



HISTORY OF THE ADULT EDUCATION ACT: AN OVERVIEW*

Twenty-seven years ago, the U.S. Congress passed landmark legislation committing the nation to invest in a program of basic education for adults. That legislation was incorporated into the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. Two years later, the program was amended and expanded in a new law called the Adult Education Act, signed by President Lyndon Johnson on November 3, 1966.

Prior to 1964, local education agencies, principally in large urban areas, offered public education programs for adults, but few states had programs in adult basic education. Congressional passage of legislation quickly motivated states to begin developing adult education plans, and by 1966, all states had programs underway. More than 245,000 individuals enrolled in Adult Basic Education programs in 1966, and thousands of teachers had begun or completed training. These numbers went well beyond initial expectations. It had been expected that only 75,000 students would enroll initially. The Federally-funded program was obviously timely and needed.

Over the past quarter-century, the spirit that inspired enactment of the Adult Education Act has been reaffirmed and refined through a number of amendments. The most recent amendments were included in the National Literacy Act, signed by President Bush on July 25, 1991. At this time of the celebration of the Silver Anniversary of the Adult Education Act, it is

fitting to review the genesis of the Act, its evolution, and the outlook for its future.

The Forces Behind Passage

During the 1950s and early 1960s, efforts to establish or expand local adult education programs or to establish statewide programs administered by state directors of adult education were largely unsuccessful because many states were unable or unwilling to commit funds to adult education. In 1962 and 1963, proposals for adult education legislation found strong Congressional support, but were stalled in committee. Opposition to the bill generally stemmed from the issue of state control of education and the fact that the 1963 amendment to the Manpower Training and Development Act provided for basic education within a training context. The professional adult education community, led by the National Association for Public School Adult Education, lobbied hard for the Act, however, seeing it as an opportunity to bring adult education into the mainstream of education services.

Their view prevailed, and ultimately, inclusion of the Adult Education title under the Economic Opportunity program widened the educational opportunities available to adults. It also established linkages among federal policies developed for adult education, manpower training and human resources programs that remain today.

Evolution of the Program

Over the past 25 years, there has been remarkable consistency in the Adult Education Act and its amendments. In 1970, the legislative mandate expanded from proficiency in basic skills to high school completion, reflecting the need for Federal support of GED programs in states. Throughout the 1970s, states expanded their basic education efforts. Some developed significant political and financial support. At the national level, the Adult Performance Level (APL) Project, conducted from 1971 to 1976, identified levels of adult functional competence as an alternative to school-based measures of literacy and recommended competency-based approaches to assessment and programming. In 1978, the Adult Education Act amendments added, as the goal of the program, that of enabling "...all adults to acquire basic skills necessary to function in society."

In 1988, Congress again turned its attention to adult education, passing amendments requiring states to:

- Provide service to institutionalized adults;
 - Upgrade state plans to include not only statewide goals but strategies, methods, and expected outcomes;
 - Develop better evaluation systems; and
 - Provide an increased state match for Federal funds by 1992.
- Amendments also established a new Federal discretionary program, the National Workplace Literacy Program. For the first time, funds were made available to support partnerships between adult education providers and business or labor organizations to provide learning opportunities in the workplace.

The Adult Education Act Today

The National Literacy Act of 1991 strengthened and broadened the scope of the adult education program. As President Bush stated at the signing ceremony, the Act represented "another significant step toward implementing our AMERICA 2000 strategy and attaining the National Education Goal of adult literacy and lifelong learning."

The Act lays the groundwork for improved coordination among Federal basic skills programs with a new definition of literacy:

"...for purposes of this Act, the term 'literacy' means an individual's ability to read, write and speak in English, and to compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."

The Act amends parts of the existing Adult Education Act State-Administered Basic Grants program, placing new emphasis on program quality and evaluation, access to Federal funds by a wide range of providers, and teacher and volunteer training. It authorizes establishment of a National Institute for Literacy, which will be administered under an interagency agreement between the Secretaries of Education and the Secretaries of Labor, and Health and Human Services. The National Literacy Act of 1991 also authorizes four new programs: State Literacy Resource Centers; National Workforce Literacy Strategies; Functional Literacy for State and Local Prisoners, and Life Skills Training for State and Local Prisoners.

A Record of Success

Over its 25-year history, the Adult Education Act has proven to be a workable, adaptable tool. It remains the major resource for providing educationally disadvantaged adults with the opportunity to reach their full potential as individuals, as responsible citizens, and as workers. Basic education programs have been developed in all states and U.S.-administered territories, and most of the funding has gone into direct service, research and dissemination, with relatively little to the administration and bureaucratic structure of the state education departments. The Act has contributed to the growth of adult education as a profession, both in terms of program development and the training of professionals.

Since implementation of the Act began, student enrollment and funding have grown by more than 900 percent. In 1989, enrollment reached 3.3 million, compared with 389,000 in 1967. Federal funding has increased from \$26.3 million in 1967 to \$238.8 million in 1992. Many programs across the country have waiting lists for enrollment.

Each year more businesses seek assistance from the U.S. Department of Education and states to help them enhance the basic skills of their employees.

All service populations have benefitted from the growth in the adult education program, but as a percentage of the total population served, English as a Second Language students have experienced the largest increase. For example, in 1989 approximately 40 percent of enrollees were of Hispanic origin. At the same time, the adult student population as a whole has also become younger. Approximately 83 percent of all 1989 enrollees were under 44 years of age, and many states reported a large proportion of students under 25. These are some of the trends that seem to be outlining the future of adult education in America.

Looking Ahead

The National Literacy Act of 1991 is one result of a decade of heightened public attention to America's basic skills deficiencies. The need to upgrade fundamental skills has been well documented by a number of reports issued in recent years by experts in both the public and private sectors. Their messages strike a consistent theme: without a dramatic increase in basic skill levels among its work force, America faces the prospect of a declining standard of living and the inability to compete effectively in a global marketplace.

The challenge is clear. The foundation for a solution has been established with the 25-year record of the Adult Education Act. That foundation will be strengthened with implementation of initiatives laid out in *AMERICA 2000: An Educa-*

tion Strategy--a comprehensive plan announced by the Bush Administration in April 1991 to involve every community in America in working to attain the National Education Goals set by President Bush and the Governors in 1990.

The AMERICA 2000 strategy for creating a "nation of students" will be largely the responsibility of adult educators. More than 40 million adults are participating in basic education courses in local programs and in workplaces, but a systematic means of matching training to needs, uniform standards, and measurement of the skills needed and the skills learned must be developed. The strategy recommends a series of specific measures that are being implemented by the U.S. Department of Education, in cooperation with other federal agencies. For example, it recommends job-related skill standards that will guide adult learning programs in developing curricula and setting goals for individual students. It also calls for Skill Clinics that offer one-stop assessment and referral in every community and workplace. AMERICA 2000 initiatives such as these will influence the shape of adult education for some years to come.

The rationale behind striving to become a "nation of students" is as compelling today as it must have been to Congress 27 years ago when it began to seriously consider creation of the first program to offer adults an opportunity to improve their basic skills through continued education. That rationale is expressed simply in AMERICA 2000: "For those of us already out of school and in the work force, we must keep learning if we are to live and work successfully in today's world....Education is not just about making a living; it is also about making a life."

* This overview is largely based on a History of the Adult Education Act prepared by Amy Rose under contract to the ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career and Vocational Education, Center on Education and Training for Employment, Ohio State University, which operates under contract to the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational and Research Improvement. The complete History is expected to be available in January 1992.

- 1964 The Adult Basic Education Program was established in Title II B of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 (P. L. 88-452). A number of State plans were approved and began operation in FY 1965. By the close of FY1966, all States had established adult education delivery systems and local programs were underway.
- 1966 The Adult Education Act of 1966 (P.L. 89-750) established the authorization for the Adult Education Program in the Office of Education, expanded the program to adults with limited English proficiency, and authorized grants for special experimental demonstration projects and for teacher training. The Act was designed to "initiate programs of instruction for persons 18 years and older whose inability to read or write the English language constitutes a substantial impairment of their ability to obtain employment," and generally provided education for adults below the 9th grade level.
- 1968 The Adult Education Act was amended (P.L. 90-576) to change the definition of an adult from 18 to 16 years of age or older.
- 1970 The Act was again amended (P.L. 91-230) to expand educational opportunities and to encourage adults to continue their education at least through the high school level through the Adult Secondary Education (ASE) program component.
- 1978 Further amendments (P.L. 95-561) defined the purpose as assuring that "all adults acquire basic skills necessary to function in society." This reflected adoption of a competency-based approach to assessment and programming, that identified levels of adult functional competencies as an alternative to school-based measures of literacy.
- 1988 Congress amended the Act (P.L. 100-297), expanding the scope to include:
- The National Workplace Literacy Partnerships Program to support basic skills programs for workers through partnerships between business or labor organizations and education agencies;
 - The English Literacy Grants Program to support services to limited English proficient adults (and their families);
 - A program of research and development to identify and evaluate exemplary practices in adult education and promising innovative methods for service delivery; and
 - New requirements for improved planning and evaluation in State adult education programs.
- 1991 New legislation was enacted, the National Literacy Act of 1991, (P.L. 102-73). It amended several existing programs administered by Federal or state governments under the Adult Education Act, created several new programs, and established a National Institute for Literacy. The Act also includes a new definition of literacy, and assigns responsibility for coordination of all literacy related programs and policy initiatives in the U.S. Department of Education to the Assistant Secretary for Vocational and Adult Education.

For further information contact:
 Clearinghouse
 Division of Adult Education and Literacy
 U.S. Department of Education
 Washington, DC 20202-7240
 202/732-2396

