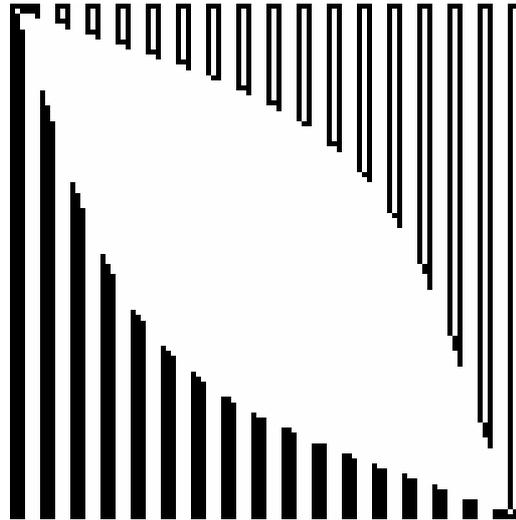


THEMATIC REVIEW ON ADULT LEARNING



UNITED STATES

BACKGROUND REPORT

September 2003

Finalised in December 2004

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NOTE TO THE READER

The U.S. Department of Education commissioned two background reports to help prepare the representatives of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for their visit to the United States in October 2003. The OECD visit was part of the Thematic Review of Adult Learning, carried out between 1999 and 2004, which involves 17 countries. The purpose of the review was to analyze the policies and practices of various countries in order to improve access to, and participation in adult learning, and to examine the quality and effectiveness of each country's adult learning system.

The U.S. Department of Education and the OECD determined that the thematic review in the United States would focus on the population of individuals who scored in the lowest levels of the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). Accordingly, the two background reports are concerned primarily with the basic adult education and literacy programs overseen by the Department's Office of Vocational and Adult Education. These programs offer instruction for individuals aged 16 and over who do not have a secondary school credential or who are learning English as a second language.

In order to simplify the downloading of the background documentation of the OECD Thematic Review of Adult Learning, the two background reports have been merged and are presented herein.

BACKGROUND REPORT 1

ADULT EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

**Country Background Report for the OECD
Thematic Review on Adult Learning**

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Office of Vocational and Adult Education

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Roberta Pawloski of Connecticut;
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Linda Young of Oklahoma.

This report was prepared by RTI International under contract with the U.S. Department of Education. However, the opinions it contains are solely those of the author.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of Education has commissioned two Background Reports to help prepare representatives of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development for a visit to the United States in 2003. The OECD visit is part of a thematic review of adult learning that involves 17 countries. The purpose of these reviews is to analyze policies used by various countries to improve access to, and participation in, adult learning, and to examine the quality and effectiveness of each country's adult learning system.

Adult learning in the United States takes many forms. According to the Department of Education's National Household Education Survey, nearly half of adults aged 16 and older participated in some type of lifelong learning in 2001. Lifelong learning activities – which are sponsored by a wide variety of public and private entities – encompass work-related courses, personal-interest courses, college or university credential programs,¹ and other activities, including apprenticeships, basic skills training, and English as a Second Language Classes. Adults of all educational levels participate in lifelong learning, although those with higher educational attainment are more likely to do so (Wirt *et al.*, 2003).

Department of Education officials, in consultation with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, have determined that the thematic review in the United States will focus on adult learning activities for disadvantaged individuals, defined as those with literacy skills in the two lowest levels on the National Adult Literacy Survey scales.² Accordingly, the two Background Reports are concerned primarily with the adult basic education and literacy programs overseen by the Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education. These programs, which offer instruction for individuals age 16 and over who do not have a secondary school credential, or who are learning English as a second language, are the principal means through which disadvantaged adults in the United States can improve their literacy skills.

Instruction offered through the system is usually classified as either Adult Basic Education (ABE), or instruction for individuals with skills at the lowest levels; Adult Secondary Education (ASE), or instruction for individuals who are working toward secondary-level credentials; or English as a Second Language (ESL), instruction to help individuals who have limited English-speaking ability improve their competence in the language. As the Department of Education directed, RTI's report focuses almost exclusively on ABE and ASE instruction. The Department has commissioned a second Background Report by the Center for Applied Linguistics, entitled *Adult ESL Education in the United States*, to describe the field of ESL instruction and its students.

The Background Report is organized into five sections. First, we describe the context for adult education in the United States. The second section outlines the organization and structure of the adult education service delivery system. Third, we present descriptive information about the individuals who are eligible for, and who participate in, adult education instruction. A fourth section reviews current

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1. Participation in a college or university program by "traditional students" (aged 16 to 24) was not counted as an adult education activity.
 2. Literacy scales used by the National Adult Literacy Survey, conducted by the Department of Education in 1992, are identical to those used in the International Adult Literacy Survey.

practices and trends in ABE and ASE instruction. The final section presents conclusions concerning access to ABE and ASE instruction in the United States.

The Context for Adult Education in the United States

The United States is the world's fourth-largest country in terms of both size and population, encompassing an area of 3.5 million square miles (5.6 million km.). It comprises 50 states, the District of Columbia, and a number of dependent areas, including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. A leading industrial power with a technologically advanced economy, the United States had a Gross Domestic Product of \$10365.8 billion dollars in 2002 (OECD, June 2003). Since 2001, however, there have been some downturns in the economy, including reduced increases in output, higher unemployment, and declines in the stock market (CIA, 2002).

The population of the United States, grew by 13% from 1990 to 2000, and was 281 million in 2000 (Perry and Mackun, 2001). In the 2000 decennial census, three-quarters of the United States population reported that they belonged to the White race alone and 12% were Black or African-American alone. Asian individuals made up 4% of the population. 6% of the population belonged to some other racial group, while 2% considered themselves to be of two or more races. 13% of the population was Hispanic or Latino.³

In recent years, the United States has experienced a dramatic increase in immigration, resulting in a high demand for adult education services. In March 2000, 10% of the population was foreign-born (*i.e.* not citizens at birth), and an additional 10% had at least one parent who was foreign-born. Half of these individuals were from Latin America (primarily Mexico and Cuba), and one-quarter were from Asia (Schmidley, 2001).

State and local governments have primary responsibility for the country's educational system and provide the vast majority of funding. Policy decisions are made by state legislatures and boards of education and implemented by state departments of education, which oversee local school districts. Each state provides students with 12 academic years, or grades, of free education, and most states also offer kindergarten programs for younger children. Most states have compulsory attendance laws that require students to attend K-12 classes from the time they are 6 or 7 until the age of 16 or 18. After completing high school, students may pursue associate's, bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at postsecondary institutions, which include colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical colleges (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.; Education Commission of the States, March 2000).

In 2000, 87% of adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who were not currently enrolled in school reported that they had earned a high school diploma or equivalent. However, this figure (known as the "high school completion rate") varies among racial/ethnic subgroups. (Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman, 2001). It is considerably lower for students in special education programs that serve individuals with disabilities: just over half of these students received a regular high school diploma in school year 1998-1999 (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Organization and Structure of the Adult Education Service Delivery System

In 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (Public Law 105-220) made adult education part of a new "one-stop" career system that includes many federally funded job training programs. Title I of the Act, which governs most programs in the one-stop system, outlines performance indicators for those programs

3. The Census Bureau considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts. Thus, an individual of any race may be of Hispanic origin.

and creates state and local Workforce Investment Boards to oversee the system. Title II, which is known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, contains the current legislative requirements for the adult education program.

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act defines adult education as services below the postsecondary level for individuals who are 16 and over, and who are not enrolled, or required to be enrolled, in secondary school. Eligible individuals must also “lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable the individuals to function effectively in society”; lack a high school diploma or equivalent; or be “. . .unable to speak, read, or write the English language.”

The legislation allocates each state a minimum grant of \$250,000, with the balance of the federal allocation distributed according to the state’s ratio of adults age 16 and older who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, as indicated by the decennial census. For the last several years, the federal government has also provided special funding for English Literacy and Civics Education programs, which include instruction on “. . .the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and U.S. history and government. . . .” (Federal Register, November 17, 1999). Federal funding for adult education and English Literacy/Civics Education programs totaled \$563 million in Fiscal Year 2002 (October 1, 2001, to September 30, 2002). However, state and local spending for adult education, totaling an estimated \$1,062,544,626 in Fiscal Year 2000, far outweighs the federal contribution (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, April 2002; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, October 2002).

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act makes almost any type of agency “of demonstrated effectiveness” eligible to receive federal adult education funds. These include: local educational agencies (*i.e.* local school districts); community-based organizations (private non-profit organizations that represent all, or part, of a community); volunteer literacy organizations (organizations that rely primarily on volunteers to deliver adult education services); institutions of higher education (*i.e.* colleges and universities); public or private non-profit agencies; libraries; public housing authorities (governmental agencies that oversee subsidized housing for low-income individuals); other types of non-profit institutions; or a consortium of providers (P.L. 105-220, Section 203(5)).

The Disadvantaged Adult Learner

This section describes the adult education *target* population; that is, the group of individuals who are eligible to receive services, in terms of educational attainment and literacy skills. It also provides information about the *participant* population: individuals who actually enroll in federally funded programs.

The target population. Data on the target population come from several sources, including:

- The decennial Census of Population and Housing and the Current Population Survey’s March Demographic Supplement, both of which provide data on educational attainment.
- Two national assessments conducted in the U.S. – the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey, which describes the prose, document, and quantitative literacy skills of United States adults;⁴

4. Prose, document, and quantitative literacy refer, respectively, to the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts, locate and use materials in documents such as forms and tables, and apply arithmetic operations. Analysts assigned respondents to one of five levels on each scale, based on their scores on a 500-point scale.

and the International Adult Literacy Survey, a comparative study of adult literacy skills in 22 countries, using the National Adult Literacy Survey's methodology and scales.

Of 212 million United States adults age 18 and over, 21% (44 million) have less than a high school diploma or equivalent. Approximately one-third of those without a diploma have less than a ninth grade education.

Approximately 20% of United States adults (40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the U.S. at the time) scored in Level 1 on the National Adult Literacy Survey's prose, document, and/or quantitative literacy scales. About one-fourth of those who scored in Level 1 on the prose scale were immigrants who may have just been learning to speak English. 62% had left high school without obtaining a diploma, and one-third were 65 years of age or older.

According to National Adult Literacy Survey data, 12% of respondents had a physical, mental, or health condition that kept them from participating fully in daily activities. These individuals were disproportionately represented in Level 1: only 21% of all respondents, but nearly half of individuals with disabilities, scored at this level on the prose scale. Individuals with learning disabilities, who represented only 3% of the total population, accounted for 9% of those in Level 1 (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993). As a group, these individuals also had lower educational attainment: more than half lacked a secondary school credential, in comparison to 16% of the total population (Vogel and Reder, 1998). National Adult Literacy Survey data do not tell us how many participants in adult education programs have learning disabilities, and estimates from other sources vary widely. However, experts agree that the number is significant.⁵

The composite scores (*i.e.* the average of scores on the prose, document, and quantitative scales) of United States adults participating in the International Adult Literacy Survey were the third-highest among high-income countries. However, while the distribution of literacy skills within many European countries (as measured by the difference in scores between the 5th and 95th percentiles) was relatively small, this discrepancy was large in the United States (Sum, Kirsch, and Taggart, 2002).

The participant population. In Program Year 2002 (July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002), nearly 2.8 million individuals participated in federally funded adult education programs. This figure represents less than 10% of those who were eligible for services.

ESL students made up the largest group of adult education students, accounting for 42% of enrollment. 38% of students received ABE instruction, while only 20% participated in ASE classes.

37% of ABE and ASE students who participated in the program during Program Year 2002 made educational gains; that is, they completed or advanced one or more levels in the program. 39% of those who specified entering employment as a goal at program entry found work by the end of the first quarter after they left the program, and 67% of students who said that they wanted to upgrade their skills in order to retain their current jobs were still employed three quarters after program exit. More than 40% of those

5. Several agencies, including the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, have developed alternative definitions of learning disability. From the adult perspective, the most appropriate definition is the one developed by the Rehabilitation Services Administration, which defines "specific learning disability" as "a specific disorder in one or more of the central nervous system processes involved in perceiving, understanding and/or using concepts through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means. This disorder manifests itself with a deficit in one or more of the following areas: attention, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, coordination, social competence and emotional maturity" (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 1985).

whose goal was to obtain a secondary school credential did so, and 30% of those who said they wanted to achieve the skills necessary to enter a postsecondary education or training program were successful.

Current Practice and Trends in ABE and ASE

Some of the most critical issues facing the field of adult education in the United States today have to do with program design and instructional practice, professional development and teacher quality, assessment, accountability, and documentation of program outcomes and impact. In this section, we describe those issues and some of the ways in which the Department of Education, the states, and local programs are addressing them.

Program design and instructional practice. Historically, many local adult education programs have relied on organizational practices that, while conserving resources, do not necessarily promote effective instruction (*e.g.*, “open entry/open exit” policies that allow students to enroll in classes at any time, and classrooms that include students at a variety of skill levels). However, recent research in the field has led many local programs to examine their programs’ operations and instructional practices much more critically. For example, a current federally funded study of reading instruction for low-level learners is investigating the question of whether operational and instructional characteristics of ABE programs affect students’ reading achievement and practices (Alamprese, 2002). Adult education teachers, who in the past have been forced to choose among instructional strategies based on a limited body of knowledge about which methods work best for which students, are also benefiting from recent research in the field of reading, including studies conducted by a new adult literacy research network sponsored by the Department of Education and other federal agencies.

Professional development and teacher quality. Adult educators often come to the field from other areas (*e.g.*, K-12 education), without specific training in teaching adults. As a result, adult education leaders agree that staff development is one of the most critical needs in the field today. However, a number of factors make it difficult for states and local programs to provide instructors with professional development opportunities. These include the fact that the majority of the workforce is part-time, lack of infrastructure for staff development, and the absence of financial incentives for adult educators to pursue advanced training.

Despite these challenges, both the Department of Education and the states have initiated efforts to improve professional development opportunities for adult educators. Federal funds are supporting research on the ways in which teachers’ classroom practices change after they participate in various kinds of staff development, an effort to improve state staff development systems, and training and technical assistance for states adopting content standards. State-level initiatives include development of certification requirements, identification of instructor competencies, support for literacy resource centers, and provision of incentives for teachers to participate in staff development activities (National Institute for Literacy, 2000b; Tolbert, 2001).

Assessment. State and local adult education programs must assess students’ skills for a variety of purposes, including initial student placement, instructional planning, assessment of student progress, and demonstration of program effectiveness. The nature of adult education programs, however, complicates assessment issues. Not only do learners have a wide range of goals, but they participate for varying numbers of hours and may not stay in the program long. Further, because local curricula vary widely, it is difficult to ensure that assessments are aligned with instructional content.

Historically, local adult education programs have used a wide variety of assessments, administered on differing schedules. As a result, it has been difficult or impossible to compare results across states or local programs, or to readily demonstrate the effectiveness of the adult education program as a whole. In

recent years, however, the Department of Education and state agencies have undertaken a number of efforts to improve assessment practices in the field.

First, the Department of Education—while allowing states and local programs to select from a variety of standardized or performance-based assessments—has provided states with instructions on categorizing students into the Educational Functioning Levels used by the National Reporting System, based on scores on commonly used tests. These test benchmarks permit aggregation of state and local data to the national level. At least 11 states have undertaken their own efforts to identify the competencies that adult education students should achieve, design curricula that teach those competencies, and/or develop appropriate assessment instruments (Kutner, Webb, and Matheson, 1996).

Accountability. Reflecting a trend toward greater accountability for federally funded programs, the Workforce Investment Act specifies three measures of effectiveness for adult education programs, including: demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels; placement in, retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement; and receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent. Each applies only to students with relevant goals; *e.g.*, the denominator for calculating the percentage of students who received secondary school diplomas includes only those students who specified that goal at program entry. In a recent study of the Workforce Investment Act’s effect on adult education programs, most state and local adult education administrators cited few concerns about the impact of these indicators (perhaps because the study was conducted relatively early in Workforce Investment Act implementation).⁶ Officials in some states expressed concern about the difficulty involved in collecting follow-up data required for compliance with the indicators but, on the other hand, several noted positive effects on local programs (Elliott, 2002).

Documentation of program outcomes and impact. In the United States labor market, success is clearly related to educational attainment. Recent research shows that literacy skills are “positively and strongly associated” with individual earnings (Sum, 1999) as well as evidence of the General Educational Development credential’s effect on earnings and transition to postsecondary education. There is also evidence that participation in adult education, in general, leads to increased earnings and promotes continued education, in addition to helping students achieve personal goals (Beder, 1999). However, certain aspects of program design and operations (*e.g.*, the multiplicity of program goals, variation in instructional and assessment practices, open enrollment policies that allow students to enter and leave the program at will, limited capacity for data collection at the local level) have made it difficult to document program outcomes. Measuring the adult education program’s *impact*; that is, the changes that it brings about in society as a whole, is even more challenging.

Conclusion

Statistics on current participation in federally funded adult education programs document low participation and persistence rates. However, a variety of current federal and state initiatives have the potential to improve participation and persistence, as well as the quality of adult education programs. These include federally funded research, such as the current study of reading instruction for low-level learners, studies undertaken by the new adult literacy research network, and efforts to disseminate findings from recent reading research to adult educators. State and federal funds are also supporting the development of content standards to make instruction and assessment more relevant for adult learners. Most states have also undertaken efforts, in the form of either certification requirements or identification of instructor competencies, to address critical staff development needs in the field.

6. The study, which involved visits to 16 states and 27 local one-stop centers, cannot be considered nationally representative.

Federal policymakers are calling for increased accountability and use of research-based practices in all aspects of American education. These principles are reflected in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which sets forth measures of effectiveness for adult education programs and requires states to consider whether local programs use instructional practices that have been proven effective in decisions about the substate allocation of federal funds.

Current federal and state initiatives have the potential to improve the quality of adult education programs. However, requirements for increased accountability and effectiveness create special challenges for adult education. The multiplicity of program goals makes it difficult for the program to document its effectiveness, and the research base about effective practices is limited in comparison to current knowledge about K-12 instruction. Nevertheless, as described in this Background Report, federal and state policymakers have undertaken a wide variety of initiatives to improve the quality of adult education in the U.S. The extent to which they are successful will determine the future effectiveness of the program in improving outcomes for current students, and in attracting and retaining more adults who wish to improve their literacy skills.

INTRODUCTION

From 1999 to 2002, representatives of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted thematic reviews of adult learning, including all types of adult education and training, in nine countries.⁷ The purpose of these reviews was to analyze policies used by various countries to improve access to, and participation in, adult learning. Reviewers also examined the quality and effectiveness of each country's adult learning system. OECD published findings from these nine visits in a report entitled *Beyond Rhetoric: Adult Learning Policies and Practices* in the spring of 2003. An additional nine countries, including the United States (U.S.) will participate in a second round of thematic reviews in 2003-2004. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) has commissioned two Background reports to help prepare OECD representatives for their visit to the U.S. in 2003.

Adult learning in the U.S. takes many forms. According to ED's National Household Education Survey, nearly half of adults aged 16 and older participated in some type of lifelong learning in 2001. Lifelong learning activities – which are sponsored by a wide variety of public and private entities – encompass work-related courses, personal-interest courses, college or university credential programs,⁸ and other activities, including apprenticeships, basic skills training, and English as a Second Language Classes. Adults of all educational levels participate in lifelong learning, although those with higher educational attainment are more likely to do so (Wirt, *et al.*, 2003).

ED officials, in consultation with OECD, have determined that the thematic review in the U.S. will focus on adult learning activities for disadvantaged individuals, defined as those with literacy skills in the two lowest levels on the National Adult Literacy (NALS) scales.⁹ Accordingly, the two Background Reports are concerned primarily with the adult basic education and literacy programs overseen by ED's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). These programs, which offer instruction for individuals age 16 and over who do not have a secondary school credential, or who are learning English as a second language, are the principal means through which disadvantaged adults in the U.S. can improve their literacy skills.

Instruction offered through the adult basic education system is usually classified as either:

- **Adult Basic Education (ABE)**, or instruction for individuals with skills at the lowest levels;
- **Adult Secondary Education (ASE)**, or instruction for individuals who are working toward secondary-level credentials; or

7. Including Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

8. Participation in a college or university program by "traditional students" (aged 16 to 24) was not counted as an adult education activity.

9. Literacy scales used by the NALS, conducted by ED in 1992, are identical to those used in the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

- **English as a Second Language (ESL)**, or instruction to help individuals who have limited English-speaking ability improve their competence in the language.

ESL students represent the largest group of adult basic education participants, accounting for 42% of enrollment in Program Year 2002.¹⁰ To describe the field of ESL instruction and its students, ED has commissioned a separate Background Report by the Center for Applied Linguistics, entitled *Adult English Language Instruction in the 21st Century*. As ED directed, RTI's report is concerned almost exclusively with ABE and ASE instruction.

The Background Report is organized as follows:

- **Section I** describes the context for adult education in the U.S., including geographic, economic, and demographic factors, as well as the nature of the country's educational system in general and the historical development of the adult education system.
- **Section II** outlines the organization and structure of the adult education service delivery system, including the legislative requirements for the program, its governance and funding, the providers that deliver adult education services, federal agencies involved in adult education, and national adult education organizations.
- **Section III** presents descriptive information about the individuals who are eligible for, and who participate in, adult education instruction. It also describes the outcomes that program participants achieve and the barriers that prevent many adults from enrolling in or completing ABE and ASE classes.
- **Section IV** reviews current practices and trends in ABE and ASE instruction, including program design and instructional practice, professional development and teacher quality, assessment, accountability, and use of technology.
- Finally, **Section V** presents conclusions concerning access to ABE and ASE instruction in the U.S. and the future of the service delivery system.

10. The Program Year begins on July 1 and ends on June 30. Program Year 2002 ended on June 30, 2002.

I. THE CONTEXT FOR ADULT EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

In this section, we discuss the geographic, economic, and demographic context for adult education in the U.S. We also describe the way in which federal, state, and local governments share responsibility for the country's educational system. Finally, we provide a brief overview of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education in the U.S. and review the historical development of the adult education system.

A. Geographic, Economic, and Demographic Factors

Geography. The U.S. is bordered by Canada to the north, Mexico to the south, and the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans to the east and west. The world's fourth largest country in terms of both size and population, it encompasses an area of 3.5 million square miles (5.6 million km.). It comprises 50 states, the District of Columbia, and a number of dependent areas, including the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

The country's population density is relatively low, averaging about 30 persons per square km.¹¹ However, like many statistics for the country as a whole, this figure masks considerable variation at the regional, state, and local levels. Although the U.S. includes 29 cities of one-half million or more, population density in many western states is less than 20 persons per square km. Both of these extremes – large cities where many language groups may be represented and extremely rural areas – pose special challenges for the adult education system.

Economy. A leading industrial power with a technologically advanced economy, the U.S. had a Gross Domestic Product of \$10365.8 billion dollars (and the third highest per capita GDP in the world) in 2002 (OECD, June 2003). Its industries include petroleum, steel, motor vehicles, aerospace, telecommunications, chemicals, electronics, food processing, consumer goods, lumber and mining. Since 2001, however, there have been some downturns in the economy, including reduced increases in output, higher unemployment, and declines in the stock market (CIA, 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the nation's unemployment rate¹² in May 2003 was 6.1%.

As U.S. society becomes more technologically advanced, the literacy skills required by adults are changing. For example, experts have recognized a need for "Information and Communications Technology Literacy," which is defined as the use of "...digital technology, communications tools, and/or networks to access, manage, integrate, evaluate, and create information in order to function in a knowledge society" (Educational Testing Service, n.d., p. 2). These skills are becoming more and more important as the use of technology in U.S. workplaces, communities, schools, and homes spreads.

Demography. The population of the U.S., which grew by 13% from 1990 to 2000, was 281 million in 2000. Like many highly developed countries, the U.S. has a relatively "old" population, with a median age of 35. 13% of the U.S. population is 65 years of age or older. More than one-third (36%) of the

11. In contrast, the population density in the United Kingdom is well over 200 persons per square km. (Population Reference Bureau, 2002).

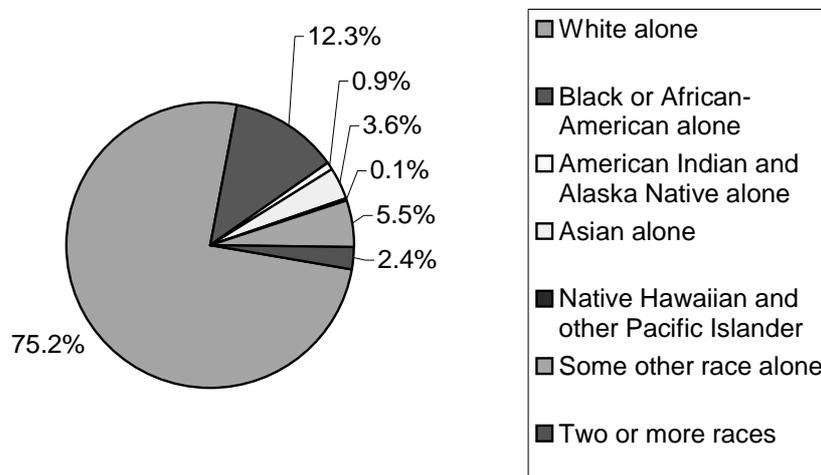
12. The percentage of people who do not have a job, have actively looked for work in the last four weeks, and are available for work.

population is under the age of 25. Another 32% is between the ages of 25 and 44, and an additional 19% is between the ages of 45 and 64 (Perry and Mackun, 2001; Meyer, 2001).

The country's aging population means that it will be required to support a large elderly population at a time when smaller numbers of individuals are entering the workforce. However, U.S. fertility and immigration rates, which exceed those of some other highly developed countries, will somewhat offset this trend (McDevitt and Rowe, 2002).

In the 2000 decennial census, three-quarters of the U.S. population reported that they belonged to the White race alone (see *Exhibit 1*), and 12% were Black or African-American alone.¹³ Asian individuals made up 4% of the population. 6% of the population belonged to some other racial group, while 2% considered themselves to be of two or more races. 13% of the population was Hispanic or Latino.¹⁴

Exhibit 1. U.S. Population by Race*



* Includes individuals of all ages.
 Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
 Source: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3), Table P6.

In recent years, the U.S. has experienced a dramatic increase in immigration, resulting in a high demand for adult education services. In March 2000, 10% of the population was foreign born (*i.e.* not citizens at birth), and an additional 10% had at least one parent who was foreign-born. Half of these individuals were from Latin America (primarily Mexico and Cuba), and one-quarter were from Asia. Much of the foreign-born population is concentrated in large metropolitan areas: about half of these individuals live in the cities of Los Angeles, New York, San Francisco, Miami, and Chicago.

13. For definitions of race categories used by the Census, please see the Glossary. Unlike earlier censuses, which allowed each person to select only one racial category, the 2000 census permitted respondents to indicate that they were part of more than one racial group. Therefore, this Background Report classifies the population as belonging to either one race alone, or to two or more races.

14. The Census Bureau considers race and Hispanic origin to be two separate and distinct concepts. Thus, an individual of any race may be of Hispanic origin.

Foreign-born individuals are less likely than native-born persons to have completed secondary school (67 versus 87%), but just as likely as native-born persons to have a bachelor's (four-year postsecondary) degree or more, with 26% of each group falling into this category (Schmidley, 2001). Foreign-born individuals may need to learn English for everyday use or may wish to meet citizenship requirements. These requirements include the ability to read, write, and speak basic English. All applicants for citizenship must demonstrate a basic knowledge of U.S. history and government by passing a "civics" test. Many schools and community programs, including adult education, offer classes to help immigrants meet these requirements.

The majority of the population (about 80% of those age 5 and older) speak only English at home. However, 18% sometimes or always use another language at home. Although most of these individuals know at least some English, about one-quarter indicate that they speak English "not well" or "not at all."¹⁵ The most common language spoken by those who speak English "not well" or "not at all" is Spanish (used at home by just over 70% of those who said they spoke English "not well" or "not at all").¹⁶

B. Brief Overview of the K-12 and Postsecondary Educational Systems¹⁷

In the U.S., which is a federal republic, governance responsibilities are shared by the federal, state, and local levels, with each exercising similar powers (*e.g.*, enacting laws and imposing taxes) so long as their actions do not conflict with those of a higher level. The Constitution assigned specific responsibilities to the federal government and reserved all remaining functions for the 50 states and the District of Columbia. In practice, however, the "balance of power" has shifted over time, with the federal level assuming additional responsibilities.

In education, the federal government's role has historically been one of ensuring equal access for disadvantaged students and promoting educational excellence. Its most recent effort to improve the quality of education came as part of the reauthorization of federal legislation governing elementary and secondary education. Known as the *No Child Left Behind Act*, this legislation requires states to develop and implement accountability systems based on state standards in reading and mathematics, and to analyze test results by poverty status, race, ethnicity, disability status, and limited English proficiency.

The U.S. educational system is overseen primarily by state and local governments. The federal government has no role in establishing curriculum, and even the states themselves may leave a great deal of decision making to local school districts. Policy decisions are made by state legislatures and boards of education and implemented by state departments of education, which oversee local school districts.

Each state provides students with 12 academic years, or grades, of free education, and most states also offer kindergarten programs for younger children (K-12). In elementary grades (1-6), a single teacher commonly provides instruction in all subject areas. In secondary school (grades 7-12, with the last 4 years referred to as "high school"), the day is divided into five or six periods, with classes in specific subject areas taught by various teachers. Most states have compulsory attendance laws that require students to attend classes from the time they are 6 or 7 until the age of 16 or 18 (Education Commission of the States, March 2000). After completing high school, students may pursue bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees at postsecondary institutions.

15. Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF-3), Table PHC-T-20.

16. Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF-3), Table P19.

17. The majority of information in this section comes from the U.S. Department of Education's Overview of education in the United States for international audiences, which is available at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OUS/PES/int-over.html>.

Most students receive high school diplomas around the age of 18: in 2000, about 86% of adults between the ages of 18 and 24 who were not currently enrolled in school reported that they had earned a high school diploma or equivalent. This figure (known as the “high school completion rate”) has remained relatively constant for the last three decades (Kaufman, Alt, and Chapman, 2001). Females are more likely to complete high school than males, although the difference in completion rates is not large (88% and 85%, respectively). However, as shown in *Exhibit 2*, completion rates vary considerably among racial/ethnic subgroups. In October 2000, more than 90% of non-Hispanic Whites and Asian or Pacific Islanders between the ages of 18 and 24 reported that they had completed high school, while only 84% of non-Hispanic Blacks had done so. The completion rate was lowest for Hispanics (just over 60%).¹⁸

Exhibit 2. High School Completion Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Race/ethnicity	Completion rate
White, non-Hispanic	91.8
Black, non-Hispanic	83.7
Hispanic	64.1
Asian or Pacific Islander	94.6
Total	86.5

Source: Kaufman, P., Alt, M. N., and Chapman, C. D. (2001). *Dropout rates in the United States: 2000*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics.

The elementary and secondary education system also includes “special education” classes that serve students with disabilities. Although graduation rates have improved somewhat in recent years, only 57% of special education students graduated from high school with a standard diploma in school year 1998-1999.¹⁹ Graduation rates varied by disability type: among individuals with learning disabilities, who represented half of special education students, the rate was 63% (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

Federal funds account for only 7% of total funding for elementary and secondary education. The balance comes about equally from state and local sources. Per-pupil expenditures vary by state, averaging just under \$7,000 in 2000 (U.S. Census Bureau, May 22, 2002).

The U.S. postsecondary education system includes colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical colleges. All charge tuition, although public institutions subsidized by state and local governments reduce fees for state residents, and many students receive some form of financial assistance. More than 2,000 four-year colleges and universities, both public and private, award postsecondary degrees, while over 1,000 community and technical colleges offer two-year associate degree programs (with students often having the option of transferring to a four-year institution to complete a bachelor’s degree). Public postsecondary institutions are governed by state agencies or boards and accredited through non-governmental peer evaluation. In addition to tuition, these institutions receive government funding and donations.

C. Historical Background of the Adult Education System

The federal government has provided funds to assist states in establishing and expanding adult basic education programs for nearly 40 years. These programs were initially authorized in 1964 as one aspect of an antipoverty initiative. Two years later, Congress passed a separate Adult Education Act, in which it

18. These statistics include an unknown number of individuals who never enrolled in U.S. schools, either because they arrived after the usual graduation age or because they entered the U.S. in search of employment, rather than education.

19. Some special education students receive certificates of completion, based on different requirements.

recognized the importance of literacy skills to “productive employment” and adults’ need for “sufficient basic education to enable them to benefit from job training and retraining programs and obtain and retain productive employment...” (Adult Education Act, P.L. 100-297, Section 311(2)).

The Adult Education Act contained many provisions that are still in effect today, including:

- ***A formula for distribution of federal funds to the states***, based on the proportion of adults below a certain educational level (initially 5th grade, now 12th grade) residing in each state.
- ***Limits on the percentage of program costs that can be paid by federal funds***. Initially, states were required to provide 10% of program costs in “matching” funds; this percentage has now increased to 25. Their share may be in the form of cash or “in-kind” contributions. (In-kind contributions are non-cash contributions on which a value can be placed; *e.g.*, classroom space, utilities, staff time, materials and supplies, etc.)
- ***A requirement for each state to submit a “State Plan”*** outlining adult education needs in the state and how federal funds will be used.
- ***Specification of the types of providers that can receive federal adult education funds***. Initially, only local school districts were eligible for federal funding. Today, almost any type of agency capable of providing literacy services may apply.
- ***Limits on the amount of funds that may be used for specific purposes***; *e.g.*, administrative costs, teacher training, and “demonstration projects” that test new approaches to service delivery.

Services under the Adult Education Act were initially targeted to individuals 18 years and over with no more than an 8th grade education. Later, the age range was expanded to include individuals 16 and up who had not graduated from high school, then anyone who “lacked sufficient basic skills to function effectively in society” (Leahy, 1991, p. 33). Over time, the legislation has directed states to pay particular attention to various “special populations,” including older individuals, persons with limited English-speaking ability, refugees, individuals who are institutionalized or incarcerated, homeless persons, and those who are “educationally disadvantaged” (defined by the Adult Education Act as individuals with basic skills at or below the 5th grade level).

In 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (Public Law 105-220) repealed the Adult Education Act and made adult education part of a new “one-stop” career system that includes many federally funded job training programs. In the next section of this report, we review the current legislative requirements governing the program, which are set forth in Title II of the Workforce Investment Act, known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. We also describe the organization and structure of the system through which adult education services are delivered under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, including its governance and funding, the types of instruction it offers, the providers that offer adult education services, and federal agencies and national organizations involved in adult education.

II. ORGANIZATION AND STRUCTURE OF THE ADULT EDUCATION SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

A. Legislative Requirements Governing the Program

Definition of adult education services. Under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, adult education services are defined as services below the postsecondary level for individuals who are 16 and over, and who are not enrolled, or required to be enrolled, in secondary school. Eligible individuals must also “lack sufficient mastery of basic educational skills to enable the individuals to function effectively in society”; lack a high school diploma or equivalent; or be “...unable to speak, read, or write the English language.” States allocate funds to local agencies that provide one or more of the following services: adult education and literacy, including workplace literacy; family literacy services; and English literacy services (P.L. 105-220, Sections 203(1)(C) and 231(b)). States must also support educational programs for individuals who are institutionalized or incarcerated.

As defined by the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act:

- **Workplace literacy** refers to literacy services that are intended to improve the productivity of the workforce.
- **Family literacy** services include four components: (1) literacy instruction for parents; (2) educational activities for children; (3) interactive literacy activities involving both the parent and the child; and (4) training that prepares parents to teach their children and to participate in their children’s education.
- **English literacy** services help individuals with limited English proficiency achieve competency in the language.

For federal reporting purposes, ABE and ASE programs are organized into educational functioning levels: four for ABE (beginning ABE literacy, beginning basic education, low intermediate basic education, and high intermediate basic education) and two for ASE (low adult secondary education and high adult secondary education). According to current federal reporting guidelines, “Each level describes a set of skills and competencies that students entering at that level can do in the areas of reading, writing, numeracy, speaking, listening, functional and workplace areas.” States use standardized assessments to determine a student’s initial placement and to assess progress (Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001).

Students in ASE programs may obtain a secondary credential in several different ways, including the following:

- Most commonly, ASE students prepare for and take the **General Educational Development (GED) examinations**. The GED credential, which was originally developed for the benefit of World War II veterans, is generally recognized as the equivalent of a high school diploma. The program is administered nationally by the American Council on Education.

The GED exams include norm-referenced tests in writing, social studies, science, reading, and mathematics, which students may take individually or all at once. In 2001, approximately 700,000 U.S. residents who had passed all five of the tests earned GED credentials.

- Alternatively, ASE students may work toward an **Adult High School Diploma**. Adult high schools are full-time schools offering comprehensive high school curricula for adults. There is no central administrative organization for Adult High School programs, and completion criteria vary from state to state. All but a few states offer Adult High School programs (Statelman and Schmidt-Davis, 1999).
- The national **External Diploma Program** allows students to earn a high school diploma by demonstrating competency in more than 60 life skills. The External Degree Program is an assessment, rather than an instructional, program: its staff provides adults with an assessment of their skills and refers them to other programs for instruction. According to the national organization, the target population for this program is adults "...who have not had recent schooling or test-taking experience, but who have acquired high school academic skills in ways other than through curriculum-based programs." Only 10 states offer the External Degree Program (National External Diploma Program, n.d.).

Under the Adult Education Act, states were prohibited from charging students for adult education services. The Workforce Investment Act removed this restriction; however, most local programs still do not charge for their services.

Distribution of funds to state and local agencies. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act allocates each state a minimum grant of \$250,000, with the balance of the federal allocation distributed according to the state's ratio of adults age 16 and older who do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, as indicated by the decennial census. To receive federal funds, each state must submit a State Plan that includes an assessment of state needs for adult education services, including "those most in need or hardest to serve" (P.L. 105-220, Section 224(b)(1)). States must also indicate how they will serve special populations that include low-income students, individuals with disabilities, single parents, "displaced homemakers" (*i.e.* individuals who previously worked primarily as homemakers, but whose circumstances now require them to obtain other employment), and individuals with multiple barriers to educational enhancement, including persons with limited English proficiency. Plans must include a description of the way in which Title II services will be coordinated with other adult education, career development, and employment and training activities in the state. Federal law sets out a number of criteria that states must consider in redistributing funds to local providers of adult education services, including the provider's success in meeting federal performance requirements, the applicant's commitment to serve individuals who are most in need of literacy services, and whether or not the program uses instructional practices that have been proven effective.

For the last several years, the federal government has also provided special funding for EL/Civics Education programs. These programs combine ESL instruction and civics education, which is defined as "...contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and U.S. history and government to help learners acquire the skills and knowledge to become active and informed parents, workers, and community members" (Federal Register, November 17, 1999). Half of this funding, which is also distributed by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, is allocated to states with the largest absolute need for services; the other half of the federal allocation is based on recent growth in the need for services.

Accountability. Reflecting a trend toward greater accountability for federally funded programs, the Workforce Investment Act specifies three measures of effectiveness for adult education programs, including:

- ***Demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels*** in reading, writing, and speaking the English language, numeracy (*i.e.* knowledge and skills needed to complete quantitative tasks), problem solving, English language acquisition, and other literacy skills.
- ***Placement in, retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement.***
- ***Receipt of a secondary school diploma*** or its recognized equivalent.

ED collects data for these measures through the National Reporting System, which has been operational since July 2000. The reporting system also collects demographic data, information on students' status (*e.g.*, whether the individual is employed, receives some type of public assistance, lives in a rural area, or has a disability), student goals, hours of instruction received, and the type of program in which the student is enrolled. Each state negotiates expected levels of performance on these indicators with ED, based partially on past performance.

Adult education's role in the one-stop system. In addition to adult education, many other federally funded education and training programs are partners in the "one-stop" career center system administered by the U.S. Department of Labor. One-stop partners include employment and training programs for adults,²⁰ youth programs, postsecondary vocational education, and vocational rehabilitation programs. Title I of the Workforce Investment Act, which governs most of the partner programs, outlines performance indicators for those programs and creates state and local Workforce Investment Boards to oversee the one-stop system. It also requires the centers to provide a tiered system of "core," "intensive," and "training" services to help their customers obtain employment, and specifies procedures for certifying agencies that will provide training services.

Each partner program is responsible for making its core services available through the system. For adult education, these include: (1) information about the performance and cost of local adult education programs; (2) initial assessment of skill levels, aptitudes, abilities, and needs for support services (*e.g.*, child care and transportation); and (3) information on the availability of support services and referral to those services (McNeil, 1999). Local programs may offer instructional services on site or refer prospective students to other locations. Most adult education partners continue to provide services at locations other than the one-stop centers, with the majority of students entering the system at these other sites.

Because the one-stop system is relatively new, it is not yet clear how inclusion in the system will affect adult education programs and the students they serve. Most adult education administrators and staff interviewed in a recent study (conducted in 2000-2001) indicated that inclusion in the system had not yet had any dramatic effect on local programs. Individual respondents, however, did point to advantages that included increased public awareness of adult education services, recognition of adult education's role in workforce development, convenient access to employment-related and support services for students, and closer relationships between adult education and other partner programs. On the negative side, some respondents expressed concern about the risk of overemphasizing employment and economic outcomes and demands on adult education resources (Elliott, 2002).

B. Governance and Funding

In this section, we describe the roles that federal, state, and local agencies play in governing Title II programs, and the financial contributions they make to those programs.

20. These programs do not award diplomas or degrees.

The federal role. The Office of Vocational and Adult Education ensures that federal requirements are implemented and provides leadership for the states in a variety of ways. These include:

- *Distributing federal funds to the states* and ensuring that those funds are used in compliance with federal regulations.
- *Reviewing and approving State Plans.*
- *Monitoring states' activities* to ensure that they comply with federal regulations.
- *Negotiating expected levels of performance* on Adult Education and Family Literacy Act indicators with the states and compiling performance data.
- *Sponsoring a limited number of national research studies.*
- *Providing technical assistance to states* and organizing conferences for state administrators.

As the federal agency responsible for overseeing the adult education program, OVAE distributes federal funds, ensures that state programs are in compliance with federal regulations, collects and analyzes performance data, and provides technical assistance to the states. In addition, OVAE works with community colleges, which provide lifelong learning opportunities for adults and also often offer adult basic skills instruction. The agency also administers vocational education programs, which at the postsecondary level are a partner in the one-stop system.

Federal funding for adult education and EL/Civics programs in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico totaled \$563 million in Fiscal Year 2002 (October 1, 2001 to September 30, 2002). The average award was about \$10.8 million per state, with allocations ranging from a low of \$861,000 to a high of \$76,321,000. However, state and local spending for adult education far outweighs the federal contribution. According to ED estimates, state and local spending for adult education in Fiscal Year 2000 totaled approximately \$1,062,544,626 – nearly twice the federal allocation for adult education and EL/Civics combined (Office of Vocational and Adult Education, April 2002; Office of Vocational and Adult Education, October 2002). National statistics, however, mask considerable variation among the states: while some states contribute amounts that far exceed their federal allocation, others have very limited funds.

Per-participant spending in adult education is quite low in comparison to elementary-secondary expenditures. One source puts the national average between \$200 and \$600 per student (Chisman, 2002). This figure, however, does not necessarily consider how long students remain in the program, or local programs' other sources of financial support.

The state role. Most states designate their Department of Education, which also oversees K-12 education, as the agency that will plan and oversee their adult education programs. Chisman (2002) reports that eight states and the District of Columbia assign this responsibility to the entity that governs community and technical colleges. (In fact, some states have laws specifying that their own funds can go only to local school districts and/or community and technical colleges.) Seven designate a workforce development board or similar entity to administer the adult education program.

Chisman also points out that each of these arrangements offers certain advantages. For example, adult education programs administered by local school districts may have access to resources, including facilities, administrative support, and supplemental local funding. Similarly, housing the program within a community or technical college system can reduce overhead costs while offering the possibility for closer

coordination between adult education and postsecondary programs. Finally, assigning responsibility for adult education to a workforce development board may promote linkages between Title I and Title II programs. However, since the one-stop system itself is very new in most states, relatively little is known about the effects of this approach to administration.

So long as states comply with federal guidelines, they are free to design a service delivery system that they believe best addresses their own needs and utilizes their own resources. For example, a state may adopt a specific curriculum or emphasize certain types of instruction; require local providers to offer comprehensive services or permit them to target specific needs; or adopt specific requirements concerning teacher training, class size, or program intensity. States may also choose to target their own funds to specific types of learners or providers.

This latitude has resulted in the development of very different delivery systems by individual states. For example:

- **Oregon**, a western state on the Pacific coast, relies primarily on its community college system to provide adult education services. The state's Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development oversees both adult education and programs funded under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act. Like many other states, Oregon has adopted the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, an integrated system of competency-based instruction and assessment.
- In **Connecticut**, a northeastern state, state law requires each local school district to offer adult education services, either directly or through coordination with another district. The state's Department of Education administers both federal and state funds, with the state's contribution far exceeding the federal allocation. Although all types of providers are eligible to receive federal funds, state monies can go only to local school districts. Like Oregon, Connecticut uses the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System.
- A southern state, **Kentucky**, was one of the first to sponsor a family literacy program, which is supported by state funds. The state relies on various types of local providers to deliver adult education services. Its "GED on TV" program, created by the Kentucky Educational Television System, has been used in many other states.
- The south-western state of **Texas** is the country's second largest. To provide adult education services across an area of nearly 650,000 square km., the state funds more than 60 regional cooperatives, each of which serves as the fiscal agent for a consortium composed of a mix of organizations. Local committees and advisory boards coordinate the services of cooperative members.

The local role. Decisions made at the local level may have the greatest impact on adult education service delivery. Although states establish overall guidelines for local operations, local agencies are responsible for assessing needs in their own areas and designing programs that respond to those needs. Local agencies decide when and where services will be offered and usually have considerable flexibility in designing instructional programs. Coordination among various agencies involved in adult education also takes place primarily at the local level.

C. Providers

Types of providers. Members of the adult education "target population" (*i.e.* the group of individuals who are eligible to receive services) come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have many

different goals. Certain subgroups of learners may be attracted to specific locations or may wish to receive specific types of instruction. For example, an individual who had an unpleasant experience with classroom instruction in high school might choose a program that offers individual tutoring. Other learners may participate only if services are offered close to home, close to work, or by organizations in which they have confidence (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). Further, since different deterrents to participation may affect different subgroups of the target population, it may be necessary to tailor programs specifically for various groups (Hayes, 1988). As a result, some experts believe that a “pluralistic” service delivery system – one that includes many different types of providers – is desirable (Chisman, 1990).

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act makes almost any type of agency “of demonstrated effectiveness” eligible to receive federal adult education funds through competitive processes established by the states.²¹ These include:

- *Local educational agencies; i.e.* local school districts;
- *Community-based organizations* (private non-profit organizations that represent all, or part, of a community);
- *Volunteer literacy organizations*, or organizations that rely primarily on volunteers to deliver adult education services;
- *Institutions of higher education; i.e.* colleges and universities;
- *Public or private non-profit agencies;*
- *Libraries;*
- *Public housing authorities* (governmental agencies that oversee subsidized housing for low-income individuals);
- *Other types of non-profit institutions; or*
- *A consortium of providers* (P.L. 105-220, Section 203 (5)).

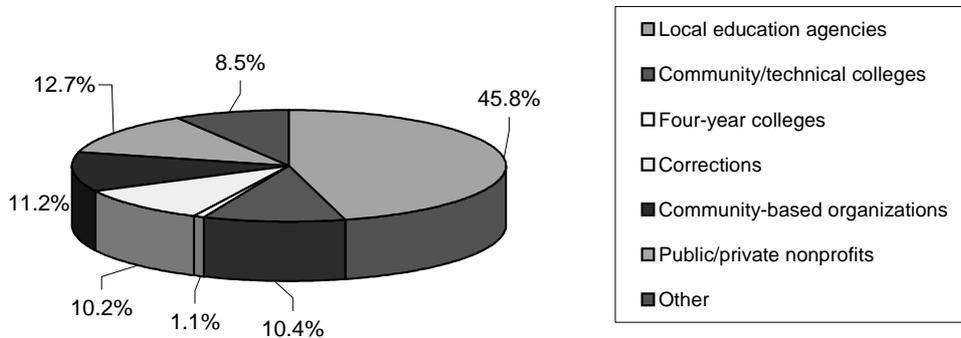
At the time that this report was prepared, Congress was in the process of reauthorizing the Workforce Investment Act. Proposed changes would add both private educational agencies and “faith-based organizations” (*i.e.* churches and non-profit religious organizations) to the list of eligible providers.

Providers receiving federal funds. Nearly half (46%) of local providers receiving federal adult education funds in Program Year 2000²² were local education agencies. Community-based organizations and other non-profits together made up almost one-quarter (24%) of providers. Community/technical colleges and correctional programs each accounted for 10% of agencies that received federal funds (see *Exhibit 3*).

21. The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act sets out a number of criteria that states must consider in this process, including the agency’s past performance and its use of effective educational practice.

22. Information on allocation of federal funds was collected under a reporting system that pre-dated the NRS and is not available for Program Year 2002.

Exhibit 3. Providers Receiving Federal Funds in Program Year 2000, by Provider Type

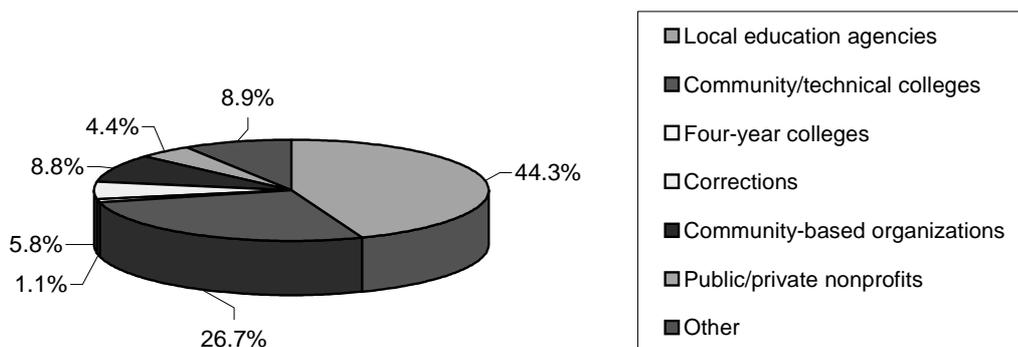


Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
 Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

As shown in *Exhibit 4*, local education agencies not only made up the largest number of providers, but also received the largest proportion of federal funds (44%). Community/ technical colleges (despite the fact that they accounted for only 10% of providers) received more than one-quarter (27%) of federal funds. Community-based organizations and other non-profits received 13% of the federal allocation.

As noted elsewhere in this report, the majority of adult education funding comes from the state, rather than the national, level. However, no recent data on the allocation of state funds by provider type were available at the time this report was prepared.

Exhibit 4. Allocation of Federal Adult Education Funds in Program Year 2000, by Provider Type



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
 Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

D. Federal Agencies Involved in Adult Education

Although the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act is the principal source of funding for adult education, other ED programs also provide educational services for a portion of the target population, or authorize adult education as one of a number of permitted activities. Among the offices that administer such programs are:

- ***ED's Office of Correctional Education***, which is responsible for programs that provide literacy, life, and job skills training to incarcerated youth.
- ***The Office of Elementary and Secondary Education***, which oversees the *Even Start* family literacy program. Like Title II funds, Even Start monies are reallocated by the states to local programs. Even Start programs serve adults who are eligible for services under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and their children from birth to age 7.

Federal agencies other than ED also oversee programs providing some funding for adult education services. These include:

- ***The U.S. Department of Labor***, which is responsible for programs funded under Title I of the Workforce Investment Act. Title I funds may be used for adult training activities, which include basic skills instruction if it is conducted in combination with job skills or job readiness training. Title I also authorizes youth programs, which may include instruction leading to completion of secondary school.
- ***The Department of Health and Human Services***, which administers the *Head Start* and *Temporary Assistance to Needy Families* programs.
 - *Head Start*, a comprehensive child development program for disadvantaged preschool children and their families, received more than \$6 billion in federal funds in Fiscal Year 2002. Head Start grantees provide a wide range of services to meet families' educational, medical, nutritional, and social service needs. The Department of Health and Human Services encourages all Head Start programs to offer family literacy services.
 - *Temporary Assistance to Needy Families* provides cash assistance to low-income families that include a child under the age of 18 or a pregnant woman. Program participants may receive benefits from federal funds for up to five years, but most adults must work at least 30 hours per week in order to maintain their eligibility. States may allow a certain percentage of adults to work a reduced number of hours if they participate in education and training activities. Although work requirements have become stricter in recent years, many Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (or "welfare") recipients enroll in adult education programs.
- The Institute of Museum and Library Services, Office of Library Services, which distributes federal funds under the Library Services and Technology Act. One purpose of the Act is to expand library services, which may include support for literacy programs. About 17% of public libraries offered adult literacy programs in 2000 (Murphy and Heitner, 2003; Lewis and Farris, 2002).

E. National Adult Education Organizations

Many national agencies and organizations contribute to the field of adult education either through research, professional development for administrators and practitioners, advocacy, or program improvement. A complete listing of national organizations would be too extensive to reproduce here; however, *Exhibit 5* describes some of the key players in the fields of ABE and ASE.

Exhibit 5. Key National Adult Education Organizations

Federally Funded Organizations	
Organization	Description and Activities
National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) (www.nifl.gov)	Established by a 1991 amendment to the Adult Education Act, <i>NIFL</i> was created to provide national leadership for the field, coordinate literacy services and policy, and serve as a national resource center. NIFL is one of three federal agencies participating in the <i>Partnership for Reading</i> , whose goal is to make scientifically based reading research more accessible to educators, parents, policymakers, and others. The Institute's other initiatives include development of content standards and related student assessments for adult education (known as <i>Equipped for the Future</i>) and materials to help adult educators identify and serve adults with learning disabilities.
National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) (www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall)	<i>NCSALL</i> is one of 12 university-based research and development centers established by ED to address nationally significant problems and issues in education. Based at Harvard University, the Center conducts basic and applied research to inform practice and advance the field. Topics of recent NCSALL studies include student persistence, patterns of participation in adult literacy programs, learner outcomes, and health literacy (<i>i.e.</i> an individual's ability to understand and use health-related information). The Center has established two "lab sites" where researchers can experiment with and evaluate new methods of instruction. It has also initiated efforts to inform instructors about research findings through states' existing professional development activities.
Other Organizations	
Organization	Description and Activities
American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (AAACE) (www.aaace.org)	<i>AAACE</i> is a professional organization for educators involved in all types of adult learning. Its mission is to expand adult learning opportunities, unify adult educators, foster the development and dissemination of research and information, promote development of professional standards, and advocate for policy and social change initiatives.
American Library Association (ALA) (www.ala.org)	<i>ALA</i> was established in the 1870s to provide leadership for the field of library services. <i>ALA</i> promotes reading and literacy, and participates in national policy discussions. The organization encourages its member libraries to establish literacy programs and provides them with a variety of resources.
Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) (www.coabe.org)	<i>COABE</i> 's goal is to provide leadership, communication, professional development, and advocacy for adult education professionals. The organization sponsors an annual conference and publishes a journal for adult literacy educators.
Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) (www.caalusa.org)	<i>CAAL</i> , an independent non-profit organization, brings together representatives of both the public and private sectors. Created in 1991 for the purpose of improving the adult literacy system, <i>CAAL</i> plans to undertake a variety of activities to promote effective policy development and program improvement.
National Adult Education Professional Development Association (NAEPDC) (www.naepdc.org)	<i>NAEPDC</i> was organized by state directors of adult education to provide professional development opportunities for directors and their staff members. It also disseminates information to the field and participates in policy review and development.

Exhibit 5. Key National Adult Education Organizations - continued

Other Organizations	
Organization	Description and Activities
National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) (www.famlit.org)	NCFL provides leadership in the area of family literacy, offering training and technical assistance, advocacy, and public information. The organization also conducts research and evaluation studies and develops model family literacy programs.
National Coalition for Literacy (NCL) (www.nationalcoalitionliteracy.org)	NCL, which comprises more than 40 literacy organizations, was formed in 1981 to increase public awareness about literacy issues, provide information, and establish a national toll-free number to refer callers to local programs. The organization also promotes communication and coordination among its members, acts as an advocate, and plays a leadership role in the literacy movement.
ProLiteracy Worldwide (www.proliteracy.org)	ProLiteracy Worldwide was created in 2002 through a merger of the country's two largest volunteer literacy organizations (Laubach Literacy International and Literacy Volunteers of America). ProLiteracy, which has more than 1,000 affiliates in all states, offers training and technical assistance to support the creation of local volunteer literacy programs.
Voice for Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) (www.literacynet.org/value)	VALUE, a national organization of adult learners, was created in 1998. Its goal is to expand the role of adult learners in adult literacy efforts, including recruitment, retention, resource development, program reform, and research. VALUE has provided leadership training for learners and participated in national policy discussions.

III. THE DISADVANTAGED ADULT LEARNER

In this section, we describe the need for adult education services in the U.S., based on educational attainment (*i.e.* individuals without high school diplomas) and performance on literacy assessments.

Data on educational attainment come from two sources:

- 1) ***The 2000 Census of Population and Housing***, which describes need based on years of education and diplomas/degrees obtained. The census, conducted on a decennial basis, provides information about the number of individuals aged 16 years and older who have not attained a high school diploma or equivalent.²³ As noted earlier, the census is the basis on which ED allocates federal adult education funds to the states. However, census data required to describe the entire adult education target population, age 16 and over, were not available at the time this report was prepared. Therefore, this section relies primarily on currently available summary data for individuals age 18 and over who do not have high school diplomas as the best available proxy for the target population.
- 2) ***The Current Population Survey March Demographic Supplement***, which describes need based on years of schooling. The Current Population Survey is designed primarily to collect statistical data about the civilian labor force. Each March, a special supplement collects demographic data – including information on income, employment, and education – from

23. Census data include individuals 16 and over who are still enrolled in high school.

approximately 100,000 households. The March supplement is the U.S.'s primary source of information on income and work experience for the entire population.

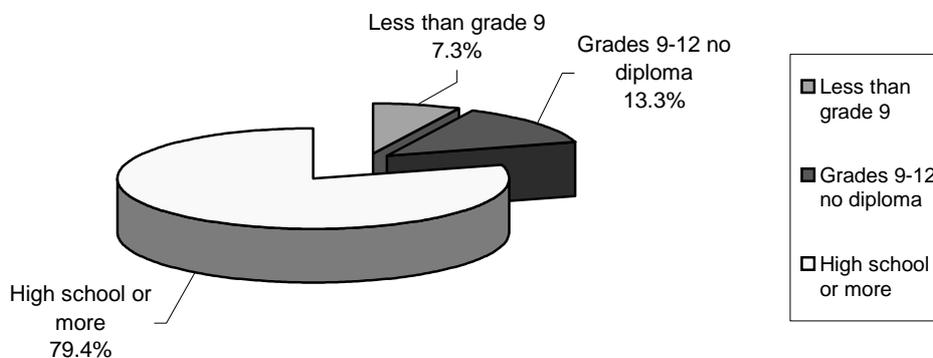
Data on literacy skills come from two national assessments conducted in the U.S.:

- 1) ***The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS)***,²⁴ a nationally representative survey of U.S. adults aged 16 and older, including a sample of institutionalized individuals. The NALS describes need based on respondents' literacy skills in three areas: (1) *prose literacy* – knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts; (2) *document literacy* – knowledge and skills needed to locate and use information in materials such as forms, tables, and maps; (3) *quantitative literacy* – knowledge and skills needed to apply arithmetic operations. Analysts assigned respondents to one of five levels on each scale, based on their scores on 500-point scales.
- 2) ***The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)***, a comparative study of adult literacy skills in 22 countries, using the NALS' methodology and scales. The IALS, conducted in the U.S. in 1994, enables researchers to compare literacy skills within and across countries, and to study the factors that influence development of literacy skills.

A. The Target Population

Need based on educational attainment. Of 212 million U.S. adults age 18 and over, 21% (44 million) have less than a high school diploma or equivalent (see *Exhibit 6*). Approximately one-third of those without a diploma have less than a ninth grade education.

Exhibit 6. U.S. Population Age 18 and Over, by Educational Attainment*



* Although the adult education target population includes individuals age 16 and over, data for that age group were not available at the time this report was prepared.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

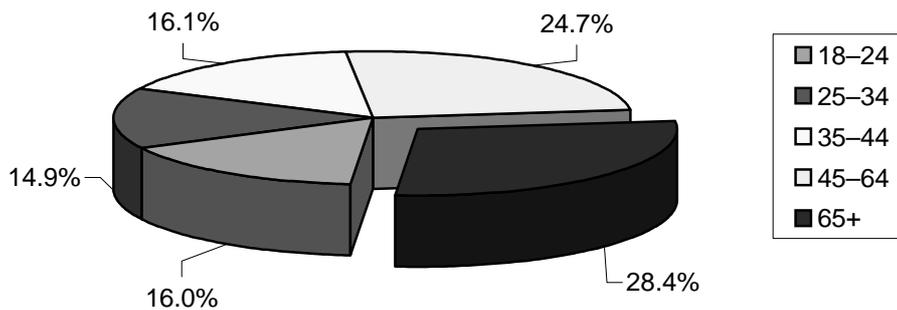
Source: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3), Table PCT025.

The target population is equally divided between males and females. 16% of the target population is between the ages of 18 and 24, and nearly 30% is age 65 and over (see *Exhibit 7*). Individuals in the latter

24. ED has undertaken a follow-up study, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which will enable researchers to study changes in the U.S. population's literacy skills since 1992.

group left the educational system at a time when people commonly received fewer years of formal schooling. In addition, many have left the workforce; thus, they may be less interested in adult education classes. When persons over the age of 65 are removed from the calculation, the percentage of the U.S. population aged 18 and over lacking a high school diploma is reduced to 15.

Exhibit 7. Adult Education Target Population by Age*



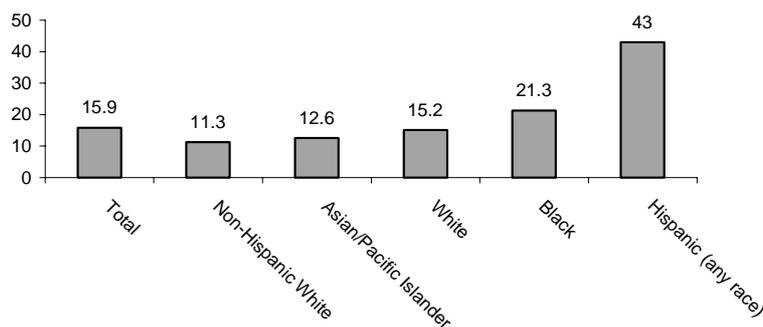
* Although the adult education target population includes individuals age 16 and over, data for that age group were not available at the time this report was prepared.

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Census 2000 Summary File 3 (SF 3), Table PCT025.

As shown in **Exhibit 8**, individuals without high school diplomas are more likely to belong to some racial/ethnic groups than others. More than 40% of Hispanic individuals age 25 and over have less than a high school education. Just over 20% of Black persons lack a high school diploma or equivalent, while 16% of Whites and 13% of Asian or Pacific Islanders are in this category.

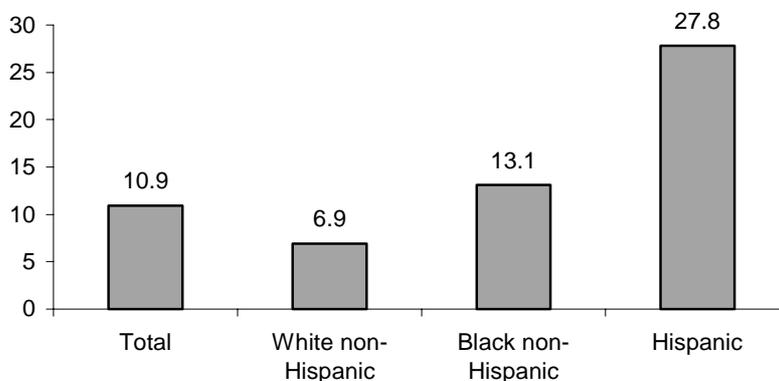
Exhibit 8. Percentage of Individuals Age 25 and Over Without a High School Diploma by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2002.

Individuals who “drop out” of high school (*i.e.* who leave without obtaining a diploma) are also more likely to belong to certain racial/ethnic groups. As shown in **Exhibit 9**, while the overall dropout rate in 2000 was about 11%, dropout rates were higher for Blacks (13.1%) and Hispanics (27.8%). These individuals often enroll in adult education classes at a later date.

Exhibit 9. Percentage of High School Dropouts Among Persons 16 to 24 Years Old, by Race/Ethnicity



Note: GED recipients are counted as high school completers.

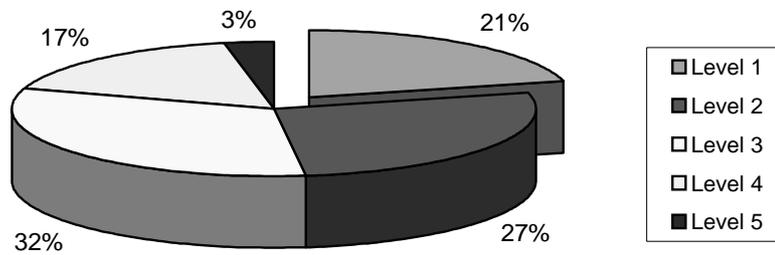
Source: Snyder, T. D., and Hoffman, C. M. (2002), *Digest of education statistics, 2001*. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics

Need based on literacy skills. Data on literacy skills in the U.S. come from two sources: the NALS and the IALS.

Need based on the NALS. As shown in **Exhibits 10-12**, 21 to 23% of U.S. adults (40 to 44 million of the 191 million adults in the U.S. at the time) scored in NALS Level 1 on the prose, document, and/or quantitative literacy scales. The skills of individuals at this level, however, varied widely: as Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993) explain:

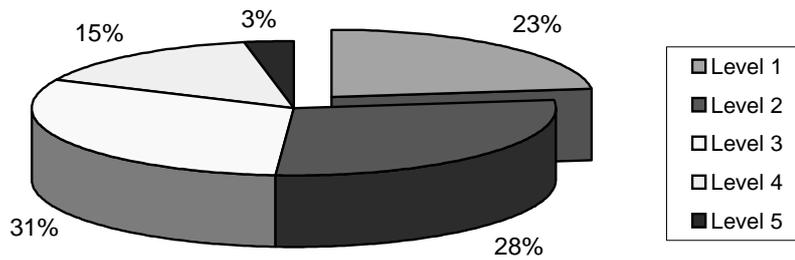
Many adults in this level performed simple, routine tasks involving brief and uncomplicated texts and documents. For example, they were able to total an entry on a (bank) deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting on a form, and identify a piece of specific information in a brief news article. Others were unable to perform these types of tasks, and some had such limited skills that they were unable to respond to much of the survey (p. xiv).

Exhibit 10. Percentage of U.S. Adults Scoring in NALS Levels 1-5 on Prose Scale



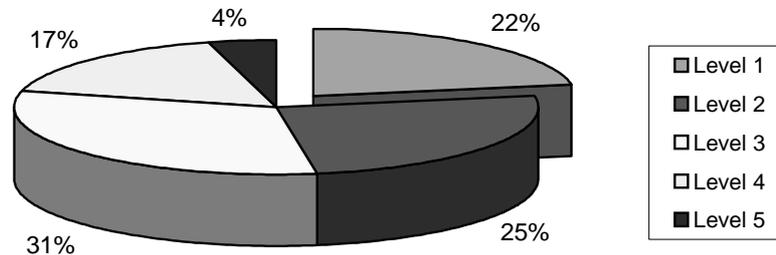
Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.

Exhibit 11. Percentage of U.S. Adults Scoring in NALS Levels 1-5 on Document Scale



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.

Exhibit 12. Percentage of U.S. Adults Scoring in NALS Levels 1-5 on Quantitative Scale



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.

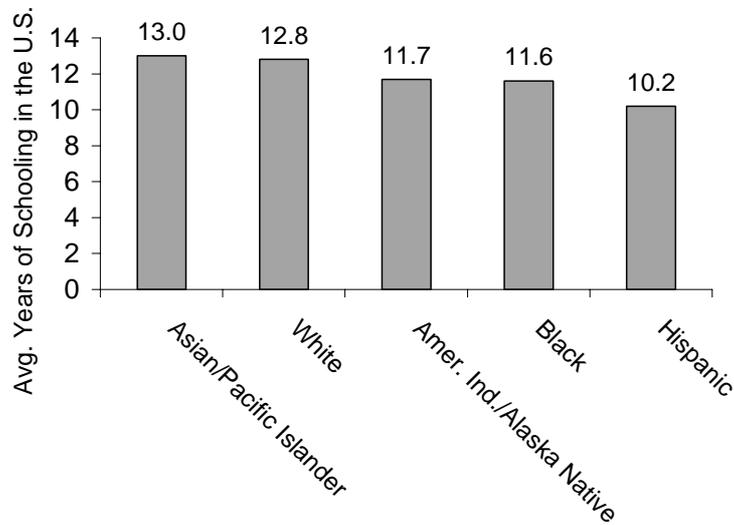
Individuals who scored at Level 1 are considered most in need of adult education services. However, many (between 66 and 75%) of those at this level indicated that they could read and write English either “well” or “very well.” Only 14 to 25% reported getting “a lot of help” from family members or friends with literacy tasks. “It is therefore possible,” the authors point out, “that their skills, while limited, allow them to meet some or most of their personal and occupational literacy needs” (p. xv).

The NALS indicates that:

- About one-fourth of those who scored in Level 1 on the prose scale were immigrants who may have just been learning to speak English.
- 62% of those who scored in Level 1 had left high school without obtaining a diploma.
- One-third of those who scored in Level 1 were 65 years of age or older.
- Approximately one-quarter of those who scored in Level 1 had self-reported disabilities that kept them participating fully in daily activities.
- One in three incarcerated individuals (in comparison to one in five members of the general population) scored in Level 1 on the prose scale.
- The average score of welfare recipients, although it was in Level 2, was lower than that of the total population (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993; Haigler, Harlow, O’Connor, and Campbell, 1994; Barton and Jenkins, 1995).

The NALS clearly illustrates the relationship between formal schooling and literacy skills: the level of education attained in the U.S. was the single most important predictor of literacy proficiency. As shown in *Exhibit 13*, average number of years of schooling varied by race/ethnicity, ranging from a high of 13 years for Asian or Pacific Islanders to just over 10 years for members of Hispanic groups, many of whom may have been recently arrived.

Exhibit 13. Average Years of Schooling in the U.S., by Race/Ethnicity



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Adult Literacy Survey, 1992.

NALS data also indicate differences in average literacy proficiency among racial/ethnic subgroups. Most of these differences are reduced – but not eliminated – when individuals with similar levels of education are compared to each other. For example, even when analysts controlled for differences in schooling, White adults averaged from 36 to 48 points higher on the three scales than Blacks. Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad (1993) suggest that these differences may be due to variation in the quality of schooling available or to differences in socioeconomic status.

According to the NALS data, 12% of respondents had a physical, mental, or health condition that kept them from participating fully in daily activities. These individuals were disproportionately represented in Level 1: only 21% of all respondents, but nearly half of individuals with disabilities, scored at this level on the prose scale. On average, the scores of persons with disabilities on all three scales were approximately 45-50 points lower than those for the total population. The size of this gap varied by disability type, but was between 35 and 74 points in most cases.

58% of individuals with learning disabilities – a group of special interest to adult educators – scored in Level 1. Although these individuals represented only 3% of the general population,²⁵ they accounted for 9% of those in Level 1 (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, and Kolstad, 1993). As a group, these adults also had lower educational attainment: more than half lacked a high school diploma or GED, in comparison to 16% of the total population. Individuals with learning disabilities were also disproportionately represented among those with the very lowest levels of education: while only 4% of the total population had eight years or less of schooling, nearly 30% of respondents with learning disabilities fell into this category.

As educational level increased, the percentage of respondents with self-reported learning disabilities declined. However, even among those with college degrees, 9% reported the existence of learning

25. Vogel (1998) notes that the percentage of NALS respondents with learning disabilities is low in comparison to estimates from other sources. One possible explanation, she suggests, is that many NALS respondents left secondary school before federal requirements to screen children for disabilities were instituted. As a result, they may have been unaware that their reading difficulties were the result of a learning disability.

disabilities (Vogel and Reder, 1998). According to Vogel and Reder, this finding illustrates adults' recognition that "...having a learning disability is a lifelong condition that permeates their existence across the life span and is not just a difficulty that children experience in school" (p. 52).

NALS data do not report how many participants in adult education programs have learning disabilities, and estimates from other sources vary widely. In one survey of state adult education directors, respondents' estimates of the percentage of students with learning disabilities ranged from less than 10 to more than 50%, with one respondent in five indicating more than 50% (Ryan and Price, 1993). Regardless of what the actual percentage may be, experts agree that the number is significant.

Need based on the IALS. Between 1994 and 1998, 22 countries, led by OECD, participated in the IALS. Each country agreed to draw a representative sample of its civilian, non-institutionalized adults aged 16 to 65. The results of this study make it possible to compare literacy skills across countries and to study the relationship between literacy skills and the factors that promote development of those skills.

Among the most interesting IALS findings about literacy in the U.S. are:

- Like most countries that participated in the IALS, the U.S. has a relatively high percentage of adults (more than 15%) at the lowest literacy level (Level 1 on the prose scale).
- About half of adults scored in Levels 1 and 2. But, according to one source, "Experts across the board ... agree that today's economy and society require skills at Level 3 or higher" (Comings, Sum, and Uvin, 2000).
- Although significant numbers of individuals in some countries attain high levels of literacy skills without extensive formal education, that is not true in the U.S.
- The U.S. ranks near the top in education spending, and many of its adults enroll in postsecondary education.
- Only 18% of U.S. adults lacked a secondary education, compared to nearly 36% of adults in 19 IALS countries.
- At the 85th and 90th percentiles, the composite scores (*i.e.* an average of scores on the prose, document, and quantitative scales) of U.S. adults were the third highest among high-income IALS countries.
- However, while the distribution of literacy skills within many European countries (as measured by the difference in scores between the 5th and 95th percentiles) is relatively small, this discrepancy is large in the U.S.
- The IALS indicated no gender gap in the overall literacy proficiencies of men and women in the U.S.
- As in most countries, literacy skills in the U.S. are negatively correlated with age, partly because older individuals have fewer years of schooling.
- Foreign-born adults accounted for 13% of the adult population in the U.S. (the fifth highest among high-income IALS countries) at the time of the survey. Many of these individuals have limited formal schooling and come from non-English speaking countries (National Adult Literacy Database, n.d.; Tuijnman, 2000; Sum, Kirsch, and Taggart, 2002; OECD, 2000).

Need vs. demand. Not all subgroups of the adult education target population are equally likely to enroll in adult education instruction. Complete data from the 2000 census, which will permit comparisons of the target and participant populations (*i.e.* students who enroll in federally funded adult education classes), were not available at the time this report was prepared. However, analyses conducted by RTI in the late 1990s (based on 1990 census data) showed that the participant population contained larger proportions of Hispanics and Asian or Pacific Islanders, and smaller proportions of Whites, than did the target population. Young adults, aged 16-24, were also disproportionately represented in the participant population (Elliott, 1998).

In some areas – particularly those with large immigrant populations – demand for adult education services may far exceed the number of classroom spaces available. Where demand is high and local resources are inadequate to serve all prospective students, local programs may be forced to maintain waiting lists for services. On the other hand, local programs in areas where lower numbers of eligible individuals choose participate may need to devote more attention to outreach and recruitment activities in order to fill their classes.

B. Access and Participation

In this section, we describe the adult education participant population (*i.e.* students who enroll in federally funded adult education instruction), based on annual reports provided to ED by the states. These data are for Program Year 2002 (July 1, 2001 to June 30, 2002), the most recent figures available at the time that this report was prepared. They include information on:

- ***The total number of participants*** who enrolled in adult education instruction;
- ***Demographic characteristics*** of the participant population (gender, age, and race/ethnicity);
- ***Participation by type of instruction received*** (*i.e.* ABE, ESL, and ASE);
- ***Employment status*** of the participant population; and
- ***Student outcomes.***

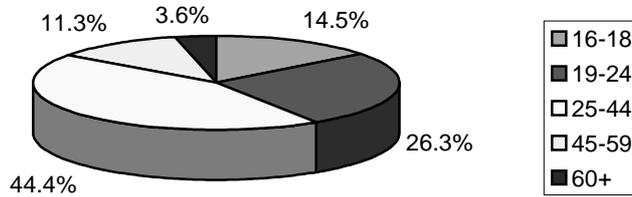
A concluding section describes the barriers that prevent many members of the target population from enrolling in adult education programs, as well as factors that interfere with student retention. We also review recent research on ways to improve student persistence, as well as potential uses of distance education and classroom technology to increase access.

Total number of participants. In Program Year 2002, nearly 2.8 million individuals participated in federally funded adult education programs. This figure represents less than 10% of those who were eligible for services. For almost all of these individuals, participation is voluntary (exceptions include some welfare recipients and individuals on probation or parole).

Demographic characteristics of the participant population. In Program Year 2002, women slightly outnumbered men in federally funded adult education programs (53% vs. 47%).

As shown in *Exhibit 14*, young adults aged 16-24 made up approximately 41% of the participant population. 44% of participants were between the ages of 25 and 44, while only 4% of participants were age 60 and over.

Exhibit 14. Adult Education Participants by Age, Program Year 2002



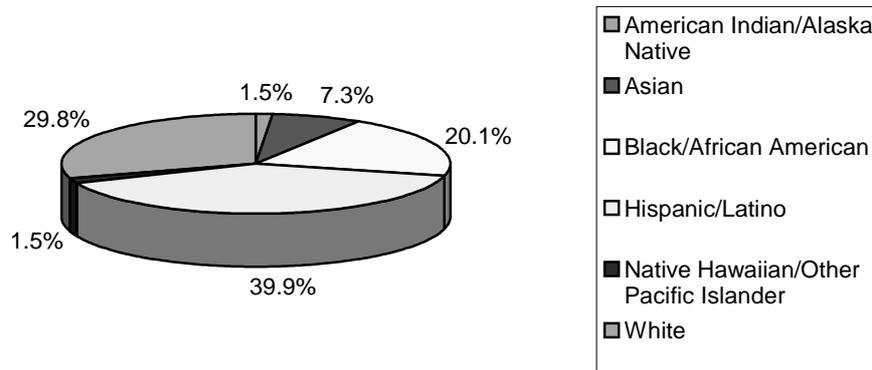
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Hispanics and Latinos made up the single largest group of adult education participants, accounting for 40% of enrollment (see *Exhibit 15*). 30% of participants were White, and 20% were Black.

Exhibit 15. Adult Education Participants by Race/Ethnicity, Program Year 2002

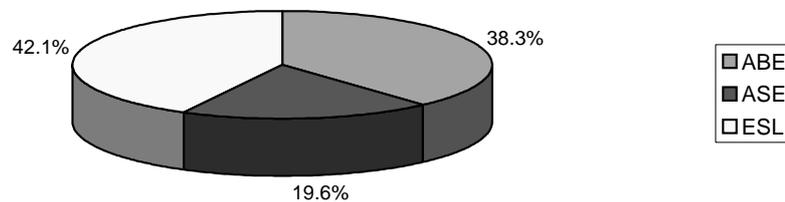
Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.



Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Participation by type of instruction received. In Program Year 2002, ESL students made up the largest group of adult education students, accounting for 42% of enrollment. 38% of students received ABE instruction, while only 20% participated in ASE classes (see *Exhibit 16*).

Exhibit 16. Adult Education Participants by Type of Instruction Received, Program Year 2002



Note: Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.
Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Employment status of the participant population. 36% of the adults who enrolled in adult education programs during Program Year 2002 were employed.

Student outcomes. In Program Year 2002, ED collected data for:

- **Core outcomes** described in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act; *i.e.* (1) educational gains (completing or advancing one or more Educational Functioning Levels); (2) obtaining employment; (3) retaining employment; (4) receipt of a secondary school diploma or GED; and (5) placement in postsecondary education or training.
- **Secondary outcomes**, including (1) leaving public assistance; (2) achieving a work-based project learner goal;²⁶ (3) achieving citizenship skills; (4) voting or registering to vote; (5) increasing involvement in community activities; (6) increasing involvement in children's education; and (7) increasing involvement in children's literacy-related activities.

As shown in *Exhibit 17*, 37% of ABE and ASE students who participated in the program during Program Year 2002 made educational gains; that is, they completed or advanced one or more Educational Functioning Levels. 39% of those who specified entering employment as a goal at program entry found work by the end of the first calendar quarter after they left the program, and 67% of students who said that they wanted to upgrade their skills in order to retain their current jobs were still employed three quarters after program exit. More than 40% of those whose goal was to obtain a secondary school diploma or GED did so. Finally, 30% of those who said they wanted to achieve the skills necessary to enter a postsecondary education or training program were successful.

26. A workplace goal is defined as a specific workplace skill requiring 12–30 hours of instruction to teach.

Exhibit 17. Number of Students Achieving Core and Secondary Outcomes, Program Year 2002

Outcome ²⁷	Number and Percentage of Students Achieving Outcome
Core outcomes	
Educational gain (ABE and ASE students)	518,468 (37%)
Entered employment	171,534 (39%)
Retained employment	184,125 (67%)
Received secondary school diploma or GED	185,848 (42%)
Entered postsecondary education or training	48,882 (30%)
Secondary outcomes	
Left public assistance	4,980 (24%)
Achieved work-based project learner goal	28,167 (74%)
Achieved citizenship skills	12,025 (54%)
Voted or registered to vote	7,165 (74%)
Increased involvement in community activities	23,579 (70%)
Increased involvement in children's education	29,730 (56%)
Increased involvement in children's literacy-related activities	29,568 (57%)

Note: Attainment of these outcomes cannot be attributed solely to enrollment in adult education classes.

Source: Office of Vocational and Adult Education.

Factors related to participation. A literature review by Comings, Parrella and Soricone (1999) describes several kinds of barriers can discourage participation, including (1) *dispositional barriers* (*i.e.* personal attitudes about participation); (2) *informational barriers* (lack of knowledge about educational opportunities); (3) psychosocial barriers (attitudes and values); and (4) situational barriers (factors that are outside of the individual's control). However, some individuals will participate even in the presence of barriers, while others will not.

Student retention is another critical issue in adult education. In Program Year 2002, 2.8 million adult education students received a total of 310 million hours of instruction—an average of about 111 hours each. This is just above the minimum 100 hours of instruction that several sources say adults need to improve by the equivalent of one grade level on a standardized test of reading comprehension.

Experts in the U.S. are working to identify factors that affect student persistence, and to provide local programs with recommendations for improving retention. For example, Tracy-Mumford (1994, in Comings, Parrella, and Soricone, 1999) suggests that retention should be considered in all aspects of program design, including intake and orientation, assessment, and program evaluation. Researchers at the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy recommend that local programs provide experiences that improve students' self-efficacy, assist students in establishing clear goals and understanding what will be involved in meeting those goals, and help students measure progress toward their goals. They also argue that a broader definition of "participation" in adult education is needed: one that recognizes that students may return after "stopping out" temporarily, move from one program to another, or study on their own. Such a definition would call for new service delivery strategies. It would also require changes in federal and state policy to make persistence an important program outcome.

One of the most promising strategies for improving access to adult education, as well as student retention, is the use of distance education and classroom technology. As described by the National Institute for Literacy, distance education is characterized by: (1) separation (in terms of either space or time) between the student and instructor; and (2) the use of media to facilitate interaction between students and the instructor, and among students. Distance education may take a variety of forms,

27. Educational gain measure applies to all students. Percentage of students achieving other goals is based on the number of students who specified that goal at program entry. Collection of data for secondary outcomes is optional.

including instructional television, web-based instruction, or videotapes, and may be used either as a stand-alone form of instruction or as a supplement to classroom instruction.

Federally funded initiatives in distance education and classroom technology include:

- ***TECH.21***, a “hands-on and virtual research to practice and dissemination system for analysis, enhancement, and implementation of high-quality IT applications in adult education learning and instruction.” The project includes two technology labs, a “hands-on” demonstration lab, six adult education program-based field sites, and an Internet portal (www.literacyonline.org/ncal/projects.html).
- ***Community Technology Centers***, which provide disadvantaged residents of economically distressed urban and rural communities with access to information technology and related training (www.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/AdultEd/CTC/index.html).
- ***LiteracyLink: Public Broadcasting System Adult Learning Services***. As one of the Department of Education’s Star Schools Projects, LiteracyLink is designed to improve instruction for disadvantaged individuals through the use of telecommunications. It offers multimedia instruction that combines video, Internet, and print materials, including preparation for the GED and workplace readiness skills (www.pbs.org/als/literacy).
- ***Evaluations of Crossroads Café video series***. ED funded evaluations of the video series Crossroads Café, which portrays six characters in a neighborhood café and the way in which they deal with everyday problems. Crossroads Café is targeted to ESL students, but can also be used by other adult learners (www.intelecom.org) (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

Many states have undertaken their own distance education initiatives. In a 1999 survey, 31 state directors of adult education indicated that their states either already used distance education to provide adult education services, or planned to do so in the future. A few states had already established statewide programs. For example, Delaware offers a *Diploma At a Distance* program for adult learners through its Adult High School (National Institute for Literacy, 2000a).

Distance education can remove many barriers to participation in adult education programs; *e.g.*, scheduling conflicts, child care needs, and transportation issues. However, it is not suitable for all adult learners: successful distance education students must possess basic computer skills and be independent learners. Further, use of distance education raises new issues for adult education programs, including the need for resources to develop and implement new programs, increased needs for technology, and the requirement to provide staff with appropriate training in the use of distance education. Adjustments in federal and state policies (*e.g.*, assessment practices, cost reimbursement methods, and attendance policies) may also be required (National Institute for Literacy, 2000a; Askov, Johnston, Petty, and Young, 2003).

IV. CURRENT PRACTICE AND TRENDS IN ABE AND ASE

In this section, we describe some of the most critical issues facing the field of adult education in the U.S. today, and the ways in which ED, the states, and local programs are addressing those issues.

A. Program Design and Instructional Practice

The state of the field. Historically, many local adult education programs have relied on organizational practices that, while conserving resources, do not necessarily promote effective instruction. For example, “open entry/open exit” policies that allow students to enroll in, and leave, classes at any time force instructors to cope with a constantly changing group of learners. Use of multi-level classrooms, including students at a variety of skill levels, may help local programs address funding or scheduling problems, but again place great demands on instructors, who may have to spend a considerable amount of time planning a variety of independent and small-group activities. Perhaps most importantly, teachers have been forced to choose among instructional strategies based on a limited body of knowledge about which methods work best for which students.

Trends and issues. Recent research in the field has led many local programs to examine their programs’ operations and their instructional practices much more critically. For example, a current study of reading instruction for low-level learners is investigating the question of whether operational and instructional characteristics of ABE programs affect students’ reading achievement and practices. Although results from this study are not yet available, the project has developed a conceptual framework identifying a number of program components that could theoretically influence students’ success. These include:

- **Learner recruitment**, including whether the program uses a multi-faceted recruitment process and has a process for monitoring the success of recruitment activities.
- **Learner intake**, including whether program staff discuss learners’ goals in light of diagnostic results, have a process for reassessing those goals, and assess learners’ capacity to commit to participation.
- **Learner assessment**; *e.g.*, whether the program uses appropriate instruments and schedules, and whether it uses assessment results in planning instruction.
- **Program management**, including use of an advisory board, existence of a process for making adjustments in the program, and use of a “managed enrollment” policy that allows learners to enter classes only at specified times.
- **Program improvement/professional development**; *e.g.*, whether the program has a means for coordinating instruction, provides opportunities for staff to collaborate in program improvement, and periodically assesses the quality of instruction and materials.
- **Support services**; *e.g.*, whether the program has a process for referring learners to appropriate support services at intake and subsequently.
- **Learner transition to further education and training**, including whether the program has a formal process for guiding learners to further education (Alamprese, 2002).

Research in the field of reading is also informing instructors' practices. ED, along with two other federal agencies, has established a new adult literacy research network, which currently includes six five-year research projects. In another federal initiative, The National Institute for Literacy recently established a panel to consider the implications of recent K-12 reading research for ABE, review studies of ABE reading instruction, and identify gaps in the ABE research. The group offered a number of recommendations for ABE instructors, but concluded that "...much more research is needed in almost all of the topic areas addressed" (Kruidenier, 2002, p. 4).

B. Professional Development and Teacher Quality

The state of the field. Adult educators often come to the field from other areas (*e.g.*, K-12 education), without specific training in teaching adults. As a result, adult education leaders agree that staff development is one of the most critical needs in the field today. However, a number of factors make it difficult for states and local programs to provide instructors with professional development opportunities. These include:

- ***The part-time nature of the workforce.*** In Program Year 2002, just over 50% of the teaching force in federally funded programs worked part time. Many of these instructors are paid only for the hours they spend in the classroom, and may have to pursue staff development opportunities on their own time and at their own expense. An additional 28% of the teaching force comprised unpaid volunteers.
- ***Lack of infrastructure for staff development.*** Part-time instructors may work in situations (*e.g.*, at night, away from main campuses) that afford them few opportunities to interact with colleagues or attend formal classes.
- ***Absence of financial incentives for adult educators to pursue advanced training.*** Instructors who complete advanced courses may not necessarily be rewarded with increases in pay.
- ***Lack of knowledge about the relationship between staff development and classroom practice;*** *i.e.* the ways in which participation in particular types of staff development affects a teacher's classroom practices.
- ***Limited funding for professional development.*** Although states may use some of their federal funding for staff development, this amount has been reduced under the Workforce Investment Act.

Trends and issues. Despite the challenges outlined above, both ED and the states have initiated efforts to improve professional development opportunities for adult educators. At the federal level, these include:

- ***A federally funded study,*** conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, to compare the ways in which teachers' classroom practices change after they participate in several different kinds of staff development, including workshops, mentoring arrangements, or "practitioner research" groups (*i.e.* groups in which instructors, often working collaboratively, investigate questions of interest during their everyday practice).²⁸

28. A summary of findings from the Staff Development Study is available at http://www.gse.harvard.edu/~ncsall/researchers_pub.html#smith.

- ***PRO-NET***, a federally funded effort to improve the staff development systems of states and professional organizations. This three-year project, which is scheduled to end in 2003, has identified professional competencies for instructors, program managers, and professional development coordinators, as well as developing several “train the trainer” programs.²⁹
- ***The National Institute for Literacy***, as one of three federal agencies participating in the *Partnership for Reading*, is disseminating the results of scientifically based reading research to adult educators. Through its *Bridges to Practice* program, the Institute has developed materials and training to help instructors identify and teach students with learning disabilities.

As with most other aspects of the program, decisions about staff development take place primarily at the state and local levels. Most states support professional development activities at least partially with their own funds, with 40 of 50 states contributing more than \$100,000 per year (Tolbert, 2001). State-level initiatives include:

- ***Development of certification requirements.*** A 2000 survey of state directors showed that about half the states had established certification processes that require teachers to have specific education, training, or knowledge before they enter the field (National Institute for Literacy, 2000b).
- ***Identification of instructor competencies.*** Instead of establishing certification requirements, 15 states have identified sets of competencies that adult education instructors should have. Local programs can use these competencies in decisions about hiring, staff development, and evaluation activities.
- ***Support for State Literacy Resource Centers.*** State Literacy Resource Centers were established by federal legislation in 1991 to serve as a resource for local programs, but lost their federal funding in 1995. Many states have continued to maintain their Resource Centers, which provide instructors with training and technical assistance.
- ***Provision of incentives*** for teachers to participate in staff development activities, including release time, reimbursement of costs, and funds for substitute teachers (National Institute for Literacy, 2000b; Tolbert, 2001).

C. Assessment

The state of the field. State and local adult education programs must assess student progress for a variety of purposes, including initial student placement, instructional planning, assessment of student progress, and demonstration of program effectiveness. The nature of adult education programs, however, complicates assessment issues. Not only do learners have a wide range of goals, but they participate for varying numbers of hours and may not stay in the program long. Further, because local curricula vary widely, it is difficult to ensure that assessments are aligned with instructional content. Some administrators and instructors believe that performance-based assessments, which require students to perform hands-on tasks, are most appropriate for adult education. However, this type of test is time-consuming to administer and score, and must be standardized in order to meet accountability requirements.

29. Information on Pro-Net is available at <http://www.pro-net2000.org>.

Trends and issues. Historically, local adult education programs have used a wide variety of assessments, administered on differing schedules. As a result, it has been difficult or impossible to compare results across states or local programs, or to readily demonstrate the effectiveness of the adult education program as a whole. In recent years, however (particularly since the advent of the National Reporting System), ED and state agencies have undertaken a number of efforts to improve assessment practices in the field.

First, ED – while allowing states and local programs to select from a variety of standardized or performance-based assessments – has provided states with instructions on categorizing students into the Educational Functioning Levels used by the National Reporting System according to scores on commonly used tests (including the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, Test of Adult Basic Education, Adult Measure of Educational Skills, and Adult Basic Literacy Exam). Using these instructions, local personnel can see, for example, that a student scoring between 680-722 on the Test of Adult Basic Education Form 5 or 6 falls into the “low intermediate basic education” level. These test benchmarks permit aggregation of state and local data to the national level. National Reporting System guidelines also specify the interval at which assessments should be administered.

To provide guidance for states and local programs that wish to use performance-based assessments, ED convened an expert panel through the National Academy of Sciences. The panel’s 2002 report, *Performance assessments for adult education: Exploring the measurement issues*, offers suggestions concerning ways in which adult education programs can use performance-based assessments to meet national reporting requirements. ED is also supporting development of two performance-based assessments: the Test of Emerging Literacy and the Basic English Skills Test Oral interview (Van Duzer, 2002; National Academy of Sciences, 2002).

Also at the national level, the National Institute for Literacy is working to develop performance assessments for use by states and local programs that choose to adopt its *Equipped for the Future* content standards. These assessments will be aligned with the federally defined Educational Functioning Levels.

Many states are also using content standards to improve the quality of their adult education programs. At least 11 states have undertaken their own efforts to identify the competencies that adult education students should achieve, design curricula that teach those competencies, and/or develop appropriate assessment instruments. In Connecticut, for example, several state agencies involved in adult education jointly developed a basic skills program based on Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System competencies. However, local programs are generally not *required* to adopt state-developed curricula and assessments (Kutner, Webb, and Matheson, 1996).

D. Accountability

The state of the field. As noted earlier, the Workforce Investment Act establishes several core indicators for adult education programs, including: (1) improvements in literacy skill levels; (2) placement in, retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement; and (3) receipt of a secondary school diploma or its equivalent. These measures took effect on July 1, 2000. Each applies only to students with relevant goals; *e.g.*, the denominator for calculating the percentage of students who received secondary school diplomas includes only those students who specified that as a goal at program entry. Local programs use student assessments to assess improvements in literacy skills, and may collect other data through direct reporting by the student, follow-up surveys, or data matching with state unemployment insurance wage record databases.

States must negotiate expected levels of performance on these indicators with ED. They must also consider the performance of local grantees on these measures in the intrastate allocation of funds. States

are also free to adopt any additional indicators that they select, and some have developed complex methods for monitoring the overall performance of their workforce development systems.

Trends and issues. In a recent study of the Workforce Investment Act's effect on adult education programs, most state and local adult education administrators cited few concerns about the impact of performance indicators (perhaps because the study was conducted relatively early in Workforce Investment Act implementation). Officials in five of 18 states participating expressed concern about the difficulty involved in collecting follow-up data required for compliance with the Title II indicators. On the other hand, several state officials noted positive effects on local programs (Elliott, 2002).

E. Documentation of Program Outcomes and Impact

The state of the field. In the U.S. labor market, success is clearly related to educational attainment. Recent research shows that literacy skills are "positively and strongly associated" with individual earnings, and illustrate the GED's effect on earnings and transition to postsecondary education. There is also evidence that participation in adult education, in general, leads to increased earnings and promotes continued education, in addition to helping students achieve personal goals. However, certain aspects of program design and operations (*e.g.*, the multiplicity of program goals, variation in instructional and assessment practices, open enrollment policies that allow students to enter and leave the program at will, limited capacity for data collection at the local level) have made it difficult to document program outcomes. Measuring the adult education program's *impact*; that is, the changes that it brings about in society as a whole, is even more challenging.

Educational attainment and earnings. Without a secondary school credential, an individual is considerably more likely to be unemployed: according to the U.S. Department of Labor, 6.5% of adults without a secondary school diploma were unemployed in 2000, in comparison to only 3.5% of those who held a secondary credential. Individuals who had completed secondary school earned about one-third more than those who had not, with a median annual income of \$28,800 vs. \$21,400 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2001). Because a secondary school diploma is often required for entry into further education or training, individuals without secondary credentials may be at an economic disadvantage throughout their lives.

Literacy skills. Analyses of NALS data for individuals in the U.S. labor force (Sum, 1999) showed that literacy skills were "positively and strongly associated" with individual earnings. Although 40% of respondents scored in Levels 1 and 2, literacy skills rose from the youngest age group to the 35 to 44 age group, then declined in older age groups. This suggests that the average literacy proficiency of the labor force will increase in the next decade, as older individuals retire.

Poor and near-poor adults who were not in the labor force had lower average proficiencies than those who were. Sum suggests that integrating education programs with job placement, job search training, and job training programs could encourage more disadvantaged citizens to enter the workforce as well as raise their long-term earnings. Less than 5% of workers who scored in Level 1 on the prose scale had received basic skills training during the past five years (Sum, 1999).

Receipt of a GED. Over the last 50 years, many researchers have studied the effect of obtaining a GED on individuals' success in postsecondary education and the labor market. Boesel, Alsalam, and Smith (1998) provide a summary of findings from these studies, including the following:

- GED recipients were clearly more likely to participate in postsecondary education and vocational training than were high school dropouts.

- Several studies found that more than half of GED recipients obtained additional education or training after they received the credential, primarily in community colleges and vocational/technical schools.
- In vocational programs, two-year colleges, and four-year institutions, the grades of GED recipients who graduated were about the same as those of students who had received high school diplomas.
- GED recipients were less likely than high school graduates to persist in postsecondary education.
- Receipt of a GED had little effect on employment rates.
- GED recipients earned more than high school dropouts and less than high school graduates. However, much of the difference seemed to be due to other characteristics of GED recipients (*e.g.*, literacy and work experience).
- In general, GED recipients worked fewer hours than high school graduates and experienced more job turnover.
- GED recipients generally earned more than comparable dropouts, primarily because the credential increased the opportunities for further education and training.

Outcomes of adult education. Beder (1999), in a review for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, describes the problems inherent in assessing the outcomes and impact of adult education programs. First, there is little consensus about desirable program goals: outcomes of interest may include effects on the individual (*e.g.*, improvement in literacy skills, entry into further education and training) or on the family, community, and economy. Second, several measurement issues (including variations in curricula, lack of a single standardized assessment instrument, and the difficulty involved in constructing comparison groups) make it difficult to draw conclusions about the program's effectiveness. Third, many local adult education programs lack the capacity to collect outcome data. Finally, no specific standards are available to determine whether or not students make adequate gains.

Beder identified 68 studies of adult education outcome or impact that had been conducted since the late 1960s and analyzed their findings. Researchers examined the design and methodology of each study, ultimately identifying 23 that they considered most credible. These included three national evaluations of the program, nine state-level outcome studies, three studies of adult education programs that served welfare recipients, two that examined family literacy programs, and five pertaining to workplace literacy programs. After determining that the limited amount of valid data available from these studies made it impossible to conduct a quantitative meta-analysis, researchers carried out a qualitative analysis that looked for consensus across studies, giving more weight to the findings of those judged to be most credible. Their analysis produced the following findings:

- ***In general, it is likely that participants in adult literacy make gains in employment.*** Of the 14 studies that examined employment outcomes, 11 reported gains in employment for program participants. However, only two of these studies had comparison or control groups, and most were based on self-reported data.
- ***In general, participants in adult literacy education believe their jobs improve over time.*** However, there is insufficient evidence to conclude that participation in adult literacy education causes job improvement. Four of the five studies that measured job improvement reported gains

for adult education students. All were based on self-reported data and only one study included a comparison group.

- ***In general, it is likely that participation in adult literacy education results in earnings gain.*** Five of the six studies that examined earnings reported gains for adult education students. These included two state-level studies that used comparison groups and data that were not based on self-report.
- ***In general, adult literacy education has a positive influence on participants' continued education.*** All 10 studies that examined the effect of participation on continued education reported positive outcomes. Most of the studies relied on self-reported data about participants' future plans, and none included a comparison or control group.
- ***Although the evidence suggests that participants in welfare-sponsored adult literacy education do experience a reduction in welfare dependence, the evidence is inconclusive as to whether adult literacy education in general reduces welfare dependence for participants.*** Six of eight studies that examined reduction in welfare dependence reported positive findings. Four of the studies included comparison groups, but not all of these four reported positive outcomes.
- ***Learners perceive that participation in adult literacy education improves their skills in reading, writing, and mathematics.*** Almost all studies that collected self-reported data about improvements in reading, writing, and mathematics skills reported gains.
- ***As measured by tests, the evidence is insufficient to determine whether or not participants in adult literacy education gain in basic skills.*** Five of eight studies that tested learning gains reported positive outcomes. However, two of the three studies that included comparison or control groups reported no gains.
- ***In general, adult literacy education provides gains in GED acquisition for participants entering at the ASE level.*** Four of six studies that examined GED acquisition provided evidence of positive outcomes. Half of the four studies included comparison groups.
- ***Participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on learners' self-image.*** Eight of 10 studies that collected data on self-image (almost entirely based on self-report) reported positive effects.
- ***According to learners' self-reports, participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on parents' involvement in their children's education.*** Eight of 11 studies that examined the program's impact on children's education (e.g., parent assistance with homework, parent-teacher interaction) reported positive outcomes. All but one study – a national evaluation that indicated negative results – were based on self-report.
- ***Learners perceive that their personal goals are achieved through participation in adult literacy education.*** Seven of the studies that evaluated learners' attainment of personal goals found positive results. However, methodological issues make it difficult to identify appropriate comparison groups for this outcome.

According to Beder, findings from this review suggested a need for a national outcome reporting system (which was subsequently implemented) and a national longitudinal assessment that tracks students for at least five years. The author also calls for well-designed studies to assess the effects of specific state and local programs.

Trends and issues. The National Reporting System, which was implemented in July 2000, should help to address a critical need for program outcome data (although some issues, such as the capacity of local programs to collect follow-up data, are still to be addressed). However, little is known about the impact of adult education programs in the U.S. on families, communities, and society as a whole. In a political climate where adult education is increasingly viewed as a workforce development program, research to demonstrate the program's economic and social impacts may be of critical importance.

V. CONCLUSION

This section summarizes the state of access to adult education services in the U.S. and considers the future of the system under the Workforce Investment Act, within the context of current federal efforts to improve the U.S. educational system in general.

A. Access to Adult Education in the United States.

Nearly three million individuals enrolled in federally funded adult education programs during the most recent year for which data are available. Many of these individuals achieved documented outcomes; *e.g.*, they advanced within the program, earned secondary credentials, or qualified for entry into postsecondary education or training. Others undoubtedly accomplished objectives that, while not captured in federal statistics, made a difference in their everyday lives: they may have acquired the skills they needed to perform job-specific tasks, carry out routine activities such as reading letters or paying bills, or participate more fully in the education of their children.

However, these individuals represent less than 10% of the target population. The majority of those who are eligible for services do not participate, for a variety of reasons: they may be prevented from doing so by conflicting demands, be unaware that services are available, or may not see a need to improve their literacy skills. Many who enroll do not stay long enough to make significant improvement: approximately 27% of those who enrolled in Program Year 2002 left the program before completing the instructional level in which they began.

Detailed census data that will permit comparisons of the target and participant populations were not available at the time that this report was prepared. However, previous analyses conducted by RTI indicate that some segments of the target population are more likely to participate in adult education programs than others. For example, younger individuals, members of some racial/ethnic groups, and recent immigrants may be more likely than others to enroll. Thus, although all members of the target population are equally *eligible* for services, they are not all equally likely to demand services.

B. The Future of the System

Statistics on current participation in federally funded adult education programs document low participation and persistence rates. However, a variety of current federal and state initiatives have the potential to improve participation and persistence, as well as the quality of adult education programs. These include federally funded research, such as the current study of reading instruction for low-level learners, the new adult literacy research network, and efforts to disseminate findings from recent reading research to adult educators. Federal and state funds are also supporting the development of content

standards to make instruction and assessment more relevant for adult learners. At the state level, adult education programs are exploring the potential of distance education to expand access. Most states have also undertaken efforts, in the form of either certification requirements or identification of instructor competencies, to address critical staff development needs in the field.

Federal policymakers are calling for increased accountability and use of research-based practices in all aspects of American education. At the K-12 level, these principles are embodied in the recently enacted *No Child Left Behind* legislation. In adult education, they are reflected in the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, which sets forth measures of effectiveness for adult education programs and requires states to consider whether local programs use instructional practices that have been proven effective in decisions about the substate allocation of federal funds.

These initiatives have the potential to improve the quality of adult education programs. However, requirements for increased accountability and effectiveness create special challenges for adult education. The multiplicity of program goals makes it difficult for the program to document its effectiveness, and the research base about effective practices is limited in comparison to current knowledge about K-12 instruction. Nevertheless, as described in this Background Report, federal and state policymakers have undertaken a wide variety of initiatives to improve the quality of adult education in the United States. The extent to which they are successful will determine the future effectiveness of the program in improving outcomes for current students, and in attracting and retaining more adults who wish to improve their literacy skills.

GLOSSARY

Adult Basic Education (ABE): Instruction for individuals at the lowest skills levels; equivalent to instruction in grades 1 to 8.

Adult Education and Family Literacy Act: Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, which governs adult education programs.

Adult High School Diploma: Diploma awarded by a high school offering a comprehensive curriculum for adults.

Adult learners: Students who participate in ABE, ESL, and ASE programs.

Adult Secondary Education (ASE): Instruction for individuals who are working toward a high school diploma or preparing for the General Educational Development exams; equivalent to instruction in grades 9 to 12.

Community-based organization: a private non-profit organization that is representative of a community or a significant segment of a community (Public Law 105-220, Section 101(7)).

English as a Second Language (ESL): Instruction to help individuals who have limited English-speaking ability improve their competence in the language.

EL/Civics Education: Programs that combine ESL instruction and civics education, which is defined as "... contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and U.S. history and government to help learners acquire the skills and knowledge to become active and informed parents, workers, and community members" (Federal Register, November 17, 1999).

External Degree Program: Assessment program that allows students to earn a high school diploma by demonstrating competency in life skills.

Family literacy: Instructional programs that include: (1) literacy instruction for parents; (2) educational activities for children; (3) interactive literacy activities involving both the parent and the child; and (4) training that prepares parents to teach their children and participate in their children's education.

General Educational Development (GED) exams: The GED exams include norm-referenced tests in writing, social studies, science, reading, and mathematics. Individuals who successfully pass all five tests earn a GED credential, which is generally considered the equivalent of a high school diploma.

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS): A comparative study of adult literacy skills in 22 countries, conducted in the United States in 1994.

Learning disability: The Rehabilitation Services Administration defines "specific learning disability" as "a specific disorder in one or more of the central nervous system processes involved in perceiving, understanding and/or using concepts through verbal (spoken or written) language or nonverbal means. This disorder manifests itself with a deficit in one or more of the following areas: attention, reasoning, processing, memory, communication, reading, writing, spelling, calculation, coordination, social competence and emotional maturity" (Rehabilitation Services Administration, 1985).

National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS): A nationally representative survey of U.S. adults aged 16 and older, which assessed respondents' literacy skills.

No Child Left Behind Act: Public Law 107-110, which reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 2001. ESEA is the principal federal law governing K-12 education.

Non-profit agency: A corporation, trust, association, cooperative, or other organization that is operated primarily for scientific, educational, service, charitable, or similar purpose in the public interest; is not organized primarily for profit; and uses net proceeds to maintain, improve, or expand the operation of the organization (Federal Financial Assistance Management Improvement Act of 1999, Public Law 106-107, Section 4(6)).

Office of Vocational and Adult Education: The U.S. Department of Education office that oversees adult education, as well as career/technical education and community colleges. Within the Office of Vocational and Adult Education, responsibility for adult education is assigned to the Division of Adult Education and Literacy.

Participant population: Individuals who enroll in federally funded adult education programs.

Race categories used in the 2000 census: “White” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. “Black or African American” refers to people having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. “American Indian and Alaska Native” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America, including Central America, and who maintain tribal affiliation or community attachment. “Asian” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asian, or the Indian subcontinent. “Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander” refers to people having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands (Grieco and Cassidy, 2001).

Target population: Individuals eligible for adult education services.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA): Federal legislation (Public Law 105-220) that created the one-stop workforce development system, in which adult education is a partner.

Workplace literacy: Literacy services intended to improve the productivity of the workforce.

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BACKGROUND REPORT 2

ADULT ESL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

**Country Background Report for the OECD
Thematic Review on Adult Learning**

Prepared for

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The U.S. Department of Education commissioned two background reports to help prepare representatives of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) for a visit to the United States in 2003. The OECD visit is part of a thematic review of adult learning that will involve 18 countries. The purpose of the reviews is to analyze policies and practices of various countries to improve access to and participation in adult learning, and to examine the quality and effectiveness of each country's adult education system.

The U.S. Department of Education and OECD determined that the thematic review in the United States would focus on the population of individuals who scored in the lowest levels of the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). Accordingly, the two background reports are concerned primarily with the adult basic education and literacy programs overseen by the Department's Office of Vocational and Adult Education. These programs offer instruction for individuals age 16 and over who do not have a secondary school credential or who are learning English as a second language.

Instruction offered through the system is usually classified as either Adult Basic Education (ABE), instruction for individuals with literacy skills at the lowest levels; Adult Secondary Education (ASE), instruction for individuals working toward secondary-level credentials; or English as a second language (ESL), instruction to help individuals who have limited English-speaking ability improve their English language and literacy skills

The Department commissioned the Research Triangle Institute (RTI) to write the background paper on ABE and ASE instruction and the National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) at the Center for Applied Linguistics to write the background paper on ESL instruction.

Adult English language learners comprise a substantial segment of the population enrolled in adult education programs in the United States. These learners want to improve their lives as individuals, community and family members, and workers. Many of them are settling into communities that previously have not had large populations of immigrants. This paper describes the system of adult ESL education in the United States, the population of adult English language learners, and current practices and trends in the provision of language and literacy education to this population.

Adult ESL Education in the United States

The federal statute that established adult basic education programs (the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) authorized instruction "toward the elimination of the inability of all adults to read and write English," thus establishing services for English language learners within the federally funded adult education system. Subsequent legislation continued to support language instruction for immigrants and refugees, sometimes setting aside discretionary monies for services to specific populations (*e.g.*, Cuban, Haitian, and Southeast Asian refugees) or for the development and teaching of specific content such as citizenship and civics.

Adult ESL classes are offered through agencies that are eligible to receive federal adult education funds through the state delivery systems. According to the most recent statistics from the U.S. Department of Education for program year 2000–2001, 42% of all participants enrolled in state-administered adult education programs were enrolled in ESL classes. This percentage does not include English language learners who are being served in ABE or ASE classes. In addition, other organizations

that may or may not receive federal funding also offer classes. These include faith-based organizations, volunteer-based organizations, museums, libraries, private language schools, and academic institutions. Large numbers of adult English language learners are served in programs sponsored by community-based organizations and large national volunteer literacy organizations such as Laubach Literacy and Literacy Volunteers of America, which merged in October 2002 to form ProLiteracy.

Adult English Language Learners

The foreign-born population comprises the majority of individuals who are not native English speakers. The foreign-born population in the United States consists of legal immigrants (including naturalized citizens), refugees and asylees, and undocumented immigrants. Between 1990 and 2000, more than 13 million foreign-born individuals entered the United States, and in 2000, the foreign-born population was 28.4 million (10.4% of the total population). Hispanics accounted for 51% of the foreign-born population; Asian or Pacific Islanders, 25%; Europeans, 15%; and individuals from other areas of the world, 9%. The foreign-born population was distributed as follows in terms of age groups: 58.7% aged 25-54 and 20.2% aged 55 or older. 67% reported high school or higher levels of education.

The following categories give more specific information about the adult population who are not native English speakers:

Geographic distribution. Six states have traditionally received the major portion of immigrants. In 2000, these states were home to 68% of the nation's foreign-born population: California, 28%; New York, 12%; Florida, 9%; Texas, 9%; Illinois, 5%; and New Jersey, 5%. Between 1990 and 2000, states that had not previously had significant numbers of immigrants witnessed a rapid growth of their immigrant population. During this time, the immigrant population in 22 states grew twice as fast as it did in the six states mentioned above. States with the fastest growing immigrant population (more than 125% growth) include North Carolina, 274%; Georgia, 233%; Nevada, 202%; Arkansas, 196%; Utah, 171%; Tennessee, 169%; Nebraska 165%; Colorado, 160%; Arizona, 136%; and Kentucky, 135%.

English-speaking ability. Census 2000 supplementary reports show 37,171,892 people 18 years or older who reported speaking a language other than English at home, with at least 9 million in this group reporting that they do not speak English well or do not speak English at all. More than 11 million households were characterized as linguistically isolated, "in which no person 14 years old and over speaks only English and no person 14 years old and over who speaks a language other than English speaks English 'very well'."

Education and literacy. Among foreign-born individuals with less than a high school education (33%), 7.2% had less than a fifth-grade education, 15% had a fifth- to eighth-grade education, and 10.8% had a ninth- to eleventh-grade education. 64% of the foreign-born population in the United States, ages 16-65, scored at Level 1, the lowest of five levels of adult literacy, on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS).

Participation in the workforce and income. Of the 140.5 million people in the civilian labor force (individuals 16 years or older who are employed or seeking employment), 12% are foreign-born. Of these, 66% are employed, which is similar to the rate of employment of U.S.-born workers (67%). Foreign-born workers hold a wide range of jobs, but 54% hold low-income jobs compared to 38% of U.S.-born workers. In 1999, 44.9% of male, foreign-born full-time workers earned less than \$25,000 compared with 24.2% of U.S.-born male workers. More than half (55.5%) of the full-time, female, foreign-born workers earned less than \$25,000 compared with 13.2% of the full-time, female, U.S.-born workers.

Immigrants who have lived in the United States more than 10 years earn about 10% less per household than U.S. born workers (\$45,400 versus \$50, 200 per household in 1997). Foreign born workers with 10 or fewer years in the United States tend to have lower incomes than those who have lived

in the United States longer. Undocumented immigrants earn the least (\$31,500), refugees earn more than undocumented immigrants (\$37,100), and legal immigrants earn the most (\$45,400).

Enrollment in adult education programs. Of the English language learners enrolled in state-administered adult education programs in program year 2000–2001, 55% were enrolled in beginning literacy or beginning ESL classes. A national study completed in 1994 found that learners in ESL programs received three to four times more hours of instruction than ABE and ASE students: The ESL students received a median of 113 hours before leaving programs, ABE students received 35, and ASE students received 28. Adults between the ages of 16 and 35 are more likely to participate in ESL classes than are older adults, and adults with a high school diploma are twice as likely to enroll in classes than are immigrants with five or fewer years in the United States. Adults report the following reasons for enrolling in adult ESL classes: to improve their English language competence; to address personal, family, or social needs; to meet work demands or pursue better employment; and to further their education. They also report the following barriers to participation: availability of time, money, childcare, and transportation, and lack of awareness of appropriate programs available in their geographic areas.

Current Practice and Trends in Adult ESL Education

The demand for ESL classes, for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners, and for appropriate resources to support these efforts has greatly increased. Changes in federal policy call for increased accountability requirements for all programs receiving federal dollars. Critical issues that have emerged from this context are in the areas of program design and instructional practice, professional development and teacher quality, assessment and accountability, and documentation of program outcomes and impact.

Program design and instructional practice. The diversity of learner populations served, program settings, systems of delivery, and instructional philosophies embraced result in a wide range of program designs and instructional practices in the adult ESL field. Programs offer classes that vary in terms of scheduling, location, duration, and content in order to maximize learning opportunities while accommodating the realities and constraints of adult learners' lives. Classes of learners with widely varied English language proficiency levels are not uncommon, and instruction is also provided in one-to-one tutoring, small-group, or large-group sessions. Some states and local ESL programs provide distance education opportunities for learners who cannot come to class consistently.

The following are the most common contexts in which adult ESL instruction is offered:

- Life skills or general ESL classes.
- Family ESL literacy programs.
- English literacy civics education (ELcivics) programs.
- Vocational ESL (VESL) programs.
- Workplace ESL classes.

Funding for major research efforts in adult education, including adult ESL, has not been extensive to date. As a result, the research base on adults learning English is limited. However, there is a substantial body of information about promising practices based on descriptive information from the field and the research base on adult second language acquisition (SLA) and reading development. Recent efforts to fund major research studies that either focus on adult ESL instruction or include adult ESL populations and programs will expand the somewhat limited research base that exists now. When these studies are

completed and released, the field will know more not only about promising practices, but also about how to implement them in the ESL classroom.

Professional development and teacher quality. The demand for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners has greatly increased in recent years as a result of ever-increasing demands for classes and changing immigration patterns and demographics. New teachers are entering the field, experienced teachers are being asked to take on greater challenges, and many adult basic education teachers are working with English language learners in classes along with native English speakers. Much of this is occurring in areas in which the adult ESL infrastructure is limited or nonexistent. Professional development is crucial for these teachers.

There is limited research that examines issues of professional development for adult education teachers in general and adult ESL teachers in particular, but studies that are underway indicate that professional development is most successful when teachers have program support that includes, planning time, opportunities to develop curriculum, and a voice in decision making. In addition, professional development is effective when it:

- is ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory and research;
- involves teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training efforts;
- provides teachers with opportunities and support to try new skills on the job and engage in feedback and follow-up activities;
- includes time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration;
- provides adequate financial support for both full-time and part-time teachers to participate in professional development activities.

Getting research information and findings to the field, and connecting research to practice in useful and meaningful ways, can have a positive impact on teachers and teaching. Strategies to connect teachers and researchers include teacher research, teacher and research collaboration, networks of teachers and researchers, and teacher presentations on research and practice.

Assessment and accountability. Learner assessment is a priority in adult ESL education. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA; Public Law 105-220) of 1998, Title II, funds adult ESL instruction through the U.S. Department of Education. WIA requires states to evaluate each local program's performance according to outcome measures established under the National Reporting System (NRS). Within the NRS guidelines, states select standardized assessments and procedures that programs can use to determine learners' functioning levels, establish timeframes for assessment to be given (either at specific times during the year or after a given number of hours of instruction), and train program staff to administer the assessments. National efforts are underway to ensure that assessments used are appropriate, valid, and reliable.

Research on effective assessment practices in adult ESL education indicates that:

- Assessment procedures should be carried out within the context of a comprehensive program evaluation plan.
- Assessment results should be shared with learners and instructors and with administrative staff and funders, and the results should be used as a basis for making decisions about program planning and instruction.

- Resources should be adequate to carry out the assessments.
- Whenever possible, multiple measures should be used to present a more complete picture of what has been learned.

Documentation of program outcomes and impact. For immigrants in the U.S. workforce, as for native-born workers, success is related to educational attainment and literacy levels. Those workers with higher education and better literacy skills in English earn more and are more likely to be continuously employed than those without. Other factors that affect the outcomes of instruction for adult English language learners include literacy in the native language, country of birth, oral fluency as well as literacy in English, and years of education before coming to the United States.

A report from the 2000–2001 program year shows the following outcomes of program participation for all participants in adult education programs:

- In the area of employment, 31% of adults were working three months after leaving the programs; 62% of those were still working nine months after leaving the program.
- In the area of education, 33% of adults who had the goal of high school completion achieved this goal.

Another report (a sub-study of the 1992 NALS), that looked at adult residents in the United States who were born in other countries or were born in the United States but spoke a language other than English as young children, found that :

- There was a positive relationship between literacy and fluency in English and earnings.
- People who did not speak English or who spoke English poorly were less likely to be employed and more likely to be completely out of the labor force than people who were fluent in English.
- When employed, people who spoke English poorly or not at all earned less money than those who were fluent in English.
- Those not fluent in English usually had blue-collar, service, fishing, and farming jobs that did not pay as well as managerial jobs.
- People who were not literate in any language were less likely to be employed than those who were literate in a language.
- People who were literate only in a language other than English earned less than people who were literate in English.
- People who were literate only in a language other than English were more likely to have non-continuous employment.

This sub-study also indicated that those most in need of educational programs were least likely to participate in them. Forty-four percent of those literate in English and another language and 51% of those only literate in a language other than English reported having taken ESL classes, while only 30% of those not literate in any language reported taking an ESL class.

Conclusion

Population trends and projections for 2003-2013 indicate that the number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. The adult education system is committed to providing quality instruction to this population. The current emphasis on learner assessment and program accountability, coupled with the focus on professional development for staff, should help achieve this goal.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adult English language learners comprise a substantial segment of the population that enrolls in adult education programs in the United States. These learners want to improve their lives as individuals, community and family members, and workers. Many of them are settling into communities that previously have not had large populations of immigrants. To meet the increasing demand for English language instruction, existing adult education programs are expanding, and new ones are being established. Qualified instructors and resources to support effective instruction are limited. Goal 5 of the strategic goals and objectives of the U.S. Department of Education (2002) mandates enhancing the quality of and access to postsecondary and adult education. At the same time, changes in federal policy that require stricter accountability for reporting program outcomes are changing the way that adult education programs operate.

This report is a companion to *OECD Review of Adult Learning in the United States*, prepared by Research Triangle Institute (RTI International, 2003). The RTI paper describes the organization and structure of the entire adult education delivery system overseen by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE). It then focuses on adult basic education (ABE) and adult secondary education (ASE). This paper focuses on adult English as a second language (ESL) education.

II. ADULT ESL EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

The federal statute that established adult basic education programs (the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964) authorized instruction "toward the elimination of the inability of all adults to read and write English," thus establishing services for English language learners within the federally funded adult education system. Subsequent legislation continued to support language instruction for immigrants and refugees, sometimes setting aside discretionary monies for services to specific populations (*e.g.*, Cuban, Haitian, and Southeast Asian refugees) or for the development and teaching of specific content such as citizenship and civics (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, 1991). Adult ESL classes are offered through agencies that are eligible to receive federal adult education funds through the state delivery systems.

As the number of English language learners has grown, many states and territories have appointed an ESL specialist to work closely with the state director of adult education to oversee services to the ESL population. According to the most recent statistics for program year 2000–2001, 42% of all participants (*i.e.* 1,119,589 out of a total of 2,673,391) enrolled in state-administered adult education programs were enrolled in ESL classes (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002). This percentage does not include English language learners who are being served within other segments of the system, such as adult basic education (ABE) or adult secondary education (ASE) classes.

Adult ESL services are also provided through other organizations that may or may not receive federal funding. These include faith-based organizations, volunteer-based organizations, museums, libraries, private language schools, and academic institutions. Significant numbers of adult English language learners are served in programs sponsored by community-based organizations and large national volunteer literacy organizations such as Laubach Literacy and Literacy Volunteers of America. (The organizations merged in October 2002 to form ProLiteracy.)

III. ADULT ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

This section describes the foreign-born population in the United States, presents demographic data on this population, and identifies factors related to access to and participation in state-administered adult education ESL programs. The foreign born consist of legal immigrants (including naturalized citizens), refugees and asylees, and undocumented immigrants.

A. Characteristics of the Population

Although data focusing specifically on learners enrolled in adult ESL classes are limited, data on the *potential* population of interest for adult ESL classes – the foreign-born population – is documented in census reports. Between 1990 and 2000, more than 13 million foreign born entered the United States (Capps, Fix, and Passel, 2002). In 2000, the foreign-born population in the United States was 28.4 million (10.4% of the total population). Hispanics accounted for 51% of the foreign-born population; Asian or Pacific Islanders were second at 25%; Europeans represented 15%; and the remaining 9% represented other areas of the world. The foreign-born population was distributed as follows in terms of age groups: 58.7% aged 25-54 and 20.2% aged 55 or older. 67% of this population reported high school or higher levels of education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b).

English Speaking Ability

In the Census 2000 supplementary reports, 37,171,892 people 18 years or older reported speaking a language other than English at home. While this does not necessarily indicate the need for English language instruction, at least 9 million in this group reported that they do not speak English well or do not speak English at all (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001a). The 2000 Census also found that more than 11 million households were linguistically isolated (U.S. Census Bureau, 2003). A linguistically isolated household is one “in which no person 14 years old and over speaks only English and no person 14 years old and over who speaks a language other than English speaks English ‘very well’” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002, p. B32).

Education

Among foreign-born individuals with less than a high school education (33%), 7.2% had less than a fifth-grade education, 15% had a fifth- to eighth-grade education, and 10.8% had a ninth- to eleventh-grade education (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b). In terms of literacy levels, 64% of the second-language, foreign-born population in the United States, ages 16–65, scored at Level 1, the lowest of five levels of adult literacy, on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 1995). People with Level 1 skills have difficulty reading and using even simple, clearly formatted print information in English, such as directions on a prescription bottle (Tuijnman, 2000).

Employment and Income

There are 140.5 million individuals in the civilian labor force (individuals 16 years and older who are employed or seeking employment). Although only about 12% (17.5 million) of the civilian labor force is foreign-born, 66% of these individuals are employed. This is similar to the rate of employed U.S.-born individuals, which is 67%. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b). Foreign-born workers hold a wide range of jobs, but 54% hold low-income jobs compared to 38% of U.S.-born workers. In 1999, 44.9% of male, foreign-born full-time workers earned less than \$25,000 compared with 24.2% of U.S.-born male workers. More than half (55.5%) of the full-time, female, foreign-born workers earned less than \$25,000 compared with 13.2% of the full-time, female, U.S.-born workers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b).

Length of time in the United States can affect the income levels of the foreign-born. Immigrants who have lived in the United States more than 10 years earn about 10% less per household than U.S. born (\$45,400 versus \$50, 200 per household in 1997; Fix and Passel, 2001 p. 10). Foreign born with 10 or fewer years in the United States tend to have lower incomes than those who have lived in the United States longer. Among immigrant groups, undocumented immigrants show the lowest household income level (\$32,200). Refugees earn more than undocumented immigrants (\$34,000), and legal immigrants earn the most (\$44,000; Fix, Passel, 2001).

Studies suggest that English language proficiency affects employment and income levels of the foreign born. The 1999 survey of the U.S. refugee population conducted by the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) found that refugees who indicated that they did not speak English “at all” or “well” were less likely to be employed than those who indicated they spoke English “well” (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement, 1999). A study by the Urban Institute of immigrants in New York City (NYC) and Los Angeles (LA) found similar results. Many of the adult immigrants studied did not speak English “well” or “at all” (51% in LA and 38% in NYC). This group was poorer than immigrants who spoke English “well” or “very well.” In LA, 33% of this group lived below the poverty rate compared with 13% who spoke English well. In NYC, 34% lived below the poverty rate compared with 14% who spoke English well (Capps *et al.*, 2002).

Some studies indicate that immigrants have a positive effect on the overall economy of the United States. A study conducted by the National Academy of Sciences found that, on average, immigrants contribute \$80,000 more in taxes than they use in services over a lifetime. Immigrants with more than a high school education contribute, on average, \$198,000 to the nation’s economy over their lifetime (Panel on the Demographic and Economic Impacts of Immigration, and National Research Council, 1997, p. 17).

B. Participation and Outcomes in Adult Education Programs

Data for Program Year 2000–2001 from the U.S. Department of Education indicate that English language learners made up the largest group of adults attending adult education classes – 42% (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002, April 8). This section describes factors that influence participation in adult education programs and educational outcomes of participation.

Recent Changes in the Geographic Dispersal of Immigrants

Six states have traditionally received the major portion of immigrants. In 2000, these states were home to 68% of the nation’s foreign-born population: California, 28%; New York, 12%; Florida, 9%; Texas, 9%; Illinois, 5%; and New Jersey, 5% (Capps, Fix, and Passel, 2002). However, between 1990 and 2000, states that had not previously had significant numbers of immigrants witnessed a rapid growth of their immigrant population. During this time, the immigrant population in 22 states grew twice as fast as it did in the six states mentioned above (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001b). States with the fastest growing immigrant population (more than 125% growth) include North Carolina, 274%; Georgia, 233%; Nevada, 202%; Arkansas, 196%; Utah, 171%; Tennessee, 169%; Nebraska 165%; Colorado 160%; Arizona,

136%; and Kentucky, 135% (Capps, Fix, and Passel, 2002). This rapid growth has had an impact on educational programs. Anecdotal information, including postings on national discussion lists and requests for training sessions, suggests that state agencies and local programs with little previous experience with English language learners are seeking assistance to design and implement effective ESL programs and train teachers (National Institute for Literacy, 1995–2003).

English Proficiency Level

Of the English language learners enrolled in state-administered adult education programs in program year 2000–2001, 55% (or 611,542 of 1,119,685 participants) were enrolled in beginning literacy or beginning ESL classes (U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2002).

Educational Outcomes

In Program Year 2001–2002, 1,173,438 students were enrolled in state-administered adult education English literacy programs. Table 1 presents information on the educational gains of these students, reported through the National Reporting System. At the time of this report, U.S. Department of Education did not have societal and economic outcomes for ESL students disaggregated from the general adult education data.

Table 1. **State-Administered Adult Education Program. Educational Gains and Attendance by Educational Functional Levels. English Literacy. 2001-2002 Program Year.**

Level	Number Enrolled	Attendance Hours	Number Completed Level	Number Completed and Advanced to Higher Level	Number Separated Before Completing	Number Still Enrolled	Percentage Completing Level
ESL Beginning Literacy	278,244	34,018,846	98,866	66,544	79,843	87,913	36%
ESL Beginning	340,233	37,806,890	109,659	74,205	90,741	130,888	32%
ESL Intermediate Low	238,089	31,970,411	92,857	60,663	57,489	84,674	39%
ESL Intermediate High	147,876	19,430,791	57,636	34,272	36,854	50,807	39%
ESL Low Advanced	126,032	17,078,639	33,544	20,009	35,674	56,071	27%
ESL High Advanced	42,964	5,186,653	10,848	5,164	12,862	18,224	25%
TOTAL	1,173,438	145,492,230	403,410	260,857	313,463	428,577	34%

Prepared by U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Accountability Team (2003, Fall).

Length of Time to Acquire a Second Language

There is limited research on how long it takes adults to acquire a second language. Extrapolating from studies of children’s language acquisition, it seems likely that it can take several years. For example, studies suggest that it takes school-aged children two to three years to develop social language (conversational skills) and five to seven years to acquire academic proficiency in a second language to reach parity with native English speakers (Cummins, 1991; Thomas and Collier, 1997). Moreover, school-aged children usually attend school five days a week for approximately six hours a day, which is

considerably more than adults in adult education programs do. Therefore, when considering factors that affect gains in English language proficiency and other educational outcomes, it is important to keep in mind the time that may be required for adults to reach the goals that are set.

C. Factors Related to Participation in Programs

According to the National Household Education Survey of 1995, 11% of the population that indicated an interest in ESL classes had attended ESL classes in the 12 months prior to the interview. Findings from this study indicated that adults between the ages of 16 and 35 were more likely to participate in ESL classes than were older adults, and adults with a high school diploma were twice as likely to enroll in classes than were immigrants with five or fewer years in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, p. 3). Adults participating in the survey who were interested in and knew about ESL classes identified the following barriers to participation: the availability of time, money, childcare and transportation, and the lack of awareness of appropriate programs available in their geographic areas (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

Participants in adult ESL classes give a number of reasons for enrolling: to improve their English language competence; to address personal, family, or social needs; to meet work demands or pursue better employment; and to further their education (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester and Carlo, 1998). Learners in these classes generally demonstrate high levels of enthusiasm for learning English and possess life experience, maturity, and motivation, which facilitate their learning. Many have positive memories of school and are eager to continue their education (Fitzgerald, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester and Carlo, 1998).

A national study completed in 1994 found that learners in ESL programs received three to four times more hours of instruction than ABE and ASE students: The ESL students received a median of 113 hours before leaving programs, ABE received 35, and ASE received 28 (Fitzgerald, 1995, p.1).

IV. CURRENT PRACTICE AND TRENDS IN ADULT ESL EDUCATION

The demand for ESL classes, for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners, and for appropriate resources to support these efforts has greatly increased. Changes in federal policy call for increased accountability requirements for all programs receiving federal dollars. These programs need to prepare individuals for the complexities of modern life, particularly in the workplace, so that learners will be equipped with the skills they need to succeed. Critical issues that have emerged from this context are in the areas of:

- Program design and instructional practice.
- Professional development and teacher quality.
- Assessment and accountability.
- Documentation of program outcomes and impact.

These issues cut across all adult ESL programs. In the following section, each issue is discussed by outlining the state of the field, discussing applicable research, and identifying promising practices.

A. Program Design and Instructional Practice

State of the Field

Adult ESL programs serve a diverse population through a variety of funding streams depending on learners' status (*e.g.*, legal or illegal immigrants, refugees, or asylees), goals (*e.g.*, basic or functional literacy, family literacy, workplace education, and citizenship preparation), and circumstances (*e.g.*, farm workers, displaced workers, and incarcerated youths and adults). The diversity of learner populations served, program settings, systems of delivery, and instructional philosophies embraced result in a wide range of program designs and instructional practices. In general, the hallmark of adult ESL programs is flexibility. To be effective, programs need to offer classes that vary in terms of scheduling, location, duration, and content in order to maximize learning opportunities while accommodating the realities and constraints of adult learners' lives.

Given the increasing demand for adult ESL instruction, large classes or classes of learners with widely varied English language proficiency levels (multilevel classes) are not uncommon (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003). Instruction can also be provided in one-to-one tutoring, small-group, or large-group sessions. Some states and local ESL programs provide distance education opportunities for learners who cannot come to class consistently. The amount of instructional support that these programs offer varies. A combination of self-study and teacher support has shown promise in helping learners learn the language and also getting them into classroom-based programs (Center for Impact Research, 2002). Support may take the form of in-person appointments or periodic group meetings with an instructor or instructional aide (Ramirez and Savage, 2003).

ESL programming seldom involves only language and literacy instruction. It also often provides English language learners with access to information, practices, and concepts that they need to survive

and succeed in a variety of life roles such as parents, employees, consumers, and life-long learners in their new land. A number of adult educators have written about ESL programming. (See, for example, National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Taylor, 1997; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003; Weinstein, 1998; Weinstein-Shr and Quintero, 1995; Wrigley and Guth, 1992.) The most common contexts in which adult ESL instruction is offered include the following:

- *Lifeskills or general ESL classes* focus on development of general English language skills. These classes usually address language skills development in the context of topics or functions of daily life, such as going to the doctor, getting a job, shopping, or managing money.
- *Family ESL literacy programs* address the family as a whole, providing English language and literacy instruction for adults and children. Often these programs include parenting elements and information that parents can use to further their children's literacy and general educational development. Some programs, such as Even Start, are collaborations between K-12 and adult education programs.
- *English literacy and civics education (EL civics) programs* integrate English language instruction with opportunities to learn about civil rights, civic participation and responsibility, and citizenship. While instruction of this type has been offered in some programs for some time, there has been new interest in developing EL/civics classes since a specific EL civics initiative was enacted by the U.S. Department of Education in fiscal year 2000.
- *Vocational ESL (VESL) programs* prepare learners for jobs. These programs may concentrate on general pre-employment skills such as finding a job or preparing for an interview, or they may target preparation for jobs in specific fields such as horticulture or hospitality.
- *Workplace ESL classes* are offered in work settings and focus on development of language that is directly relevant to that setting.

Technology is used in ESL programs in a range of different contexts: in the classroom, in distance education, and in extended self-study options. ESL teachers use technology both as an instructional tool (*e.g.*, integrating multimedia packages and PowerPoint presentations into instruction) and as instructional content itself (*e.g.*, learning word processing programs, using the Web to access information, and using English through e-mail communications). While computers and the Internet play a growing role in adult ESL learners' and teachers' lives at work and at home, there are still segments of both populations that could benefit from easier access to this type of technology and the information it conveys (Children's Partnership, 2000; Terrill, 2000).

Educators report a wide range of expertise and resources in adult ESL programming (Florez and Burt, 2001; Hayes, 2000; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, and Ewen, 1993; Wrigley and Guth, 1992). The reasons for this include the following:

- Immigration and settlement trends that bring English language learners to areas of the country in which program and instructional staff are unaccustomed and untrained to work with English language learners.
- Uneven and insufficient funding.
- The diversity of learners and their needs.
- The overwhelming need for English language instruction.

- An insufficient number of trained adult ESL teachers who can teach a diverse learner population.
- Inadequate professional development opportunities for teachers.

Funding for major research efforts in adult education, including adult ESL, has not been extensive to date (Sticht, 2002). As a result, the research base on adults learning English is limited. However, there is a substantial body of information about promising practices based on descriptive information (*e.g.*, case studies, ethnographic research, and teacher research) from the field (*e.g.*, articles in refereed professional journals such as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Language Learning*, and *Language Testing*) and the research base on adult second language acquisition (SLA) and reading development.

Applicable Research

Until recently, little research was conducted with adult English language learners in ABE and ESL contexts. Decisions about what works have relied on extrapolations from research with children or with adult learners studying English in university or other academic contexts. The complexities of adult ESL instruction make research in this field challenging. Investigating issues of culture, language, and education and tracking learner progress over time is not easy when complicated by diverse, mobile learner populations and varied learning contexts. Finding or developing research designs that can acknowledge or accommodate these issues is not easy.

Recent efforts to fund major research studies that either focus on adult ESL instruction or include adult ESL populations and programs will expand the somewhat limited research base that exists now. These studies include such efforts as the Adult Reading Components Study (conducted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy [NCSALL], John Strucker, project director); the Adult ESL Lab School (managed by Portland State University and NCSALL, Steve Reder, project director); “What Works” Study of Adult ESL Literacy Students (conducted by American Institutes of Research, Larry Condelli, project director; and Aquirre International, Heide Wrigley, subcontract manager); and the Evaluation of Effective Adult Basic Education Programs and Practices (conducted by Abt Associates, Judith Alamprese, project director). See Mortensen (2001) for information about these and other current research studies.

In addition, two studies are underway that include English language learners in studies of health literacy and of distance education as an instructional option. In the fall of 2002, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), awarded a grant to the University of Illinois to examine health literacy issues among adults. Many of the participants in this study are adult English language learners. The Project IDEAL Support Center at the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan (funded by consortium members and the U.S. Department of Education) is providing technical assistance to a consortium of 13 states that are conducting experiments to identify best practices in distance education (Young, Johnson, and Hapgood, 2002). Three of these states are using distance education with English language learners.

When the studies described above are completed and released, the field will know more not only about promising practices but also about how to implement them in the ESL classroom.

Finally, programs of study that focus on second language acquisition and reading development inform specific aspects of adult English language learning.

Research on second language acquisition

Research on second language acquisition (SLA) – how people learn to speak a language other than their native language – guides the practice of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Recent

research has focused on motivation, opportunities for interaction, task-based learning, focus on form in instruction, and English literacy.

Motivation. Studies by Gardner and his colleagues support the theory that integrative motivation – the learner wants to learn a language to become part of the target community – promotes SLA (Gardner, 1985; Masgoret and Gardner, 2003). Moreover, these studies have found that integrative motivation promotes SLA regardless of the age of the learner or whether the language is being learned as a second or a foreign language.

Research examining how to improve learner motivation suggests that socially grounded factors affect students' attitudes, effort, classroom behavior, and achievement. Therefore, teachers should encourage group cohesion in the classroom in order to foster a conducive learning environment and should cultivate opportunities outside the classroom that can foster language use outside regular class hours (Clement, Dörnyei, and Noels, 1994). Along the same lines, it has been suggested that teachers should provide constructive feedback on learner performance, develop learner autonomy, and encourage learners to regulate their own learning behaviors (Noels, Clement, and Pelletier, 2003). Research supports the contention that a learner's motivation may vary from day to day and even from task to task (Dörnyei, 2002; Dörnyei and Kormos, 2000).

Research on the relationship between motivation and second language acquisition is ongoing. Because studies to date indicates that motivated students learn languages better than unmotivated students, current research is looking into instructional practices that develop both motivational strategies (to generate and maintain learner motivation) and self-motivating strategies (through which learners can take control of the factors that impact their motivation and learning; Dörnyei, 2003).

Opportunities for interaction. Another area of SLA research focuses on the role of interaction in second language learning. Interaction provides learners with opportunities to receive comprehensible input and feedback (Gass, 1997; Long, 1996; Pica, 1994) as well as to make changes in their own linguistic output (Swain, 1995), because it allows learners to “notice the gap” (Schmidt and Frota, 1986, page311) between their command of the language they are learning and correct use of the language. Empirical research with second language learners supports the contention that engaging in second language interactions facilitates second language development (Mackey, 1999). While much of this research investigates theoretical issues, other research is focused on the language classroom. Included in this latter category are, among other topics, research on task-based language learning and teaching, and focus on form.

Task-based learning. A general definition of a task is “an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective” (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001, p. 11). Research suggests that interactions are most successful when tasks contain elements that are new or unfamiliar to the participants; require each learner to exchange information with his or her partner or group members; have a specific, or closed, outcome; involve details; center on a problem, especially an ethical one; and involve the use of naturally occurring conversation and narrative discourse (Ellis, 2000).

Focus on form. Research has examined the role of focus on the grammatical forms of language in instruction. In a focus-on-form approach to language teaching, rather than teaching grammar in isolation, learners' attention is drawn to grammatical form in the context of meaning, and teachers' attention to form is triggered by learners' problems with comprehension or production (Long, 2000). A meta-analysis of research studies has found that instruction that uses a focus-on-form approach – incorporating form with meaning – is as effective as more traditional grammar-teaching approaches (Norris and Ortega, 2001). The use of focus on form in communicative lessons can result in high levels of learner uptake – that is, learners may be more likely to incorporate new learning into their language use (Ellis, Basturkmen, and Loewen, 2001).

Research on learning to read

The National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) reviewed what we know about how adult English language learners learn to read in English and published *Research on Reading Development of Adult English Language Learners: An Annotated Bibliography* (Adams and Burt, 2002). This bibliography was developed to present a comprehensive view of the research that has been conducted on reading development among adult English language learners in the United States in the last 20 years (with some additional research conducted in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom). In addition to experimental research studies, descriptive studies, case studies, and practitioner research were included, as were theoretical studies describing models of reading processes. Research on adult English language learners in adult education programs or in intensive English programs (IEP)s were included.

From the research in this bibliography, a synthesis paper, *Reading and Adult English Language Learners: A Review of the Research* was developed (Burt, Peyton, and Adams, 2003). It summarizes research on adult English language learners reading English, offers adult ESL teachers and administrators suggestions for practice, and points to areas where further research is needed. The paper looks at the kinds of native language literacy that English language learners bring to the ESL classroom and the ways that native language literacy affects learning to read in English.

Huntley (1992) describes four types of literacy in the first language (L1) that affect English literacy development and should be considered in adult ESL literacy instruction: preliterate, nonliterate, semiliterate, and non-Roman-alphabet literate. Birch (2002) adds to these types nonalphabet literate, and Birch and others (Hilferty, 1996; Strucker, 2002) add Roman-alphabet literate. *Preliterate* learners come from cultures where literacy is uncommon in everyday life because the language is not written, has only recently been written, or is being developed. These learners need exposure to the purposes and uses of literacy. They generally progress slowly in literacy and other language instruction and require re-teaching of skills and concepts. *Nonliterate* learners come from cultures where literacy is available, but they have not had access to literacy instruction, often because of their socioeconomic status. These learners may be reluctant to disclose their limited literacy background in class, and instruction with them may proceed slowly. *Semiliterate* learners usually have had access to literacy in their native culture, but because of their socioeconomic status or educational situation, they have not achieved a high level of literacy in their native language. They may have had past negative experiences with literacy learning. *Nonalphabet literate* learners are fully literate in a language written in a nonalphabetic script (e.g., Chinese). These learners need instruction in reading an alphabetic script and in the sound-syllable correspondences of English. *Non-Roman-alphabet literate* learners are literate in a language written in a non-Roman alphabet (e.g., Arabic, Greek, Korean, Russian, and Thai). These learners need instruction in the Roman alphabet in order to transfer their L1 literacy skills to English. Some, such as readers of Arabic, will need to learn to read from left to right. *Roman-alphabet literate* learners are fully literate in a language written in a Roman alphabetic script (e.g., French, German, and Spanish). They read from left to right and recognize letter shapes and fonts. These learners need instruction in the specific letter-to-sound and sound-syllable correspondences of English.

Reading and Adult English Language Learners: A Review of the Research also discusses four reading skills that researchers have identified as necessary for English language learners to develop in order to read fluently: phonological processing, vocabulary development, syntactic processing, and schema activation (see for example, Coady, Mgoto, Hubbard, Graney, and Mokhtari, 1993; Davidson and Strucker, n.d.; Jones, 1996; Koda, 1999; McLeod and McLaughlin, 1986; Strucker, 1997, 2002; Tan, Moore, Dixon and Nicholson, 1994). *Phonological processing* is recognizing and reproducing letters and other graphic symbols related to the language. *Vocabulary development* is creating an ever-growing vocabulary bank. *Syntactic processing* is understanding and applying grammar and usage conventions and identifying and using structural and organizational features common to English. *Schema activation* is initiating appropriate strategies for reading comprehension (e.g., identifying and setting a purpose for

reading, gaining meaning from context, using pictures and other graphics, predicting, and skimming and scanning).

Promising Practices

This research supports promising practices that are employed in the adult ESL field. Giving students the opportunity to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction around tasks that promote these activities, and teaching language forms in the context of meaningful learning activities are applications of second language research to the classroom environment (Florez and Burt, 2001; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2000; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, and Ewen, 1993; Wrigley and Guth, 1992).

The following promising instructional strategies for adult ESL educators have emerged from SLA and reading research:

- Incorporate principles of adult learning, adult second language acquisition, and ways to work with multicultural groups,
- Begin with an assessment of learners' needs and goals (*e.g.*, where and why do they use or want to use English) to establish instructional content that is relevant to and immediately usable by speakers of other languages,
- Employ a number of different approaches to language acquisition and ESL techniques that match the diverse needs, motivations, and goals of the learners and provide opportunities for interaction, problem solving, and task-based learning where learners can use English,
- Acknowledge and draw upon learners' prior experiences and strengths with language learning,
- Include ongoing opportunities for language assessment and evaluation of learner progress in becoming proficient English language users,
- Provide courses of varied intensity and duration with flexible schedules to meet needs of learners who may be new to this country and burdened with settlement demands or multiple jobs,
- Use technology to expand or individualize learning inside and outside the classroom in accordance with learners' language proficiency, preferences, and needs and to potentially reach learners who cannot attend classes (*e.g.*, individualized activity stations, self-access learning labs, and online courses; Burt, 1999; Gaer, 1998; Hacker, 1999; Hawk, 2000; Terrill, 2000).

Efforts to develop standards and indicators for learner performance and program quality are underway. These efforts include program standards and a program self-review instrument from Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2003); Equipped for the Future content standards (Stein, 2001); and state projects such as the California model ESL standards (California Department of Education, 1992), the Massachusetts adult ESL frameworks (Department of Education, Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1999), and the *Tennessee Adult ESL Curriculum Resource Book* (Sawyer, 2001). Such efforts are producing program and instructional models and quality standards that are accepted and easily accessed by professionals in the field.

B. Professional Development and Teacher Quality

State of the Field

The demand for qualified personnel to work with adult English language learners has greatly increased in recent years as a result of ever-increasing demands for classes (Florez and Burt, 2001). While the demand for classes is not new, changing immigration patterns and demographics have had an impact on professional development. As a result, new teachers are entering the field, experienced teachers are being asked to take on greater challenges, and many adult basic education teachers are working with English language learners in classes along with native English speakers. Much of this is occurring in areas where the adult ESL infrastructure is limited or nonexistent. Professional development is crucial for these teachers (National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2000).

The data suggest that most adult ESL teachers are part-time, hourly employees with minimal or no employment benefits and that many are unpaid volunteers (Wrigley, Chisman, and Ewen, 1993). In 1992, a national study of federally funded adult education programs reported that the ratio of volunteers to full-time professional teachers was almost 8 to 1, and that just 1 in 4 paid staff members worked full-time (Young, Morgan, and Fleischman, 1992). Although there has been no study with a national scope since then, a recent study from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy looked at professional development for adult education teachers – including those teaching adult English language learners – in five states: Idaho, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Virginia (Belzer, Drennon, and Smith, 2001). The authors report that only a small percentage of staff work full-time: 5% in Idaho, Ohio, and Pennsylvania; 12% in Virginia; and 19% in Massachusetts (p. 8). As these states were chosen for the study because they had professional development systems, there is no reason to believe that these percentages are lower than those in other states.

Adult ESL teachers come to the field with varied backgrounds, training, and experiences. There is a high teacher turnover rate. The wide range of instructional contexts (*e.g.*, academic, workplace, family literacy, and volunteer programs) and curriculum content (*e.g.*, employment, parenting, life skills, and civics) makes uniform professional development challenging. Certification and training requirements for teachers vary from state to state and sometimes even from program to program within states. There are limited opportunities and funding for professional development, and many teachers who work on part-time schedules or in isolated programs have difficulty connecting with other teachers and participating in a professional community (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, 2003)

The use of technology for professional development is being explored for a variety of reasons, many similar to those prompting technology use in instruction: to increase delivery options; to address wide, often dispersed audiences; to establish ongoing professional development opportunities; to provide ways for practitioners to connect with each other; and to familiarize practitioners with technology so that they are prepared to incorporate it effectively in their own instructional practice. Emerging applications include development of Web-based courses and training programs that integrate face-to-face meetings with Internet-based, video-based, or teleconferencing components. For example, the California Adult Literacy Professional Development Project (CALPRO) offers video-based ESL training materials and guidelines for using these materials in an independent study approach (K. L. Savage, personal communication, Sept. 10, 2003). National online projects for adult ESL teacher professional development include *ESLCivicsLink*, which is managed by Kentucky Education Television and offers short online courses on teaching adult ESL and civics (see www.pbs.org/literacy/esl for more information), and the National Reporting System training courses (see <http://nrsweb.org> for more information). Some states are also providing online courses for adult ESL teachers (Tolbert, 2001). For example, Virginia offers an eight-week facilitated online course for new ESL practitioners.

Applicable Research

There is limited research that examines issues of professional development for adult education teachers in general and adult ESL teachers in particular (Belzer, Drennon, and Smith, 2001; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998). The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) is conducting a multiyear study of how adult education teachers change, and apply new ideas in their instructional practice in substantial ways, after participating in professional development activities. One hundred teachers, including ESL teachers, have participated in one of three models of professional development: multi-session workshops, mentorteacher groups, and practitioner research groups. The study has found that all three models supported teacher change and different models met the needs of a diverse group of teachers. The teachers that show the greatest change have program support that includes having medical and vacation benefits, paid planning time, opportunities to develop curriculum, and a voice in decision making (Smith, Hofer, and Gillespie, 2001).

The National Technology Laboratory for Literacy and Adult Education (TECH21) is examining effective models of instructional technology for learners and teachers. The National Center on Adult Literacy (NCAL), the Sacramento County Office of Education, and the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium are working in partnership on this project, through a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Part of their study focuses on what factors influence the effectiveness of online distance learning for professional development for teachers of adults. Some of the teachers from the field test sites will work together in a study group and use the *ESL/CivicsLink* online resources for professional development (TECH21, 2003).

Getting research information and findings to the field, and connecting research to practice in useful and meaningful ways, has a positive impact on teachers and teaching. Strategies to connect teachers and researchers include teacher research, teacher and researcher collaboration, networks of teachers and researchers, and teacher presentations on research and practice (Smith, Bingham, Hofer, and Medina, 2002).

Promising Practices

Summaries of professional development efforts in adult education (Belzer, Drennon, and Smith, 2001; Burt and Keenan, 1998; Crandall, 1993) indicate that effective professional development:

- Is ongoing, extensive, and based in solid theory and research,
- Involves teachers in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the training efforts,
- Provides teachers with opportunities and support to try new skills on the job and engage in feedback and follow-up activities,
- Includes time for inquiry, reflection, and collaboration,
- Provides adequate financial support for both full-time and part-time teachers to participate in professional development activities.

Given the realities of the field of adult ESL education, creating professional development opportunities that meet the criteria above is challenging. Educators have described recent professional development efforts that show promise (Burt and Keenan, 1998; Florez and Burt, 2001; Smith, Hofer and Gillespie, 2001). Key factors in these efforts include:

- Building teachers' knowledge in the areas of adult learning principles (in ESL contexts), second language acquisition processes, effective second language teaching approaches, and techniques for working with multicultural groups,

- Exploring ongoing professional development formats with opportunities for the application of new ideas, collaboration, and feedback (as well as integrating one-time workshops, workshop series, and conferences into these formats),
- Using technology-based approaches to offer professional development options that optimize financial resources, reach scattered teachers and programs, and promote collaboration and community,
- Promoting reflective practice and professional communities through efforts such as mentoring, practitioner research groups, reading circles, and peer teaching,
- Encouraging teachers to bring theory, SLA and reading research, and practice together through practitioner research or joint projects between researchers and teachers,
- Developing new models for credentialing and certification based on the skills and knowledge that adult ESL teachers need to be able to demonstrate,
- Focusing on professional development within other national efforts such as *Program Standards for Adult Education ESL Programs* created by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2000) and *Research Agenda for Adult ESL* by the National Center for ESL Literacy (1998).

C. Assessment and Accountability

State of the Field

Learner assessment is a priority in adult ESL education. Many adult ESL programs use a variety of assessment tools to place learners in classes, inform instruction, evaluate learner progress, and report outcomes of instruction. These assessment tools include standardized tests, materials-based and teacher-made tests, portfolios, projects, and demonstrations.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA; Public Law 105-220) of 1998, Title II, funds adult ESL instruction through the U.S. Department of Education. WIA requires states to evaluate each local program's performance according to outcome measures established under the National Reporting System (NRS; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 2001). These outcomes include educational level advancement and follow-up goal achievement. States have flexibility to choose the assessments and procedures they will follow to measure these outcomes.

There are six NRS functioning levels for English as a second language (ESL), which range from beginning ESL literacy to high advanced ESL and describe a set of skills and competencies that students entering at each level can do in the areas of speaking and listening, reading and writing, and functional and workplace skills. Within the NRS guidelines, states select standardized assessments and procedures that programs can use to determine learners' functioning levels, establish timeframes for assessment to be given (either at specific times during the year or after a given number of hours of instruction), and train program staff to administer the assessments.

Using the level descriptors and state policy as guidelines, programs assess, pretest, and place learners in an initial functioning level. After an instructional period set by state policy, learners are tested again to determine changes in functional levels. These changes are then reported to the state education agency that, in turn, reports the data to the U.S. Department of Education.

Key Concepts in Assessment

Current research on appropriate, valid, and reliable assessments is informing practice in the adult ESL field. The National Research Council (2002) outlines the following:

Appropriate assessments

Appropriate assessments determine the relationship between learner outcomes and the various factors that influence those outcomes. These include curriculum, classroom instruction, and factors outside the educational setting (learner personality and learning styles, prior education and life experiences, and opportunities to use English outside the instructional program). One type of assessment that is appropriate is performance assessment, which requires test takers to “demonstrate their skills and knowledge in a manner that closely resembles a real-life situation or setting”, such as reading a pay stub or job schedule and answering questions about it (National Research Council, 2002, p. 7). Although performance assessments are not easy to develop, administer, score, and validate, they are valuable tools, and some performance assessments are in use in adult ESL programs.

Valid assessments

Validity is the degree to which the information gained from an assessment matches the inferences or decisions that programs make about learners, or actions that they take as a result of that information (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council in Measurement in Education, 1999; Messick, 1989). Whether or not an assessment is valid depends on the uses of the outcomes achieved with it.

Reliable assessments

Reliability is the consistency of the measurement when the testing procedure is repeated on a different population of individuals or groups (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, and National Council in Measurement in Education, 1999). Reliability depends first on test developers and distributors, who determine that an assessment is reliable. However, it also depends on those who create the conditions for testing and administer and score the test.

Assessments in Use

The following assessments are currently in use in the field to assess oral English language proficiency and reading: For oral proficiency, the *BEST Plus* oral language assessment and the BEST; for reading, the BEST literacy skills test and the CASAS Life Skills Assessment. (For descriptions of these assessment instruments, see the appendix.)

Promising Practices

Research on effective assessment practices in adult ESL education suggests the following:

- Assessment results should be shared with learners and instructors and with administrative staff and funders, and the results should be used as a basis for making decisions about program planning and instruction (National Research Council, 2002; Van Duzer and Berdan, 1999; Wrigley, 2001).
- Resources should be adequate to carry out the assessments (*e.g.*, enough materials, comfortable environment, and adequately trained administrators and scorers).
- Whenever possible, multiple measures should be used to present a more complete picture of what has been learned (*e.g.*, standardized assessments, performance assessments, and portfolios).

- Assessment procedures should be carried out within the context of a comprehensive program evaluation plan. State and program staff, learners, and external stakeholders should work together to set goals and objectives for the program, develop measures to assess progress toward those goals and objectives, and identify how progress will be determined. A comprehensive plan allows learners to know how they are progressing, teachers to assess the effectiveness of instruction, administrators to monitor progress toward program goals and to gain feedback for program improvement, and external stakeholders to see the results of their investment (Holt and Van Duzer, 2000).

D. Documentation of Program Outcomes and Impact

State of the Field

For immigrants in the U.S. workforce, as for native-born workers, success is related to educational attainment and literacy levels. That is, those with higher education and better literacy skills in English earn more and are more likely to be continuously employed than those without (Greenberg, Macías, Rhodes, and Chan, 2001). Other factors affect the impact of instruction for adult English language learners as well. These factors include literacy in the native language, country of birth, oral fluency as well as literacy in English, and years of education before coming to the United States (Burt, Peyton, and Adams, 2003).

Applicable Reports

A new report from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education looks at how states met their performance targets in the 2000–2001 program year and reports the following outcomes:

- In the area of employment, 31% of adults were working three months after leaving the programs; 62% of those were still working nine months after leaving the program.
- In the area of education, 33% of adults who had the goal of high school completion achieved this goal (States make progress, 2003, p. 125).

English language learners comprised 42% of the enrolled students. Of the remaining participants in federally funded adult education programs, 37% were in ABE classes and 21% were in adult secondary education. Because Latinos made up the largest single group of enrollees during this time – of the 2.67 million participating in U.S. Department of Education-funded programs, 1 million were Latino and 835,000 were white – one can assume that many of the learners who got and kept jobs, and at least some of those who achieved their GED, were English language learners. As of yet, the statistics have not been disaggregated for English language learners.

It is also difficult to stipulate specific information about adult English language learners from recent impact studies, because English language learners were not looked at separately in those studies. (See, for example, Beder, 1999; Murnane, Willet, and Tyler, 2002.)

English Literacy and Language Minorities in the United States (Greenberg, Macías, Rhodes, and Chan, 2001) is a report based on the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). The report looked at adult residents in the United States who were born in other countries or were born in the United States but spoke a language other than English as young children. Greenberg *et al.* (2001) found that:

- There was a positive relationship between literacy and fluency in English and earnings in 1992.
- People who did not speak English or who spoke English poorly were less likely to be employed and more likely to be completely out of the labor force than people who were fluent in English.

- When employed, people who spoke English poorly or not at all earned less money than those who were fluent in English.
- Those not fluent in English usually had blue-collar, service, fishing, and farming jobs that did not pay as well as managerial jobs.
- People who were not literate in any language were less likely to be employed than those who were literate in a language.
- People who were literate only in a language other than English earned less than people who were literate in English.
- People who were literate only in a language other than English were more likely to have non-continuous employment.

Promising Practices

In terms of employment outcomes, non-native English speakers clearly can benefit from improved literacy and proficiency in English. Because those who were literate in any language (in the Greenberg et al. study) were more likely to be employed than those who had no literacy at all, it is possible that native language literacy instruction may improve employment outcomes for non-native English speakers.

It seems, however, that those most in need of educational programs are least likely to participate in them. Looking again at the analysis of the NALS data for language minority populations, one finds that 44% of those literate in English and another language and 51% of those only literate in a language other than English reported having taken ESL classes. Only 30% of those not literate in any language reported taking an ESL class (Greenberg *et al.*, 2001, p. 86). Creative ways to reach those in need include

- *Workplace instruction for those already employed.* This can provide opportunities to learn workplace content and to practice English literacy skills and the communication skills needed for success in the workplace. It can also provide cultural information: For example, for ESL participants who come from cultures where assertiveness, ambition, and speaking up on the job may not be valued, direct instruction in these areas may be necessary. Advancing in the U.S. workplace is a cross-cultural skill, which, like language and literacy skills, must be taught (Burt, 1997).
- *Incentives for businesses to offer instruction in the workplace.* From 1988–1994, under the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP), the U.S. Department of Education awarded grants to collaborative projects – partnerships between business or labor and education – to provide workplace-based instruction in basic skills, literacy, and English as a second language. During these six years, the NWLP funded more than 300 workplace literacy projects, 49% of which included English language instruction (Burt and Saccomano, 1995). The evaluation of the NWLP projects concluded that institutionalization of workplace instruction may be more likely to occur when employers receive incentives to offer instruction to their employees (Moore, Myers, Silva, and Alamprese, 1998).
- *Distance education (e.g., videos, telecourses) for those unable to access programs.* Because video-based distance education uses an asynchronous delivery method, learners who work at more than one job and whose responsibilities conflict with the time of regular class offerings can study whenever they have time. Those with transportation or childcare problems can study without leaving their homes. Learners who need to acquire new skills expediently can progress through the materials at a rapid pace; others may need or want to move through the program at a

slower pace. In California, the state's Innovation and Alternative Instructional Delivery Program allows adult schools to spend up to 5% of their block grants on innovative programs including distance education using video. Between 2000 and 2002, 90% of the learners in the Innovation Program were English language learners (Center for Impact Research, 2002; Porter, 2002).

V. CONCLUSION

Currently, 42% of the adult education population served in federally funded programs are English language learners. Population trends and projections for the next 10 years indicate that the number of adult English language learners in the United States will continue to grow. The adult education system is committed to providing quality instruction to this population. The current emphasis on learner assessment and program accountability, coupled with the focus on professional development for staff, should help achieve this goal.

GLOSSARY

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL)/English as a second language (ESL): These acronyms are used to describe programs for individuals who are seeking to improve their competence with understanding, speaking, reading, and writing English.

EL/Civics education: Programs that combine ESL instruction and civics education, which is defined as “contextualized instruction on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, naturalization procedures, civic participation, and U.S. history and government to help learners acquire the skills and knowledge to become active and informed parents, workers, and community members” (*Federal Register*, November 17, 1999).

Family literacy: Instructional programs that include literacy instruction for parents, educational activities for children, interactive literacy activities involving both the parent and the child, and training that prepares parents to teach their children and participate in their children’s education.

General Educational Development (GED) exams: The GED exams include norm-referenced tests in writing, social studies, science, reading, and mathematics. Individuals who successfully pass all five exams earn a GED credential, which is generally considered the equivalent of a high school diploma.

International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS): A comparative study of adult literacy skills in 22 countries, conducted in the United States in 1994.

National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS): A nationally representative survey of U.S. adults aged 16 and older, which assessed respondents’ English literacy skills.

National Center for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE): Established by Congress in 1988 (Adult Education Act, P.L. 100-297, Sec. 372) and housed at the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), a non-profit organization located in Washington, D.C.. NCLE is a national information center focusing on the language and literacy education of adults and out-of-school youth learning English. It provides information on adult ESL literacy education to teachers and tutors, program directors, researchers, and policymakers interested in the education of refugees, immigrants, and other U.S. residents whose native language is other than English.

National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS): A national accountability system set up to ensure that learner outcomes are reported systematically. The NRS requires each state to report learners’ educational gains in terms of level descriptors defined by the NRS implementation guidelines. There are descriptors for ABE and ESL learners (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education, 2001).

National Technology Laboratory for Literacy and Adult Education (TECH21): Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, TECH21 consists of a principal Laboratory at the National Center for Adult Literacy (NCAL) in Philadelphia; a companion Lab in Sacramento, CA; a “hands-on” Demonstration Lab in Washington, D.C.; seven adult education program-based field sites nationwide; and an Internet portal. At each site, adult learners and educators examine, test, and refine technology-based instructional materials including video conferencing, digital broadcasting, and the Internet.

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD): Part of the National Institutes of Health, the biomedical research arm of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. NICHD supports and conducts research on topics related to the health of children, adults, families, and populations. In 2003, it funded research projects looking at how adults learn to read.

Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE): The U.S. Department of Education office that oversees adult education (including ESL) as well as career/technical education and community colleges. Within the OVAE, responsibility for adult education is assigned to the Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL).

Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Research that investigates the motivations, activities, and instructional contexts that promote the language development of individuals learning a second language. SLA research focuses primarily on oral language development.

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL): A non-profit, international association of English language educators. TESOL supports English language education through professional development, advocacy, standards development, and publications.

Workforce Investment Act (WIA): Federal legislation (Public Law 105-220) that created the one-stop workforce development system, in which adult education is a partner.

Workplace education: Workplace-based English language and literacy education intended to improve workers' productivity in the workforce.

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APPENDIX: ASSESSMENTS IN USE

The following assessments are in use in ESL programs in the United States to measure oral English proficiency and reading ability.

Oral English Proficiency

BEST Plus Oral Language Assessment

The *BEST Plus* is a performance-based assessment, an individually administered face-to-face oral interview, to assess the functional oral language skills of adults learning English in the context of interpersonal communication. It is based on the *BEST (Basic English Skills Test)*, which has been used in the field since the 1970s and is still in use. Like the *BEST*, the *BEST Plus* assesses what learners are able to do with the language rather than what they are struggling to do. The *BEST Plus* assesses learners from Beginning ESL Literacy to High Advanced ESL levels as described by the NRS levels in the areas of listening comprehension, language complexity, and communication. It was developed by the Center for Applied Linguistics, following rigorous test development procedures and with full involvement of assessment experts and stakeholders in adult ESL education. The scoring categories and response qualities used for the *BEST Plus* were adapted from the work of researchers who study second language acquisition (for example, Foster and Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Skehan, 1996), and the importance of each category for measuring the quality of second language speech has been verified through research. The *BEST Plus* can be used for learner placement, to document and provide diagnostic reports about learner progress, for NRS reporting, and for program evaluation. *BEST Plus* scale scores are correlated with the appropriate NRS and SPL levels and provide diagnostic information about learners' performance. Because the computer program adapts to a learner's English proficiency level as the test proceeds and to a learner's growing proficiency over time, the learner does not receive the same test twice. (For more information about the *BEST Plus*, visit <http://www.best-plus.net>.)

Reading

BEST Literacy

The *BEST Literacy* skills test assesses reading and writing ability. Reading tasks include dates on a calendar, labels on food and clothing, bulletin announcements, and newspaper want ads. Writing tasks include addressing an envelope, writing a rent check, filling out an application form, and writing a short biographical passage. The assessment can be administered in one hour, either individually or to groups. (For more information about the *BEST Literacy* assessment, see www.cal.org/best.)

CASAS Life Skills Assessment

The *CASAS Life Skills* assessment is a reading test. It is part of the *CASAS* assessment system, which is designed to integrate curriculum, assessment, and instruction into a comprehensive system. The reading assessment tests learner skills from Beginning Literacy to Advanced ESL and is used in ESL, EL/civics, citizenship, vocational ESL, employability, and workplace programs. Test items are aligned with more than 300 learner competencies related to practical life and work skills, which include basic communication, employability and workplace skills, and computer literacy. The *CASAS* skill levels are aligned with the NRS proficiency descriptors. (For more information about the *CASAS* assessment system, visit www.casas.org.)