

Forum: The Power of Partnership

Introduction to the Forum

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I joined our field in the 1980s as an adult basic education program director and then as the executive director of an adult literacy education professional development center, because I saw our field's potential to help low-literate adults meet their learning goals, escape from poverty, get family-sustaining wages or salaries, bring up children who love reading, writing and numeracy/mathematics, and be productive members of their communities and our society. In many ways, I have seen our field become more sophisticated and accountable, but I have also seen a shift away from serving the lowest levels of learners, those who may not have as a goal getting a job or on a career pathway or preparing for post-secondary education. I have seen public funding focus on jobs, careers, or postsecondary education at the expense of native speakers of English who need the most basic levels of literacy, and of immigrants who need the most basic levels of English speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. I have also seen evidence showing that the major source of public funding for adult education and literacy, the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity and Act Title II, *Adult Education and Family Literacy*, now serves well under 2% of the adults in need of basic education.¹ These concerns urgently need to be met by a broader and more ambitious vision for whom our field should be serving, significantly increased funding, and with specific examples of how those needs can best be addressed.

One promising way to reach more adult learners is with partnerships between adult (foundational) education programs (i.e. adult basic literacy, adult basic education, adult secondary education, and English for adult immigrants and refugees) and other service providers such as senior services, parks and recreation services, digital inclusion services, health and medical services, affordable housing providers, battered women's services, public libraries, and other organizations whose primary

mission is not education, but whose adult clients, patients, residents, patrons and others need basic education services in order to meet their needs and goals. A "go to where adult learners are" in addition to a "come to us" model can benefit the field, its programs, and the communities our field serves. The three articles that follow are examples of some of the ways that our field has supported partnerships that meet that wider range of learners' goals.

The first article in this Forum provides a detailed account of lessons learned by the City of Philadelphia's Office of Children and Families, as they set out to systematically implement a "go to the learners" digital literacy instruction model. The authors provide a brief history of the City's past involvement in community computer skills delivery to adults, how they tried to rebuild that capacity after the Covid-19 pandemic, and lessons learned from more recent efforts that focused on learners' articulated needs, and meeting those needs in the trusted community spaces in which the learners were already comfortable. It describes partnerships for meeting these needs with older adult centers, and parks and recreation centers. With the advent of several new pieces of federal legislation, including multi-year, state-provided funding beginning in 2024 through the federal Digital Equity Act, experience from projects like this one are especially helpful to city and town administrators, and adult (foundational) educators who want to benefit from this new funding to address the digital literacy needs of adults and young adults in their communities.

The Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy in Houston, Texas, has developed a comprehensive plan for adult literacy that builds participation of a wide range of public and private organizations for adult literacy education partnerships. In addition to long-time and new adult

literacy providers in the Houston metropolitan area, it encourages and supports a wider community-based approach that includes delivery of services in other venues, e.g., in digital equity and inclusion programs, financial institutions, faith-based organizations, health care services, for City of Houston employees, and in the City's public library department as well as in workforce preparation programs. Although cities such as Philadelphia, Boston, Nashville, and others have developed city-based adult literacy initiatives, Houston's blueprint is the best current example of a comprehensive city-based effort to support adult education ecosystem partnerships. This article describes five kinds of partnerships and provides more information on the work of the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy. The effort in Houston is a good example of current work in building a collective impact model in adult literacy education.

Portland (Oregon) State University's Department of Applied Linguistics has a partnership with an affordable housing project for low-income seniors that since the mid-1990s has served older adult immigrants who need English language learning. The Community ESL Project enables

ESL Master's degree candidate teachers-in-training to provide English classes to these adults in locations that are convenient and that enable them to attend despite their physical challenges. It enables older adult immigrants to have English lessons focused on their needs and enables their English teachers-in training to experience supervised instruction in authentic adult immigrant teaching and learning settings.

All three partnerships described here are examples of "go to where the learners are." Such an approach needs to be more than offering the same class that is currently available at an adult (foundational) education program in a new location but with the same curriculum and in the same way. Instead, and there are good examples of this in these articles, with this approach it needs to begin with specific learners' needs, purposes and goals, and the curriculum and instruction need to be customized to them. As the articles describe, these kinds of partnerships involve more planning and maintenance time, especially between partner organizations. There are also different kinds of challenges in maintaining these partnerships over time, including achieving stable funding.

Endnotes

- 1 According to the National Reporting System for Adult Education, in program year 2001- 2002 2,788,218 adult education and literacy learners were served, the highest annual number in the last two decades. (Source: NRS National Reporting System for Adult Education, an official website of the United States government <https://nrs.ed.gov/rt/reports/aggregate>). Since then, there has been a steady decline in the number of adult learners served with these funds provided by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Title II. In program year 2019-2020, the year before the pandemic when enrollment dropped even more precipitately, only **1,113,571** adult learners were served through Title II federal funds. By 2020, nearly two decades later, 40% fewer adults were served by the major source of federal public funding in the U.S. The latest U.S. data show that the current need for adult literacy and education services is 48 million people. Of this 48 million, WIOA Title II now annually serves under 2% of those in need.