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ABSTRACT

For the past 18 years, Federal policy for adult literacy has been contained principally in the Adult Education Act of 1966 and in the administration of the program it supports. When this Act was passed, few programs for adult literacy existed in the states; thus, the Act authorized 90 percent Federal funding in order to encourage states to develop adult literacy education programs. At the same time, however, the legislation clearly required states to bear the responsibility for the education of all adults. The 1978 Amendments to the Adult Education Act contained some significant new policies. These Amendments required that services to adults be expanded throughout the public and private sector, instead of relying so heavily on the public schools as such programs had done previously. The Act is expected to be reauthorized as it stands. The Reagan Administration created the Adult Literacy Initiative in September 1983, putting a national priority on a minimal education level for all adults. The Adult Literacy Initiative promotes decentralized and pluralistic approaches to expanding literacy services, while the Adult Education Act has supported centralized state planning. Tensions raised by these two approaches will have to be resolved. For the future, it is recommended that a new national organization be generated to support adult learning generally and adult literacy and basic skills specifically. This organization should be sustained by private sector resources and remain responsive to adult learning needs in an information society. (KC)

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ENSURING EFFECTIVE ADULT LITERACY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES at THE FEDERAL AND STATE LEVELS

BY

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ENSURING EFFECTIVE ADULT LITERACY POLICIES AND PROCEDURES AT THE FEDERAL AND STATE LEVELS

INTRODUCTION

For the past eighteen years, Federal policy for adult literacy has been principally contained in the Adult Education Act of 1966 and in the administration of the program it supports. Other Acts, such as the Vocational Education Act and the Job Training and Partnership Act and its antecedents, have also authorized basic skills and literacy instruction; however, they have done so within a context of economic development and job training. As such, these authorities support literacy as an ancillary service.

The same is true for adult literacy instruction supported directly by the military services. The military provides literacy and basic skills instruction when it finds these are needed to maintain a viable military organization. Literacy instruction is viewed as remediation required to meet the mission of defense. The military services would much prefer to recruit persons fully competent in basic skills and cannot provide literacy instruction apart from the military mission. It cannot, for example, provide these services to dependents of military even though it could be argued that to do so might improve the overall effectiveness of the nation.

Thus, even though historically the amount of literacy and basic skills training provided by federally supported occupational training programs and the military has probably exceeded that provided under the Adult Education Act, for purposes

of this paper, these programs can be ignored. They have little direct bearing on explicit Federal policy in support of adult literacy.

CURRENT FEDERAL POLICY

The objective of this section is to identify some major policies which are clear in the Adult Education Act and its administrative history. Rather than attempt to comprehensively list all policies, the emphasis will be on selectively discussing those which appear to be most relevant to the future of adult literacy.

Background

Education is constitutionally the responsibility of the States. Thus, Federal laws and policies should be designed to assist the States in meeting this responsibility. At the time the Adult Education Act and its antecedent Title IIB of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 became law, there were virtually no adult basic education programs generally available to citizens of any State. This reality accounted for several policies in the original legislation, especially that of authorizing Federal funds to support 90 percent of programs on a statewide basis and the absence of any limit on the amount allowed for State administration costs. These policies were explicitly conceived as aiding States in developing an adult basic education capacity that did not exist.

While a limitation of 5 percent was subsequently placed on State administrative allowances, the 90 percent support for programs remains as do other features which support the capacity-building character of the legislation.

A second set of policies requires the States to actively plan and work toward providing adult education programs for all adults in the State. Section 306(b)(1) requires the State to "set forth a program ... to carry out the purposes ... with respect to all segments of the adult population." In the Statement of Purpose, Section 302, programs are to "enable all adults to acquire basic skills necessary to function in society...."

These provisions make explicit the responsibility of the State to provide adult basic (and adult secondary) education for all adults. No less significant is the requirement that program outputs be measured in terms of skills necessary to function in society.

The 1978 Amendments to the Adult Education Act contained some significant new policies. While the capacity-building character of the legislation remained unchanged as did the requirement that the States take responsibility for providing services to all adults, some explicit processes were prescribed as to how the States were to go about providing services to all. These amendments were based on evaluation data that indicated services were not being directed to certain segments of the adult population because of the heavy reliance upon the public school system. The amendments required that services "be significantly expanded through the use of agencies, institutions, and organizations other than the public school systems, such as business, labor unions, libraries, ... and community organizations" (Section 306(b)(7). The amendments went on to require that these organizations, and many others, be "involved in the development of the plan and ... continue to be involved in carrying out the plan" Section 306(b)(8).

Applicants eligible to receive funds from the State have always been public and private non-profit agencies. However, actual recipients have always been dominated by local education agencies and community colleges. In support of the 1978 requirement to expand the program through organizations other than the public school systems, Federal regulations implementing this requirement mandate a competitive process:

> In evaluating the quality of applications, a State educational agency shall employ a competitive process that considers the best possible combination of agencies, organizations, and institutions. (166a.51)

The Current Assessment

As this paper is being prepared, the Adult Education Act is again due for reauthorization by the Congress. This cycle triggers a review of policies and procedures by both the administrative and legislative Branches. Aided by regional hearings conducted by the National Advisory Council on Adult Education, the Administration's review of practices and procedures since the 1978 Amendments indicates that no major changes are needed. Brief hearings conducted in the Senate support this position and it appears the Act may be re-authorized without major changes. No changes are indicated in the State Planning process nor in major policies already described. An increase in national projects authority and a modest authority to collect data are the most significant additions to the Federal administrative provisions. An adjustment in the funding formula for State appropriations promises to shift slightly more Federal money to smaller States. However, the overall review of the policies and procedures contained in the Act confirms that they are effective.

THE ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE

When President Reagan announced the Adult Literacy Initiative on September 7, 1983, for the first time in the history of the United States a minimal education level for all adults became a national priority. Thomas Jefferson cited the importance of an educated populace to the success of Democracy, but the Adult Literacy Initiative marks the first time a minimal education level for adults was endorsed.

While the Adult Literacy Initiative is clearly a response of the current Administration, promoting adult literacy has concomitantly emerged as a bipartisan concern of the Congress. In September 1982, the Subcommittee on Postsecondary Education of the House Committee on Education and Labor initiated hearings on adult illiteracy. Secretary Terrell H. Bell appeared as the first witness followed by public and private representatives knowledgeable about the problem. Informal discussions followed among Secretary Bell, Subcommittee Chairman Paul Simon of Illinois, and other witnesses. These were aided by Mrs. Barbara Bush who independently became aware of the significance of the problem and began to promote a new level of understanding among citizen groups she addressed. The specific strategies and activities supported by Secretary Bell's Adult Literacy Initiative, to a considerable extent, are an outgrowth of positive interaction between the current Administration and the Congress.

The Adult Literacy Initiative exists at this time because of the convergence of three phenomena:

1. a new level of awareness of the extent and seriousness of the problem of adult illiteracy;

2. an assessment of State and local capacity to support an expanded adult literacy effort; and

3. a commitment to the potential inherent in a public, private, voluntary coalition to promote adult literacy.

The specific activities that currently make up the Adult Literacy Initiative primarily flow from phenomena two and three. The demand for literacy programs is significantly higher than current capacity can supply. Nevertheless, State and local capacity to train, manage and support an expanded effort is high if the additional resources can be generated and coordinated. The current Administration's commitment to greater involvement of the voluntary and private sectors in effecting solutions to national problems is the driving principle behind most of the activities of the Initiative.

EMERGING POLICY AND PROCEDURAL ISSUES

The convergence of the Adult Education Act with the Adult Literacy Initiative poses new policy and procedural tensions. The Adult Education Act explicitly requires the States to discharge their responsibilities to provide literacy and basic education for adults. Consistent with this, it prescribes a series of procedures in which the traditional State roles of centralized planning and decision making are endorsed and reinforced. The current assessment of the effectiveness of this experience is highly positive, so much so that no significant revisions are proposed.

The Adult Literacy Initiative, on the other hand, promotes decentralized and pluralistic approaches to expanding literacy services. Organized voluntary

literacy efforts in the United States have a history of some forty years, but the numbers served annually by them is well under 100,000. While private agencies -- especially Church-related ones--have a much longer history, the number of adults served is not impressive in relation to the effort needed. Understandably, while the call for voluntary and private resources to expand adult literacy services is viewed by some as long-awaited help on the way, by many others it is regarded as naive and unrealistic. Reactions of adult literacy administrators range from genuine support to predictable cynicism.

Resolving the new policy and procedural tensions is the major challenge of the next several years. Successful resolution will largely determine the outcome of the effort to expand quality services to those adults needing basic skills and literacy instruction. In the remainder of this paper some specific issues and questions will be highlighted as a first step in promoting dialogue.

Planning and Coordination Isues

How can the centralized planning of State Education Agencies support decentralized service agencies without reducing their effectiveness with their specialized populations? Should the role of SEA's in managing statewide adult education services be strengthened or reduced? How can SEA's develop a plan "with respect to all segments of the adult population" without requiring control of program resources and performance criteria? How can effective plans for training and managing volunteers be developed?

Financing Issues

How will the resources to expand voluntary and private programs be identified and acquired? How will they be allocated? Federal regulations currently prohibit charging fees for literacy and basic skills instruction. Should this be changed? Are different accountability standards appropriate for voluntary and grass roots agencies? If so, how should they be different?

Quality Control Issues

How can effective programs and practices be effectively disseminated, especially to decentralized providers of services? How will expanding services be evaluated and effective practices replicated? How will ineffective practices be discontinued? How will the relationship between literacy training and functional ability be interpreted as the delivery system becomes more and more decentralized and pluralistic?

Evaluation Issues

What impact measures can be used to determine the effectiveness of an expanded and decentralized adult literacy effort? How can cost effectiveness be determined when voluntary and private agencies conduct autonomous programs? How will resources needed for rigorous nationwide evaluations be forthcoming? How can data be collected from pluralistic providers and who will process it?

This brief list is merely suggestive of policy and procedural issues which are beginning to emerge. It needs to be greatly expanded and further specified. Discussions begun at the White Paper Conference will have to be extended and continued in the years ahead.

Recommendation

Over the past 10 years, separate policy studies (Ziegler and Mezirow) prepared for the Department of Education and the National Advisory Council on Adult Education have pointed to the need for an independent national organization to provide leadership in adult literacy and in adult education broadly defined. Such an organization would be a center for gathering information, disseminating programs and practices, providing technical assistance, evaluating program effectiveness, and promoting dialogue and communication among the myriad of providers. The initial focus of this organization could be adult literacy but the perspective of the organization would be that of viewing society as a total learning system. The scope of the organization would be all adult learners and all adult learning.

RECOMMENDATION - That a new national organization be generated to support adult learning generally and adult literacy and basic skills specifically. This organization should be sustained by private sector resources and be constituted in such a way as to remain responsive to the major adult learning issues and adult learning needs in an information age society.