

Written Testimony submitted by

Kevin G. Smith

Executive Director

Literacy New York, Inc.

to the

SubCommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness

The Honorable Ruben Hinojosa, Chair

New Innovations and Best Practices Under the Workforce Investment Act

Thursday, February 26, 2009



777 Maryvale Drive  
Buffalo, New York 14225  
716-631-5282/ 716-631-0657/ ksmith1@aol.com

Written Testimony submitted by  
Kevin G. Smith  
Executive Director  
Literacy New York, Inc.  
to the  
SubCommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness  
The Honorable Ruben Hinojosa, Chair  
New Innovations and Best Practices Under the Workforce Investment Act  
Thursday, February 26, 2009

Current economic conditions notwithstanding, America's supply of adequately skilled workers does not meet its demand. It is essential to consider what skills are available versus those needed to support and sustain national, state and local economic development strategies. As the nation succeeds in building an economic recovery, including job creation, the skills gap will impede progress. Simply, citizens who lack basic literacy and language skills will continue to draw from rather than contribute to efforts to create economic stability and growth. We must invest in the nation's human infrastructure, as we do the nation's capital infrastructure.

When discussing the issue of adult literacy, advocates point to studies indicating the millions who function below basic levels. The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) and more recent National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports chronicle the issue indicating that 30 million or 14% of adults possess below basic skills. In my home state of New York that number is 22%, although in Congressman Bishop's district it is the same as the national figure – where one in seven or 160,034 working age individuals have below basic skills. The simplest information processing tasks are challenging. Another 63 million or 29% of adults function at levels consider to be basic. These adults may become challenged as accessing, understanding and utilizing information at work becomes more sophisticated. In many cases, these are native born people who have attended public school but, for a variety of reasons, not gained the desired abilities. For many others, they are immigrants who have come to the United States with varying level of academic exposure and success but do not speak English well enough to fully engage in social and economic

activities. It is very important for the Committee to consider the wide scope of adults that may benefit by improved literacy and language skills to support their training and employment goals when crafting legislation that facilitates the development of a more highly and appropriately skilled workforce.

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 correctly tied the adult training and education systems together. The law suggests levels of coordination and cooperation. Many in the adult education community remain concerned about dedicating our work strictly on workforce development. Nonetheless, it is clear that supporting incumbent and unemployed workers with the skills they need to acquire and retain employment is critical. Honestly, while there are examples of successful local initiatives, much more needs to be done to research and implement more efficient and effective practices that seamlessly merge WIA Title I and Title II functions.

As has already been testified, the need for adult education services far exceeds the capacity of the current system to deliver. You know that of the 88 to 93 million Americans who have basic or below basic skills fewer than 3 million are getting help. Some, notably the National Commission on Adult Literacy (NCAL) have called for a new approach and investment supporting a massive expansion of the adult education system. There is no doubt that we will need to enhance efforts to serve more, better; not just to help people to help themselves but to maximize the country's investment in economic recovery as well.

However, before we consider how much it would cost to serve 3 or 5 or 17 million more adults, it is important to consider reengineering the current system in to one that can and will efficiently and effectively assess the compatibility of the skills available in the nation, state, community and individual to specifically meet the demand for skills in these respective current and future economies. Obviously, difficult decisions will have to be made regarding how many may be served how well in order to expedite development of the skills needed to fill the jobs available and being created. Analogous to plans to focus on sector employment we should consider the literacy and language skills needed to fill jobs in those sectors and concentrate and coordinate our efforts

accordingly. The current system does not function in that manner. Why? ... because it lacks the capacity to do so, capacity that includes human and fiscal resources, flexibility, local authority and relative parity. The result is two distinct systems still operating as if they had no related purpose when, in fact, a large percentage of Title II students have employment goals and Title I customers need literacy or language improvement in order to avail and benefit by One-Stop services.

In order to further explain the problems faced by adults seeking skill development as needed to become and remain employed it may be useful to consider further the range of learning needs that the adult education system is expected to address and then, therefore, why coordination is so difficult. As you may know, the National Reporting System (NRS), WIA Title II reporting matrix has categorizes learners as Basic Literacy or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). Further, these two populations are divided into six levels each. A Level I Basic Literacy student tests in at reading below the second grade reading level while a Level 6 student demonstrates abilities between grade 11 and 12. For the ESOL population the six levels also create a scale of English language competency that is an equally broad spectrum of abilities. Simply, the adult education system accommodates learners the equivalent of a K -12 system for Basic Literacy students and a K-12 system for ESOL students. However, it must be considered, that the adult education system is working, for the most part, with the students who have not achieved success as school-aged learners and who present with multiple literacy-related issues including poverty, unemployment, incarceration, substance & alcohol abuse, chronic health problems and so on.

The system responding to this continuum of need includes secondary, post-secondary, community-based, faith-based, library and volunteer-based sectors. These programs are all competing for scant resources needed to serve the learning needs of this large, complex population. The very limited resources are spread very thin. State and local contributions vary widely. The level of investment from program to program varies dramatically as does the quantity and quality of service. Community colleges seeking to serve Level 5&6 students compete with community-based programs better suited to serving Level 1&2. State Education Agencies (SEAs) compelled to get

funds to secondary or post-secondary institutions finesse the competitive process despite 'direct & equitable' statutory language. Programs are pitted against each other rather than creating a greater sum because there is such great need and so few resources and strategic planning.

On the WIA Title 1 side of the equation, years of deep funding cuts have diminished services and capacity. As in any economy, less is managed by reduction of costs. Fewer are served and, all things being equal, those who cost the least to serve are targeted. Programs that do not have fully developed partnerships are relegated to selecting those closest to job placement. Others have created structures and partnership that facilitate the disparity of readiness to work and availability of employment. This capacity should not be a local anomaly based on governmental structure or leadership. Rather, it must be systematic.

Despite the problems very good work is being accomplished within and between the WIA Title I and Title II systems. Here are few examples of what is or could be happening to improve the effort:

*Suffolk County, New York*

In Suffolk County, New York the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and One-Stop have been structured in a way that allows for public assistance recipients lacking the skill needed for employment to be served accordingly and avoiding inappropriate placement and rating for the One-Stop operator. They have developed a strong referral system with the Long Island Regional Adult Education Network (RAEN) that brokers services to a range of all sectors of adult education programs by learning need and service availability.

Despite this strong local solution to the structural and funding issues they face, they recognize that things could work better. Statutory authority to seek and secure the literacy and language skill development required to place customers in the jobs that are available would be greatly facilitated by making placement into educational services a positive outcome. Reinstating the multiple variable regression model from the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) would allow One-Stop Career Centers to address more difficult-to-serve populations without sacrificing their performance

and accompanying incentive funding in this difficult fiscal climate. Veteran operators report that under the old system a weighted-scale permitted them to identify and serve adults with more serious and difficult employment barriers.

*Allegany County, New York*

In Allegany County, New York, a rural county in the western part of the state, a partnership between the WIB, the two major employers and the local volunteer literacy program has found great success. Dresser Rand, one of the largest global suppliers of rotating equipment solutions and a large regional Dairy, which together employ a significant percentage of the working population, have each established minimum skill levels for employment consideration. If a perspective employee enters the system lacking the skills needed to pass the employer-administered test, they are referred to Literacy West for a six-week course that has produced results highly satisfactory to both employers. The CEO of Dresser Rand has indicated that this flow of skilled workers and the support of the workforce and adult education communities has figured prominently in their decision to remain and continue to invest in upstate New York.

Again, improvements can and should be considered. As in Suffolk County, New York there is a lack of clarity regarding protocol and procedure in referring customers from the One-Stop to the adult education provider. Two distinct data systems that do not communicate or share information further hinder efficiency. The inability to obtain read only, much less limited data entry access, clearance for the adult education partner in Title Is data system forces multiple and more expensive steps.

The One Stops data system provides Literacy West with the employment status they need to complete their NRS data reporting required by New York State for all adult education funding. This is the only adult education program in the state that I am aware of that has this access. All others have used less reliable, more costly post-program survey strategies to track the employment outcome they are responsible to report. This cooperation and capacity, coupled with the

exemplary educational gain results they produced, made them the most highly ranked adult education program in the state last year.

### *Conflicting Outcome Expectations*

Another concept for consideration is retooling our adult education system to specifically deliver workplace skills. Currently, there is a growing conflict between demonstrating educational gain outcomes as indicated by norm-referenced tests and soft skill instruction and job protocols.

Employers consistently report wanting employees who show up on time and work well with others but adult education is forced to focus on academic services to realize educational gain outcomes.

There has simply got to be a way to modify service outcome expectations to support and report the delivery of services that effectively produce job acquisition and retention results and that encourage the continuation of literacy and language development while workers are employed.

### *The Volunteer Asset*

The adult education system is unique for its significant volunteer-based service response. The nation should be proud of this history and heritage, yet many view it as evidence of the system's relative insignificance and value. I encourage this Committee to consider, especially with the renewed Presidential call to voluntary services, the worth and role of the volunteer sector.

Currently relegated to serving the most in need with the least resources, the volunteer-based programs have persisted in organizing fundamental neighbor-helping-neighbor efforts across the country. Better supported and utilized as additional support to group instruction services or as job coach/ community mentors to high risk new hires are a couple of ways of considering to better utilize the rich volunteer resource already serving in adult education.

The nation and states need to sort out how many adults can be served how well with the resources made available under WIA Title II. In Policies to Promote Adult Education and Postsecondary Alignment Julie Strawn, CLASP Senior Policy Analyst, reported that the national average investment from all sources per student, per year is only \$645. Not surprisingly, she went on to report that

few adult education students go on to postsecondary education and a very high percentage of those who do not complete. This analysis speaks clearly for the need to create a continuum of adult education services in each state and as required in law. The nation must strategically engage the assets it has available to serve the full spectrum of Basic Literacy and ESOL learning needs, and use the resources made available to develop and coordinate the same.

Both WIA systems have atrophied significantly in recent years and are in desperate need of reengineering and rebuilding. Together they represent an essential aspect of our country's infrastructure and capacity to close the skills gap between our nation's workforce and business needs to compete in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century global economy.