also present significant barriers to participation.*

*Encourage combinations of adult basic education with job training.* For many low-literate adults, the amount of time required to master reading and writing skills under WIA Title II is incompatible with the employment and training timeframe under WIA Title I or TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. This frequently prevents adults with low literacy skills from participating in job training and literacy instruction at the same time. Research shows that learners progress more rapidly if education and training are combined. Adopting a "virtual literacy" approach would benefit both adult learners and the system as a whole.

The success of policies and programs dealing with early childhood education, health care, welfare, retraining the American workforce, and maintaining a strong military with capable recruits all depend on having an adult population with better literacy skills. We cannot continue to waste the potential of the current adult population by devoting so little attention and so few resources to the adult basic education system. ●

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## Family Literacy *continued*

Arkansas. The needs of New York City are obviously different from the needs in Springdale, Arkansas, but the flexibility of family literacy programming yields success for all communities. Results from the Toyota programs already implemented include:

- 54 percent of participating adults have improved their literacy scores by at least one level. This progress has contributed to an improved understanding of basic oral and written instructions in English, reading a note from a teacher, setting up a doctor's appointment, and displaying basic computer literacy skills (word processing and sending e-mail);
- Children in the program have exceeded peers in such areas as academic performance (79 percent), motivation to learn (86 percent), attendance (96 percent), classroom behavior (91 percent),

and involvement in classroom activities (88 percent);

- 92 percent of participating parents stated they are better able to help their child with homework; and
- 91 percent of participating parents report that their child's grades have improved.

We provide adults and their children with the skills and resources necessary to be successful in their education, financially secure and productive members of their communities. They become lifelong learners, which has never been more important in this global, high-tech economy. I strongly encourage Congress to continue to support family literacy programs as an important delivery model in the provision of adult education services. ●

# Liberation, yes!

I am a thirty nine year old Mexican American woman. I married very young at the age of seventeen and soon after became the proud mother of four beautiful children. I struggled throughout my life to make ends meet. Not having a diploma made it very hard for me to find a decent paying job and at times to even qualify for one.

Through the years I worked at many trades and unable to master none, due to the fact that I did not have my Diploma or GED. In the past nine years I became a teacher's aide, vocation counselor for Autistic adults, quality control for production, and data entry. My last position for the same company was shipping and receiving. I went for a two week vacation and upon my return I was given my notice, the company was downsizing.

The day I was released from my duties I drove myself to the Richmond L.E.A.P. Office and signed myself up

for my GED preparation. This was my green light for the opportunity of a life time that would not occur again. I worked very hard and stayed focused on my goal which was to obtain my GED I received so much help and encouragement from the staff.

In one hundred sixty seven hours later, I took the test and PASSED. This first time out, YES! My first feelings, I had tingling from the top of my head to the bottom of my toes and then I began to cry in disbelief. For the first time in my life after twenty one years, proud of my hard work and left with the feeling of liberation. Liberation, yes! The repression of ignorance was gone forever, free to continue my Education where I left off.

*Alma Miller*

LEAP Community Literacy Program, Richmond, CA



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