

### SUMMARY

Adult education has long been an integral part of our nation's prosperity. Yet over the last decade, the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) reports that declines in federal and state funding have led to decreasing numbers of adult learners who can access services (CLASP, 2012). Of the 36 million adults with low basic skills, adult education currently assists 1.8 million of them each year to earn a high school equivalency, increase basic and employability skills, or improve their English language proficiency (Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act).

**COABE PRINCIPLE:** Increase investments in adult education to ensure that these 36 million Americans are able to access services, strengthen their basic skills, and advance through career pathways in high demand fields. Adult education is instrumental in closing social and economic disparities in our country, stimulating economic growth, global competitiveness, and prosperity.

### ISSUES

#### A NATION FALLING BEHIND

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the *Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies* (PIAAC) in 2013. This international assessment of adult basic skills found that the U.S. is stagnating in adult literacy with even poorer rankings in numeracy. In fact, American adults ranked lower than most of the other 24 participating nations across all three domains, including literacy, numeracy, and Problem Solving in Technology Rich Environments.

Of the 36 million American adults who lack literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills:

- 1 in 6 have only a basic vocabulary and struggle when reading simple texts.
- Nearly 1 in 3 have difficulty with simple mathematical operations involving counting, sorting, and basic arithmetic.
- 3 in 10 have difficulty using technology to solve problems such as sorting through emails and organizing them into folders provided for them (PIAAC Gateway, 2015).

Additionally, PIAAC data shows that:

- The U.S. has a larger population of low-skilled adults than most developed countries.
- American adults who come from poorly educated families are 10 times more likely to have low skills.
- Younger generations, 18-24 year olds, are only slightly outpacing, or are doing worse than older adults — unlike in many other industrialized countries (OECD, 2013).

#### FUNDING AND ENROLLMENT

Federal and state funding and enrollment have declined in the last 15 years. Federal funding and enrollment decreased from nearly 2.8 million learners and over \$700 million in federal funding in 2001 to 1.8 million learners and \$569 million in 2015. According to CLASP, “Although federal adult education has traditionally been supplemented by sizeable state-level matching funds, a decline in federal and state funding for adult education has resulted in states serving only fraction [sic] of the students—2 million out of 93 million—who could benefit from services” (2012, p. 1). While Adult Basic and Literacy Education State Grants saw a modest increase of 2.2 percent as a result of the *Bipartisan Budget Act of 2015*,

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funding for adult education has not yet been restored to pre-sequestration levels.

## DEMAND FOR SERVICES

The most recent survey of demand conducted by the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, found that 50 of the 51 states and territories reported waiting lists for services (McLendon, 2010). Additional analyses of PIAAC data conducted by OECD found that at least 3 million U.S. adults are not enrolled in a program, but would like to be (OECD, 2013).

## SOLUTIONS

U.S. adult education and literacy programs bring a powerful return on investment, impacting the lives of Americans, their families, and communities. Adult education and literacy help adults break cycles of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy by providing adults the skills they need to succeed as workers, family members, and citizens.

## JOBS AND THE ECONOMY

**ISSUE:** Labor market economists project that by 2020, nearly two-thirds of all jobs will require some postsecondary education and training beyond high school (Carnevale, A., Smith, N., & Strohl, J., 2013). Yet 36 million American adults lack the literacy, numeracy, and problem solving skills needed to get a family-sustaining job and advance in a career. In today's rapid-paced world, employers need access to skilled, credentialed workers now more than ever.

The *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014* (WIOA) prioritizes the development of career pathways which lead to meaningful careers and economic security for low-skilled adults and their families. WIOA promotes partnerships among adult education and vocational programs, businesses, and higher education institutions in order to create these pathways.

**SOLUTION:** Promising models such as "career pathway bridge" programs are helping adult students transition from adult education to postsecondary education, training, or family-supporting jobs (Strawn, 2011). According to CLASP, "data on the effectiveness of such models shows that students in these programs are 56 percent more likely than regular adult-education students to earn college credit, 26 percent more likely to earn a certificate or degree, and 19 percent more likely to achieve learning gains on basic skills tests" (CLASP, 2011, p. 2).

The U.S. Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education, reports that individuals who participate in adult education and literacy programs have higher future earnings as a result of participating, and their income premiums are larger with more intensive participation (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to a U.S. Census Bureau study, education levels have more of an effect on earnings over a 40-year span in the workforce than any other demographic factor (Julian & Kominski, 2011).

## CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

**ISSUE:** Research has shown time and again that the parent is the child's first and best teacher. Policy makers are scaling up early childhood programs in order to help children read proficiently by third grade. However, little attention is paid to parents. Research shows that "better educated parents raise better-educated, more successful children, who are less likely to end up in poverty or prison" (McLendon, Jones, & Rosin, 2012, p. 3).

While the high school graduation rate has risen, there is still considerable room for improvement. New research reinforces that "children who do not read proficiently by the end of third grade are four times more likely to leave school

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without a diploma than proficient readers,” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013, p. 5).

“Black and Hispanic children who do not read proficiently in third grade are twice as likely as similar white children not to graduate from high school (about 25 vs. 13 percent)...Overall, 22 percent of children who have lived in poverty do not graduate from high school, a figure about three times greater than the rate for children with no family poverty experience” (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2013, p. 5).

While single-parent households are less common among foreign born residents than native born, nearly 54 percent of the country’s low educated parents of young children are foreign born immigrants and refugees. They are also four times more likely to lack a high school diploma or its equivalent (McHugh & Moraski, 2015).

Further, a recent study found that children whose learning environments were of consistently low quality were much more likely to have language and literacy delays before kindergarten, while supportive home learning experiences could help close the school readiness gap (Rodriguez & Tamis-LeMonda, 2011).

**SOLUTION:** Adult education and family literacy is an investment in the families and future of our nation. Adult education and family literacy programs, under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), improve the economic prospects of a family and better enable family members to support their children’s learning needs (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, 2014). Children whose parents are involved with them in family literacy activities score 10 points higher on standardized reading tests (Sénéchal, 2006). A single year of parental education has a greater positive impact on the likelihood of a son or daughter attending a

postsecondary institution than does an extra \$50,000 in parental income (Finnie, Childs, & Wismer, 2011).

Additionally, the narrow focus of WIOA on transitioning to college and career leaves little room for family literacy. Adults in family literacy programs often have the goal of helping children with homework, not necessarily of transitioning themselves to college or a career. States that use AEFLA funds to provide family literacy programs may need to negotiate performance targets that better reflect participants’ goals and expected outcomes (McHugh & Moraski, 2015).

## **POVERTY**

**ISSUE:** According to CLASP’s analysis of the 2014 Census Data Report, almost half (more than 40%) of all children and young adults live in low-income households that are below 200 percent of the poverty line (CLASP, 2015). The Migration Policy Institute reports that forty-two percent of foreign born residents fall below 200 percent, as compared to 30-percent native born residents (McHugh & Moraski, 2015).

Additionally, 43 percent of adults at the lowest levels of literacy live in poverty compared to only 4 percent of those at the highest (Begin to Read, 2015).

EdWeek reports, “Students from low-income families are 2.4 times more likely to drop out than middle-income students, and over 10 times more likely than high-income peers to drop out” (Lynch, 2013). Without a high school diploma or its equivalent, adults are far more likely to spend their lives periodically underemployed or unemployed, on government welfare, or resorting to crime.

Even when dropouts are employed, they earn, on average, nearly \$10,000 less annually than high school graduates and they pay less in taxes (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). A study from Northeastern University shows that each high school dropout costs taxpayers

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\$292,000 over the course of his or her life. Collectively, dropouts cost taxpayers more than \$8 billion annually in public assistance programs (Sum, Khatiwada, & McLaughlin, 2009).

**SOLUTION:** Helping low-skilled adults to become better educated is likely to have a multi-generational positive impact (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009). Everyone benefits. Adults who get a high school equivalency earn, on average, \$10,000 a year more than those who do not. Through high school equivalency, families can improve their standard of living and break intergenerational cycles of poverty and illiteracy. Communities with a better educated citizenry spend less on social welfare services; by growing the number of such communities, the U.S. is better positioned among industrialized nations to be economically competitive.

## HEALTH LITERACY

**ISSUE:** According to the report *Low Health Literacy: Implications for National Health Policy* the cost of low health literacy to the U.S. economy is between \$106 billion to \$238 billion annually (Vernon, Trujillo, Rosenbaum, & DeBuono, 2007). This is a major source of economic inefficiency in the U.S. healthcare system.

Health literacy is the ability to understand and communicate health information, such as understanding a prescription label or getting a flu shot. While literacy is one factor affecting health literacy, a person can be literate and still have limited health literacy. Nearly half of high school graduates have limited health literacy. Furthermore, "When one accounts for the future costs of low health literacy based on current actions (or lack of action), the real present day cost of low health literacy is closer in range to \$1.6 trillion to \$3.6 trillion," (Vernon, et al., 2007, p. 6).

**SOLUTION:** Analysis of PIAAC data found that U.S. adults with higher literacy scores report

better health. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) reports that this suggests adults with higher literacy have a stronger set of skills to prevent disease and protect their health. Adult education better equips people to overcome barriers to good health, helping individuals lead healthier lives and reducing health care costs to individuals and society.

## IMMIGRANT INTEGRATION

**ISSUE:** Each year, about 1 million foreign born individuals settle in the U.S. Many need adult education and literacy services in order to fully integrate into society and lead full lives as workers, family members, and citizens.

Nearly 23 million of the country's foreign born have limited English proficiency (LEP). More than ten million of these residents – roughly 32 percent of low-educated adults in the U.S. – lack a high school diploma or its equivalent (McHugh & Moraski, 2015).

Additionally, 2.6 million (14 percent of) foreign-born adults (ages 25 and older) are also highly educated (with a bachelor's degree or higher) but lack English proficiency, making it difficult to get a job in their field. This, coupled with the lack of recognition of their foreign credentials and experience, has led to a phenomenon called "brain waste" (Batalova, McHugh, & Morawski, 2014). These highly-skilled foreign-born adults must work low-wage, low-skilled jobs to make ends meet. Their full potential to contribute to their family and community remains largely untapped.

**SOLUTION:** WIOA now requires adult-education programs to provide Integrated English Literacy (IEL) and Civics Education activities. These activities blend the traditional English Language and Civics programs with Integrated Education and Training. However, IEL activities need significant additional investments as there is little funding available to implement them. Adult education also needs funding to provide

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targeted services to highly-skilled immigrants so that they can transition to a career in their field.

## INCARCERATION AND RECIDIVISM

**ISSUE:** The U.S. Bureau of Justice Assistance reports that more than 700,000 incarcerated individuals from federal and state prisons reenter society each year (Davis et al., 2014). Forty percent of those will be reincarcerated within three years of release. The rate of incarceration of juveniles in the U.S. is more than three times higher than other developed countries (Davis et al., 2014).

Ex-offenders are generally less educated. EdWeek reports that 80 percent of incarcerated individuals are high school dropouts (Lynch, 2013).

The vast majority of prison inmates reenter the community. Yet they do not have the basic education, or workforce and cognitive skills to successfully overcome the challenges of integrating into society. Furthermore, cycling in and out of prison costs states more than \$50 billion each year and takes a traumatic toll on children and families of the incarcerated (OVAE, 2012).

**SOLUTION:** A recent meta-analysis funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, U.S. Department of Justice, found the following:

- Inmates who participate in correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower chance of recidivating than those who did not — a reduction in the overall risk of recidivating of 13 percentage points.
- Providing correctional education can be cost-effective when it comes to reducing recidivism.
- The odds of obtaining employment post-release among inmates who participated in correctional education were 13 percent higher than for those who did not (Davis et al., 2014).

Invest in providing evidence-based practices in correctional education and further research on gaps in the knowledge base that will move corrections education forward. Without meaningful investments in our nation's adults, basic skills gaps will continue to deepen social and economic disparities in our country and stifle our nation's economic growth, competitiveness, and prosperity.

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## WHAT DO WE NEED TO DO?

Increase access to adult education programs by providing federal funding at least at these authorized levels:

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|------------------------|------------------------|
| ○ 2015: \$ 577,667,000 | ○ 2018: \$649,287,000  |
| ○ 2016: \$ 622,286,000 | ○ 2019: \$ 664,552,000 |
| ○ 2017: \$ 635,198,000 | ○ 2020: \$ 678,640,000 |

Increasing access to adult-education programs will also require increased state funding for adult education, and leveraging funding opportunities in the private and corporate sectors. Furthermore, we

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must create and utilize partnerships with adult education, vocational and trade schools, businesses, corrections institutions, and institutions of higher education.

We have the opportunity to make real and lasting positive change for adults, families, communities, and our nation through adult education. However, without significant investments in adult education, at least at WIOA authorized levels, the advancements made in its reauthorization will not become reality.

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*Our mission: Inspiring educators so adults succeed and communities thrive.*

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