

First 100-Day Plan for Adult Literacy in the U.S.

The Problem

Thirty million adults in the U.S. can barely read and write; an additional 63 million have significant gaps in basic literacy skills. This data, gathered through the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), describes a crisis in American life that affects virtually every aspect of our economy. It affects the ability of American workers to find and keep jobs that pay living wages and the ability of the United States to compete globally.

A disproportionate number of those who are unemployed, lack health insurance, and require public assistance are adults who struggle with daily tasks that involve reading, writing, and math. Research shows that adult education and skills development are key factors in addressing societal issues. When their literacy skills improve, adult learners find jobs, get better jobs, and take better care of their health and the health of their families.

Adult low literacy is connected to every socioeconomic problem this country faces today.

FACT: More than half of the inmates in our state and federal prisons are illiterate. Inmates who receive basic literacy instruction during or after incarceration are less likely to return to prison. The average cost of housing a prison inmate is \$25,000 a year. It costs \$500 - \$800 for one year of adult literacy instruction.

FACT: One-half of the two million immigrants entering the U.S. each year are not literate in their own language. This makes it more difficult for them to gain the English-speaking skills they need to find jobs, advance to better jobs, and maintain safety on the job. Programs that provide these individuals with English-as-a-second-language instruction need support if they are to keep pace with the demand for their services.

FACT: Annual Medicare costs for adults with low literacy skills are more than four times greater than costs for others; medication errors, long hospital stays, and overuse of emergency rooms attributed to low literacy cost as much as \$238 billion a year — enough to fund health insurance for every uninsured individual in the U.S.

FACT: Basic literacy, GED preparation, and English-as-a-second-language services are provided by community-based organizations (CBOs) and adult basic education (ABE) programs. More than 90 percent of these programs have waiting lists for classroom space or tutors. People who seek out literacy services understand that they can change their lives and their families' lives by improving their reading, writing, math, and computer skills. They took that first important step by contacting a program — only to be told that it will be months before they can begin.

FACT: Current federal appropriations to adult literacy and basic education programs, combined with state matching dollars and philanthropic donations, make it possible for only 3 million adults to receive instruction.

The Solution

Adult literacy and basic education is a fundamental human right. ProLiteracy calls for the following 100-Day Plan:

1. Include Adult Literacy Funding in Economic Stimulus Package.

ProLiteracy calls for \$50 million in funding to be made available to adult literacy and basic education programs

Rationale: Millions of adults in the U.S. need to improve their English reading, writing, math, and computer skills to find jobs that pay a living wage and to keep those jobs. This is true during times of economic stability. It is especially critical during today's economic crisis. Without the assistance of local adult literacy and basic education programs, these individuals likely will need unemployment benefits and other forms of public assistance, adding to the drain on already-strapped local communities. Federal support for these programs now will bring a significant return on investment.

2. Reauthorize and Update the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1999 (AEFLA, also known as Workforce Investment Act Title II).

ProLiteracy calls for an Act that includes program requirements that are flexible enough to meet the varying capacities of local literacy and adult basic education programs.

Rationale: The largest source of federal funding for adult education and literacy, AEFLA, has not been reauthorized since 2003. Reauthorization creates an opportunity to review the Act and to make adjustments necessary to keep its provisions relevant to the needs of individuals currently using the system.

3. Fund a national study on the scope and size of the adult literacy problem and develop a national plan to reduce adult illiteracy in the United States.

ProLiteracy calls for up-to-date information regarding the status of adult illiteracy for the federal government, business and industry, the K-12 education system, adult literacy and basic education programs, institutions of higher learning, and the American public.

Rationale: The most recent assessment of adult literacy in the United States was completed in 2003; results were released in December 2005. The "small area estimates" component of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) has yet to be released, despite repeated requests from ProLiteracy and local programs.

The NAAL data was two years old at the time of its release; the "latest" information available regarding the English reading skills of America's adults now is more than five years old. The state, county, and city level literacy data contained in the small area estimates is important to local programs' efforts in seeking public and private funding. When this information is finally released, it too will be more than five years old.

It is not enough that we collect information on this national issue. Data on its own has little value. It is the plan we make and the actions we take based on the data that will make the difference in our efforts to address illiteracy in the U.S. It is this essential step that has been missing from prior data collection efforts; it must be included in future studies.

4. Establish an Undersecretary of Adult Literacy, elevating the assistant secretary for vocational and adult education. Create an education/adult literacy "czar" to be part of the White House domestic policy council. Appoint a nationally recognized expert in adult literacy to the directorship of National Institute for Literacy (NIFL).

ProLiteracy calls for the issue of adult illiteracy to receive the attention of the federal government that the size and scope of the problem deserves.

Rationale: Creating an adult literacy “czar” and establishing an Undersecretary for Adult Literacy will elevate awareness and emphasize the importance of the issue within the federal government. It also will promote discussion of adult literacy in other areas where it is a factor but has not been addressed adequately; for example, health care, poverty alleviation, employment and workforce skills, and crime prevention.

Congress’s original intent in establishing the National Institute for Literacy was to provide a focus on adult literacy and education that it felt was lacking in the Education Department. Over the past several years, however, the Institute’s focus has shifted from that original mandate. It is imperative that the Institute’s focus be returned to its original purpose.

5. The existing adult literacy and basic education system should be the primary service provider for English-as-a-second-language instruction in any immigration reform program President-elect Barack Obama considers.

ProLiteracy calls for additional federal funding to the current system to support a significant increased demand for services.

Rationale: The existing adult literacy and basic education system already is well-established as a primary source of English-as-a-second-language instruction in communities across the country. Teachers and volunteer tutors have received appropriate training for working with adults.

6. Create research and demonstration projects on new and innovative community-based adult literacy and basic education practices, using leadership grants and other mechanisms available under AEFLA.

ProLiteracy calls for program models that will help dedicated teachers, trainers, and tutors to translate research findings into effective classroom practice.

Rationale: The adult literacy and basic education field is heavily populated by part-time teachers who are certified in K-12 education and volunteers who receive considerable training before becoming tutors. Program directors require technical assistance to enable them to build program capacity and to design innovative, state-of-the-art programs. We call on President-elect Obama to use leadership grants and other mechanisms already available under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act to conduct research that identifies best practices. The federal government should use this information to create program models, pilot these programs in the field, and then make them available.