



It Starts With a Goal:

The Transformative Power of Adult Education

A Briefing Paper
For
The Adult Education Vision Retreat

September 20, 2007

BACKGROUND

The roughly 70,000 New Yorkers who sign up for adult education classes come from all walks of life and from every corner of the world. They bring with them a wealth of experience and a thirst for a better life for themselves and their families. As Mayor Bloomberg has noted, “they are poets, mathematicians, community leaders, and aspiring entrepreneurs.”

For all their differences, adult learners usually start from the same place – a goal. For some the goal is to become a citizen, earn a GED, or learn English to get a better job. For others, the goal is to put an end to the humiliation of not being able to read, to take their child or grandchild on their lap and share a book, or to be the first one in their family to go to college.

When adults are able to see their goals begin to materialize, they are likely to persist in their education despite considerable obstacles. When the adult learner’s motivation and intelligence are by the skills and insight of well qualified, highly trained teachers working in programs with the resources to support achievement, the results are nothing short of transformational.

The existing adult education programs have served the City well. However, there is consensus that we can do better. The fiscal and policy climate has for years been challenging, ultimately limiting the impact that programs could otherwise achieve. The “system” within which programs operate has come undone to a certain extent and is in need of updating and strengthening for today’s opportunities.

Your Task for the Visioning Retreat

Your charge is to envision a system that serves more people with greater outcomes, is rooted in the goals of learners and reflective of best educational practices, and is more consistently transformational in its impact.

VISIONING RETREAT PRE-WORK

This memo is intended to prepare you for the retreat, so that all participants are ready to make meaningful contributions towards a vision for the future.

Summarized below is:

- Background information on the existing adult education sector;
- An overview of the community of learners;
- Statistics on the larger population of New Yorkers with limited literacy skills and/or limited English proficiency;
- Voices from the field on key themes that were surfaced in preparation for the retreat; and
- Resources for further reading on best practices and system design issues.

THE ADULT EDUCATION SECTOR IN NEW YORK CITY

The existing adult education sector consists of publicly-funded free classes offered by:

- The Department of Education
- The City University of New York
- The Public Libraries
- The Human Resources Administration, and
- Numerous community based organizations under contract to the Department of Youth and Community Development or to the State.

Several other agencies play an important, albeit more modest, role in funding or providing adult education classes to eligible individuals. These agencies include:

- The Department of Small Business Services
- The New York City Housing Authority
- The Department of Parks and Recreation
- The Department of Correction; and
- The State University of New York

The State Education Department has the largest role in funding and regulation, having responsibility for implementing federal Workforce Investment Act (Title II) policy and funding among programs.

INSTRUCTIONAL OFFERINGS

There are four main types of instruction offered in the system:

English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL, also referred to as English as a Second Language, ESL), including a range from very basic classes for immigrants who do not know the alphabet to more advanced classes for those who have college degrees and some fluency in English, but need to improve for work or further study; some programs offer English classes geared specifically towards passing the citizenship test;

Adult Basic Education (ABE), including literacy (i.e., help with reading and writing), pre-GED classes, and GED preparation; these classes are for adults who already speak English and include many immigrants;

Basic Education in the Native Language (BENL), consists of literacy instruction in adults' native language, often a precursor to an individual moving into an ESL class (only a small number of people are currently educated using this approach); and

Career and Technical Education (CTE), small number of classes offered by the Department of Education in areas such as licensed practical nursing, barbering, clerical skills, computer networking, and limited classes or workshops on topics related to employment preparation offered by a wide range of programs.

Most programs use a federal framework – the National Reporting System – to organize instruction into six standard levels reflecting literacy and language skills criteria. Students are placed into the appropriate level based on a standardized pre-test and, sometimes, other program-specific criteria. After a certain number of hours of instruction, students are post-tested and results are reported to the State Education Department via a data system known as “ALIES” that is administered by the Literacy Assistance Center. The data reporting system is being replaced with an on-line database application beginning later this year.

Most instruction is provided in formal classes meeting 6 – 12 hours per week for a 10 – 12 week semester, according to the more-or-less traditional academic calendar. There are several large programs with more intensive hours of instruction and others with schedules that vary from this range. There are also programs, such as those administered by the libraries and Literacy Partners, utilizing volunteer-based tutoring groups.

RELATED SECTORS

In addition to free publicly-funded classes, there are tuition-based continuing education classes offered by CUNY campuses and other universities that offer a wide range of options, from single courses to programs leading to licensure or industry-recognized certificates. There are also over 200 privately funded, volunteer-driven, or fee-based English language programs in the City, with wide variation in scope of services and cost. It is not known how many individuals use these programs or the outcomes they achieve.

There are a broad array of workforce development programs, including a system of individual training vouchers administered by the City's Workforce One career centers. The City's Human Resources Administration oversees many strategies to help people move from public assistance into the workforce; some of these initiatives involve training and/or education.

In addition, there are labor-based classes operating at workplaces in a variety of industries, aiming to improve the job skills and vocational English of thousands of New Yorkers each year.

Finally, there is a system of post-secondary education (i.e., college) to which many adult education students aspire.

THE CURRENT STUDENT POPULATION

There were approximately 70,000 adults enrolled in classes during the year ending June 30, 2006, most of these at the lower levels of instruction.¹ Nearly two-thirds of all students were in ESOL classes as indicated in the following table.

Instruction and Level	% of Total Enrollment
ESOL – Beginning	43%
ESOL – Intermediate	14%
ESOL – Advanced	7%
ESOL Subtotal	64%
Adult Basic Ed -- Literacy	9%
Adult Basic Ed – Pre-GED	19%
Adult Basic Ed Subtotal	28%
GED Preparation Subtotal	7%
Total	100%

The estimated age distribution of the student population (based on the age categories provided by the regulatory reporting system) is as follows:

Instructional Type	16-18	19-24	25-44	45-59	60 +	Total
Adult Basic Ed	4%	22%	49%	21%	4%	100%
GED	2%	25%	55%	16%	2%	100%
ESOL	1%	11%	52%	26%	9%	100%

LITERACY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS OF NEW YORK CITY ADULTS

According to the 2000 Census, there were nearly 1.6 million adults 21 and over in New York City without a high school degree.² Of these, approximately 847,000 (54%) were fluent English speakers and 718,000 had limited English proficiency.³ Nearly one-third of these adults lived in poverty, almost double the citywide poverty rate.

¹ Data for the year ending June 30, 2007 will not be available until December 2007.

² Once can assume that these individuals have functional skills equivalent to the 5th to 8th grade levels, given that adults generally have functional literacy skills equivalent to two to five grade levels behind the last year of school completed.

³ Limited English Proficiency (“LEP”) status is attributed to those individuals who told the Census that they spoke English less than “very well.”

In addition, there were approximately 774,000 adults who could not speak English proficiently, but reporting having at least a high school education (from their home country, no doubt). The poverty rate among these adults was approximately 21 percent, much closer to the citywide rate of 18 percent.

From 1990 to 2000, the number of adults of any educational level with limited English proficiency increased by 34 percent, while the number of native US born adults without a high school education declined by 19 percent.

English Speaking Adults Without a High School Education, 2000	
US Born	595,000
Foreign Born	252,000
Total	847,000
Poverty Rate	32%

Non-English Speaking Adults, 2000	
Without a High School Education	774,000
Poverty Rate	31%
With a High School Education	715,000
Poverty Rate	21%
Total	1,489,000

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Following are some of the themes and perspectives that surfaced in the months of pre-work with program managers, teachers, learners and other stakeholders leading up to the retreat.

Intensity of Engagement: the more intensively engaged learners are (e.g., hours and days per week, modalities of learner, etc.), the more progress they will make towards their goals; anything that supports or enables greater intensity of engagement (including child care, as was mentioned many times) is a good thing.

Self Study: we can do more to engage students – and the larger population of un-enrolled adults in need of service – outside the traditional classroom format; as programs move to more intensive formats, resources are needed for learners who cannot thrive in those environments.

Pathways for Learners: there should be a clear pathways towards – and into – post-secondary education and job training programs that lead to good jobs; along the way, there should be realistic milestones (ideally linked to wage or job “pay-offs”) at attainable intervals for learners of all levels; curriculum, professional development, and support services will need enhancing to support pathways.

Connections: better connections within and among programs could enable more learners to move seamlessly from one level to another and gain skills beyond the offerings of the program where s/he first enrolled in classes; connections with alumni could strengthen program impact.

Networks: too many practitioners are working in isolation and desire to be part of a larger movement with a strong sense of purpose; were they organized into networks, programs in geographic proximity could share resources, combine professional development activities, and pursue synergies to serve their communities better.

Full-Time Professionals: full-time teachers and other staff with ongoing professional development and opportunities for career advancement could be new stability to the field and enable significant improvements.

Innovation at All Levels: where a culture of innovation has been nurtured, impressive gains and program improvements are possible at all levels of instruction and across demographic groups.

Funding Should Reflect Priorities: paying for outcomes (rather than line item budgets) sets a clear framework for program management, but funding levels need to be sufficient to actually pay for the desired outcomes; performance metrics need to be authentic, realistic, and equitable across different types of programs and different learner characteristics.

One Size Never Fits All: priorities do need to be more clearly established and the system has potential to focus its energies better to create more value; however, one mandatory approach will never meet all needs

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR BEST PRACTICES AND SYSTEM DESIGN

Excerpts from the following documents are being sent to you along with this memorandum for additional reading.

1. An Evidence-based Adult Education Program Model Appropriate for Research

National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy
Harvard University

http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_comings4.pdf

Describes what teachers, adult students, counselors, administrators, and partners should do based on professional wisdom and empirical evidence “to provide both effective instruction and the support services adults need to persist in their learning long enough to be successful.” The report outlines key principles in the following areas:

- Program Quality Support
- Entering a Program
- Participating in a Program
- Re-engagement

2. Equipped for the Future

National Institute for Literacy and the EFF Center for Training and Technical Assistance
University of Tennessee

<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/default.htm>

A national standards-based educational improvement initiative for adult basic education and ESOL that outlines content standards and other factors to guide adult learning, instruction, and assessment based on the functional literacy skills adults need to perform tasks required of them in three defined roles: worker, parent/family member, and citizen/community member.

3. Adult Literacy Education in Immigrant Communities

Asian American Justice Center

http://www.advancingequality.org/files/AAJC_Adult_Literacy_Education_report.pdf

Highlights ten policy priorities for increasing adult learners' access to high quality ESOL courses, based on the input of more than 50 practitioners and national experts in adult literacy, immigration and refugee issues, and other related topics.

4. Dare to Dream: A Collection of Papers from a Resource Group of 102 Education and Literacy Professionals

The National Commission on Adult Literacy

<http://www.caalusa.org/daretodream.pdf>

Recommendations on ways to upgrade the nation's approach to adult literacy and expand quality services to more adults.