

Testimony of Dr. Stephen Reder

To the

House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning and Competitiveness

The Hon. Rubén Hinojosa, Chair

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Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members, I am Dr. Stephen Reder, University Professor and Chair of the Department of Applied Linguistics at Portland State University. The Department is involved in teaching, research and service activities related to language and literacy issues in education, work and community settings. My research is focused on adult education and literacy and language development in adults. I was the Principal Investigator of two recently completed major projects in adult education: the National Labsite for Adult ESOL, a classroom-based video laboratory for studying second language teaching and learning, and the Longitudinal Study of Adult Learning , in which I followed a random sample of about 1,000 high school dropouts for nearly ten years, to study how youths and adults fail or succeed in reconnecting with learning, education and work. I am a member of the Board of Directors of ProLiteracy Worldwide and have served on numerous state and national advisory boards concerned with adult education.

I am here to speak with you today about the need for independent research that would help millions of adults develop the skills they need to be successful in today's information and technology age. You have heard about the scope of the adult literacy issue in this country — nearly one-half the adult population of the United States stands to improve their financial health, their physical health, and the well-being of their families by improving their reading, writing, math, computer technology, and English skills. Yet we spend relatively little on research given the size and importance of the adult education mission. Think of the many millions of dollars we would save through better utilization of health care services and the economic prosperity that would be generated from increased levels of employment and a more highly skilled workforce – and research suggests that all of these outcomes will result from appropriate investments in adult education. My own research illustrates, for example, how adults whose literacy skills improve over time experience increasing levels of employment and earnings, whereas those whose skills decrease experience reduced levels of employment and earnings.

### **The issues to research**

Research has a vital role to play in helping shape and deliver adult education more effectively. My longitudinal study of about 1,000 adults who had dropped out of high school brought to light many issues that affect their participation in adult education and identified obstacles to their successful learning. I found, for example, that many adults work independently to improve their basic skills or prepare for the GED. This includes many adults who never attend a basic skills program. This, along with the long waiting lists that potential students find at many programs, tells us that there is much more demand for services than the system can supply.

The research further shows that many adults engage in periods of "self study" between periods of program participation. This suggests that programs could increase their outreach and enrollment and increase their students' persistence by connecting self-directed learning activities with traditional classes. This indicates an important potential role for technology, not only in offering distance education, but in connecting different learning modalities and activities over time.

Studies of only those students in programs teaches us little about effective outreach methods and student retention problems, however. We need more longitudinal research that follows both youth and adults who participate in literacy programs and those who do not. We need to discover how to provide services to adults so they participate in learning with sufficient engagement, intensity and duration to reach their goals. We also need to learn much more about how to help the hardest-to-serve learners — those who are at the lowest literacy levels, those for whom English is a second language and who are illiterate in their native language, and those who have learning disabilities. Many of these individuals will require years of instruction in order to reach their learning and employment goals. We must be able to help them stay the course as they cope with learning setbacks as well as successes, family concerns, and work issues. Building the persistence of learning in adults facing such long trajectories must be a research priority. We need to learn how to build locally connected and integrated delivery systems that allow community-based programs to feed low-level learners into higher-level institutionally-based ESL and adult education programs. And how to help adult education students transition successfully into post-secondary education and training programs. At the same time, we need much more information about how to reconnect dropouts with both education **and** family-supporting work.

Most literacy and adult basic education programs retain learners for relatively short periods of time. Therefore, we need to develop new types of *learning support systems* that provide persistent structures for adults to follow. These structures might combine periods in which adults attend programs, use online materials to work independently or with tutors, or receive support services from local community-based organizations (CBOs) and volunteer programs, for example. Grants could encourage and assist local communities to develop cross-sector, long-term adult learning support systems, perhaps utilizing technology to provide learners and a range of providers and agencies working with them shareable information that can be used to foster more learner-centered integration of services.

We need research to improve the National Reporting System (NRS), the accountability system used in adult education. I support program accountability; however, my own research indicates that important program impacts are missed by a system that focuses on short-term outcomes

and narrow measures of literacy and skills development. When we compared program participants and non-participants over time, the evidence of program impact on learner outcomes depended on the literacy measure used and the time period involved. According to these findings, the NRS uses too short a follow-up time period for the literacy measures it uses; therefore, the NRS may not help programs put their best foot forward. Perhaps even more problematic, the NRS may not be as useful as it could be for program improvement. A review of the NRS could determine whether changing either the type of literacy measure or lengthening the time period would better support programmatic improvement efforts. Other issues could be examined as well, such as making sure that the accountability system gives due credit to programs for assisting the lowest-level and hardest-to-serve students. In supporting adults and the programs that serve them, we must keep in mind the words of William Butler Yeats: “Education is not filling a bucket, but lighting a fire.”

To assure translation of research into improved educational practice, increased support is needed for adult education teacher training and professional development. Federal funding once available for State Literacy Resource Centers, for example, is no longer available and the resources for professional development are highly uneven across states. Research can help us determine the role that technology should play in providing such teacher training and professional development in a cost-effective manner.

### **Increasing the capacity of the adult education delivery system**

The goal of all this research is to increase both the quantity and quality of programs and services, not just so that programs can serve **more** adults — although we certainly need to do that — but also so that we increase the *persistence* of their learning. We want more adults to stay in programs long enough to reach their education, job-training, and family-supporting employment goals. Better coordination of WIA Title I and Title II programs can play an important part in this as long as we do not lose the basic educational focus of the Title II programs. The stimulus legislation that allows Title I WIBs to fund Title II adult literacy providers is an excellent step in this direction, one which I hope the Committee will include in the reauthorization. The knowledge gained through research can help us develop programs that offer a continuum of services across skill levels and life contexts, and engage the full range of resources and capacities in learners’ communities, including full-time and part-time teachers and volunteers, whether working in institutionally-based programs or CBOs. Research can also help us assess the extent to which adult learners are availing themselves of such links to the job training available in their communities. Such service continuum is vital to addressing the complex issues of adult literacy.

## **Increasing our research capacity**

In addition to pursuing a systematic research agenda through targeted grant competitions, the adult literacy field needs a comprehensive research and development center focused specifically on adult literacy and learning. Legislation establishing the Institute of Educational Sciences (IES) requires the Department of Education to operate one or more Centers that address adult literacy issues. Although the Department of Education established R&D centers for adult literacy that operated successfully for 15 years, first at the University of Pennsylvania and then in a collaborative of universities led by Harvard University, funding for such a Center has recently been discontinued. If the leadership at IES is not interested in recompeting a center for adult literacy and education, it is important for other legislation to establish one.

Such a center could be competed and placed at any university or network of universities. It should work closely with literacy and adult education providers and focus on conducting basic and applied research, distilling practitioner knowledge, and disseminating results so that practitioners can understand, respond to, and translate research into practical programs.

Wherever such a Center is established, it is essential that it conduct research about how programs can best support the learning of diverse adult learners to help them meet their long-term educational and employment goals. It is critical that the Center be managed in a way that keeps it free from political interference and pressures unrelated to the needs of the adult education system. It needs the independence, with guidance from a suitable advisory board and peer-review processes, to construct and pursue a long-term research agenda using an appropriate mix of exploratory and confirmatory research methods.

## **Summary**

While there are occasional notable research projects, by and large, the United States invests little money in research and development that would help us increase capacity and improve the quality and effectiveness of our adult education system. Considering the importance of these services to success in higher education, lifelong learning and economic competitiveness, Congress must commit to supporting systematic research designed to identify effective ways to increase program capacity and effectiveness. I recommend:

- Immediately reauthorize WIA Title II to contribute to our economic recovery, with a central focus on adults who are not functionally literate
- Re compete and fund an independent research center for adult literacy and education

- Focus research on building student persistence, reconnecting dropouts, helping the hardest-to-reach learners, and supporting successful transitions of adult education students into family-wage employment and postsecondary education and training
- Develop learning support systems that provide persistent structures for adults to follow over relatively long periods of time
- Explore uses of technology to increase delivery system capacity through online and blended instructional programs and to coordinate employment, education and social services
- Review and modify the National Reporting System for better accountability and program improvement

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you. I offer my services to the Committee as it continues its work in adult literacy. I can be reached at: [reders@pdx.edu](mailto:reders@pdx.edu), 503-725-3999.

Respectfully submitted,  
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