



National Council for Adult Learning

www.ncalamerica.org

Adult Education Facts That Demand Priority Attention

What Is The Adult Education System? It is a national network of community-based programs spread throughout the U.S. The system provides instructional basic skills services to out-of-school adults 16 and older in a wide range of venues: to workers and potential workers...to high school non-completers and alternative diploma seekers...to parents in family literacy settings...to corrections and re-entry populations...to recent immigrants and indigenous Americans who need to learn or improve their English language skills...to enrollees in voluntary community programs and community colleges...and to many others lacking proficiency in the basic skills.

FACTS & FIGURES:

1 – ADULT EDUCATION IS NOT JUST EDUCATIONAL IN NATURE. It is a vital part of efforts to improve career and college readiness, high school completion, healthcare access, gender and racial equality, equality of opportunity and justice, immigrant integration, and intergenerational poverty. Extensive research shows that adult basic skills services produce a powerful return on investment, enabling low-skilled adults to succeed as workers, parents, and citizens. Moreover, the children of better-educated parents are more educationally successful themselves, and less likely to end up in poverty or prison.

2 – THE U.S. HAS A HUGE LOW-SKILLED ADULT POPULATION. Our adults aged 16 to 65 are well below average in their reading, math, and problem-solving in technology rich environments. PIAAC¹, the recent international survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (in cooperation with the Educational Testing Service and other experts), shows that some 36 million Americans score at the lowest levels in the reading/literacy assessment and even worse in the other measures. And many million more have deficient basic skills that require some skills upgrading. The U.S. also has the highest “inequality” ranking among the industrialized countries. For example, in America, Blacks and Hispanics are 3-4 more times likely than other adults to be low-skilled, and adults from families with low education are 10 times more likely to be under-skilled. We also are doing a poor job meeting the ESL and basic skills needs of immigrants. And, adults with low skills are 4 times as likely to have poor or fair health than other adults in the population, *double the international average.*

3 – AMERICAN ADULTS HAVE ALARMINGLY LOW SKILLS ACROSS ALL EMPLOYMENT CATEGORIES. THE COST IN TERMS OF NON-PRODUCTIVITY IS STAGGERING. Twenty-five percent of adults who were *out of the labor force* were found by PIAAC to be at the two lowest levels on the literacy scale; 43 percent were among the lowest skilled in numeracy. A whopping 67 percent scored at the two lowest skill levels in problem-solving in technology-rich environments. *Employed adults* (the majority of test-takers were employed)) also scored poorly. Low skills costs the U.S. \$225 billion or more each year in terms of workforce non-productivity, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.

4 – FAMILY LITERACY IS PART OF THE ADULT EDUCATION ENTERPRISE. Research shows that children whose parents have low skill levels have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading level themselves. They are also more likely to get poor grades, display behavioral problems, have high-absentee rates, repeat school years, or drop out of school. Low-literate parents who improve their own skills and are qualified to hold down a job with family-sustaining wages are more likely to have a positive impact on their children’s education. It is impossible to impact children’s education issues without first addressing the skills needs of their parents.

5 – DEMAND FOR SERVICES OUTSTRIPS SUPPLY. Only 1.5 million of all adults who could benefit from adult education services have access to them. More than one million of the youth in our schools drop out each year and add to that number. According to the National Commission on Adult Literacy,² 30% of our foreign born population speak English either “not very well” or “not at all,” further expanding the pool. More than 40% of incarcerated adults have not finished high school. According to a recent survey by the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, there are waiting lists in adult education programs in every state but one, including nearly 75% of all local programs.

6 – INCENTIVES LACKING FOR THE ADULT EDUCATION LABOR FORCE – The U.S. Department of Labor estimates³ that the size of the U.S. Adult Education teacher labor market is just under 80,000 jobs. In 2012, their median annual pay was \$48,590. In 2014, the labor force supported by the Adult Education and Literacy Act of the federal government was 85,660. This included 56,204 teachers, 13,731 paraprofessionals, 11,608 local administrative staff, 3,679 counselors, and 438 state-level staff. Some 23% of these professionals were unpaid volunteers. Fifty-five percent were part-time paid staff, and only 22% were paid full-time staff. *Part-time staff represented 72% of all paid staff in publicly funded programs.* Of the total labor force, *nearly 99.5% were working for 2,390 local grantees.* States reported that in 2014 about 35,000 paid professionals or only 42% of local paid had some certification, from K-12, Adult Education, or ESL groups

7 – OTHER ALARMING FACTS. We pay more than \$230 billion a year in *health care* costs linked to low adult skill levels. As indicated above, the *school dropout rate* is still far too high. Every year, one in three young adults drops out of school. In terms of *income level*, data shows that nearly 30% of adults with household incomes at or below the poverty level lack a high school credential. Some 2 million *immigrants* come to the U.S. each year seeking better jobs and better lives. About half of them lack a high school education and adequate English language skills, limiting their access to jobs, college, and a living wage. Only a third of these new Americans have access to programs. On the *correctional* front, one of every 100 U.S. adults 16 and older is in prison or jail at any given time. Research indicates that 75% of state prison inmates and 59% of federal inmates did not complete high school and/or are low-skilled. Yet most nonviolent offenders return eventually to our communities, lacking the basic education and technology skills needed for jobs. All of these fellow Americans are among the clientele for Adult Education services.

8 – INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION WILL HAVE A HUGE PAYOFF. Improving educational attainment of adults by upgrading their basic skills, *and* adequately funding the Adult Education enterprise, will have huge benefits to our nation and individual Americans. We will have increased voter participation, higher rates of immigrant citizenship, enhanced voluntary and civic engagement, children lifted out of poverty, more stable family units, lower incarceration rates, better health and healthcare, higher employment and college-going, more productive and profitable workers, more consumption of goods and services, and a higher standard of living across our land. We will also experience boosts in the economy through increased tax revenue for national, state, and local government. For example, if 4 million high school dropouts were to earn a high school diploma by 2020, the net fiscal contributions to government at all levels from that one indicator alone would exceed \$25 billion annually. The increase in personal income over a lifetime of adults aged 25-64 who acquire a high school diploma or equivalent would be \$191 billion. The lifetime increase for all adults aged 25-64 who acquire at least an associate degree would be nearly \$850 billion.⁴

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¹ See www.piaacgateway.com

² *Reach Higher America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, the final report of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, at www.caalusa.org/report.html

³ *Throwing Down the Gauntlet for Professional Development*, September 24, 2015 Blog of the Office of Career, Technology, and Adult Literacy of the U.S. Department of Education, at <http://sites.ed.gov/octae/2015/09/24/throwing-down-the-gauntlet-for-pd>

⁴ *Reach Higher America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, *ibid.*