

Written Testimony of Martin C. Finsterbusch
Executive Director of VALUE, Inc.
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Thank you Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee for this opportunity to speak to you about the need for innovation to improve our nation's adult education and literacy system.

My name is Marty Finsterbusch. I am the Executive Director of VALUE, Voice of Adult Learners United to Educate. VALUE is the only national nonprofit organization in the U.S. governed and operated by current and former adult literacy students. VALUE's mission is to improve our nation's education system and empower adults with low literacy skills to realize their human potential. VALUE asserts that almost all successful for-profit companies systematically use consumer input and feedback to improve their products and services. VALUE helps adult learner leaders, literacy professionals, and policy-makers do this too. In addition to policy advocacy, we help state-level agencies and organizations develop the capacity to train and support adult learner leaders. We also conduct biennial national adult learner leadership institutes and operate a national resource center on adult learner involvement and leadership.

Ninety million adults in our nation have low literacy skills according to the 2004 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The current adult basic education system is serving fewer than 3 million of them. That means, 87 million aren't being served at all. The vast majority of them don't want to seek help from a system that looks like the schools that failed them in the past - a system that by its design continues to reinforce the stigma of adult low-literacy. Many who do seek help drop out because they can't achieve their own real goals in a timely manner within a system that uses outdated methods. I come to you today to plead for extensive changes to the current adult basic education system authorized under Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). If ever there was a system that cried out for reform and innovation, the current approach to adult literacy in this country is one such system.

But before I make specific recommendations on reform, let me give you a bit more background on who we low-literate adults are and the very real threats we face daily. First, I need you to put out of your mind the unfortunate stereotypical image of the person with low-literacy as being homeless and of low intelligence. For many, adult literacy issues can be traced to undiagnosed learning disabilities, failing schools, and family issues -- all having more to do with class, race, gender, and cultural bias than intelligence. As one of our members stated:

"We are your family-members; we are your neighbors; we are your co-workers. We are small-business owners; we are first-responders. We are among the working poor and some of us are even millionaires. Few around us ever know our truth. Because of shame and stigma, we keep it hidden."

And let me add, we are among the millions of people who worked for decades in the industries of America that no longer exist or whose jobs are being relocated to other countries.

When adults with low literacy skills publicly admit this deficiency, some lose their jobs -- jobs for which they received good performance appraisals up until their secret was revealed; they lose the chance at promotion; some lose the respect of their family, friends, and co-workers. As another member stated:

"When we loose jobs, we are unable to transfer to new jobs and new industries, not for lack of desire, but lack of literacy skills. We are people who can't get into job training programs or off of welfare, not for lack of desire, but because of a lack of literacy skills. We are also people who want to learn English as the language of our new country, but we can't because of the learning skills we failed to get in our nations of origin."

Far too few adults with low literacy skills are going to seek help when faced with these very real threats. Especially, they will not seek help from the current system.

My personal experience provides an example of what some low-literate adults experience in our nation's educational system. As a small child, I suffered from a serious ear infection that caused me to miss-hear certain sounds. In the course of testing, my family discovered that I have a learning disability. I started out going to public school, but had to stay after school almost every day. I wasn't learning to read, but my teachers would have promoted me anyway because I was a good kid who tried hard. Instead, my parents sent me to a semi-private special education school where there were no grade levels and few challenges. The kids in my neighborhood asked, "Why do you go to that retard school?" I graduated in 1982 with a 4th grade reading level and a poor self-image.

After working for two years, I decided I wanted to go to college. I knew I needed to improve my reading so I went back to my former school. They said they couldn't help me because I already had my high school diploma. They referred me to a community-based volunteer program. There, I improved my reading 6 grade-levels in 14 months. I began taking courses at the community college. Despite getting A's and B's in all of my other courses, I kept failing English composition. Documentation of my learning disability didn't excuse my inability to spell. I was told I could never graduate until I passed my English courses. With this obstacle on top of job and family responsibilities, it took me 10 years to earn my Associates Degree.

During that time period, I dedicated the rest of my life to adult literacy. I started by organizing a student support group in the program that had helped me so much. I became a part-time staff member there before moving to serve on its Board of Directors. Beginning in 1986, I organized a state student network; conducted workshops and conferences at state and national levels; and served on the boards of several national literacy organizations. I have been appointed to the Pennsylvania State Interagency Coordinating Council under three different Governors. In 1999, I was a National Institute for Literacy Fellow, after which I became the Executive Director of VALUE, the national adult learner organization I helped create.

I talk with adult learners from around the country continually. They share with me their insights, their frustrations, and promising practices. I continually talk with my colleagues from state and national literacy organizations too. I feel I am able to share with you a good sense of what works and what doesn't work in our system -- from the consumer perspective.

VALUE believes it is unacceptable for the current adult basic education system to serve less than 3 million adults each year using 19th Century methods, requiring 3-5 years on average for an adult to achieve "functional literacy." It is no wonder that perhaps as many as 20% of learners drop out of adult literacy programs before completing ten hours of instruction and less than 3% reach their primary goal of earning their GED in 3-5 years. The system is simply not designed to meet the self-identified and evolving needs of today's learners and employers in a realistic time-frame - needs that should redefine adult basic education.

VALUE's Social Change Initiative calls for a consumer-driven redesign of the current adult basic education system in this country. It must be redesigned to help many times more learners achieve their personal goals faster using 21st Century approaches. Funding must be dramatically increased to pay for this system modernization and expansion. And finally, adult literacy policy must not be dealt with in isolation; it must be integrated with other federal policies and programs.

The Model T car, silent movies, and vaudeville have long been outdated, yet the approach to adult literacy we use in this country today is still based on assumptions and practices created before the first Model T rolled off the assembly line, and long before the advent of silent movies. We need to modernize this system. Many of the recommendations that follow are based on the promising practices of exceptional providers in the adult education and vocational rehabilitation fields that VALUE asserts should be implemented throughout a modern, innovative system.

First, adult learners should be taught to use modern technology for reading and writing.

The adult basic education system must take advantage of tremendous advances in technology.

The current system uses the computer mostly as a tool for drill and practice and largely ignores

its potential to speed up the process of meeting learner goals. Technology that reads, writes, and translates exists today for the blind, the deaf, diplomats and international business people. With widespread access to knowledge through technology, adult learners can more rapidly gain the skills and knowledge needed to be productive members of the global workforce.

UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization defines literacy as:

“the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning to enable an individual to achieve his or her goals, to develop his or her knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in the wider society.”

The focus of the current system in the U.S. is on reading and writing. The focus should be on accessing and processing information independently, as stated in the UNESCO definition of literacy. The Act should require the use of technology, such as what is currently used in the blind and low-vision community to enable adult learners to access and process information independently much sooner than they are able to in the current system.

Using modern technology to help them read and write, adult learners could turn their attention to employment and training information much sooner than if they had to first master reading and writing. It can take three to five years for an adult learner to reach the point of being able to access information by first learning to read. Using technology, an adult learner can learn to access information in three to five months.

VALUE is not asserting that learning to read and write is no longer important. We’re simply saying that it doesn’t have to hold back adult learners from employment-related information and training when modern technology provides access. Essentially, what we’re suggesting is replacing the current adult education and literacy approach with one that looks much more like the vocational rehabilitation model. This would shorten the time required for WIA Title II activities and make it fit better with the Title I timeframe.

Those of us in the field promoting this new approach have coined the term “virtual literacy” to describe it. Virtual literacy merely is attempting to allow for the literacy assistive technologies currently being used successfully in the disability community be used throughout the adult literacy and job training communities. Because of the major technological breakthroughs, the ability to make almost anyone “virtually literate” is currently available, affordable, and gaining wide acceptability in the general public. In fact, Congress recently added a free software download to their website to enable anyone with limited literacy capacity to be able to be “read” -- through hearing -- all Congressional materials.

Text-to-speech and speech-to-text dictation software is widely available for personal computers. There are even very good software programs available for free. And continually, new and improved handheld devices are being introduced that make virtual literacy an increasingly viable mobile option. With us here today we have representatives from virtual literacy pilot programs at Drake and Michigan State Universities who will be doing a hands-on demonstration this afternoon for Senate HELP Committee staff.

Let me just add that with my learning disability, it is still a tortuous exercise for me to write. Consequently, I dictate messages to my interns. For longer documents like this testimony, I discuss with writers what I want to say and then edit what they draft for me. I have not yet learned to use the technology that I'm telling you about. However, I am confident that when I do learn to use it, my productivity will increase significantly because I will be able to do the writing myself.

The adoption of this "virtual literacy" approach will require a significant investment, as much or more in professional development as in hardware and software. However, while data does not yet exist to back me up, I think the cost/benefit ratio will be compelling as the significantly reduced time required per student will make it possible for many, many more adult learners to get the help they need.

Second, make case management a core service.

Currently the Act does not require the provision of case management. Due to the complexity of the lives of adult learners, case management should be required as a core activity. Case managers should help adult learners deal with problems in their lives that prevent them from pursuing their education and provide career guidance, making it possible for them to make informed decisions and prepare for future education, a job and/or job training.

Case managers are needed both in adult literacy programs and in One-Stop centers. In One-Stops, many adults with low literacy skills find it very difficult, even intimidating, to navigate the one-stop system of job, education, and training services. In some cases, low-literate adults get bumped around from program to program, not knowing how to describe their situation in a way that will help someone determine what services they really need and in what order. Skilled case managers could help them understand what is available and successfully get the services they need and get them in the order they need them. This would not only improve the customer experience, it would also increase the overall efficiency of the system.

The situation is similar in adult literacy programs. Many adult learners have personal difficulties, sometimes related to their low-literacy skills, but sometimes unrelated, which distract or prevent them from focusing on their adult basic education. Literacy-related low self-esteem tends to make a bad situation worse. This is one of the prime reasons adult learners drop out of a program. A case manager could help learners get the help they need so they don't have to drop out.

In some exemplary programs, having a current or former adult learner take on this role enhances the rapport between client and staff.

Adult learners' transition from the literacy program to further education, employment, or job training is another area in which a case manager is essential. Figuring out what your options are, what the requirements are for each option, what next steps to take, and how to prepare yourself for the transition can be a bewildering set of tasks; I know it was for me at one point. In exemplary programs, a case manager makes this process less intimidating and enhances the chances for success. The critical policy point here is that the Act must permit and encourage case management as a core service, not relegate it to an ancillary or administrative function.

Third, adult education instruction should include workplace essential skills.

Currently the Act doesn't address the much needed soft skills including customer/client service; critical thinking/problem solving; cultural sensitivity; leadership; negotiation; personal responsibility; teamwork; and time-management are essential for the success of all workers. Teaching these skills should be a core responsibility of all adult literacy providers.

These skills are needed by those of us who pursue higher education as well as those who take part in job training. The adult literacy program is the place to teach them because many of us work one or more jobs while we are in a literacy program or we get a job without taking part in job training. These skills help us do better in our literacy programs too.

Fourth, measure performance differently.

Learner goal achievement must be the primary measure of success for a redesigned adult basic education system. The current system uses standardized test scores as a primary measure of success and consequently, the program focus is on successful test-taking rather than goal attainment. Adult learners want to focus on their own goals, not on artificial goals generated for local programs by "experts." The use of measures such as standardized test scores are inconsistent with a consumer-driven system.

The current system treats learners not as adults with time-sensitive real-life goals, with job and family responsibilities, with knowledge and experience acquired over a lifetime, and with the burden of shame and stigma associated with low literacy, but it subjects them to a traditional fixed drill-and-practice classroom model more appropriate for working with children. So few seek help and many that do drop out because this approach is completely inappropriate given the complexities of adult lives in the 21st Century.

Adult education instruction should be customized to help individual adult learners meet their self-defined personal goals. One size does not fit all. Learners stay in programs as long as they see the connection between instruction and their personal goals. Adult education instruction

should be based on a "wealth model" rather on a "deficit model." The wealth model, which is more appropriate for adults, helps learners realize their own strengths and knowledge and use them as a basis for further learning; this builds better self-esteem. Zeroing in and focusing on what adult learners can't do may be appropriate in child education, but in adults it reinforces already low self-esteem.

Fifth, share leadership with adult learners.

One of VALUE's core beliefs is that most successful for-profit companies rely on consumer input and feedback to improve their products and services; the adult literacy system should do this too. Adult learners should be part of the planning, delivery, and supervision of adult education services and research at every level. As recipients of adult education services, adult learners have a unique, important, and all-too-often overlooked perspective regarding what does and does not work.

The consumer, the adult learner, isn't asked for input or feedback about adult literacy policies and programs in any systematic way. Low-literate adults are sometimes viewed as ignorant - at best, people to be pitied and taken care of; at worst, people to be looked down on and dismissed. As one of our members stated:

"When people find out we have low literacy skills, some suddenly start to treat us differently - they talk down to us and show less respect for our opinions, knowledge, and experience than they did before they found out."

Currently, the Act does not require that adult learners be specifically included in program operation and governance at local, state, and national levels. The system should be much more consumer-driven. The Act should specifically require the integration adult learners into program operation and governance at all levels; our perspective is as important as that of literacy professionals and bureaucrats and must be heard.

During the upcoming intergovernmental conference on adult education to be held later this month in Brazil, UNESCO will consider an International Adult Learners' Charter. In addition to affirming adult literacy as a human right, this charter states that adult learners have the right to a central role in policy development for adult and lifelong learning systems. UNESCO officials anticipate approval of this charter.

I should add that by and large the community-based program sector of the adult literacy field has been the most willing to embrace an advisory role, and in many programs a governance role for adult learners.

Sixth, change participation requirements.

The adult education system should take into consideration that adult learners have job and family responsibilities that limit their ability to participate in adult literacy activities. The adult education system must be flexible so learners can fit instruction into their busy lives. Because research shows that learners make greater learning gains with increased participation, participation requirements were established for publicly funded programs. While they may be fine for adults without significant job or family responsibilities, they are unrealistic and inappropriate for many others.

Consequently, these participation requirements serve as a barrier to some who seek help and cause others to drop out when they find they just can't fit the required level of participation into their busy lives. In such cases, dropping out or opting not to participate is a choice they shouldn't have to make, especially since it is based on research that fails to take into consideration the real-life demands of adults. Additionally, a significant number of community-based adult literacy programs forego public funding because they primarily serve adult learners who can't meet the participation requirements. The Act should expressly permit the flexibility needed so these programs don't have to forego public funding in order to serve adult learners with one or more jobs and family responsibilities.

Personal shame and societal stigma of low-literacy also present significant barriers to participation in adult literacy programs. Adult education policy and outreach efforts should be designed to address these barriers.

Lastly, encourage adult basic education and job training activities to be done together.

For many low-literate adults, the amount of time required to master reading and writing skills under WIA Title II doesn't fit well with the employment and training timeframe under WIA Title I or under TANF, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. This incompatibility has resulted in far too few opportunities for adults with low literacy skills to participate in job training and literacy instruction at the same time.

Research shows that learners can make gains more rapidly if education and training are done together. In his 1997 book entitled *Functional Context Education: Making Learning Relevant*, Dr. Thomas G. Sticht wrote:

“Functional Context Education is designed to generate swift gains in reading and math skills by teaching academics in the context of learning and performing a given task. For instance, an electrician in training may learn math concepts while she fixes a malfunctioning device. Or a maintenance worker may improve his reading skills while learning to use job-specific manuals, specifications, and forms. Military researchers have found that

compared with general literacy instruction, this kind of learning-to-do instruction generates robust and rapid gains in job-related literacy that endure over time.”

By having the adult basic education system adopt a “virtual literacy” approach, the incompatibility between Title I and Title II timeframes can be minimized. As a result, more bridge programs combining adult literacy and job training can be offered, which benefits both adult learners and the system as a whole.

In conclusion, the adult basic education system must not be viewed as a second chance system for people who failed earlier in life. For many like me, it was the inadequacies of the K-12 system that failed us. Rather, a strong adult basic education system must be viewed as an essential part of the prescription for our nation’s economic health and prosperity. Adult literacy is an essential public policy concern; it must not be dealt with in isolation, but rather integrated with other policies and programs. The success of policies and programs dealing with early childhood education, health care, welfare, retraining the American workforce, and maintaining a strong military with capable recruits are all linked to having an adult population with better literacy skills. We cannot continue to waste the potential of the current adult population by devoting so little attention and resource to the adult basic education system. With all federal and state funding combined, less than 4% of adults with low literacy skills are in adult basic education programs and many programs have long waiting lists. And we can not well serve the current adult population by attempting to simply replicate the existing traditional fixed drill-and-practice classroom model.

Thank you for this opportunity to talk with you today. I look forward to working closely with you and your staff in creating a modern and appropriate adult literacy system that is truly designed to meet the 21st century needs of adult learners.