



Making Skills Everyone's Business

A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States



Skills are everyone's business. Youths' and adults' foundation skills¹ determine local, regional, and national competitiveness. They have lasting impacts on individuals' success and social mobility. Skills are vital components of healthy, safe families and civic engagement, and are the building blocks of economic development and growth. In our fast-changing and ever-connected 21st-century lives, learning and skill development must be a constant and lifelong pursuit.

This brief guide is a preview of a longer report that the Department of Education's Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) will publish in August 2014. The report represents a yearlong review of the performance and outcomes of state adult education practices; an assessment of states' status on various adult education reforms; consultations with peers in the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and other nations that have developed national strategies for improving



U.S. Department of Education
Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education

foundation skills; a review of the literature on instructional effectiveness; a deeper dive into the U.S. data by the OECD, which resulted in the report *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?*²; and an engagement process that took OCTAE leadership across the country listening to students and stakeholders and encouraging communities to submit input. All of these efforts informed the understanding that, because skills matter to so many quality-of-life issues, raising Americans' skill levels will require everyone's commitment.

This guide provides seven high-level strategies that communities, public and private entities, and all levels of government can adopt to achieve a collective-impact approach, with shared objectives to strengthen our nation.

1. *Create joint ownership of solutions.*

It is often crises in our lives that make us realize we lack the necessary skills for protecting and advancing our health, job opportunities, financial security, or safety. This call to collective action asks communities to invest time and resources in skill development in advance of such crises. Such investment will better prepare individuals and communities to weather the inevitable storms and changes in the human context with knowledge and problem-solving abilities. When adopting a collective-impact approach³, key stakeholders from various sectors agree to a common agenda, shared accountability, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication, and a coordinating agency. In this way, communities can tackle challenging issues while building the capacity of stakeholders to do even more.

2. *Expand opportunities for adults to improve foundation skills.*

The current federally funded adult education system reaches fewer than 2 million adults annually.⁴ With the Survey of Adult Skills estimating that there are 3 million adults in the United States who want to get started on skill development but face a variety of barriers, and 36 million adults who could benefit from improved skills, U.S. residents clearly need greatly expanded opportunities for learning. Innovative technologies, online platforms, and instructional designs provide transformative



WHO BENEFITS FROM HIGHER SKILLS?

Individuals, families, employers, and communities stand to benefit from improving the foundation skills of U.S. adults.

- The economic payoff to individuals for higher skills is greater in the U.S. than in almost any other industrialized country (OECD, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?*).
- Improving adult skills increases productivity and, among industrialized nations, countries with higher cognitive skills have substantially higher long-term economic growth. (*How Much Do Educational Outcomes Matter in OECD Countries?* Eric A. Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, Working Paper 16515, National Bureau of Economic Research, November 2010).
- States with better educated workforces have higher economic growth and higher wages generally (*A Well-Educated Workforce Is Key to State Prosperity*, Noah Berger and Peter Fisher, Economic Policy Institute, August 22, 2013).



- A growing body of evidence suggests that increasing parents' skills can improve education outcomes for their children ("*Increases in Maternal Education and Young Children's Language Skills*," Katherine A. Magnuson et al, *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3, July 2009.)

ways for learners to access high-quality, engaging content, just-in-time support and encouragement, peer and expert mentors, and diagnostic assessments.⁵ Realizing the potential of these innovations will require the collaboration of funders, service providers, businesses, and educational entrepreneurs to bring promising models to scale.

3. *Make career pathways available and accessible in every community.*

The federal departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services published a joint letter⁶ in April 2012 promoting career pathways as “an efficient and customer-centered approach to training and education ...” This holistic practice utilizes contextualized instruction, a model found to be effective with low-skilled adult learners.⁷ High-quality career pathways also engage employers in helping ensure that they address their current and future hiring needs and result in the employment of pathways participants. Career pathways that are aligned with local and regional labor market trends should be available in every community.

4. *Ensure all students have access to highly effective teachers, leaders, and programs.*

Effective teachers and programs using evidence-based instruction can accelerate learning and boost students’ outcomes. However, the current



OECD'S SURVEY OF ADULT SKILLS

The [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development \(OECD\)](#) released the results of the [Survey of Adult Skills](#), part of the [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#), in October 2013. This assessment was conducted with nationally representative samples from 23 countries of adults ages 16 through 65. It is an international household survey to assess the cognitive and workplace skills needed for success in the 21st-century global economy.

The rankings show that, in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in a technology-rich environment, the U.S. average performance is significantly lower than the international average. The data also show that the skill levels of U.S. adults have remained stagnant over two decades, and that our youngest learners are not improving their skill levels either. In many other countries, by contrast, young adults score well above older ones and also outpace their American peers.

WHO ARE THE LOW-SKILLED IN AMERICA?



One-third are under age 35.



One-third are immigrants.



More than half are black or Hispanic.



Two-thirds of the young (16-24) low-skilled population are men.



People with learning disabilities are twice as likely to have low skills.



Nearly two-thirds of the low-skilled are employed.



Over one-third have done volunteer work in the past 12 months.



Overall, one in six U.S. adults has low literacy skills, one in three has low numeracy skills, and low skills are just as prevalent now as 20 years ago.

adult education system lacks the infrastructure to support teachers equitably across states and programs. Greater investments are required for high-quality professional development to scale up what works, including the necessary job supports and structures for teachers to deliver these programs. More research, development, and evaluation on promising interventions and program models are also needed to address the diversity within the adult learner population.⁸

5 *Align federal policies and programs to integrate services for adults.*

Education, social services, and workforce development systems that serve low-skilled and vulnerable populations should be able to work together seamlessly for their clients. Too often, however, this is not the case, and clients experience disconnected and conflicting services and enrollment requirements. Federal agencies should work to identify and address policy and regulatory barriers to providing integrated services, and pursue the means to give communities the flexibility to innovate when appropriate. Federal programs should use common measures of pertinent practices or services that clearly articulate success.

6 *Increase the return on investment in skills training for business, industry, and labor.*

Almost two-thirds of the low-skilled population in the United States is employed,⁹ which makes federal, state, or local partnerships with



COLLECTIVE IMPACT

Some communities are now applying the collective-impact model to raise adult skills regionwide. The Silicon Valley ALLIES initiative unites three workforce boards, 10 community colleges, three adult education schools, human services agencies, community-based organizations, the Service Employees International Union, and the San

Mateo Hispanic Chamber of Commerce in a collaborative effort to innovate and advocate around skills development. Their collective goal is to help adult English learners access education, training, and other services to successfully enter and advance in family-sustaining careers, and help local employers meet their workforce skill needs.

employers ready-made routes for reaching those individuals with skill development services. Federal tax and federal-share incentives, such as incumbent worker training, on-the-job training, apprenticeships, unemployment insurance, work sharing, and more closely coordinated training programs, can be used to increase the foundation and technical skills of entry-level employees and new hires. Also, businesses, industry associations, and labor unions across the country have found cost-effective ways to invest in their workers. Documenting how these programs create efficiencies and economies of scale, and then sharing those case studies of returns on investment with other businesses and enterprises can help scale up these practices to reach more workers.

7. *Commit to closing the equity gap for vulnerable sub-populations.*

The low-skilled population in the United States is remarkably diverse, with specific sub-populations presenting distinct learning backgrounds, challenges, and needs. Historically underserved populations and those who still bear the unfortunate scars of earlier achievement gaps¹⁰ merit deliberate outreach, partnerships with community-based organizations, and focus, such as the Obama administration’s My Brother’s Keeper initiative.¹¹ The 12.4 million *adults who do not speak English well or at all*¹² represent significant linguistic diversity and include both highly skilled and educated immigrants, and those who have little or no literacy education in their native languages. *Low-skilled adults with disabilities and chronic health issues* may or may not be properly assessed



K-12 AND PARENTS



All parents need strong foundation skills to earn a family-sustaining wage, support their children’s academic growth, and socio-emotional and physical health, and contribute to their communities. Especially where schools have concentrations of families with low skills and low English proficiency, parental engagement in English language, education, and training opportunities is essential to the children’s kindergarten readiness and academic success, and the future of the community.

and matched to effective instruction and assistive technologies. *Rural residents* often face isolation and economic challenges specific to their locations. *Incarcerated and re-entering individuals* often face unique education and training situations that require creative solutions. For all these groups and others, focused investments are required for research, development, and evaluation to create effective, differentiated interventions and program models.

How you can make skills your business. The Department of Education is committed to being a champion of change for low-skilled adults who need further education, English language development, and skills training to advance into the middle class. Join us in this effort that is so critical to the immediate and long-term future of our nation. You can

- educate your colleagues and peers about the importance of skills to your clients, business, industry, and labor unions;
- enlist your social organizations to take action on skills development in your community;
- hold your elected officials accountable for skills improvements in your community;
- identify partners and feasible, practical actions toward skills development that will make a difference in your community; and
- become a champion and commit to making skills your business.

Learn more: OCTAE's full report will explain how the call to action on skills was developed, provide greater detail on the strategies as well as more examples of promising practices, and share the research in which the call is grounded. The full report will be published in August 2014 and made available at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/index.html>.

¹OCTAE defines foundation skills as a combination of literacy, numeracy and English language skills (i.e., listening, reading, writing, speaking in English, digital literacy and the use of mathematical ideas), and employability skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life.

²OECD (2013). *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?: What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*, OECD Skills Studies, OECD Publishing. Available at http://skills.oecd.org/Survey_of_Adult_Skills_US.pdf

³Kania, J. & Kramer, M. (2011). "Collective Impact," *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Vol. 65. Available at http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact

⁴See Adult Basic Education Grant Program Factsheet at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/facts-figures.html>

⁵Russell, M., Lippincott, J., & Getman, J. (2013). *Connected Teaching and Personalized Learning: Implications of the National Education Technology Plan (NETP) for Adult Education. Draft for Public Comment*. Washington, D.C.: American Institutes for Research. Available at http://iincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ImplicationsNETP_AdultEd.pdf

⁶<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/ten-attachment.pdf>

⁷National Research Council. (2012). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. Committee on Learning Sciences: Foundations and Applications to Adolescent and Adult Literacy, A.M. Lesgold and M. Welch-Ross, Eds. Washington, D.C.: The National Academies Press; Martin, V. & Broadus, J. (2013). *Enhancing GED Instruction to Prepare Students for College and Careers*. New York: MDRC.

⁸National Research Council. (2012). Ibid.

⁹OECD (2013). *Time for the U.S. to Reskill?*

¹⁰Duncan, G. & Murnane, R. (Eds.) (2011). *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances*. New York: Russell Sage and Spencer Foundations. Available at <https://www.russellsage.org/publications/whither-opportunity>

¹¹<http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/27/remarks-president-my-brothers-keeper-initiative>

¹²See data from U.S. Census at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/facts/us-country-profile.pdf>