



Adult Education Pays... For Educational Attainment

On November 13, 2013, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released *Time for US to Reskill? What the [PIAAC] Survey of Adult Skills Says*.ⁱ The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) was a survey of 5,000 adults aged 16-65 in the U.S. and 24 participating countries. The survey assessed literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments.ⁱⁱ

The OECD PIAAC Survey report found that low basic literacy skills “are more common in the US than on average across countries.” One in six adults has low literacy skills, and one in three has low numeracy skills.ⁱⁱⁱ

Low basic skills occur “despite a relatively high level of education. Among comparison countries the US had one of the smallest proportions of adults with less than high school education, and one of the largest with more than high school”.^{iv} But for US adults with a high school education or less, “performance is worse, on average, than [for] their international counterparts.” The higher level of education of US adults “is outweighed by the weaker basic skills” of adults functioning at the high school level or less, “so overall, US adult skills do not compare well internationally.”^v

The OECD report continued: “Basic skills and educational attainment are mutually reinforcing, so those with higher levels of education tend to have better basic skills”.^{vi} Data collected solely for the US “show that adults with less education – and therefore often with low skills – are less likely to pursue basic skills training.”^{vii}

“Education is tied to skills,” the OECD report concluded, “and US weaknesses in basic skills, particularly among young adults, are in significant part the product of initial schooling... The US has not succeeded in improving the education (and therefore skills) level of younger cohorts, as compared with older cohorts.”^{viii}

The OECD report also pointed to adult education as an incentive: “Stronger basic skills tend to be rewarded by better chances of employment and higher wages, even when taking educational attainment into account.”^{ix}

Independent research evidence “supports the common sense view that skills are maintained and developed through practice.” Practicing basic skills tends to help keep skills sharp and even to improve them.^x

More than 1 million students in the US drop out of high school every year, according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.^{xi}

According to the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE), “Adult education serves adults 16 years of age and older who are no longer in school and are functioning below the high school completion level. Services include foundation skills (reading, mathematics, and English) coupled with college and career readiness skills leading to adult secondary education and transitioning to post-

secondary. Local programs are conducted by combinations of public schools, community-based organizations, and community colleges.”^{xii}

“Adult education programs are successful in meeting their performance measures as identified in the federal law and negotiated each year with the US Department of Education. Those measures include: educational gains in reading, math, and/or English; completion of secondary education; transition to postsecondary education; employment; and retaining employment.”^{xiii}

Adult education “improves and expands the nation’s available pool of human capital by helping motivated but under educated people achieve gainful employment in today’s increasingly high-tech and global job market, and at a far lower cost per learner when compared to either K-12 or higher education,” observed a recent policy paper.^{xiv}

An NCSDAE survey found 72% of adult education programs across 50 states confirmed waiting lists. “Many of these adults who went to public schools that prepared them for 20th century jobs find themselves ill equipped to compete in the 21st century job market.”^{xv}

Among those low-skilled adults who did not participate in adult education and training, 18% (3 million adults) said they would have liked to participate.^{xvi} About half of adult learners in adult education programs with the goal of entering postsecondary education or other training did so between 2006-7 and 2011-12; the percent of all adult learners entering postsecondary education from adult education programs is small, less than 5% annually, but signs of growth are present in some regions of the USA.^{xvii} Participation rates in adult education and training (at any level) are higher in the US than in most countries, according to the OECD report, although low-skilled adults are less likely to participate; the report found only two in five low-skilled adults [PIAAC survey takers] participated in the past year.^{xviii}

“Paving the road from adult education to a college credential,” concluded a 2012 Working Poor Families policy brief, involves “expanding opportunity for low-skilled adults”, and the “most powerful tool for accomplishing this goal” is the adult education system.^{xix}

ⁱ http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill_9789264204904-en

ⁱⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/publications.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD: *Time for US To Reskill?* p. 11.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid, pp. 28-29.

^{vi} Ibid, p. 28.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 25.

^{viii} Ibid, p. 33.

^{ix} Ibid, p. 12.

^x Ibid, p. 31.

^{xi} <http://all4ed.org/>

^{xii} National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, Fact Sheet Career Pathways to Jobs with Family Sustaining Incomes Through Adult Education and Literacy Services, http://www.ncsdae.org/need_impact_success.html

^{xiii} National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, *Adult Education Services: The Success, The Impact, and the Need*, <http://www.ncsdae.org/BlueBook20130402.pdf>, p. 1.

^{xiv} McGraw-Hill Research Foundation, *The Return on Investment from Adult Education and Training*, www.mcgraw-hillresearchfoundation.org, p. 2

^{xv} McGraw-Hill Research Foundation, p. 8.

^{xvi} OECD, pp. 36-37.

^{xvii} Research Allies for Lifelong Learning (2012), http://www.researchallies.org/Crossing_the_Bridge_7.html

^{xviii} OECD, pp. 36-37.

^{xix} Hilliard (2012), *Graduating to College*, http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/policybrief-summer2012_2.pdf, pp. 1 and 11.