

Forum: Responses to Stephen Reder's Article*(Part 3 of 4)*

Performance vs. Learning: My Takeaways from Lifelong Learning in Adult Education

Jackson Lilly, Adult Education, Technical College System of Georgia

Reder (2026) offers an important reminder that the benefits of adult education extend beyond our immediate interactions with a student. As a state staff member responsible for WIOA Title II reporting, I am acutely aware of how limiting some primary performance measures are at capturing adult education's full long-term impact. There are several conclusions that both confirmed experiences with my state's system and expanded my understanding of the issues and solutions.

I can attest to the difficulties states and local programs face in assigning unique identifiers for students across program years and providers. No matter how many data checks and processes we create, it is a constant effort to maintain clean longitudinal data on student progress. Seeing this data from another state is eye-opening, with almost half of students who participated in both multiple programs and multiple program years needing to be de-duplicated to demonstrate learning progress.

The point on the need to improve data systems and their ability to track students across providers and program years is critical for reasons beyond just accurate reporting. Dr. Reder points out that appropriately shared records increase our ability to serve students' needs. For instance, as we continue to prioritize contextualized learning alongside skills training through workplace literacy and integrated education and training, there could be more continuity in an individual's learning pathway. A student is unlikely to know that they previously attended classes with another WIOA funded provider in the state. There would be great benefit to knowing that the student previously worked toward a particular career pathway by obtaining introductory credentials, specialized instruction, or micro credentials.

Another important lesson is in the results identifying that students with longer, measurable skill gain periods have lower initial test gains and longer gain periods. Present National Reporting System (NRS) performance metrics likely favor students who learn and progress quickly, possibly due to their previous years of schooling or how recently they were enrolled. While these measures are obviously important for accountability purposes, they may disincentivize supporting students who were already left behind in the K-12 system due to a slower learning pace or an unidentified learning disability. We often hear from our providers about the difficulty in balancing these short-term performance targets with their charge to serve all students at every level. The measurable skills gain rate as currently defined would imply that, in many places, less than half of students make no progress at all. This 12-year longitudinal study suggests otherwise that many of those students without NRS "measurable skills gains" are demonstrating long-term improvements in their educational functioning level.

Dr. Reder outlines the implications of this in his research. The shorter-term "pipeline" skill development metrics are so established in many WIOA Title II funded adult education programs that they likely impact the student's experience and ability to learn. Recruitment and testing may be prioritized around arbitrary reporting deadlines rather than times that are more responsive to student needs. The analysis using gain days and gain hours, independent of program years or providers, offers a helpful assessment of adult education's impact independent of the strict guidelines for reporting a measurable skill gain.

While not the focus of the research, it further identifies an issue with retention in adult education, finding that a

significant number of students had a zero-time span of participation and less than 12 total instructional hours. Adult education students have a uniquely high number of outside responsibilities, as well as significant time and resource constraints. State policies for student attendance and scheduling could be more conducive to long-term students with frequent breaks in attendance, considering these students are still able to make gains in the long run.

While I'm conscious of the large data gaps, I would be interested in further research on the student goals element. For instance, how many of the short time span students stopped out because they quickly met their educational or career goal? If this occurred prior to a post-testing period, measuring testing gains would not be relevant or possible. It was particularly interesting to me that only one in five long-term students ever take a GED® test. States and local programs have varying policies and practices that dictate when it is recommended for a student to move to testing on the

GED, which could impact the timing of a long-term student's first GED attempt.

I would also be interested in the long-term skill gains of students who begin as English language learners and transition into ABE or ASE. For many of the same reasons laid out in the research, the NRS reporting structure gives us very little visibility into the long-term learning pathways of students who test out of ESL and start in ABE. In states with larger proportions of ESL participation, these students could be some of the students with the longest participation periods.

With the large body of evidence surrounding education and literacy's effect on our social and economic well-being, Dr. Reder's research offers an important perspective on the impact of adult education. Many states understandably prioritize shorter term and measurable educational progress, and there is work to be done continuing to quantify and communicate the unique long-term education gains of adult education students.

References

Reder, S. (2026). Lifelong learning in adult education: A 12-year longitudinal study of participation and skill growth. *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*, 8(2), 5-28. <https://doi.org/10.35847/SReder.8.2.5>