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## ABSTRACT

This discussion paper endeavors to inform decision makers about the goals and outcomes for adult basic education in Washington State. It first examines the current goals operating in adult literacy programs in the state, concluding that, although there may appear to be agreement about the very general purposes of literacy education in the state, the operative goals vary widely, and the absence of agreed upon and clearly stated goals and outcomes has made collaboration around operational issues such as participant definitions, intake and placement, curriculum and assessment difficult. The paper then describes a framework and suggests the following considerations for determining goals: making goals specific, stakeholder agreement, learners' goals and motivations, statewide applicability, change requirements, purposes, and assessment of progress toward the goals. Finally, the paper proposes policy options and implications for consideration. Implications for setting the following goals are discussed: self-sufficiency, community-oriented goals, Goal 5, a National Education goal which states that "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship," employability, and literacy skills. Various outcome measures for assessing progress toward the goals are outlined. The paper concludes that the effective redirection of policy and practice in Washington State requires that goals and outcomes for adult basic education be widely shared, measurable, broad enough to include learner aspirations but narrow enough to promote accountability, built on the strengths of a pluralistic delivery system and diverse learners, and based on consciously chosen principles rather than obsolete assumptions. (KC)

A Series of Discussion Papers for the Adult Education Advisory Council

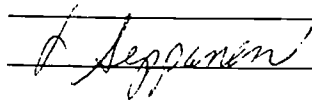
# ReDirection: Options for Policy and Practice in Adult Literacy in Washington State

## Goals and Outcomes

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*"Society is able to reap its benefits from  
adult literacy education only if learners are able to reap theirs."*  
—Hal Beder, Rutgers University

## OVERVIEW

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Adult basic skills services in Washington State have expanded significantly since the Adult Education Act of 1966. This expansion has not only been in the numbers of students, but also in the numbers of providers. While community and technical colleges still enroll half of the learners in basic skills programs, they have been joined by community based organizations, housing authorities and many volunteer literacy councils. Prompted by the *Investment in Human Capital Study* in 1991, increasing collaboration and coordination among programs has become a high priority among state and local agencies. State leaders, recognizing that a cohesive delivery system for adult basic education is vital to meeting the literacy challenge, face new questions about how best to focus funds and efforts. An initial step toward developing a cohesive delivery system is a discussion of goals and outcomes.

This paper endeavors to inform decision makers about the goals and outcomes for adult basic education in Washington State. It will first offer an examination of the current goals operating in adult literacy programs in the state. It will then describe a framework and suggest considerations for determining goals. Finally, options and their implications are proposed for consideration.

Because they are closely connected to goals, outcomes and measures of outcomes will be addressed similarly, with a framework, considerations, and policy options and implications. The options discussed here are not intended to be exhaustive, but to stimulate discussion and inform policy development.

## THE STATE OF THE STATE

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An analysis of current literacy efforts in the state reveals that, 1) while there may appear to be agreement about the very general purposes of literacy education in the state, the operative goals vary widely, and 2) the absence of agreed upon and clearly stated goals and outcomes has made collaboration around operational issues such as participant definitions, intake and placement, curriculum and assessment difficult.

### Local Program Goals

Literacy programs in Washington State exhibit a broad array of goals:

- ◆ JTPA funded programs aim to place participants in employment.
- ◆ Programs funded by JOBS work toward the goal of self-sufficiency.

- ◆ Even Start programs strive to make parents more effective, particularly as participants in the education of their children.
- ◆ The goal of workplace literacy programs is the improvement of job performance.
- ◆ Programs supported by the McKinney Act serve homeless students in order to break the cycle of homelessness.
- ◆ In volunteer and community-based organizations, students' goals are sometimes pre-eminent.
- ◆ State-funded adult basic education programs are often aimed toward basic skills in order to help students obtain a GED, adult high school diploma or a vocational or college-level education.

Furthermore, many programs receive funding from multiple sources, each with its own implicit or explicit purposes which might be in conflict or might be so broad as to be undefinable. Among different programs within the delivery system conflicts may be less apparent, but this lack of a common goal or shared vision will remain a barrier to collaborative efforts until it is addressed at the state level.

## RANGE OF PURPOSES

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A synthesis of research conducted over a period of years in eight states identified four basic purposes of adult basic education: social mobility, social change, economic productivity, and learners' goals.

### **Social mobility**

As with economic productivity, social mobility into the middle class is one of the predominant intended outcomes of adult education policy.

### **Economic Productivity**

Many agree that literacy, a publicly funded endeavor, should serve the economic interests of a competitive global economy. Therefore some believe literacy education should be limited to the goals necessary for getting employment or enhancing job skills.

### **Social Change**

Increasingly, discussions about literacy are moving from blaming individuals for lack of literacy to holding society accountable for the conditions that foster low literacy. Many believe that literacy efforts should be geared toward changing the social structures that perpetuate inequality, including low literacy.

### **Learner's Goals**

A central issue in the debate over the goals of adult basic education is the balance between the goals of society, which funds adult basic education, and those of the individuals who participate for personal reasons.

## SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR SETTING GOALS

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1. Are the goals specific enough to be used to:
  - ◆set priorities;
  - ◆provide a rationale for acquiring and allocating resources;
  - ◆determine the focus of curriculum and instruction;
  - ◆define program effectiveness;
  - ◆establish standards by which the state can periodically examine and evaluate its progress?
2. Are stakeholders likely to agree to the goals?
3. Do the goals incorporate learners' goals and motivations?
4. Given the diversity of the state, can the goals be applied statewide?
5. How much change would be required by adopting the goal?
6. Which of the four purposes do the goals address?
7. Can progress toward the goals be assessed?

## POLICY OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

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The options are presented as goals varying in scope, from broad to narrow. Common goals, or those that have received attention have been selected as examples to illustrate the implications.

### Broad Goal: Self-Sufficiency

Self-sufficiency is an example of a broad goal that has been widely discussed and merits examination. Many of the implications are tentative because self-sufficiency has not been defined.

Consideration	Implications
<b>Specificity</b>	Depending on how self-sufficiency is defined it may be too general to be useful.
<b>Buy in</b>	One of the benefits of self-sufficiency as a broad goal would be buy-in from stakeholders and providers alike.
<b>Learners' goals</b>	It is likely that learners' goals could be incorporated in a goal such as self-sufficiency.
<b>Applicability</b>	Depending on how self-sufficiency is defined by the state, it could allow flexibility for diverse programs.
<b>Degree of change</b>	Focusing state literacy efforts toward the goal of self-sufficiency could precipitate significant change.

- Purposes** Self-sufficiency is broad enough to include three of the four purposes, but could exclude literacy for social change.
- Accountability** Because the goal is so broad, there will be difficulty in determining how progress can be accurately assessed in both the short and long term.
- Other** In programs with multiple funding sources, varying interpretations of this broad goal may create strain in meeting the priorities of different funders.

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**Broad Goal: Community-Oriented Goals**

Traditionally, literacy programs have focused on individual learners, but recently a smaller group of programs have made it their goal to help literacy students develop skills that serve the larger purposes of community development and social change.

<b>Consideration</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>Specificity</b>	Like other broad goals it might be too general to be useful.
<b>Buy in</b>	It might not be attractive to those allocating resources.
<b>Learners' goals</b>	Curriculum in these programs reflects adults' concerns such as jobs, housing, child care, transportation, and crime.
<b>Applicability</b>	This orientation features adaptability to local needs and concerns.
<b>Degree of change</b>	Literacy education that is community-oriented has not been widely implemented.
<b>Purposes</b>	The focus is on literacy for social change; the degree to which this goal accomplishes other purposes has not yet been determined.
<b>Accountability</b>	Like other broad goals, it is hard to measure.
<b>Other</b>	The advantage of such a goal is its potential ability to attract and retain students.

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**Multiple Goals: Goal 5**

Many states have adopted or adapted National Education Goal 5, which states that "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." This goal is similar to the mission statement of the Adult Education Advisory Council.

<b>Consideration</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>Specificity</b>	There may be difficulty in setting priorities because of the multiplicity of goals.

<b>Buy in</b>	It is likely that multiple goals would be accepted by a variety of stakeholders.
<b>Learners' goals</b>	There is the potential for the learners' goals to be considered in this option.
<b>Applicability</b>	It is probable that Goal 5 would be adaptable across programs.
<b>Degree of change</b>	Depending on the focus, this goal may or may not precipitate significant change.
<b>Purposes</b>	It incorporates primarily the economic and social purposes for literacy education.
<b>Accountability</b>	Because each of the component goals within Goal 5 is so far reaching, assessing progress toward this goal will be problematic.

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### **Narrow Goal: Employability**

Narrowly defined goals present an attractive option at the policy level for many reasons. For example, the goal of employability has widespread support.

<b>Consideration</b>	<b>Implications</b>
<b>Specificity</b>	Even though the goal is narrow, there is no standard definition of employability.
<b>Buy in</b>	There would be significant buy-in from many stakeholders which might increase the likelihood of the allocation of more and more stable resources.
<b>Learners' goals</b>	Research indicates that students' goals for participation are more complex and less clearly defined.
<b>Applicability</b>	Will require accommodation and may not be adaptable across the state.
<b>Degree of change</b>	A large proportion of the delivery system would need to make significant changes in curriculum and instruction to meet the goal.
<b>Purposes</b>	It is likely that the goal will serve a limited range of purposes of literacy education.
<b>Accountability</b>	Because it is so narrowly defined, progress could also be more easily measured. However, given that adult students remain in programs for less than 100 hours, this goal may be unattainable.
	Employability is determined by a number of factors beyond the control of literacy programs.



**Other** The advantages would be that such a clearly defined goal could focus program efforts. However, if the goal is narrow, the results will be narrow as well, thereby neglecting the larger national goals as stated in the National Literacy Act of 1991, which span all of the literacy purposes described above.<sup>1</sup>



### Narrow Goal: Literacy Skills

This goal is also fairly narrow, but it represents the most common operative goal among the major providers of adult basic education in Washington State.

Consideration	Implications
<b>Specificity</b>	This goal seems specific, but there are varying interpretations of literacy by which skills are identified.
<b>Buy in</b>	An increase in skills might not be the purpose of funders who see those skills as instrumental in achieving other outcomes.
<b>Learners' goals</b>	Enhancement of literacy was one of the preferred goals of participants in the Iowa studies and is directly related to attainment of a GED or adult high school diploma. However, skills-based instruction, without the real life context or application that is meaningful to students, is found in many programs.
<b>Applicability</b>	Improvement of basic skills is the current goal of most basic education programs.
<b>Degree of change</b>	Instruction in literacy skills can be set in a variety of contexts, e.g. employable, parenting, or academic transition. This in fact was the assumption behind the adoption of the Washington State Core Competencies which are mandated for all AEA funded programs.
<b>Purposes</b>	Literacy education for increased literacy skills could embody economic, societal and learners' purposes.
<b>Accountability</b>	The field is experienced in measuring this goal. However, this experience has shown us that doing so is problematic due to poor student persistence, inadequacy of currently available tests, and the diversity among students.



### Conclusion

The challenge for policy makers is to develop goals that include the concerns of the nation, the priorities of funders, the capabilities of local programs and the aspirations of students, thereby maximizing funding and participation. Goals which provide direction to programs, yet are consistent with student purposes, are critical to the success of adult education programs.

<sup>1</sup>According to the National Literacy Act, the national literacy goals are to enable individuals to function on the job and in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential.

## OUTCOMES AND THEIR MEASURES

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Progress toward state goals can only be viewed through clearly defined and commonly agreed upon outcomes and measures of outcomes for literacy education. Outcomes provide accountability for individual programs and point to strategies that improve student success. Defined outcomes aid students by establishing benchmarks on their way to their ultimate goals and have shown to increase retention.

The selection of outcomes and their correlate measures which will be used to define program and student success could fundamentally change the way that programs operate, so careful selection of particular outcomes is critical. Also critical is the balance between uniform standards with flexibility.

## RANGE OF OUTCOMES

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This list of outcomes represents a sample of those in use in the field. Since improved literacy can impact adults' lives in many ways, many outcomes are possible.

### Old and New Basic Skill Gains

The most frequently used outcome is a gain in reading, writing or math skills. Programs are beginning to look for improvement in the new skill areas--for example, learning to learn, problem solving, critical thinking, and interpersonal communication. Pre- post-test scores on standardized tests, materials-based tests, teacher-made tests, writing samples, and portfolios are used to document improved skills.

### Competency Mastery

Another way to document skills is the use of competencies. In this state a common set of competencies, the Washington State Core Competencies for ABE, ESL and GED, have been adopted for all Adult Education Act funded programs. These competencies and the competencies identified by JTPA were combined in a pilot project called I♦CANS. The I♦CANS Skills List includes competencies in traditional areas like reading and computation as well as newer areas identified by the *SCANS Report* including learning to learn, group effectiveness, and thinking skills. Lists of functional competencies, such as the ability to interpret a bus schedule or write a check, are also used in other states.

### Transition to other programs

Progress from ESL to ABE, from ABE to GED, or from any of these programs to vocational or academic programs is often cited as a desirable outcome.

### GED or High School Diploma

Obtaining a GED is one of the most common goals of adults entering adult basic education (but not ESL) programs. While emphasis has been on skills acquisition, recent analysis of the NALS data indicates the importance of a high school credential in employment.

## Improved Self-Concept

In several studies improved self-concept proved to be the single most universal impact of literacy education. It may also have an enabling effect that impacts other areas of individuals' lives.<sup>2</sup>

## Learners' Goals

The importance of including learners' goals to enhance motivation was discussed earlier. If those goals are important they should also be considered as outcomes. Various funders do recognize outcomes that learners often aspire to by requiring that they be reported. These include achievements such as obtaining the GED, citizenship, job acquisition, retention, or promotion; driver's license, transition to another training program, etc.

## Social Change

Social change and community development indicators reflect adults' concerns with employment levels, housing, crime, transportation, etc. in their own communities. As an outcome, it has the benefit of being a motivation for learners and a positive impact on the community.

## Employment and Self-Sufficiency

Getting a job and/or getting off welfare are expected outcomes of some categorical programs. Federally funded ABE programs, Even Start, and Adult Education for the Homeless consider these within a broad base of other outcomes and collect information about these successes. Because employment and self-sufficiency are long range, they are more likely to be achievable as goals than as outcomes.

## Program-Specific Outcomes

There are outcomes which are specific to family literacy, workforce literacy, corrections and homeless education programs. These include outcomes such as improved parenting skills, specific job skills, reducing recidivism, and obtaining long-term shelter.

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR OUTCOMES

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1. Are the outcomes directly relevant to the goals so that progress toward the goals can be determined?
2. Is there a variety of outcomes to reflect the complexity of adults' lives and learning?
3. Can the outcomes be directly related to curriculum and instruction?
4. Are the outcomes clearly defined and measurable?

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<sup>2</sup>Hal Beder. (1991). *Adult Literacy: Issues for Policy and Practice*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company, p. 116.

5. Are the outcomes likely to be commonly understood and agreed upon?
6. Are some of the outcomes attainable within the time frames and context of basic skills programs?
7. Are the outcomes meaningful?

## OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OUTCOMES

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There will be many options for outcomes once the state goals are determined by the Advisory Council. Since outcomes serve as the operational definition of goals, they must be chosen subsequent to the goals. Looking at outcomes in three broad categories will provide an organizational framework for selecting outcomes. While the questions for considering outcomes serve as a screen for qualifying each option, this framework insures a balance of outcomes.

- ◆ Learning outcomes, such as basic skill gains, competency mastery, high school diploma or GED, and transition to other programs, are the most common outcomes of basic skills programs.
- ◆ Societal outcomes are those that focus on the larger social impact of literacy education and typically include employment and self-sufficiency and social change. Registering to vote, getting a library card, and being involved in a child's education are also examples of societal outcomes.
- ◆ Personal outcomes generally overlap learning outcomes and societal outcomes. However, they also include outcomes that do not easily fit into the other two categories, for example improved self-esteem resulting from learning or completing an assignment of a level or a program.

### The Measurement Issue

Some outcomes, such as getting off welfare or obtaining a GED are easy to determine; others, such as skills gain, need to be measured. Still other outcomes of basic skills instruction, including improved self-concept and social change are particularly problematic because they are difficult to define and to assess. However the outcomes are defined, assessment is the crux of the accountability issue: In order to indicate progress toward the larger literacy goals, assessment methods must accurately measure the outcomes of adult literacy education.

The issue of statewide assessment in Washington has been controversial and often divisive. Testing is seen as problematic due to the complexity of the learning enterprise, the variables in adults' lives and the limitations of current testing instruments. Alternative assessment measures are increasingly gaining acceptance from within education and in the public policy sector. But they have not been developed to the point where their validity and reliability have been sufficiently demonstrated. Here, we have attempted to briefly display and examine some commonly used assessment strategies.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Susan Lytle and Marcie Wolfe, *Adult Literacy Education: Program Evaluation and Learner Assessment*. Columbus, Ohio: Eric Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education. Richard L. Venezky. (1992). *Matching Literacy Testing with Social Policy: What are the Alternatives?* NCAL Policy Brief, Philadelphia: National Center on Adult Literacy.

**Strategy - Standardized Tests - Norm Referenced<sup>4</sup>**

*Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), Adult Basic Learning Examination (ABLE), Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT)*

**Advantages**

Grade equivalent (GE) scores are meaningful to students and teachers

Cost effective

Easily administered

Highlight gains

Easy to use for program comparison and accountability

The TABE is currently widely used for placement and diagnosis. It is used in about half of AEA funded programs and some JTPA and Employment Security offices

Can facilitate communication among programs and agencies

**Disadvantages**

GE scores are derived from children's norms

GE scores are often demeaning to adults

Do not match curriculum

Measurable gains require approximately 100 hours of participation

Incompatible with SALS

May measure test-taking skills rather than literacy

Floor sometimes too high for new readers or low level ESL

Usage generally based on the deficit model

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**Strategy - Standardized Tests - Criterion Referenced<sup>5</sup>**

*Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS), Test of Adult Literacy Skills (TALS), Basic English Skills Test (BEST)*

**Advantages**

Based on competencies or functional literacy tasks

Cost effective

Easily administered

Highlight gains

**Disadvantages**

Scores are often meaningless to adults

Do not match current curriculum

Measurable gains require approximately 100 hours of participation

Only TALS may be compatible with SALS

Ann Davis and Kim Yap. (1992). Results of Field Research: ABE/ESL Assessment. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Prepared for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

Ann Davis and Kim Yap. (1992). Summary Report of the ABE/ESL Assessment Project. Portland, OR: Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, prepared for the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges.

<sup>4</sup> More information on specific standardized tests can be made available to the Council.

<sup>5</sup> More information on specific standardized tests can be made available to the Council.

Easy to use for program comparison and accountability

May measure test-taking skills rather than literacy

The CASAS is used by some JTPA and Employment Security Offices. It is also used by some AEA funded programs, generally as a link with other agencies.

Measure only identified competencies

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### Strategy - Competency Checklists

*Washington State Core Competencies, I-CANS*

#### Advantages

Absolutely related to curriculum  
 Meaningful to students and teachers  
 Can be a good means of establishing benchmarks  
 Can facilitate communication among programs and agencies  
 Broad range of strategies possible

#### Disadvantages

Require considerable time and paperwork  
 Are not standardized or validated  
 Measure only identified competencies (Checklists are as good as the competencies on which they are based.)  
 Can be difficult to present as accountability measure

### Strategy - Classroom Based Assessment

*Materials-based tests, Portfolios, Observation, Interviews, Writing Samples, Self report*

#### Advantages

Measure a range of tasks, abilities, and contexts  
 Non-threatening  
 Very directly related to instruction  
 On-going  
 Use a broad range of strategies  
 Can actively involve learners  
 Meaningful to students  
 Variety of learning styles  
 Show incremental progress  
 Readily available feedback for teachers and students

#### Disadvantages

Can be difficult to present as accountability measure  
 Are not standardized or validated  
 Require considerable time and paperwork

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**Strategy - Student Tracking**

*Transition to other programs, GED, Drivers license, Citizenship, Voting for first time, Employment, Involvement in childrens' schooling*

**Advantages**

**Disadvantages**

Look at real life gains

Sometimes difficult to identify

Often identical with learners' own goals

Not always attributable to instruction

Often do not require long periods of attendance

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**Strategy - Multi measures**

*Can include some or all of the above.*

**Advantages**

**Disadvantages**

Provide the most comprehensive record of impact

Can be time consuming

Can have all the advantages of whichever measures are used

Can have all the disadvantages of whichever measures are used

**CONCLUSIONS**

As a representative and objective body, it is appropriate that the Adult Education Advisory Council take on the challenge of recommending the goals and outcomes for adult basic skills education in the state. The role of the Advisory Council is to identify goals and outcomes which are inclusive yet focused enough to be useful in determining priorities and setting direction. The task will be arduous due to the variety of interests and perspectives, the diversity of students and programs, and the complexity of literacy education.

The effective redirection of policy and practice in Washington State requires that goals and outcomes for adult basic education be:

- ◆ Developed through dialogue and shared meaning at all levels.
- ◆ Aligned, and the measures be appropriate to gauge them.
- ◆ Broad enough to support the aspirations of learners yet narrow enough to promote accountability.
- ◆ Built upon the strengths of a pluralistic delivery system and diverse learners.
- ◆ Based on consciously chosen principles rather than obsolete assumptions.

The recommendation of goals and outcomes for adult basic education in Washington State does not imply that all parties must agree on a single goal and outcome. In fact, a number of researchers and theorists agree that pluralism in the adult basic education delivery system

provides flexibility and is one of its strengths which should be preserved. However, pluralism must exist in an environment in which the parties have clearly articulated their goals and purposes to insure that literacy efforts will be executed in concert, not in conflict. Guided by leadership at the state level and the considerations described in this paper, significant progress can be made in focusing literacy efforts and thereby improving the overall effectiveness of adult basic education at all levels of the delivery system.