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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-09-575](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Subcommittee on Children and Families, Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Millions of adults in the U.S. report that they speak limited English, and English language ability appears linked to multiple dimensions of adult life, such as civic participation and workforce participation and mobility. GAO examined (1) the trends in the need for and enrollment in federally funded adult English language programs, (2) the nature of federal support for adult English language learning, (3) ways in which states and local public providers have supported English language programs for adults, and (4) federal agencies' plans for research to identify effective approaches to adult English language learning. To conduct this work, GAO analyzed Census and enrollment data and conducted interviews with federal officials within the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services (HHS), and Labor and the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL); semistructured telephone interviews with state adult education officials in 12 states; site visits to 4 states; and reviews of relevant laws and literature.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that Education work with HHS, Labor, and other agencies as appropriate to develop coordinated approaches for sharing information and planning and conducting research. The agencies concurred with the recommendations and cited intentions to work together toward their implementation.

View [GAO-09-575](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Cornelia M. Ashby at (202) 512-7215 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING

Diverse Federal and State Efforts to Support Adult English Language Learning Could Benefit from More Coordination

What GAO Found

The number of adults who speak English less than very well grew by 21.8 percent between 2000 and 2007, to roughly 22 million. The Adult Education State Grant Program, the key federal program for adult English language instruction, reported enrollment of about 1.1 million English language learners in 2007—which had remained relatively stable since 2000. However, most state adult education grantees we contacted reported increased demand. Also, there are many federal programs that allow for adult English language instruction for which national enrollment data are not collected.

Federal support is dispersed across diverse programs in Education, HHS, and Labor that allow for English language learning in pursuit of other goals and do not collect data on participation in English language learning or the amount of federal funding that supports it. The agencies have undertaken initiatives and provided technical assistance. However, while there has been some collaboration among federal offices on behalf of English language learning, there is no ongoing mechanism to share information on resources or strategies to expand and capitalize on the agencies' individual efforts.

States GAO contacted generally did not distinguish funding for English language learning from the other components of adult education, but they did vary greatly in the state matching funds contributed to their programs. GAO found states and local providers collaborating with other federal- and state-funded programs that serve populations likely to need this help. Yet such efforts to coordinate were not universal, and some local providers said they did not know how to access additional instructional or financial resources. States and local providers also supported English language learning in various ways.

Education had one research study under way to test the effectiveness of an approach to adult English language learning, and Education and Labor had some ongoing work related to adult English language learners. Education officials said that there had been little research on what approaches are effective for adult English language learning, and noted that federal funds for rigorous research are limited. However, while agencies cited efforts to collaborate, they had not coordinated research planning across agencies to leverage research resources for adult English language learning.

Providers of Adult English Language Instruction



Sources: Pui Tak Center, Chicago, Illinois (left); Hubbs Center, St. Paul, Minnesota (right).