

Forum: Creating a Better Future*(Part 1 of 3)*

Rescuing and Rebuilding U.S. Adult Foundational Education: We Can and Must Do Both

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About 4 years ago, with the help of 10 colleagues and ProLiteracy, I published *A Different Way: Reorienting Adult Education Toward Democracy and Social Justice*. The writing occurred when many aspects of U.S. life were in turmoil: “an out-of-control pandemic, a troubled presidential and congressional election, growing hunger and poverty, shuttered educational institutions, and—on January 6, 2021—a violent attack on the U.S. Congress and our democratic system” (Jurmo, April 2021, p. 5). Though we might wish otherwise, here we are 4 years later, again facing a number of very serious challenges, not only as a nation but now also as an adult foundational education (AFE) field. In a nutshell: a new federal administration has been dismantling AFE and other supports that the learners and communities we serve have relied on.

This article proposes strategies that we—as AFE advocates—can use to both respond to our current situation and support what I believe is an overdue transition to more effective ways of doing AFE. These strategies draw on ideas and models developed over decades. They are offered with a “can-do” spirit, grounded in both an informed understanding of AFE’s strengths and limitations and a vision for a better future.

Strategies to Adapt

A Different Way identified strategies adult educators have used to help learners better manage social, economic, and other challenges and opportunities they encounter. Learners are helped to mitigate and navigate around challenges and possibly eliminate those challenges and create alternative ways of participating in life roles. In subsequent publications (Jurmo, 2023a, 2023b, 2025a, 2025b), I expanded the concept of “learners as problem-

solvers” to propose a community-oriented approach to AFE. This model would equip not only learners but other community stakeholders and AFE providers to more effectively manage opportunities and challenges they face. This article now adapts democratic problem-solving strategies from the above documents to propose actions that AFE advocates and partners can now take to achieve two goals: respond to current damages and threats to AFE and lay the groundwork for a transition to an AFE for our future as a field and nation.

Five considerations:

1. It is natural to assume that we now—in 2025—need to focus primarily on responding to current damages and threats to AFE resulting from changed federal policies. However, I strongly believe we also need to simultaneously be planning how to transition to more effective and better sustained models of AFE. Doing the latter will give us a vision, resources, and focus to use when doing the former. This dual approach will require flexibility and efficiency, with work groups focusing on particular tasks within a larger, coordinated effort.
2. We should recognize that not everyone will want to use this dual-focus, team-based approach. Those who do should go ahead and develop their own version of this process at whatever level (national, state, local, program) or segment of AFE they work in. This will require diplomacy in locations accustomed to top-down decision-making as their *modus operandi*. Those doing this work should welcome others to join their efforts as appropriate.
3. We need to be realistic about how much of this can be done without funding for staff or other

expenses. Previous similar collaborative planning and advocacy efforts were often funded by private-sector (e.g., foundations) and government sources (e.g., federal agencies, governors' and mayors' offices). It might be necessary for groups to start with limited resources and then, as their plans and proposals gel, reach out to relevant sources for financial and political support to put their ideas to work.

4. The strategies and activities below need not be invented from scratch or in isolation. There already exist a number of resources (e.g., advocacy groups and materials) that can be learned from and worked with. In particular, we should learn from how our field previously responded to the September 11, 2001, attacks (Literacy Assistance Center, Fall 2002) and COVID-19 (Belzer et al., 2022).
5. Those doing this work should be guided by their own version of the guidelines outlined in this article's final section.

Goal 1: Respond to Current Damages and Threats

Strategy 1.a: Assemble SAFE Teams

In May 2025, the National Coalition for Literacy initiated a strategic planning process when federal supports for AFE and other opportunities for the populations served by AFE were being dismantled. Other national-level AFE-related networks (e.g., COABE, TESOL, Migration Policy Institute, ALL IN, National Skills Coalition) were likewise developing resources (updates, advocacy materials, activities) related to federal policy shifts. It will be important for those and other national-level organizations to individually and collectively continue such "emergency response" work. Similar strategizing is already underway—or might now be considered—by (a) state- and local-level AFE organizations and coalitions; (b) segments of the field, such as researchers, professional developers, and programs serving particular learner populations (e.g., individuals who are immigrants, refugees, or U.S.-born; currently- or formerly-incarcerated; parents; job-seekers or incumbent workers); (c) other stakeholder groups with active or potential interest in working with AFE, such as employers and labor unions; K-12 schools and family services; public libraries; providers of services related to public health, corrections and public safety, digital access, disabilities,

housing, environmental sustainability.

At whatever level, these AFE emergency response groups (which we will here refer to as save adult foundational education [SAFE] teams) might invite current or potential AFE supporters to get involved as planners, "worker-bees" (carrying out particular tasks), information-providers (responding to surveys, tracking down documents), or providers of financial and/or in-kind resources. Members should be individuals or organizations who recognize AFE's importance, understand the significant threats to federal supports for AFE and other opportunities for adult learners, and want to strengthen AFE in the short and longer terms.

Strategy 1.b: Assess Current Challenges and Strengths

Each SAFE team should move quickly to assess (a) immediate challenges to existing AFE and other supports for the adult learners they serve and (b) strengths (assets) that AFE can now adapt to respond to such challenges. This assessment might adapt procedures already being used by other AFE groups. (The National Coalition for Literacy conducted a SWOT analysis of the AFE field in its May 2025 meeting.)

While conditions will have evolved by the time this article is published in later 2025, here are some examples of AFE challenges and strengths as of May 2025:

Challenges. Options include (a) federal supports for AFE are being dismantled: U.S. Department of Education adult education staff have been reduced, its LINC online resource center curtailed, and research and professional development contracts (e.g., the Teaching Skills that Matter in Adult Education and PIAAC projects) ended and (b) other federally-funded services used by adult learners and their communities have also been reduced or are at risk. These include public libraries, AmeriCorps, and supports for refugees and immigrants, public health, employment, disabilities, environmental protections, among others.

Strengths. The AFE field has experienced professionals, networks, stakeholder partners, funders, and resource materials (e.g., advocacy messages, program evaluations). AFE advocates can tap into those resources when carrying out the strategies below.

Strategy 1.c.: Mitigate and Avoid Challenges.

For each challenge, the SAFE Team should identify actions that might be taken to mitigate or avoid that challenge's impacts. Those actions might be performed by individual AFE programs or networks; community stakeholders (e.g., employers, health care providers, libraries, or foundations) which have partnered with AFE; and/or individuals (adult educators, learners, or other community members) who understand AFE's importance. For example,

- a state- or local-level AFE coalition might make it a priority to learn from, join, and support existing national-level AFE advocacy efforts and encourage their members to do the same;
- a state- or local-level AFE coalition might undertake advocacy activities to preserve existing state and local supports for AFE while also generating new funding for programs or special AFE initiatives. Multi-partner projects would develop AFE models customized to selected learner populations and social and economic needs (e.g., workplace AFE for incumbent workers, health or family literacy, correctional education, democratic participation, or environmental education);
- state- and local-level AFE coalitions might provide guidance to help local AFE providers deal with actual and potential resource reductions by seeking alternative financial or in-kind supports; creating new fee-for-service models for workers in local companies or unions; or reducing costs by paring or streamlining direct, in-person services to learners, shifting to online instruction, or using volunteers to assist paid staff. (The Urban Alliance for Adult Literacy website profiles urban AFE networks exploring alternative funding sources); or
- to respond to actual or potential closing of online collections of AFE resources, researchers and university-based libraries might create new archives that preserve and make those materials accessible (Adult Foundational Education Digital Library Group, 2023).

Strategy 1.d: Eliminate Challenges

Where appropriate and feasible, a SAFE Team might support efforts to reduce or eliminate challenges identified in Strategy 1.b. For example, if a revised policy

or a funding reduction is undermining AFE capacities, can that policy or reduction be changed or reversed altogether? Might administrators, policy makers, or legislators who have influence over those negative changes be shown how AFE can support important policy goals and guided to reverse those changes? Or might those responsible be replaced, if necessary?

Goal 2: Facilitate Transition to a Better Future**Strategy 2.a: Assemble AFE Renewal Task Forces**

To achieve Goal 2, adapt a process similar to that used for Strategy 1.a. to create what we will here call AFE renewal task forces. These too could be organized at national, state, local, and program levels and within various AFE field segments and stakeholder groups. As their name implies, these task Forces would develop information and recommendations to strengthen AFE as a resource for the future of local communities, states, and the nation (Jurmo, 2025b). They would operate parallel to and possibly overlap with the more-immediately-focused SAFE teams.

Strategy 2.b.: Become Familiar with Previous AFE Improvement Initiatives

These future-focused task forces can benefit significantly from lessons learned in previous efforts to reform AFE overall and various aspects thereof (e.g., workplace and health literacy, technologies, public awareness, partnership-building). (See Chisman, 2002; Jurmo, 2023b; 2025a; National Commission on Adult Literacy, 2008; Stein, 2000).

Strategy 2.c: Assess AFE's Longer-Term Strengths and Limitations

AFE renewal task forces should begin by assessing the AFE field's longer-term strengths and limitations, building on Strategy 1.b.'s more-immediate assessment. This longer-term assessment would—objectively and frankly—help AFE advocates better understand the current status of key AFE components, including:

1. Who AFE serves or might serve (both learners and other community stakeholders);
2. Intended and actual outcomes/benefits of AFE for learners and communities;
3. Other stakeholders who can benefit from and collaborate with AFE;

4. Relevance and efficiency of services AFE provides on its own and with other partners;
5. Availability of AFE providers and the supports they need (e.g., professional training, mentoring, equipment, research, opportunities for family-sustaining employment);
6. Quantity, accessibility, and efficiency of financial and other supports AFE receives from various sources;
7. Improvements that existing AFE services need;
8. Potential supporters of new efforts to strengthen AFE.

Strategy 2.d.: Envision AFE that Better Serves More Individuals and Communities

Based on this broader assessment, task forces might now develop a vision for community-level AFE service systems that more effectively serve more learners and community stakeholders. Task forces should pay special attention to social and economic concerns of governmental and non-governmental policy makers and funders they currently or might work with by identifying: Who are the learner populations and other community stakeholders who might benefit from and contribute to AFE?

What should be the goals of AFE for those learners and stakeholders? More specifically, how might AFE help learners manage particular challenges and opportunities in their work, family, and civic roles? How might AFE also help other important stakeholders (e.g., employers, unions, health care providers, K-12 schools and family services, libraries, correctional and public safety agencies) perform their roles in building stronger communities?

What needs to be in place for AFE—sometimes in partnership with other stakeholders—to provide relevant, high-quality services to more learners and other community stakeholders? What instructional and administrative staff, procedures, and material infrastructure are needed? And what financial and in-kind supports do those components require?

What public- and private-sector sources (e.g., federal agencies, governors' or mayors' offices, foundations, other stakeholders) might support one or more AFE improvement initiatives?

Strategy 2.e.: Identify Actions to Transition to More Effective AFE

AFE renewal task forces can now identify actions that might be taken—over time—to create AFE models aligned with the above vision and with local community needs and strengths. A state or municipality might, for example, support local-level demonstration projects focused on particular needs (e.g., family, health, or financial literacy; preparation for jobs in relevant industries) of selected learner populations (e.g., parents of school-age children, people with disabilities, currently- and/or formerly-incarcerated individuals, young people without secondary credentials, older job changers, people seeking employment in key industry clusters).

Such customized demonstration projects would be supported by partnerships with relevant stakeholders, special funding, and professional development (training, resource collections, community-of-practice networks). Projects would be continuously evaluated and improved—perhaps by existing or new AFE Resource Centers—producing documentation to guide further projects and investments.

Strategy 2.f.: Secure Supports for AFE Improvement Initiatives

AFE Renewal Task Forces should also work with relevant stakeholder groups and public and private funders to advocate for and secure supports for the above improvement initiatives. Again, the aim would be to build more effective AFE system models that better equip more individuals and community partners to manage opportunities and challenges ahead.

Guidelines to Keep Us on Track

The above overview is admittedly brief. A more-detailed guidebook (and related webinars, other professional development, and demonstration projects) could help individuals and organizations implement these ideas in ways relevant to their contexts.

Regardless of the particulars of the teams, task forces, and contexts involved, such efforts require guidelines to keep them on track. Each group should define guidelines that work for them. Options include: being prepared (with an understanding of how AFE previously developed new



models and responded to emergencies, an openness to new ideas and information, realistic expectations, and systematic work plans); a willingness to humbly, respectfully, and diplomatically work with others (which can sometimes be difficult); and courage, a thick skin, and perseverance.

AFE has faced major challenges in the past. Now we can and must do so again.

Note: Thanks to David J. Rosen for his input on this and many of the other documents cited here.

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