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ABSTRACT

This policy paper lays the groundwork for policy recommendations by providing information about the level of adult literacy needs and services in Washington State. Analysis of two reports shows a gap between the population in need of literacy services and the current level of services in Washington. In this context, considerations and options for effective and equitable strategies for prioritizing the allocation of resources and services are explored. Policy considerations are as follows: equity, access, participation, state goals, long- and short-term goals, cost, and various other factors. The paper concludes that there are questions to be explored as part of the decision-making process, such as recruiting basic skills students, communicating priorities and determining participant eligibility, making targeting of priority groups consistent with long-term state and national goals, and setting priorities for service without creating inequities. (KC)

A Series of Policy Papers for the Adult Education Advisory Council

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

Priorities for Service

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"Excellence and equity in adult literacy must grow hand in hand."
--Steven Reder

OVERVIEW

The pressing need for more efficient and effective use of resources in adult basic education is due to several factors: existing resources are inadequate to support the capacity and quality necessary to improve literacy skills in the state; existing services have not had significant impact on statewide learner outcomes as indicated by retention, transition and employment data; additional funding to increase the capacity of adult basic education is unlikely to be made available until efforts have been focused and outcomes demonstrated.

The necessity of setting priorities for services is clear, but the task is particularly difficult given the size of the population in need of literacy services. Prioritization, moreover, has the potential to exclude certain groups and therefore could be a politically divisive issue. Consensus among all the vested interests may be difficult to achieve.

Priorities for Service lays the groundwork for policy recommendations by providing information about the level of literacy needs and services in Washington State. In this context, considerations and options for effective and equitable strategies for setting priorities are explored.

THE STATE OF THE STATE

The following information is based on the best data available about the current level of skills, needs and services in Washington State. The results of two reports are described, which serve to 1) illustrate the gap between the population in need of literacy services and the current level of services in Washington, and 2) emphasize the critical need for determining strategies for prioritization of how resources and services will be allocated.

The Gap Between Literacy Needs and Services

Washington State Adult Literacy Survey (SALS) is the most comprehensive information available about adult literacy in Washington and therefore provides the most accurate picture of

the scope of the literacy need in the state.[1] Performance in the two lowest literacy levels (of the five levels) on the SALS has commonly been accepted as demonstration of limited literacy skills. In all, 31-36% of Washington residents, almost one million people, were identified in this way as those who could potentially benefit from adult basic education services. These figures serve to describe the entire "need population" in Washington.

In contrast, the numbers of adults served by the adult basic education delivery system is contained in a study conducted at the University of Washington, *Adult Basic Skills Instruction Services and Needs in Washington*. According to this report, approximately 77,000 adult were served in all basic skills programs in 1991-92 at the cost of $40.9 million plus 300,00 volunteer hours.[2]

While these numbers provide evidence that current services are not reaching the level of need, they still do not present a complete picture. The gap between needs and services is an issue of quality as well as quantity as illustrated by information from the community and technical college system which is the largest provider of adult literacy services:

- Student-faculty ratios are high. 35.8 FTE students to one FTE faculty compared to 23.2 for other programs.
- The median hours of instruction available per week is six.
- Over 70% of ABE/GED/ESL faculty are part time, compared with approximately 40% in academic and vocational programs.
- Over half of the programs are administered by directors who have teaching assignments and/or other major administrative responsibilities.

Clearly, despite expansion of the service delivery system since 1988, the estimated need far exceeds the resources and the capacity of the delivery system to meet this need. Nationally, estimates of the proportion of adults served range from 9%-11% of need, and Washington is no exception.

Identified Groups: Those in Need, Those Served

The SALS data also provides information about specific groups who tend to demonstrate the most limited literacy skills. According to the SALS report, adults who performed in Level 1 are more likely to be foreign born, over 65, minority, to earn less, to be unemployed or out of the labor force, to have less than 12 years of formal schooling, or to have physical or mental disabilities. In secondary analyses of the SALS data when individuals with severely limiting mental disabilities and individuals over 65 years of age are excluded, the number of adults in the lowest literacy level is decreased by 10%.

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[1]It involved a sample of 1,200 to represent the 3.7 million adult state residents, the survey used a test which consisted of contextualized skills measured on three literacy scales: document, prose, quantitative—a definition of literacy consistent with the National Literacy Act of 1991.

[2]Includes state and federal ABE, JTPA, Even Start, Department of Vocational Rehabilitation, Adult Education for the Homeless, Adult Immigrant Education, Bureau of Refugee Assistance, Workplace Literacy, Volunteer Tutor Coordination Program, Department of Corrections, and programs for the developmentally disabled.

Many programs report that they serve the "most in need" or the "least educated," but there is no guarantee that those groups are actually receiving priority for service. In other programs, some priorities have been set by the categorical funding which these programs receive. The chart below displays the breakdown of those enrolled in instructional programs.[3] It demonstrates that most student are served by programs designed to serve general literacy needs. Overall, there has been no consistent determination or strategy at the state or local level as to how resources can be best targeted.

Community and Technical Colleges	41,397
Developmental Disabilities*	10,929
Volunteer Tutor Coordination Project	6,452
Adult Immigrant Education	5,891
Department of Corrections	3,960
Job Training Partnership Act Title IIA and III**	4,036
Refugee Assistance	2,000
Adult Education for the Homeless	982
Even Start	756
Workplace Literacy	298
Vocational Rehabilitation	108
Total, All Programs	**76,666**

*Enrollment in Developmental Disabilities is a snapshot at the beginning of FY 1992, the enrollments in other programs are persons served in the entire fiscal year.
**Title IIA and III figures exclude individuals age 22 and below who are out of school and served in basic skills programs.

RANGE OF GROUPS

If priorities are to be set, there must be some useful ways to categorize the need population. Local programs often use certain factors to classify students to meet funding requirements or otherwise structure programs. Four such classifications, which are currently used and could serve to identify possible targets are described in this section.

Level

One way to identify priority populations is by basic skills level. If one assumes that skills range from non-literacy to a desired level of literacy, or from having no English to a desired level of fluency, it is possible to identify a specific skill level, for example a Core Competencies level, or

[3]William Zumeta et al. (1992). *Adult Basic Education Services and Needs in Washington*. University of Washington Human Services Policy Center.

range of skill levels to serve. The federal adult education legislation's mandate to serve most in need is often interpreted this way i.e., as requiring that priority be given to those at the lowest skill level as defined by the state.

Outcome

If goals are defined in terms of specific outcomes, they can be used to segment the need population. For example, if employment is the outcome, then adults who are available and able to work are the priority group. That definition can be further refined by using level and previous work history to ascertain the likelihood of employment. Another example is family literacy programs which use the outcome of children's success in school to target parents of pre-school or at-risk children for services.

Demand

This is a *de facto* prioritization of the need population which many programs use to target their services. Program services are designed around those who participate assuming they represent the entire need population. In Washington State, ESL enrollments have increased 37% in response to increased demand since 1989-90, while literacy and basic skills has increased by only about 12%.

Subgroups

It is possible to identify groups with particular characteristics, e.g., age, employment status, public assistance usage, English proficiency, etc., which can be the focus of literacy services. Categorical funding often identifies such groups. The SALS data also suggest some likely targets if this method is used.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR IDENTIFYING PRIORITIES FOR SERVICES

1. What is the impact on non-target groups? Do the priorities make the system inequitable by excluding groups of adults?

2. Do the priorities make instruction inaccessible to anyone simply because of geography or schedule? For example, if it is decided to serve the priority population(s) with such intensive instruction that programs can offer services at only one central site, place bound adults might not have access to instruction.

3. How will the priorities affect voluntary student participation?

4. Are the priorities congruent with state literacy goals? Will targeting a specific group have significant impact on the attainment of those goals?

5. Do the priorities address both long- and short-term goals? For example, if the priorities do not include mothers with small children because they are not likely to enter the labor force for several years, does that jeopardize the education of the children and consequently the long-term aim of significantly reducing illiteracy rates?

6. What are the costs associated with these priorities? Will the targeted groups be more expensive to serve because of higher need for supportive services, specialized recruitment, the nature of the instruction, or other factors.

POLICY OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The goals for adult literacy education in Washington State to be established by the Adult Education Advisory Council are central to the task of determining the priorities for service, for they will drive how services and resources are distributed in the state. The influence of state goals on each option demands particular attention.

Target Subgroups

In *A Governor's Guide to Literacy*, the National Governor's Association recommends a selection process whereby states identify key target subgroups for literacy service and then select those target groups that are most critical to state goals. Given the available information from the SALS data described above, this direct strategy for determining priority groups is feasible. Once state goals are determined, specific groups can be identified and prioritized for service.

Consideration	Implication
Equity	Some groups will be excluded from the delivery system.
Access	This will depend on which groups are targeted. If, for example, the target is workers in high-tech industries, adults in agricultural areas might not have access to programs.
Participation	The targeted groups are not necessarily the most likely to participate.
State Goals	Priorities can be very closely aligned with state goals.
Long/short term Goals	The groups which are targeted for service will determine how long and short term goals are addressed.
Cost	There are a number of variables that will increase programming costs dependent on which groups are targeted.
Other	Better definition of the groups and targeted marketing and recruitment will be required.

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Continuum of Literacy Levels

Using the state goal as the end point, groups are placed along a continuum toward that goal. Groups at different points or within certain ranges on the continuum are then targeted. An example of this approach is being used in Oregon where the ultimate goal is employment and workforce mobility. Factors including skill level, availability, and previous work experience are used to assign individuals or groups to a point on the continuum. Washington's Adult Education Advisory Council has been exploring a continuum with self-sufficiency and mobility as the goals.

Consideration	Implication
Equity	This option is flexible: the service base can be broad or narrow. All groups can be served in varying degrees, or specific groups can be the focus. Adoption of this model does not automatically, but can potentially exclude groups.
Access	Access to services will depend on which groups are targeted. For example, if the target is JOBS recipients who must be in class for twenty hours per week, programs might not be able to continue to offer instruction at multiple sites.
Participation	Certain populations, such as currently employed workers, are less likely to participate.
State Goals	With the state goal designated as the end point on the continuum, services will be clearly focused.
Long/short term Goals	Depending on the end goal and the groups that are targeted the continuum model serves both long- and short-term goals.
Cost	Additional costs will be incurred in evaluating individuals in order to assign them to a point on the continuum and like all options will depend on which groups are targeted.
Other	Because assignment of individuals to the continuum will involve a number of factors, this option will be complex to implement.

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Most in need

Another option is to serve those who need improved literacy skills most. In fact, the Adult Education Act mandates that programs provide services to the most in need, but states have considerable leeway in defining that group. Clearly "most in need" can be interpreted by using any of the groups described in the range of groups above, e.g., the lowest literacy levels, the least employable, the most at risk. Of all the options, except for perhaps serving one or several groups exclusively, this one has the most far reaching implications.

Consideration	Implication

Equity	Some groups will clearly be excluded, but the basis of the exclusion might be supportable because of the federal mandate.
Access	The definition of most in need will affect eligibility and therefore there could be areas in which there are not enough eligible students to constitute a class.
Participation	The most in need are the least likely to seek and participate in adult basic education programs.[4] The "hard to reach" adults--those low socioeconomic status, low educational attainment, poor occupational status and income, and older adults--are the same adults who performed in the two lowest levels of the SALS.[5] If adult basic education is essentially a voluntary activity, learners in this group could be difficult to recruit and retain.
State Goals	Targeting most in need is congruent with general state goals like statewide literacy. However, progress toward more specific goals, such as self-sufficiency or employability will be delayed.
Long/short term Goals	State goals will more likely be achieved over time rather than in the short term.
Cost	No matter how one defines most in need, this will be an expensive option since this group requires more and longer instruction and more support services than any other.
Other	Defining the priority group as those most in need is problematic if ability to benefit is not also considered. A decision about services to developmentally disabled, severely learning disabled or brain injured students must be made.

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Targeting Resources

While the discussion has heretofore revolved around identifying which groups to serve, another option is to target different resources (kinds and quantity of services) toward different groups. To some degree, this allocation of resources already happens because categorical funding dictates who is eligible for some services. If applied consistently, it could serve as an effective planning tool. What has been missing is a check to see that all services are indeed available to groups eligible for a category of funding or, perhaps more important, a check to see that those who are eligible for specific funding are not displacing those who can only be served by the most general sources.

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[4] Karen Reed Wikelund. *Motivations for Learning: Voices of Women Welfare Reform Participants*, Technical Report TR93-10. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy.

[5] Karen Reed Wikelund, Stephen Reder, Sylvia Hart-Landsberg. *Expanding Theories of Adult Literacy Participation: A Literature Review*, Technical Report TR92-1. Philadelphia, PA: National Center on Adult Literacy.

For example, it may be that some outcomes can be reached by some groups using strategies or a mix of strategies that do not require as much teacher time, e.g. volunteers, computer-aided instruction, or distance learning. Conversely, some groups might require more intensive instruction, but fewer supportive services.

This is a different way of conceptualizing the priorities; it looks at a relationship between resources and all groups and determines the most effective use of those resources. The success of this model depends upon effective coordination among agencies and providers.

Consideration	Implication
Equity	This model would not exclude any group, but there is potential for uneven quality and quantity of service to different groups.
Access	If the whole range of services were not available in a given location or at a given time, some individuals or groups might not have access.
Participation	Targeting resources has the potential to actually increase participation by matching resources and groups of learners.
State Goals	State goals could be used to make decisions about which services will be available to which groups.
Long/short term Goals	The flexibility of this option allows for both kinds of timelines.
Cost	If the relationships among agencies is established, this could be very cost effective.
Other	The existing delivery system is diverse and responsive to the availability of resources. Therefore it is predisposed toward this approach which would formalize and enhance service delivery.

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Targeting Curriculum

Another very different option for setting priorities is to create curriculum and instruction that is specific to the state's chosen goals and outcomes. Such a model would provide focus for programs and attract learners who have goals that are complementary to the state goals. For example, if the targeted outcome is family literacy, programs design their curriculum and instruction around skills and contexts relevant to parenting, consumerism, nutrition, etc. Learners who want to read to their children, help with homework, manage the budget , etc. are likely to participate.

Consideration	Implication

Equity	Since this model would serve the demand population, it appears to be the most equitable option. There is no policy decision to exclude anyone who wants to participate, but there is danger that populations that are attracted will be limited.
Access	There are no barriers to access.
Participation	Participation will not be affected if the curriculum allows for some negotiation of individual goals
State Goals	There will be an exact fit with goals because curriculum and instruction will be designed around the goals
Long/short term Goals	Because the demand population is so broad based, both long and short term goals are likely to be addressed.
Cost	The statewide curriculum , the Core Competencies, will require significant revision.
Other	If the option of targeting curriculum is coordinated with targeting services, it will be a powerful strategy for providing focus, sharing resources, and impacting outcomes. The inclusion of GED preparation in any statewide curriculum will make it more attractive to learners.

CONCLUSION

The implications of setting priorities in order to more efficiently use scarce resources are complex and far reaching. There are several general questions that should be addressed as part of the decision-making process:

- What are the logistical implications for the basic skills field, such as recruitment of priority groups, which may be resistant to adult basic education?
- How will priorities be communicated and translated to the program level, particularly in terms of determining participant eligibility and screening?
- How can consistency with long-term state and national goals be assured through targeting of priority groups?
- Can we set priorities for service that use our resources more efficiently without denying adults' rights to literacy? In other words, how can priorities be established without creating inequity in a system designed to serve all adults?