
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Why no literacy programs for 30 million in U.S.?

Original Reporting | By David Noriega | Education

Dec. 11, 2013 — There are currently more than 30 million adults in the United States whose ability to read, write, and do basic math is at or below the level of the average third grader.

The current system of adult basic education in the U.S. has long been unable to reach more than a fraction of the population that could benefit from its services.

Experts in the field agree that this is a problem that could be meaningfully addressed. Doing so, however, would require aggressive, coordinated investment on all levels of government, and the federal government has not provided the necessary leadership or funding. In fact, over the last decade, federal funding, adjusted for inflation, has gone down. State governments, too, have mostly failed to respond in any way that would suggest recognition that the epidemic of adult illiteracy is an emergency.

Experts and advocates suggest a number of reasons for this political lethargy, including a tendency among lawmakers to see low-skilled adults as undeserving or beyond repair, along with unreasonable expectations of progress without first providing meaningful investment. Whatever the cause, there has not been sufficient political will to do what is necessary to help the millions of adults in the country whose lack of basic literacy skills are major obstacles to a decent life.

“An undernourished system”

The extent of the adult literacy problem in the United States was made newly clear in October when, for the first time in a decade, an international survey organized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) produced a comprehensive picture of adult skills in the U.S. The survey revealed not only the number of adults in the country lacking basic reading and math skills, but also that adults at the lowest skill levels were four times as likely to report poor health than those at the highest levels, a gap far larger than the international average.

While dreary, the results came as no surprise to those who work in adult education. The researchers, teachers and advocates we interviewed all acknowledged that the current system of adult basic education in the U.S. has long been unable to reach more than a fraction of the population that could benefit from its services.

Marcie Weadon-Moreno Foster, public policy chair for the National Coalition for Literacy and a policy analyst at CLASP, an anti-poverty group, said that out of the 36 million adults with the lowest skills, only about 5 percent have gained access to education programs. In other words, about 34 million have not gained access. There are waiting lists for such programs in all but one state, some stretching to a year's time and hundreds of thousands of people.

"The number one issue is that we're simply not providing the resources that we need to serve the students that we need to serve," Foster said.

The federal government funds adult education through the Workforce Investment Act by distributing money to states, which, in turn, fund local education programs. (States are required to match at least a quarter of what they get from the federal government.) CLASP calculates that federal funding, adjusted for inflation, has declined by 17 percent since 2002: measured in 2011 dollars, funding for adult education in 2002 was above \$700 million, dropping to less than \$600 million today. To make matters worse, state contributions plummeted along with revenues after the recession. As funding sank, so did enrollment in education programs.

"It's a very undernourished system at both the federal level and the state level, and you can only do so much with that many dollars," Foster said. Federal and state governments combined spend between \$700 and \$900 a year per adult learner, Foster observed, compared with about \$10,000 per student in the K-12 system. And that refers only to those adults who are already enrolled in programs, leaving aside the tens of millions who are not receiving services at all. "That's how much we're attesting to care about our adult learners, and about improving the basic skills of our adult population," Foster said.

Two well-regarded programs

Two state-operated programs are frequently cited by experts in adult education as showing great promise: Minnesota's FastTRAC (Training, Resources and Credentialing) and Washington State's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST)

Those who praise these programs say their approach reflects two of the basic principles behind successful adult education: classes are intensive and concentrated, with clear goals and expectations; and the approach combines the teaching of basic skills with career-specific, technical training.

In FastTRAC, the state gives grants to interconnected groups in different aspects of basic education and workforce training: voluntary education programs and rehabilitation centers combined with employers in manufacturing or nursing, for example. Using the state's guidelines, these groups teach basic reading and math skills intensively and in the context of specific career paths. According to FastTRAC's own numbers, 88 percent of students complete the courses successfully.

While I-BEST is limited to Washington's community colleges, its proponents say its model can be applied in wider settings. Every class is taught by two instructors: one for basic reading and math skills, and the other for occupational skills. The Community College Research Center found that I-BEST students generally perform better than students from other basic skills classes in terms of their likelihood to earn college credits and workforce credentials, and to secure better-paying jobs.

Structural challenges

Making any substantial progress in educating the country's low-skilled adults would require surmounting a number of deeply ingrained problems, according to the people we interviewed.

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Adult education programs, for example, are plagued by high attrition rates, due in large part to the difficulty of adding classes to lives already busy with work and families. Adult learners also vary tremendously in terms of what they know and the experiences they bring to the table, making it hard to apply uniform teaching strategies to large groups of students. This complexity is compounded by a lack of professional training amongst the people who teach adults, a large proportion of whom work as volunteers. Finally, adult education is delivered through a patchwork of local programs that vary tremendously in their settings, methods and effectiveness—from programs run through public schools to occasional meetings in libraries and community centers.

Which methods and programs are most effective? Though efforts in a couple of states are widely praised anecdotally (see bottom box), there is surprisingly little empirical research available to answer the question. In spite of a few spasmodic attempts, the federal government has failed to sustain a dedicated research center for adult education. In addition, the immense variety of programs and high attrition rates hinder researchers.

“Research with adult populations is particularly difficult to do compared to research in schools, because the programs are quite varied in their structure and organization,” said Charles MacArthur, a professor of literacy and education research at the University of Delaware. “There’s also a big problem with attrition in research. If you run a study for six months, you’re likely to lose 40 percent of your population.”

The more, the earlier, the better

Nevertheless, there was broad agreement among the educators and researchers we interviewed regarding the effectiveness of certain overarching principles in how to teach adults. Tellingly, implementing these principles would necessitate a significantly higher, more concentrated investment than is currently the norm.

For instance, basic skills improve dramatically if instruction occurs intensively and frequently over a shorter period of time, rather than provided in a drawn-out and less intense fashion, as is commonly the case in community-based programs.

Geri Mulligan, director of the Center for Literacy, Education and Employment at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, compared programs that taught students for 20 hours a week in daytime classes to those that taught students for four hours a week in two sessions—the former, unsurprisingly, were far more effective, with much higher rates of progress and lower rates of attrition.

“If you’re coming in as a low-level adult [learner], and you look to the future and see that it’s going to take you the next six years to finish by doing this reading one hour a day, or twice a week, or three times a week, the chances of you persisting in that are pretty low,” Mulligan said. “You’re probably not going to make it.”

Asked to imagine a scenario in which students could pursue full-time basic skills education for 40 hours a week, Mulligan said such a program could bring even students at the lowest literacy levels to proficiency in as little as six months. “You could be definitely on course to becoming a registered nurse if you could do that for six months,” Mulligan said.

Short of teaching adults full time, several researchers and educators have said achieving enough intensity in a program requires investing heavily in financial and institutional supports for working students: child care, transportation, social services, and so forth.

Foster, of the National Coalition for Literacy, said such supports were integral to so-called “bridge” or “career pathway” programs—those that explicitly tie adult basic education to work opportunities or post-secondary education. These programs often work by simultaneously teaching career-specific job skills and basic reading, writing and math.

Again, such a coordinated approach requires a commitment far higher than a handful of hours a week, and benefits from structures more formal and demanding than the typical community-based program. Some of the more successful programs, Foster said, “look more like a community college semester or like a school year,” as compared to “coming in and out of a library or school basement as you please.” Thus, “you have a starting date and an ending date, there are clear expectations about how many hours a week students need to dedicate to the class,” and so on.

“We understand that this provides a lot of challenges to work schedules,” Foster added. “But at the same time, if the students are staying at their jobs and only devoting one or two hours a week to their education, they’re never going to make much progress.”

Individual instruction, scaled up

Much of the research that has been done into adult education emphasizes the fact that, unlike schoolchildren, adults bring an immense variety of learning levels and life experiences to a classroom—far more so than elementary school students, who tend to move through the learning process more or less as a cohesive group.

As such, a critical element to effective adult education is the rigorous assessment of any given student’s skill level and the development of a teaching plan suited to that student’s idiosyncrasies. In practice, this usually translates to a highly individualized approach: one-on-one tutors, ideally, or very small classes at the most.

This kind of individualization would create huge financial and organizational hurdles were the current system of adult education to serve more than the fraction of low-skilled adults it currently does. But several researchers and educators we interviewed agreed that it would be possible, given a much higher number of students in the system, to identify meaningful subgroups with similar skill levels, learning obstacles, and goals and intentions. That, in turn, would enable programs to create appropriate classes of students that could be taught simultaneously by a literacy instructor, a much less expensive approach per student than one-on-one tutoring or something similar.

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“There’s some good research where they have given batteries of assessments to large numbers of adults, to see if there are clear profiles that emerge—and they have found that some of these profiles are fairly distinct,” said John R. Kruidenier, a private consultant and researcher in literacy and education. (Kruidenier, along with MacArthur of the University of Delaware, helped co-author a comprehensive 2010 review of the research into adult literacy instruction commissioned by the federal government.)

Kruidenier said he still believed these subgroups would need to remain flexible: a student would have to be able to move from one group to another if he or she responded to instruction at a different rate. But it would still be possible to address and respond to the differing individual needs of students without remaining stuck at the one-on-one or small-group scale.

“It’s not that simple”

The final element to a revamped adult education system about which nearly all experts agree is the need for a more professional, better-trained, and better-paid teachers. Adult education professionals frequently say the same thing: volunteers are wonderful and we could not do without them, but we need better.

“People make the mistake of thinking, ‘everybody reads, it must be easy to teach it’,” said Kruidenier. “It’s not that simple. At the very least, you need professionals who are guiding any paraprofessionals you have.”

MacArthur explained that this is because the teaching methods that have been proven to work necessitate a solid grasp of complex concepts both linguistic and pedagogical.

“Reading instruction is actually a highly technical field,” MacArthur said. “There’s a lot that you need to know. You have to understand the structure of the English language. Why are words spelled the way they are? It’s not random. There’s a structure and an organization, and there’s a developmental sequence that learners follow in learning how to spell and decode words.”

MacArthur pointed out that when elementary school teachers get their professional degrees, they usually have to take three courses devoted entirely to teaching reading and writing. “And they’re hard courses,” he added.

Jane Hugo, senior project director at ProLiteracy, the largest national membership group of community-based literacy programs, said that there was an even steeper need for trained instructors in programs teaching basic math. This is because teaching math is just as technical and difficult as teaching reading, but far fewer people consider themselves capable of doing it. “There is math-phobia among volunteers, just as there is among the learners,” Hugo said.

The reaction so far

Since the results of the OECD’s survey of adult skills came out in October, the federal Department of Education has openly acknowledged the problem. Officials from the department’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education interviewed by Remapping Debate said it was a significant issue that so few adults with low basic skills had access to education programs. (The officials were made available by the department only on condition that we would not quote them by name.) They also pointed to the need for research evaluating the different kinds of existing programs and the possibilities for rolling them out on a broader scale.

To this end, the officials said, the department is launching a series of information-gathering meetings across the country with regional representatives of the adult education field: educators, advocates, employers, philanthropists, and so on. The goal of the meetings is to learn what those on the ground believe is needed to solve the problem; the end result will be a “national action plan” due some time in the spring.

“Without some kind of investment, it’s impossible to do anything” to have a significant impact on the problem, said Jeff Carter.

However, the officials would not say whether they believed any attempt to revamp the system would involve significant new funding from the federal government, saying that this question would not be answerable until after they had completed their research. One official also suggested that there may be several ways to improve the system without spending a lot more money, including increased partnerships with the private sector (such as employers and philanthropists) and the use of technology for distance learning.

Some in the adult education field have taken a similar tack, concluding that it is impractical to demand more funding from a Congress very unlikely to give it, and instead looking for ways to do more with less. “People stepped back from [asking for more funding] a little bit in the face of the recession,” said Jane Hugo of ProLiteracy. The thinking, she said, is that “it won’t help our cause if we ask for something that at the moment is totally unfeasible.”

Indeed, the only recent effort to increase federal funding — a Democratic bill in the House that would have almost doubled funding — failed to make it out of committee.

But others insist that it is folly to pretend that any real progress will come without substantial additional government investment—and insist that the government’s failure to devote more resources to the problem represents not an inevitability, but a choice. “That’s the policy decision that’s not being made,” said Jeff Carter, a literacy advocate in Washington D.C. and member of the board of directors of the National Coalition for Literacy. “Without some kind of investment, it’s impossible to do anything.”

A problem, and a population, ignored

Beyond simple congressional inaction, advocates pointed to longer-standing factors behind adult basic education’s low position on the scale of priorities, especially in the larger context of education. Compared to children and college students, for example, uneducated adults tend to be viewed as altogether beyond repair or unworthy of resource-intensive efforts.

Stagnating efforts

Remapping Debate reached out to 13 members of the House and Senate of both parties, all with high-ranking positions on the relevant committees and subcommittees and many with past action on adult literacy on their records. Besides one who cited a scheduling conflict, only three responded, and of these only one—Rep. John F. Tierney, Democrat of Massachusetts—gave more than an emailed statement.

Tierney, who sponsored the Democratic House bill that would have nearly doubled funding, said the waiting list for adult education programs in his state has remained at close to 20,000 since he came into office in 1997. “The resources clearly are not sufficient,” Tierney said. He added that, while securing those funds is difficult in a House bent on cutting billions in food stamps, this doesn’t mean the money isn’t there. “We understand we have to make some hard decisions on prioritization, but there are plenty of places within our budget—if you include the military as well as the domestic budget—where we can move resources to the places they have to be. And this is a place where it’s obviously appropriate to do that.”

Rep. Phil Roe, Republican of Tennessee and chairman of the Health Education Labor and Pensions subcommittee of the Education and Workforce committee, emailed a statement detailing the intentions of the Republican bill that passed the House. In the statement, Roe characterized the bill as intended to improve adult literacy by cutting down on inefficiencies in the current system rather than by devoting more resources to the problem.

The office of Sen. Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa and chairman of the senate’s Health Education Labor and Pensions committee, emailed a brief statement summarizing the bipartisan bill that passed his committee but did not respond to follow-up questions about whether more funding is needed.

“I think we’re still dealing with the overlooking of this population as undeserving,” said Foster of the National Coalition for Literacy.

Added MacArthur, of the University of Delaware, characterizing a common perception of adult learners: “They went to public school for twelve years, and they didn’t learn what they should have. So now they’re in adult education, and what are the chances that we’re going to be successful this time?”

According to Carter, the advocate in Washington, for policymakers this translates into an unwillingness to invest in a population towards whom many people feel indifferent or unsympathetic. Carter also pointed out that, even among those willing to address the problem, investing in adult learners is politically riskier than in early childhood education and other programs aimed at children. This is because, compared with children, adults are expected to deliver more immediate results.

Even though there are generally agreed-upon principles and practices that work better than others, and even some potential model programs, the question of how to implement them on a large scale is only now being asked. The result, as described by most advocates and experts in the field, is a vicious cycle of neglect. Because insufficient resources have been devoted comprehensively assessing approaches to deal with the problem, there is a dearth of solutions that have been confirmed to be effective. This, in turn, saps the political will to direct more resources into bolstering, researching and fixing the systems that do exist.

“It’s sort of like having a car with no wheels and no engine,” Carter said. “And then you have people saying, ‘Well, we’re not going to give you any more money to fix up this car until you show me it can run’.”

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