National Council of State Directors of Adult Education

Commendation and Response to

The National Commission on Adult Literacy

Report

Reach Higher America

Overcoming Crisis in the U. S. Workforce

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Executive Summary

The adult education state directors applaud the Commission's report, *Reach Higher, America*, as one of the most thoughtful syntheses of adult education and literacy issues since the *Jump Start* report almost two decades ago. As the managers of the adult education and literacy programs in the states and territories, we see and feel first hand the gap between the need for services and the extent to which we can respond to that need.

Several states and groups of practitioners are engaged in efforts to systematically improve services; many of these will serve as models for the types of changes and improvements called for in the Commission's report. In recognition of our efforts to date, the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART) report has rated adult education programs as "Effective"—OMB's highest rating. Adult Education is one of only four of the ninety-three Department of Education programs to receive the "Effective" rating. OMB confirms that adult education is a wise investment.

The Commission's report focuses attention on the wide range of policy priorities addressed by adult education state directors and the practitioners in our states:

- Workforce development
- A living wage and a foundation of transferable skills for workers
- Intergenerational/Family Literacy
- Attainment of a high school diploma or its equivalent
- Successful transitions to higher education and training
- English literacy
- Improved family and community health
- Decreased recidivism

The Commission's report provides a significant and well supported "Call to Action" for a more accessible and even stronger system of adult basic education services. The report calls for the following:

- Expanding the focus of adult education beyond the GED so students will succeed in higher education, training, and their career;
- Strengthening curricula, student assessment, program evaluation, and teacher quality;
- Strengthening counseling/guidance within programs and providing additional support services like child care and transportation through more robust state interagency planning;
- Strengthening alignment and coordination across adult education, workforce development, pre-K-12, higher education, health and human services;
- Enrolling 20 million students for $20 billion by 2020; and
- Expanding public/private co-investment.

Our full narrative contains a number of recommendations that we think will strengthen the discussion, but in this Executive Summary, we want to point out three critical areas where the report falls short.

1. **Do Not Narrow the Scope:**

The Commission's report correctly identifies several public policy priorities (see bulleted list above) that are served by adult basic education (adult literacy, adult secondary education and English as a second language) programs. These priorities are also the reasons that undereducated and limited English proficient adults cite as their "motivation" for returning to school and continuing their education. **The report, however, emphasizes the critical importance of workforce development to such an extent that it risks a national response that narrows the focus of adult education to this one dimension alone.** This would be a mistake, not only because it would disconnect policy leaders and students energized by the pursuit of other policy priorities (e.g., family literacy and its potential to advance pre-K-12 education reform), it could also preempt state efforts to tailor adult education programs and services to local needs/priorities. New legislation should reflect workforce needs but not at the detriment of other issues.

2. **Maintain the Diversity of Providers and Resources:**

While the report mentions the value added by the many sectors that support and provide adult education (school districts, community based organizations (CBOs), libraries, correctional institutions, community colleges, business and labor), it focuses primarily on the potential of strengthening two of these sectors, community colleges and CBOs. Missing, for example, is the very large contribution to adult education services by school districts through the appropriation of local tax dollars and how this can and should be leveraged further. **That limited focus runs the risk of a national response that narrows the possible providers and resources rather than expanding them.**

3. **Governance**:

A major strength of the current adult education legislation is the state's flexibility to respond to the needs of their citizens and the priorities of their elected leaders. This flexibility serves the state, the adult education providers, and adult learners well.

Options for governance of the adult education and literacy program must be flexible enough to work within the very different structures for educational leadership found across our fifty states. While the report acknowledges the importance of the Governor's leadership in achieving a stronger and more effective adult education and literacy service delivery system it does not, for example, accommodate situations where the chief state school officer is elected independently of the Governor or where there is a state constitutional separation between a lay board and the governor.

While we support the intent of achieving increased interagency coordination, we realize that one entity must take the lead on submitting the state plan. That role must reside with the lead adult education and literacy agency with recommendations and support from a variety of agencies and organizations incorporated into the plan.

Summary: It is evident that the Commissioners devoted much time and effort to studying the adult education and literacy issues facing our country. The adult education state directors commit our ongoing efforts to contribute our best thinking for legislative options, implementation strategies, and carrying out effective adult education and literacy services. We commit to do our part to "Reach Higher." Our country, our states, our communities, our families, our neighbors, and our students deserve nothing less—"real people, real payoff."

INTRODUCTION

The adult education state directors applaud the Commission's report, *Reach Higher, America*, as one of the most thoughtful syntheses of adult education and literacy issues since the *Jump Start* report almost two decades ago. We commend the commissioners and staff for this excellent work.

As the managers of the adult education programs in the states and territories, we see and feel first hand the gap between the need for services and the extent to which we can respond to that need. We are able to place a few stepping stones in the 'treacherous path' but they are too few and too far between.

Even so, we are proud of the contributions we make to the adult learning needs in America. We look forward to the upcoming discussions that promise to quickly and thoughtfully adapt the Commission report along with the National Coalition for Literacy's reauthorization recommendations into meaningful legislation that will expand services and close the gap.

We are prepared to do our part in that process. The practitioners in our states have worked to bring our programs up to standards of quality. In recognition of our efforts, the Office of Management and Budget's (OMB) Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART) report has rated adult education programs as "Effective"—OMB's highest rating. Adult Education is one of only four of the ninety three Department of Education programs to receive the "Effective" rating. OMB confirms that adult education is a wise investment.

As the Commission report states, reauthorized federal adult education legislation is sorely needed. Focusing on states convening multiple organizations and agencies in planning and delivering adult education services will enable programs to respond to the educational needs as well as the social service, job training, public health, and other support needs that enable adults not only to survive, but to prosper. Improving access to 'effective' programs is certainly a priority throughout the country. Technology has proven to hold promise for expanding that access, and we have fourteen states in a consortium now developing those opportunities. Other states are expanding their individual capacity. The Commission's report is right on target regarding expanding that capability.

At present we have no federally funded research and development center for adult education. We applaud the report's emphasis on reinitiating that investment in creating new knowledge and best practices to guide our work. We have also lost the national leadership on workplace education for incumbent workers. A decade ago we had over a thousand workplace programs in industries—many supported by the industry itself. The national initiative that supported that work has disappeared. We concur with the Commission that public/private partnerships can go a long way toward expanding and enhancing our services in that area and others.

The report focuses attention on the wide range of policy priorities addressed by adult education state directors and the practitioners in our states:

- Workforce development
- A living wage and a foundation of transferable skills for workers.
- Intergenerational/Family Literacy
- Attainment of a high school diploma or its equivalent

- Successful transitions to higher education and training
- Improved family and community health
- Decreased recidivism

The report provides a significant and well supported "Call to Action" for a more accessible and stronger system of adult basic education services.

- Expand and strengthen focus of adult education beyond the GED so students will succeed in higher education, training, and their career;
- Strengthen curricula, student assessment, program evaluation, and teacher quality;
- Strengthen counseling/guidance within programs and provide additional support services like child care and transportation through more robust state interagency planning;
- Strengthen alignment and coordination across adult education, workforce development, pre-K-12, higher education, health and human services;
- 20 million students for $20 billion by 2020; and
- Public/private co-investment.

We look forward to discussing and shaping the specifics of these proposals with the goal of better serving the adult learners in our states.

We would also like to offer a few considerations that we hope will inform those discussions. Those considerations are listed below with a brief explanation of each.

CONSIDERATIONS

The adult education state directors commend the Commission report to Congress and the Administration as a guide for re-visioning adult education in America. We offer the following considerations regarding a few of the Commission recommendations.

One overall consideration involves the contributions adult education makes to so many federal and state initiatives: education reform depends on parents being able and willing to support children's learning; public health initiatives depend on adults being able to read and follow medical instructions—AMA Foundations say 46% cannot; workforce development depends on adults having reading, math, English and higher order thinking skills matched to today's workplace; older American initiatives depend on seniors having the math and reading skills for personal finance and medical (Medicaid/Medicare) needs; and others.

The Commission with a propensity of business persons concerned with business issues focused on that part of our work—workforce development. We have learned from their wisdom and their contributions to that part of our work. We also acknowledge adult education's role in other social and economic arenas at the federal, state, and local levels.

DO NOT NARROW THE SCOPE OF SERVICES: The Commission's report correctly identifies several public policy priorities (see bulleted list above) that are served by adult basic education

(adult literacy, adult secondary education and English as a second language) programs. These priorities are also the reasons that undereducated and limited English proficient adults cite as their "motivation" for returning to school and continuing their education. **The report, however, emphasizes the critical importance of workforce development to such an extent that it risks a national response that narrows the focus of adult education to this one dimension alone.** This would be a mistake, not only because it would disconnect policy leaders and students energized by the pursuit of other policy priorities (e.g., family literacy and its potential to advance pre-K-12 education reform), it could also preempt state efforts to tailor adult education programs and services to local needs/priorities. New legislation should reflect workforce needs but not at the detriment of other issues.

During welfare reauthorization, recommendations emerged to target all adult education funds and functions toward welfare recipients and issues related to helping adults obtain jobs with family-sustaining incomes. Likewise, the Commission urges most if not all adult education efforts be targeted toward workforce development. It is tempting to look at adult education through one lens.

States have varying needs. For example, Rhode Island, Texas, California, Michigan, Idaho, and Georgia vary quite a bit in the variety and intensity of issues they face. Adult education is the underpinning to addressing many of those issues. Elected officials have their own priorities based on those needs and their visions for the state. As a result, the states are in the best place to determine where to target their limited adult education funding. New legislation should reflect the diversity of needs. States should be empowered to target their funds to their prioritized needs.

GOVERNANCE: A major strength of the current adult education legislation is the state's flexibility to respond to the needs of their citizens and the priorities of their elected leaders. This flexibility serves the state, the adult education providers, and adult learners well.

Options for governance of the adult education and literacy program must be flexible enough to work within the very different structures for educational leadership found across our fifty states. While the report acknowledges the importance of the Governor's leadership in achieving a stronger and more effective adult education and literacy service delivery system it does not, for example, accommodate situations where the chief state school officer is elected independently of the Governor or where there is a state constitutional separation between a lay board and the governor.

We support the intent of achieving increased interagency coordination, and we realize that one entity must take the lead on submitting the state plan. That role must reside with the lead adult education and literacy agency with recommendations and support from a variety of agencies and organizations incorporated into the plan.

PERFORMANCE MEASURES: Adult education is an education program. As an education program it contributes education value to workforce development. As a result, it seems wise for an education program to be held accountable for educational performance measures.

Recent discussions to have one set of performance measures for job training programs and adult education programs led to considering an added performance measure of "increased income" for

adult education programs. Adult Education does not have a job placement component and job placement services are not allowable expenditures since they are provided through other federal resources. We do not have a job counseling component—nor, we would argue, should it. Like higher education and K-12 education, adult education should not be required to adopt job training performance standards.

We wholeheartedly agree with the provision of a system of services in which each agency with its expertise provides its part of the needs for workforce development. Adult education should be measured for reading, math, English, and higher order thinking skills, secondary credentialing and transition to post secondary. Title I should be measured for job placement, job retention, and increased income.

CERTIFIED TEACHERS: The Commission report rightly cites the need for highly trained adult education teachers and program managers. It purports that so many part-time teachers (80%, in fact) is an indication that "adult education is not considered a serious professional enterprise." On the contrary, many teachers are part time because many of our students are part time. Due to family, community, and work responsibilities, adults often do not have time for full-time education.

Even though part-time teachers and volunteers bring a richness to our profession, they do need professional instructional leadership at the local level. Thus, it is true, more full-time teachers are needed to not only teach adult learners, but also provide the technical assistance and resource support the part-time teachers and tutors need.

Encouraging adult education certification for full-time teachers is the right thing to do. Expecting it of part-time teachers may not be realistic.

All that said, professional development is critical. Prior to 1998, adult education programs were required by federal guidelines to spend a MINIMUM 15% of federal funding on professional development and resource development. WIA allows a MAXIMUM of 12.5% for those support services. The state directors are on record through their reauthorization proposals to return to the 15% requirement.

THE FEDERAL ROLE: The report speaks little to the specific roles we need the federal government to play. The federal role should be to conduct the research and development needed to provide policy makers and practitioners in the states the information they need to plan, carry out and evaluate quality programs. For example, the Commission recommends "alignment with the content and skills required on commonly used college placement tests." Development of models and options for such alignment is but one of many Commission examples of a role for the federal government. There is no need for every state to have to carry out that research and development to create models and guidance for alignment.

DECREASING ENROLLMENT/FUNDING: The state directors agree that the level of federal funding for adult learning is disgraceful. The OMB PART "Effective" designation connotes that adult education is a wise investment. Increasing funding at a manageable rate to the year 2020 as the Commission has suggested would allow for that quality to increase as capacity increases.

Our national association (National Council of State Directors of Adult Education) has reported that forty of the forty-three states reporting had waiting lists in their states in 2006. The 2008 study is due out this summer and will no doubt report similar results.

The Commission reported decreasing enrollment in adult education programs. That decrease is not due to the quality of the program nor is it due to the lack of desire to participate. In fact, improving the quality of the program services entices adult learners to stay in the program longer, decreases dropouts, and, as a result, with limited numbers of seats, fewer students are served. In addition, the decreasing federal funds no doubt affects enrollment.

STUDENT GOALS/ADULTS VOTE WITH THEIR FEET: Adults come to adult education for help with any number of issues: helping their children with homework, managing fixed income and Medicare forms, preparing for jobs, learning English, learning the math they need for their job, and others. If we do not teach them what they want, they will leave.

We should not expect every adult learner to want work-related educational services. Likewise, many adult learners are not at a level to enter post-secondary institutions. Our services need to be responsive to the needs of the learner. That said, we can have a concerted effort to recruit adults for pre-employment or employment enhancement purposes and have a stronger impact on workforce development. For those adults who want and need workforce-oriented skills, we certainly need to enhance our services to improve our ability to meet their needs. For adults with other learning needs, we want to maintain the flexibility to respond to those needs.

ESL FORMULA: The Commission calls for allocating funds for ESL to states by a formula based on need—adults who speak English less than very well. A word of caution is offered here. Currently it is estimated that limited English proficient (LEP) adults make up approximately 15% of the target population for adult education services. However, ESL students comprise 46% of current students. Unless there is a very significant increase in funding, allocating funds based on the LEP population may decrease the funds available for ESL.

A second caution on the ESL formula discussion is the dramatic shift in funding that could occur if additional funds are not added to the distribution and LEP adults are. The current formula based on adults who have not finished high school is one dynamic. Adding LEP adults is an entirely different one.

SET ASIDES: The Commission proposes allocating funding also for family literacy services. Here again the state directors have held a position for some time that decisions related to the proportion of funding for specific populations be as close to the learners as possible. In other words, the states and local programs should decide, based on their needs, how much should be spent for family literacy, ESL, corrections, and services for other specific populations. That provision was part of the gentleman's agreement with Congress with the WIA shift in 1998 from Washington-imposed set-asides and regulations to performance measures and reporting.

"LACK" IS OVERSTATED: In a number of places, the Commission reports a 'lack' of critical components, when in fact several states have developed exemplary models that address many of the adult education system "shortcomings" highlighted by the report, e.g.:

- "Poor data sharing and tracking" (p.9)
- "Little if any alignment between instructional content and assessments…" (p.11)

Truly, these models need to be more pervasive, and the state directors are anxious to expand their application.

To that end, states have created model data systems aligned with the federal performance measures. In addition to performance standards, states are creating and sharing program standards, practitioner standards, content standards, data quality standards, and professional development standards across the country.
http://www.naepdc.org/resource_library/program%20planning%20library/quality%20standards.html

LIMITED RECOMMENDATIONS: The report comes up short in its recommendations for strengthened leadership for adult education:

- While the report mentions the value added by the many sectors that support and provide adult education (school districts, community based agencies, libraries, correctional institutions, community colleges, business and labor), it only focuses on the potential of strengthening two of these sectors: community colleges and CBOs. Missing, for example, is the very large contribution to adult education services by school districts through the appropriation of local tax dollars and how this can and should be leveraged further.
- The state adult education plan must be submitted by the lead adult education agency and not the "state's legislated policy and planning board" (p.25). That board should receive, comment on, and have their comments and recommendations incorporated into the state adult education plan.
- The report does not address adult education and literacy's significant role in two critical areas of national crisis:
    - The Health Care Crisis: The Joint Commission and the Institute on Medicine have issued dramatic calls for action to raise health literacy across the country. Ninety million Americans are at risk because they do not have the prerequisite skills to read, understand and act on health literacy information.
    - Education Reform: Educated parents are crucial to their children's success in school. The focus on the workforce is an important part of our work; however, the family literacy services have an equally significant impact on individuals, families, and the economy.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES: The report could have pushed harder in a number of critical areas:

- Extend Pell grants (p.21) by a factor of 1.5 for high school graduates who require remediation.
- Re-establish a "national adult education research center" (p.23) perhaps at the National Institute for Literacy.
- Push states harder to invest by implementing a "matching share" program after a certain minimum adult education allocation has been provided to each state.

NATIONAL SUPER AGENCY: Lastly, the report calls for "…a national super-agency membership organization with philanthropic backing…"(p.28). The role, purpose, and function of this entity needs discussion.

SUMMARY

We realize that the Commissioners devoted much of their time to studying the adult education and literacy issues facing our country. The breadth and depth of that devotion is evident in this report. We commit an equal amount of time and devotion to contributing to shaping the legislation and implementation strategies in order to expand and improve our already effective, if stressed, system of program services.

We commit to do our part to "Reach Higher." Our country, our states, our communities, our families, our neighbors, and our students deserve nothing less —"real people, real payoff."