




*Reach Higher,* **AMERICA**  
OVERCOMING CRISIS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Report of the  
National Commission  
on Adult Literacy

June 2008

NATIONAL  
COMMISSION   
on ADULT LITERACY





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education drives the economy. Almost a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, America faces a choice: We can invest in the basic education and skills of our workforce and remain competitive in today's global economy, or we can continue to overlook glaring evidence of a national crisis and move further down the path to decline. In *Reach Higher, America*, the National Commission on Adult Literacy presents powerful evidence that our failure to address America's adult education and workforce skills needs is putting our country in great jeopardy and threatening our nation's standard of living and economic viability. The Commission recommends immediate action to reverse the course we are on. It calls for strong, bold leadership from federal and state government, and it challenges business leaders, philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector to become part of the solution.

### A. FACING THE PRESENT

America is losing its place as a world leader in education, and in fact is becoming less educated. Among the 30 OECD free-market countries, the U.S. is the only nation where young adults are less educated than the previous generation. And we are losing ground to other countries in educational attainment.

More and more, the American economy requires that most workers have at least some postsecondary education or occupational training to be ready for current and future jobs in the global marketplace, yet we are moving further from that goal. By one set of measures, more than 88 million adults have at least one major educational barrier—no high school diploma, no college, or ESL language needs. With a current U.S. labor force of about 150 million (16 and older), a troubling number of prime working age adults likely will fall behind in their struggle to get higher wage jobs, or to qualify for the college courses or job training that will help them join or advance in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage.

More than two-thirds of the workforce is beyond the reach of the schools. Yet our current adult education system—designed for a different time and different challenges—is not equipped to address this urgent national need. Federal adult education, training, and English language programs reach only about 3 million adults a year.

~ ***U.S. Scores Poorly Internationally.*** The U.S. is the only country among 30 OECD free-market countries where the current generation is less well educated than the previous one. The U.S. is also losing ground in international comparisons in terms of high school diplomas and college degrees awarded. Further, while we score as one of the highest countries in numbers of well educated people we also score near the top in the largest number of people at the lowest education levels—a form of inequality that affects all Americans. Minority groups—whose numbers, in some cases, are increasing as a percentage of overall population growth—are disproportionately at the low end of educational attainment, especially Hispanics, blacks, and American Indians/Alaska Natives. About 55 percent of adults at the lowest literacy levels did not graduate from high school and have no GED or high school equivalency diploma.

~ ***High School Dropout Rates Are Staggering.*** Every year, one in three young adults—more than 1.2 million people—drop out of high school. Even more alarming, many high school graduates who do complete high school lack basic skills and readiness for job training and college.

~ ***Low Parent Learning Affects Children.*** One in four U.S. working families is low-income, and one in five children lives in poverty. Parents and caregivers in many of these households lack the education and skills to earn a family-sustaining wage.

~ ***Low Literacy in Burgeoning Prison Population.*** One in every 100 U.S. adults 16 and older is in prison or jail in America (about 2.3 million in 2006). About 43 percent do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 56 percent have very low literacy skills. Ninety-five percent of incarcerated people return to our communities. It is hard enough for them to find jobs burdened with a prison record, but it is nearly impossible without the necessary education and basic skills.

~ ***Large and Growing English Language and Literacy Need.*** About 2 million immigrants come to the U.S. each year seeking jobs and better lives—the promise of America. About 50 percent of them have low literacy levels and lack high school education and English language skills, severely limiting their access to jobs and job training, college, and citizenship.



~ ***Aging of the Baby Boomers.*** About 8,000 people turn 60 every day. As these “baby boomers” leave the workforce, their places are being taken by the smaller cohort of workers born in the mid-to-late 1960s and early 1970s. As a result, the U.S. workforce is increasing more slowly and, without intervention, is likely to become less educated on average.

The Commission finds that current solutions fall short in crucial ways. It discusses these in depth—including failures in the Workforce Investment Act, declining enrollments in current programs, inadequate ESL training, lack of data at both the federal and state levels, and problems of fragmented and insufficient funding. It also addresses underuse of the GED; lack of alignment among curricula, assessment instruments, and systems; and lack of adult education teacher training and credentials.

The Commission concludes that the present situation threatens not only America’s ability to compete in the world economy, but its civic preparedness, its national security, and its very democratic core. It offers an action program to overcome crisis and throws down the gauntlet: the time to act is now!

## **B. GOING TO SCALE: 20 Million by 2020**

**RECOMMENDATION:** *The National Commission on Adult Literacy calls on Congress to transform the adult education and literacy system into an adult education and workforce skills system with the capacity to effectively serve 20 million adults annually by the year 2020.*

**RECOMMENDATION:** *The Commission calls on Congress and state governments to make postsecondary and workforce readiness the new mission of the adult education and workforce skills system.*

A service level of 20 million by 2020 will produce a cumulative enrollment increase 3.5 times greater than we have now, and system capacity will increase seven times. But simply bringing large numbers of adults back into the system is not enough. That new system—which must be adequately funded—must produce results. The hallmark of the new system will be its ability to measure the number of adults who achieve GEDs or equivalents, English language proficiency, credentials and workforce certificates, adults enrolled in postsecondary education and job training, and incumbent workers enrolled in basic skills programs. The Commission proposes goals for 2020 in each of these areas.

To achieve the transformation needed to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century goals in America, the Commission calls for nine broad actions, and it also offers a variety of specific recommendations in each of those areas. The broad action recommendations are:

**ACTION 1:** *Congress should pass and the President should sign a comprehensive new Adult Education and Economic Growth Act to overhaul and expand adult education and workforce skills training.*

This new Act should be bold in scale and crafted to excite the public imagination—similar to such great historical achievements as the original GI Bill and the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act. The Commission calls for public funding of the new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System of \$20 billion a year by 2020, about five times the current expenditure for related programs under Titles I and II of the current Workforce Investment Act. Additional funding must come from corporate and private philanthropy. The Commission also recommends that Congress establish a National Trust or National Training Fund.

The new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System should also connect and coordinate essential elements of Titles I and II of the Workforce Investment Act of the U.S. Departments of Education and Labor and the adult education and basic workforce preparation components of programs in other federal departments. These programs should be aligned with postsecondary education entrance requirements—especially at community colleges.

**ACTION 2:** *The new Act should focus service on the needs of the unemployed; low-skilled incumbent workers; immigrants with limited or no English; parents or caregivers with low basic skills; incarcerated adults; high school dropouts; and high school graduates not ready for college.*

The report offers specific recommendations for each of these groups. At their core is one overarching recommendation: that each group, including incumbent workers, must be explicitly written into law and adequately provided for.

**ACTION 3:** *The new Act should redefine the fundamentals of adult education, set program goals, and offer incentives and strategies to increase learner access.*

The expanded and reformed System should continue to provide basic reading, writing, math, and English language services. But it should also teach adults how to communicate, acquire information, think critically, solve problems, use technology, and work in teams. And greater emphasis should be placed on career exploration, counseling services, and instruction that is customized to the context in which it will be used.

Other actions call for states to set enrollment goals for all programs in the System; for Pell grants and financial aid programs to become more responsive to current adult needs and circumstances; for activities that increase student access to and success in programs; and for strong collaboration between federal and state government in ways that benefit the entire country.

**ACTION 4:** *Strong national leadership must be provided to develop and deploy technology-assisted learning, including the creation of a national Web portal for adult learners.*

The Commission believes that both public and private funding is essential to flesh out and put into use technology in all its forms—and it emphasizes that we cannot reach the recommended 20 million goal by 2020 without providing access beyond classroom walls. Properly deployed, technology has the power to provide unprecedented access to adult learners—at times, in places, and at a pace convenient to their life and job circumstances. It is an absolutely vital ingredient.

**ACTION 5:** *For the new Act to be successful, Congress must provide significant support for a national, independent research and development program.*

The research should focus on best practices and approaches that work, and emphasize critical areas of need. The National Institute for Literacy, a unique, quasi-independent resource, should be strengthened to lead the federal research and development role, and it should be fully restored to its originally mandated adult focus.

**ACTION 6:** *States should engage in comprehensive planning and establish goals to improve educational attainment and workforce skills of their adults in light of their economic development goals.*

**ACTION 7:** *The states should legislate authority for coordination and alignment of systems consistent with their postsecondary education, workforce, and economic development goals. In some cases, a cross-agency planning body already exists; in others it may need to be created. In some states, a cabinet level position might be either established or strengthened. Whatever the approach, the involvement of the governor's office is essential.*

**ACTION 8:** *Under the Act, new federal funds should be awarded to states following federal approval of a comprehensive adult education plan that each state develops and updates periodically for federal review. These funds should be available for awards within the first year of passage of the new Act. States should be "held harmless" at current federal adult education grant levels.*

The states must take a central leadership role, while coordinating their activities with new federal Act goals. Like federal government, most states have not developed effective links across agencies and programs that provide services, or steps to connect their adult education and workforce skills training services to economic development policies and plans.



**ACTION 9:** *States must invest in the skills of their workers so that increased productivity helps offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries. Business must be an active partner in this effort.*

States and businesses should co-invest in the skills of the states' workforce to be sure that workers can adapt continuously to evolving labor market needs. Only 3 to 4 percent of workers with the most limited literacy proficiencies receive basic skills training from their employers. Low-skilled incumbent workers should be given top priority and incentives to spur their participation. The Commission suggests various steps that states and employers might take to accomplish these goals.

Business and labor groups must be more active advocates at national, state, and local levels. They should work more with state legislatures, and call for leadership by chambers of commerce, workforce investment boards, trade associations, and other groups.

***Philanthropic and Nonprofit Involvement.*** The fundamental reform called for by the Commission also requires philanthropic organizations—both corporate and private foundations—to play an active role. Nonprofit groups of all kinds also have a key role—ranging across groups with responsibility for research, instructional service, and policy development in adult education and workforce skills. To boost the effectiveness of these disparate nonprofit entities, the Commission recommends establishing a national “superagency” membership organization to provide an effective leadership voice.

***Building Public Awareness.*** As we build infrastructure for a new expanded system, we also must launch well-funded public campaigns, on an appropriate schedule and scale, to motivate adult learners to enroll in programs and to build public understanding of the value of the adult education enterprise in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America.

## C. WE ALL BENEFIT

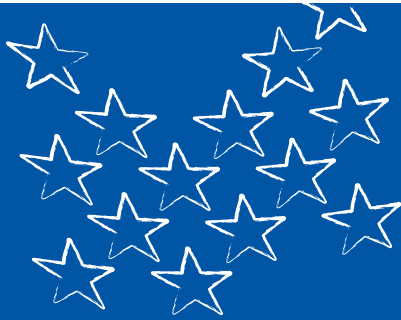
Better educated and more literate adults fare better in every way: higher rates of employment and better jobs, substantial increases in personal income and individual economic well being, dramatically increased fiscal contributions to government at all levels, greater success for their children as the educational levels of parents and caregivers rise, significantly increased voter participation, higher rates of citizenship for foreign-born immigrants, enhanced volunteerism and civic engagement, and better health and more effective healthcare. The last section of *Reach Higher, America* provides compelling data about each of these benefit areas.

If the nation reaches the Commission's projected goals, our adult learners' fiscal contributions to national, state, and local government will more than offset the cost of paying for the build up of America's new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System. To illustrate with just one measure, the net fiscal impact for federal, state, and local governments from getting 400,000 adults to earn a high school diploma is estimated to be \$2.5 billion a year. If, by 2020, 4 million dropouts earn a high school diploma, the net fiscal contributions would exceed \$25 billion annually.

## FINAL NOTE

The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act is at the very heart of the Commission's action plan. The proposed legislation will strengthen and align the nation's existing adult basic education and workforce skills systems to address the priority education needs of American adults, who in staggering numbers lack skills needed for college and jobs. Adults who enroll in this new adult basic education system will be better prepared to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and job training and will move more seamlessly into well-paying jobs of the future.





[www.nationalcommissiononadulthoodliteracy.org](http://www.nationalcommissiononadulthoodliteracy.org)

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