



## Access and Inclusion: Adult Education and Literacy Priorities for 2021 and Beyond

*By the National Coalition for Literacy and the Open Door Collective*

With its theme of “build back better,” the incoming Biden-Harris administration has named economic recovery and racial equity among its top priorities—and a spectrum of advocacy organizations have noted that “education holds the key to economic revitalization and must play a central role in addressing systemic inequities” (Education Strategy Group, 2020). An adult career and technical education system that promotes attainment of postsecondary credentials, including certificates with labor market value and associate’s and bachelor’s degrees, is the foundation for a society that ensures access to family-sustaining employment and the skills required for full participation in community life for all of its members.

However, if building back better is to include all individuals in American society, it must also open opportunities for those adults who are not yet ready to participate fully in postsecondary credentialing and education programs. That is, it must include **adult basic education**, which gives youth and adults ages 16 and older essential skills in literacy, numeracy, English language acquisition, and digital technology use within the context of high school equivalency, workforce preparation, family literacy, and transition-to-employment and postsecondary education programming (Minnesota State, 2020; OCTAE, 2020; Open Door Collective, 2020). In the United States, 19 percent of adults are profoundly in need of literacy skills development and 29 percent lack critical numeracy skills (NCES, 2018). These adults are overrepresented in communities of color—the same communities that have been most adversely affected by the COVID-induced health and economic challenges that are rooted in systemic inequity.

Adult basic education plays a critical role in a community’s overall education continuum, and all adults must have equitable access to educational opportunity. We offer three overarching recommendations for a powerful federal investment in adult education and literacy that will enable all of America’s people to participate in building back better.

1. **Integrate adult basic education** into an intentionally coordinated lifelong formal education and training system that spans childhood through adult years and works at every level to disconnect the far-too-predictable links between race/ethnicity, English language proficiency, socioeconomic status, and education outcomes. A fully integrated education structure would provide clear, well-articulated paths and benchmarks for development of the skills and

knowledge needed to obtain and retain quality employment, support family wellbeing, and participate fully in their communities, and it would make these services available to all adults who need them. Many of the pieces of such a system are already in place, and the field has good models of how coordination among those pieces can work. Federal investment in a sustained effort to bring the system together in locally appropriate ways throughout the country will increase the effectiveness of all of its parts.

**2. Implement national infrastructure projects** that will empower adults to participate in adult basic education, career development, and postsecondary programs.

- *Digital inclusion.* Lack of access to high-speed internet connections, home computers, and digital skills training disproportionately affects low-income adults and members of minority communities. As adult basic education has transitioned almost completely to online instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, programs have discovered that this type of delivery can mitigate some of the traditional barriers to participation, including transportation and child care. However, major obstacles remain for adults who do not have the digital access or skills to take advantage on online learning. A federal commitment to extend high-speed broadband access to all regions of the country, provide the basic digital skills training that will enable all adults to take advantage of that access, and provide professional development for adult educators in the most effective ways of using online tools for education will transform educational opportunity for adults and children in low-income and minority communities.
- *Community infrastructure.* Inadequate access to transportation, stable and affordable housing, child care, and health care is characteristic of communities experiencing systemic inequity, and these deficiencies are among the top reasons cited for nonparticipation in in-person adult education (Patterson, 2018). Conversely, consistent participation in adult education correlates highly with achievement of educational goals and increased earnings potential (Morgan, Waite, & Diecuch, 2017). “To engage in education and training for a family supporting job, a person’s basic needs – food, housing, medical care, and childcare – must be met. That means our nation’s safety net programs have a transformative opportunity: To help millions of individuals who can and want to train for a family-sustaining career but need supports along the way” (National Skills Coalition, 2020). By increasing adults’ ability to persist in pursuing educational goals, a federal investment in infrastructure will build community strength and resilience, directly addressing the effects of systemic inequity (Open Door Collective, 2020).

**3. Reorient adult basic education accountability and outcomes reporting** toward a competency-based approach that promotes and demonstrates progress toward the full spectrum of adults’ learning and self-development objectives. The accountability system currently in place through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) allows only for outcome measures related to increased scores on standardized tests, attainment of high school equivalency, entry into/completion of workforce training or postsecondary education,

and entry into the workforce. These measures reflect some of the important goals and motivations of adult basic education participants, but they ignore other essential ones, such as “assisting their children with schoolwork, understanding and addressing their own health issues or those of family members, or participating in civic affairs” (Reder, 2020). Adult basic education programs have extensive insight into the variety of outcomes that their adult learners are able to achieve, but the limits imposed by the current compliance-focused system prevent them from encouraging pursuit of or reporting on those outcomes. A federal initiative that decouples accountability from a narrow focus on assessment and encourages a broader perspective on results would more equitably and appropriately support the potential of adult basic education programs and the learners they serve. A multiple measures, competency-based approach that is valued by all stakeholders, valid, equitable, and aligned with the goals of the individual and the community will modernize the adult education accountability system to meet its larger role in advancing an inclusive recovery.

The National Coalition for Literacy and the Open Door Collective appreciate the opportunity to provide input on education to the Biden transition team. We offer these recommendations in hopes that they will help the incoming administration address educational inequities in our country. We welcome opportunities to work with new and continuing Education Department staff to promote educational equity for all.

### **About the Submitters**

The ***National Coalition for Literacy*** (NCL) is an alliance of the leading national and regional organizations dedicated to advancing adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the United States. NCL’s mission is to advance adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the United States by increasing public awareness of the need to increase programs and funding; by promoting effective public policy; and by serving as an authoritative resource on national adult education issues. Through collaborative efforts with other advocacy organizations and individuals, NCL ensures that leaders and legislators at the national level make informed decisions about policies, regulations, and funding for adult education and family literacy. We envision a nation in which all adults are able to fulfill their potential and meet their goals through accessing high quality adult education and literacy services provided by an integrated and well-developed system.

The ***Open Door Collective*** (ODC) is dedicated to reshaping U.S. society to have dramatically less poverty and economic inequality and more civic engagement and participation in all our society has to offer. As professionals working in adult education, social services and poverty reduction, ODC members believe that adult basic skills education and lifelong learning programs can help open the doors of opportunity for everyone to healthier, more prosperous and satisfying lives. ODC members have expertise in connecting adult basic skills education to employment and training, health care, and family and social services. We believe that helping all adults to

acquire and use English language, basic literacy, numeracy, high school equivalency, college readiness, and technology skills will improve everyone's economic outcomes, broaden social participation and move us much closer to the kind of society in which we all want to live.

## References

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