

The National Commission on Adult Literacy (The Commission)

Reach Higher, America (2008)

and

The National Coalition for Literacy (NCL)

2009 Workforce Investment Act Recommendations

Comparison and Analysis

Introduction

In June 2008, the National Commission on Adult Literacy (The Commission) issued *Reach Higher, America*. The report contains The Commission's analysis of US adult education and workforce skills programs and recommendations for improving them. The National Coalition for Literacy issued the following statement about the report in a press release dated as of June 28, 2008: *The Coalition commends the members of the Commission for their tremendous effort and scholarship that have contributed to this document and the Dollar General Literacy Foundation for its commitment to furthering adult literacy in the U.S. and support of the Commission.*

The National Coalition for Literacy included the recommendations of the National Commission on Adult Literacy report, *Reach Higher America*, along with the input of its members, in the development of its 2009 Workforce Investment Act Recommendations. These recommendations were issued in February.¹

The purpose of this white paper is to compare and analyze The Commission and NCL recommendations.

I. Summary Recommendations

The National Commission on Adult Literacy makes the following summary recommendations in its report:

1. **RECOMMENDATION:** *The National Commission on Adult Literacy calls on Congress to transform the adult education and literacy system into an adult education and workforce skills system with the capacity to effectively serve 20 million adults annually by the year 2020.*
2. **RECOMMENDATION:** *The Commission calls on Congress and state governments to make postsecondary and workforce readiness the new mission of the adult education and workforce skills system.*²

¹ National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America Overcoming Crisis in the US Workforce*, 2008. Retrieved April 5, 2009 from: <http://www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org/report.html>. ; National Coalition for Literacy, *111th Congress Reauthorization of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act Recommendations of the National Coalition for Literacy*, and *WIA Side-by-side Analysis*, 2009. Retrieved April 5, 2009 from: <http://www.national-coalition-literacy.org/analysis.html>. All words in *italics* are quoted from the reports.

² THE COMMISSION, p. iii

The National Coalition for Literacy supports the recommendation to significantly increase federal and state appropriations for adult basic education and literacy in order to expand the capacity of the system to serve more adult students. NCL agrees with The Commission's finding that at least 30 million, and arguably 93 million³, adults would benefit from additional literacy instruction, and that the system today can only serve approximately 3 million adults⁴ through combined federal, state, and philanthropic funding.

NCL does not support the recommendation to make postsecondary and workforce readiness the singular mission of the system. The system today serves the educational goals of all adults, regardless of their motivation to acquire or improve their literacy skills. For example, although The Commission report addresses demographic shifts indicating that the number of adults aged 65 and older in the U.S. is increasing⁵, and the evidence is that these adults have among the lowest literacy skills of any demographic group, the report does not demonstrate how an instructional focus on workforce readiness will assist these individuals. Similarly, although The Commission report discusses *evidence accumulated over decades that improving the educational levels of mothers also improves children's ability to learn and succeed in school*⁶, it does not demonstrate how this shift in focus will address the instructional needs of mothers and other caregivers who may not be interested in work skills development.

NCL supports the following Purposes for reauthorization of Title II of the 1998 Workforce Investment Act (WIA), the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)⁷:

Adult basic education and literacy are fundamental human rights. It is the purpose of this title to create a partnership among the federal government, states, and localities to provide, on a voluntary basis, a continuum of adult literacy and basic services and instructional opportunities for adults to improve their basic reading, writing, speaking, math, computer, and English language skills through program in their communities to: 1. Assist adults, including the least educated and most in need, to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency; 2. Assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency; and 3. Assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education.

In its report, The Commission asserts in part that *America's workforce is compromised by an adult education system that is obsolete and ill-equipped to meet 21st Century needs*⁸. NCL calls for reform of certain aspects of the system, but not necessarily for *transformation* of those aspects that are effective today. Specifically, NCL notes that a recent federal OMB audit of AEFLA resulted in a favorable rating, one of only four out of 93 Department of Education programs to achieve this distinction.⁹

³ THE COMMISSION, p. 3

⁴ THE COMMISSION, p. ii

⁵ THE COMMISSION, p. 7

⁶ THE COMMISSION, p.5

⁷ NCL, WIA Side-by-side Analysis, p.1

⁸ THE COMMISSION, p. 1

⁹ National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, *Commendation and Response to The National Commission on Adult Literacy Report*, June 27, 2008, p.3

II. Action Items

The Commission recommends the following action steps:¹⁰

ACTION 1: *Congress should pass and the President should sign a comprehensive new Adult Education and Economic Growth Act to overhaul and expand adult education and workforce skills training.*

NCL has made its legislative recommendations to authorizing staff in the Senate and House taking into account language in the existing 1998 WIA, Title II, and has not proposed new legislation for consideration.

ACTION 2: *The new Act should focus service on the needs of the unemployed; low-skilled incumbent workers; immigrants with limited or no English; parents or caregivers with low basic skills; incarcerated adults; high school dropouts; and high school graduates not ready for college.*

NCL supports the Purposes of AEFLA, stated above.

ACTION 3: *The new Act should redefine the fundamentals of adult education, set program goals, and offer incentives and strategies to increase learner access.*

NCL supports the Purposes of AEFLA stated above.

ACTION 4: *Strong national leadership must be provided to develop and deploy technology-assisted learning, including the creation of a national Web portal for adult learners.*

NCL supports the role of federal, state, and local leadership in developing and implementing technology-assisted adult education instructional and program management strategies but has not taken a position on the creation of a *national web portal* per se.¹¹

ACTION 5: *For the new Act to be successful, Congress must provide significant support for a national, independent research and development program.*

NCL has called for the reinstatement of a federally funded research center on adult education, including family literacy, to be housed under the Institution for Education Sciences (as was the case until it was discontinued in 2007) or under the direction of the National Institute for Literacy.¹²

¹⁰ THE COMMISSION, p. iii-vi

¹¹ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 20

¹² NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 38

ACTION 6: *States should engage in comprehensive planning and establish goals to improve educational attainment and workforce skills of their adults in light of their economic development goals.*

NCL supports the role of the states in comprehensive planning and goal setting across Titles I of WIA and II of WIA.¹³

ACTION 7: *The states should legislate authority for coordination and alignment of systems consistent with their postsecondary education, workforce, and economic development goals. In some cases, a cross-agency planning body already exists; in others it may need to be created. In some states, a cabinet level position might be either established or strengthened. Whatever the approach, the involvement of the governor's office is essential.*

NCL supports the role of the states in comprehensive planning and goal setting across Titles I and II of WIA; however, NCL also recognizes that due to existing state law, it may not be feasible in all states for the Governor to play a decisive role in such planning and goal-setting. Leadership structures must be flexible enough to accommodate state law.¹⁴

ACTION 8: *Under the Act, new federal funds should be awarded to states following federal approval of a comprehensive adult education plan that each state develops and updates periodically for federal review. These funds should be available for awards within the first year of passage of the new Act. States should be "held harmless" at current federal adult education grant levels.*

NCL supports similar goals in its AEFLA recommendations.¹⁵

ACTION 9: *States must invest in the skills of their workers so that increased productivity helps offset the effect of low-cost labor furnished by developing countries. Business must be an active partner in this effort.*

NCL supports state investment in the skills of workers, and agrees that business can, and should be, an active partner in this effort¹⁶. NCL has not taken a position on the role of low-cost imported labor on the U.S. economy; however, NCL supports efforts to assist immigrants to improve their English language proficiency and to achieve their citizenship goals¹⁷.

¹³ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 23-24

¹⁴ National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, *Commendation and Response to The National Commission on Adult Literacy Report*, June 27, 2008, p. 4

¹⁵ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 23-26

¹⁶ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 24, 29, 43

¹⁷ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 38, 47, 50

III. Other Key Points

The Commission has called for the creation of a *new national superagency membership organization, with philanthropic backing, to provide leadership, a platform for collaboration, and an effective voice for disparate and vital nonprofit entities.*¹⁸

NCL is a nonprofit membership organization whose mission is to: *advance adult education, family literacy, and English language acquisition in the U.S. by increasing public awareness for the need to increase funding and programs; promoting effective public policy; and serving as an authoritative resource for the field on national adult education issues.* NCL actively recruits philanthropic leaders, government agencies, nonprofit literacy organizations, education “think tanks”, and individuals with an active interest in adult and family literacy to its membership.¹⁹ NCL opposes the creation of a new adult literacy *superagency* unless its mission and purpose is clearly differentiated from that of its own.

The Commission asserts that *high quality instruction is essential to foster student retention and produce successful outcomes... Few states require that adult education teachers show mastery of the specialized knowledge and skills needed to teach adults.*²⁰ The Commission calls for increased professional development opportunities and credentialing for adult educators.

NCL supports an increase in the allowable allocation of federal funds under AEFLA that states can spend on professional development from the current maximum of 12.5% to 15%.²¹ Additionally, NCL asserts that professional development opportunities should be extended to all adult educators, including volunteers, in recognition of the valuable role that they play in the system.²²

The Commission asserts that *community colleges, in particular, must be positioned to move to the forefront as a service provider, and they must be funded to do so.*²³

NCL respects the role that community colleges play in the adult education system. However, NCL recognizes the diversity of adult education and literacy providers and supports funding for all “*Eligible Providers of demonstrated effectiveness*” as defined in AEFLA, as follows:²⁴

- *A local education agency*
- *A community-based organization*
- *A volunteer literacy organization*
- *An institution of higher education*
- *A public or private nonprofit agency*
- *A library*
- *A public housing authority*

¹⁸ THE COMMISSION, p. 28

¹⁹ NCL, <http://www.national-coalition-literacy.org/about.html>

²⁰ THE COMMISSION, p. 13

²¹ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 18

²² NCL, p. 19-20

²³ THE COMMISSION, p. 16

²⁴ NCL, WIA Side-by-side, p. 3

- *A nonprofit agency not described above*
- *A consortium or coalition of agencies, organizations, institutions, libraries or authorities as described*

The Commission recommends allocating *federal funds for ESL to states by a formula based on need – as measured by percentage of adults by state who speak English less than very well.*²⁵

NCL supports this recommendation, provided that any additional funding arising from such a formula were added to the existing state allocation and would not cause the state to shift funding from basic literacy students to ESL students. Although NCL agrees with The Commission's findings that a growing demand for ESL instruction exists and that approximately 46% percent of all adult basic education and literacy enrollments are for ESL instruction,²⁶ it is also true that a majority of programs serving basic literacy programs also report waiting lists.²⁷ Demand for instruction in both categories exceeds supply. The solution to the problem is additional funding across the board.

²⁵ THE COMMISSION, p. 20

²⁶ THE COMMISSION, p. 10

²⁷ National Council of State Directors of Adult Education, *Commendation and Response to The National Commission on Adult Literacy Report*, June 27, 2008, p. 9