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## ABSTRACT

The national literacy movement in the United States can be traced to attempts to educate black former slaves after the Civil War. Prior to that time, most blacks received little education because whites saw no economic need to educate those who served them in menial jobs. The fact that most slaves were denied education provided the impetus for the first national literacy movement. Socially conscious white people went to the South in a volunteer effort to educate former slaves. They established hundreds of schools, sometimes with financial aid from the federal government. In addition, the freedmen themselves created schools and promoted learning. This literacy initiative was very successful, creating graduates who went on to college and became middle-class citizens. The first literacy movement ended quickly, however, after about a decade, as Northern liberals lost interest and Reconstruction funds dried up. This state of affairs continued until the 1950s and the ensuing Civil Rights movement, when education for all citizens again became a priority. This second national literacy movement was spurred by federal and state funding and justified by self-interest in economic development, as well as by principle. Since the 1980s, the United States has conducted a major and visible movement to address the problems of educationally disadvantaged adults on many fronts. Although these efforts continue today, the campaign has fallen far short of success. For the future success of the country, adult education for the disadvantaged is crucial. It will benefit the economy as well as individuals and should be driven by a bipartisan action of citizens united in a cause that is right. (KC)

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*by Forrest P. Chisman*

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**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy**

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## ADULT LITERACY & THE AMERICAN DREAM

An Essay by Forrest P. Chisman

Any case for adult education and literacy – any rationale for why it matters and why the federal government, the states, and ordinary citizens should care about it – must be based squarely on mainstream American principles and the American experience. The events of September 11 have reminded us how important these are, and how important it is to be true to them. Moreover, if we reflect on American principles and our collective experience, we must conclude that adult education and literacy should be a very high priority for the United States – one of the dozen or so “must do’s” on the national agenda for the foreseeable future.

A compelling way to make the case for adult education and literacy in these terms is to examine the first American national literacy movement and to draw lessons from it for the present day. In this, as in many other cases, history provides a clarity of view that no amount of social science or any other type of research can offer. It shows us the constants of problems and solutions, as well as the consequences of paths taken and forgone.

### Background: Slavery and Illiteracy

The first concerted American attempt to combat adult illiteracy was the remarkable national effort to educate blacks in the former slave states after the Civil War. The problem that provoked this effort is often imperfectly perceived.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to much mythology, it was not illegal to educate slaves in the American South during most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries. State laws prohibiting slave education were passed at various times – usually when the white population felt some acute threat, such as the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831. But in most states, they expired after a few years or fell into disuse.

It was not the law, but the perceived self-interest of slaveholders that prevented education for slaves. Quite simply, most slaves were field hands, and

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the best contemporary analysis of the varying conditions and legal status of American slavery is: Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

their owners saw no need to educate them. On the other hand, household slaves, those trained as artisans, and the few who obtained minor managerial positions, often received some measure of education. The treatment of the Hemings family at Thomas Jefferson's plantation is an example of this.

Economic interest, then, was a major factor bounding education of blacks under slavery. Low skilled, exploited labor did not need or deserve education; higher skilled and higher paid labor merited it.

In addition to economic interest (and closely allied to it) were considerations of social control. Slavery was based on humiliation and terror. Unless slaves could be persuaded by these means to accept their lot, no amount of force could have kept them in bondage. The public and private literature of the slave states is filled with discussions of education in these terms. Education, it was agreed, would make slaves "uppity" and harder to control. It would give them a sense of their self-worth and open up the world of ideas to them. They would begin to think of themselves as equals to their masters. They would become unhappy, dissatisfied, and more inclined to run away. Just as important, education might help them to obtain skills from which they could gain income to buy their freedom in the small amount of leisure time afforded by plantation societies. That would swell the ranks of free blacks, who were always viewed as a subversive element.

There is ample evidence that blacks in the slave states understood the white logic of withholding education. And they hated it. They hated it because of the humiliation they had to endure. It was part and parcel of a system that preached white racial superiority, that denied them surnames, and that inflicted the greater humiliations of physical abuse, family separations, and forced labor. Black slaves realized, probably better than any other people have ever realized, that with education came not only economic and social opportunity, but also a sense of individual worth, in their own eyes and in the eyes of others. With education came much of what is most worth having in life.

Education was important enough to enslaved blacks that some took extraordinary measures to obtain it by clandestine means. Frederick Douglass bribed white children to teach him letters, stole books, and eventually set up an underground school in St. Michael's, Maryland. There is evidence that this was repeated elsewhere. There is also evidence that free blacks sometimes found ways to provide education to their enslaved friends and family members. And there is ample evidence that black churches, where they were tolerated, provided such education as they could, primarily in reading the Bible. Finally, we know from Census records that many free blacks, particularly those who were not employed as field hands, rushed to obtain education.

We will never know how *much* education enslaved and free blacks achieved by these means. Certainly the achievement was small. But such achievement as there was demonstrates an extraordinary hunger for education in the face of great adversity.

## The First Literacy Movement

The fact that most slaves were denied education provided the impetus for the first national literacy movement.<sup>2</sup> After emancipation, the former slave states contained an enormous population of blacks who had suddenly acquired, at least nominally, full economic, legal, and civic rights. In a few states they were a majority of the total population. Yet almost all of these new citizens were illiterate, even by the narrow definition of the times: they could not write their own names.

Concern for the future of the “freedmen,” as they were called, captured the imagination of members of the socially conscious elite in the North. It became a fad. The initial response was substantial. Even before the smoke of war had cleared, both white and black organizations (such as the American Missionary Association, The Society of Friends, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church) began sending teachers and books south. The movement swelled into a torrent. Large amounts were subscribed to the cause. Thousands of teachers arrived – many from upper class families. Hundreds of schools were established.

This volunteer push was aided, abetted, and in some cases led by the federal government. Agents of the Freedmen’s Bureau and officers of the army of occupation did more than protect the new black schools against an often hostile public. Sometimes they actively helped create black schools, gave them financial support, and taught in them.

But the first literacy movement was not solely an effort generated from the North. The freedmen themselves took most of the initiative for creating black schools. Along with family reunification and establishing churches, education was one of their top priorities. They employed as teachers anyone, black or white, they could find. Any literate person was a candidate teacher, and judging by the number of schools established, it is probably only a slight exaggeration to say that almost everyone who was literate in the black community (and many who were not) must have lent a hand in some way.

Many of the schools created by these various means were informal affairs — gatherings at churches, homes, or other convenient locations. But in most areas the freedmen demonstrated how much they valued education by erecting proper schools – special buildings for education, fully equipped by the standards of the time. They took pride in these new institutions, and they often built them, as they did their churches, with their own hands.

There are several important things to recognize about this first national literacy movement:

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent thumbnail sketch of the first literacy movement as well as references to leading scholarship related to it, refer to: Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* ( New York: Harper &Row, 1988) pp. 96-100.

First, it was an outstanding success. The freedmen flocked to the schools. The demand was so great that there were concerns about a shortage of teachers, books, and facilities.

Second, the first literacy movement was in large part an *adult* literacy crusade. Children, of course, attended the schools, but educating adults was at least as great a concern. The most immediate educational need in the former slave states was to help black adults establish themselves economically, socially, and in civic society. And the adults attended in large numbers. They attended despite the fact that most of them worked dawn to dusk six or seven days a week.

Third, the mission of the schools was clearly understood and articulated by blacks and whites alike. The mission was to reverse the logic of education under slavery. It was to use education to give blacks an economic opportunity beyond that of field labor, to protect them from being cheated, and to help them become informed citizens. Education would help empower them to form their own associations, advance their own causes, and manage their own affairs. Overall, the mission of the black schools was to help former slaves develop self-esteem as a fully equal and socially effective people.

To achieve all of this, the aspirations for education in the first national literacy movement were broader than simply eradicating illiteracy. The schools established for adults and children attempted to provide as much education as possible. Certainly they taught the rudiments of reading, but they also taught reading beyond the basic level, using the King James Bible and textbooks that included selections from the finest English literature. They taught mathematics and some of its applications, such as weights and measures and even surveying. They taught civics, history, and geography. In short, they aspired to teach what white schools taught, although the goal often was not realized. At the time, this standard was not unrealistic: until the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century the average white child received at best six to eight years of primary education seasonally administered.

How much did the students of the black schools learn? We do not know precisely, because record keeping was spotty. But we do know that some of their graduates went on to become middle-class business owners, clergy, doctors, lawyers, and, in some cases, college graduates. These achievements by themselves showed the “logic of slavery” to be a lie.

But the major reason for uncertainty about what students of the first national literacy movement learned is that it came to a fairly abrupt end. It lasted for a decade at most. *Why* did it end?

The reasons were simple. The Northern liberals who supported the literacy movement lost interest. The fad was over. Those who did retain an interest in black education increasingly turned their attention to higher education – to founding and endowing black colleges and vocational schools. In addition, the first literacy



movement was supported by the institutions of Reconstruction in the South: the Freedmen's Bureau and the army of occupation. With the end of Reconstruction, the Freedman's Bureau was abolished and the army was withdrawn. The federal role in supporting black education withered away. Finally, most of the former slave states provided camouflage for waning national interest by offering to support black education at public expense. In most cases, the offers were little more than tokenism. The state-supported schools created were both separate and radically unequal.

The black community was largely left to fend for itself in the educational arena. And it tried. Volunteer teachers, local subscriptions for buildings and materials, and community-created schools were part of the effort. But the black community was poor. It could not maintain the momentum that national aid, both public and private, had created. A few national institutions, such as the NAACP, continued to advocate the cause, with limited results until the 1950's.

In short, the first national literacy movement ended because of a growing indifference by the educated classes, both North and South. It was abandoned by the federal government, and the states lacked a commitment to it.

The results of the collapse of the first national literacy movement are well known. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century the under-education of blacks in America was a national disgrace. It limited black economic opportunities, kept blacks at the bottom of the social scale, marginalized them in civic life, fueled the fires of racism, bred despair, and in general relegated them to the status of second-class citizens. Lack of education was not the only cause of the continuing tragedy of black Americans after slavery, but blacks and whites, North and South, were quite straightforward in admitting that they believed it was a major factor in the equation that "kept the black folks down."

#### Bridge to the Second Literacy Movement

Not until the 1950's did the United States make a principled commitment to equal educational opportunity. The principle was most memorably articulated in the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education. It took a full decade for major progress to be made in efforts toward achieving educational equality—though the effort from then on was primarily directed at improving public schools and increasing opportunities for children to learn.

At about the same time the nation awakened to the need to improve its schools, a growing number of influential people began to take seriously another problem of educational equity that only a few private groups had previously grasped. The problem was that a major adult literacy problem existed in America, just as it had after the Civil War—and it knew no color line. Many millions of adult Americans were found to be seriously undereducated, and a small portion were completely "illiterate." Most were undereducated in the sense that they had

significantly less education than their fellow citizens — often so much less that they could not function effectively in American society. Those with the most serious educational problems were almost universally poor, socially marginalized, civically ignored, cheated and abused, lacking in self-esteem, and increasingly hopeless. In short, then as today, America contained an educational underclass – another group of second-class citizens in almost every sense of the word.

In many cases, the population of undereducated adults recognized in the 1960s did not *appear* to be as desperate as the freedmen. Rising national wealth allowed many to eke out a living in low wage jobs with no future. But in the worst cases, their conditions were desperate indeed. The adults among America's dispossessed – the homeless, welfare mothers, heads of households that are chronically unemployed – were disproportionately undereducated.

As was the case with undereducated blacks in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and thereafter, education was only one of the problems of this population. But the fact that it *was* one of their major problems is evident from looking at who they are.

Most fell into one or more of four categories:

Some were people who, for a variety of reasons, entered school unready to learn. A substantial body of research has shown that some children start school behind their peers in terms of their educational development, and those who start behind rarely catch up. In fact, they often give up on school altogether.

Others were the products of grossly inferior inner city and rural schools. It has long been the mission of educational reformers to upgrade these schools, and some progress has been made. However, millions of today's adults have attended them, and vast numbers received instruction far below the national norm.

A third category were people with learning disabilities, who until recently were rarely diagnosed and for whom there were and still are inadequate programs of treatment.

The final category consisted of immigrants. Increasingly, a significant portion of our immigrant population began coming to the United States with some combination of very limited ability in English, limited education and literacy in their home countries, and a limited understanding of how to function successfully in American society.

Whatever other problems the population of undereducated adults so described may have, they were not likely to overcome those problems without greatly improved education. And they needed education that was at the same level obtained by most other Americans. How could it conceivably be otherwise? After all, they were faced with the same problems other Americans faced, and they required the same skills if they were to seize the opportunities of American life.

Despite their “disadvantaged” circumstances, then as now, there was no reason to believe these adults could not learn as well or as much as anyone else. Those who entered school unprepared or who attended inferior schools were simply never given the opportunity to learn. Generations of immigrants with limited English ability and education have always distinguished themselves educationally in America, when they have been given the opportunity. And most learning handicaps can be overcome if they receive proper attention.

Realization in the 1960s that the nation had a large population of undereducated adults was one of the fruits of the War on Poverty. Looking at conditions in poor communities, the “poverty warriors” concluded that improved education would have to be part of any solution. They realized that improving schools for poor youngsters was part of the solution, too, although this could not by itself solve the problem. Moreover schools were for children, and many school-based notions were not applicable to adult circumstances. Beyond the struggling volunteer groups, there were few organizations to serve educationally disadvantaged adults.

From these realizations, the seeds were sown for the second national adult literacy movement. The immediate national response was a typical War-on-Poverty strategy: a tiny program of grants-in-aid to states to establish and operate adult education and literacy programs. The states took the money with varying degrees of enthusiasm and created an embryonic public system to serve undereducated adults.

The accomplishments of this system were not trivial, but funding on the order of only a few tens of millions of dollars a year barely made a dent in the problem. Still, improving the lot of undereducated adult Americans was at least nominally established as a national purpose.

### The Second Literacy Movement Unfolds

Then something remarkable happened. In the late 1980’s an adult literacy enthusiasm swept through America that was analogous to the first national literacy movement. As with the first movement, this new enthusiasm was sparked initially by socially conscious elites. A respected and articulate First Lady of the United States took up the cause. It was adopted by the mass media and by business leaders and civic organizations of every stripe. Soon others joined in – First Ladies in some of the states, philanthropies, research organizations. Literacy became a standard story in newspapers and on television. Volunteering for literacy came into vogue. A few major foundations felt the need to make literacy part of their portfolios. New national leadership organizations sprang up. Another literacy fad was in the making.

Again, the federal government played a crucial role. Literacy was elevated on the priority lists of the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and HHS. At the

Department of Education, state grant funds were greatly increased and new programmatic directions were adopted. At Labor and HHS support for adult education was incorporated into mainstream programs. In 1991, Congress passed new legislation – The National Literacy Act with its centerpiece National Institute for Literacy— greatly expanding the federal role in adult education.

This rapid expansion of federal activism was made possible, in part, because adult education was seen as a bi-partisan issue. Democrats saw improving education for adults as an expression of their traditional concerns about the plight of the disadvantaged. Republicans could easily sign up for this form of help to the disadvantaged because it was a way to help people help themselves.

Also, as in the first literacy movement, the beneficiaries of the second wave enthusiasm took an active role. Grassroots organizations serving the disadvantaged took up the literacy challenge, and new grassroots organizations were created especially for this purpose. Their goals and means were as various and hard to chronicle as those of black communities in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But, like those communities, they accepted as much responsibility as they could bear.

Finally, as in the first literacy movement, the aspirations of the second went far beyond basic literacy in the strict sense of the term. Adult Basic Education in reading, writing, math, and ESL was offered, and Adult Secondary Education aimed to produce high school graduate equivalency diplomas — although the two efforts were often inadequately linked. Moreover, there were the beginnings of meaningful linkages to vocational education, firm-specific job training, and higher education.

But the second national literacy movement differed from the first in at least two important ways. First, the federal agencies involved often justified their expanded role in adult education not only in terms of principle, but also the self-interest of the nation as a whole. Officials at Education, Labor, and HHS claimed that helping undereducated adults improve their skills was an integral part of solving a whole host of problems, such as welfare dependence and a shortage of skilled workers. Helping undereducated adults would reduce welfare costs to the public and possibly help boost the overall economy. In addition, a whole new field, family literacy, was created in the belief that elevating the educational level of parents—and helping them and their children learn together—would improve the future performance of both. All these considerations were important driving forces behind the National Literacy Act, and they were used to justify increased private commitments as well.

Another way the second national literacy movement differed from the first was that many of the states made substantial efforts to respond. Nationwide, state funding soon outstripped federal and private funding combined. Ambitious state literacy campaigns were planned and executed by state governments and private organizations. These took many different forms. Collectively, the states served as experimental laboratories for innovation in adult education and literacy.

In short, beginning in the 1980s, the country witnessed a major and highly visible national movement to address the problems of educationally-disadvantaged adults on many fronts. As with the first movement, it was justified on the grounds of both pragmatism and principle. This time, the principle was outrage at the nation's overall educational inadequacies and the dismal fate of the underclass they bred. Inadequate adult education was seen as part and parcel of the general problem. And, pragmatically, there was a desire, as had been the case after the Civil War, to make productive workers from the educationally disadvantaged and to integrate them into civil society. Pragmatic concern was given a sharper edge, however — this time the nation as a whole felt that it had a self-interest in improving adult education. In short, taken together these rationales constituted a condemnation of second-class citizenship and of a two-tiered society.

Like the first national literacy movement, the second met with an outstanding response from its intended beneficiaries. People enrolled in adult education classes by the millions. Undereducated adults understood the importance of education, and the second movement accomplished a great deal for those who enrolled. Far more instruction of higher quality was provided to far more adults than ever before in the past, and by most reckonings, it benefited their lives. Nevertheless, it is hard to assess how *much* was accomplished.

### Literacy Today

Why is assessing the accomplishments difficult? The main reason is that, like the first adult literacy movement, the second came to an abrupt halt. The manner in which this happened was also similar. For no particularly good reason, most socially conscious elites lost interest. First Ladies, the media, and philanthropists no longer signed up for it. Literacy became old news for the media. Most foundations and other major charities have quietly dropped it from their lists.

The federal agencies balked at some of their new responsibilities under the National Literacy Act of 1991. They backed away from research showing the severity of the problem and sidelined literacy in welfare and job training programs. Although the Education Department's state grant funds continued to increase, they are still far short of the \$1 billion per year set as an initial target by the 1991 Act. Most other literacy programs administered by the Department of Education were terminated or failed to grow, although its research investments in the field increased somewhat. Funding for family literacy increased, but commitment to it at the federal level is still in doubt.

Some of the states have tried to take up the slack, and a few have actually succeeded, although there has been episodic backsliding even among former leadership states. The grassroots and volunteer literacy organizations have been integrated into state programs in some areas, but in other areas they face a difficult struggle.

As was the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the second campaign has been abandoned under camouflage. National leaders and ordinary citizens seem to have reverted to the conclusion that the problem of undereducated adults can best be addressed by improving the education of children. In fact, they appear to believe that it should almost exclusively be addressed in that way – and many millions of adults with serious educational problems have been rendered almost invisible by the imperative to improve our public schools.

The result of these recent developments is that the national literacy effort in America today is not even remotely comparable to that of just a decade ago. This does not mean there are no worthwhile activities. On the contrary, with the additional capitalization provided in the late 1980s and early 1990s, adult literacy provision in America is certainly better today than ever before. Extraordinary people are providing extraordinary service in many places.

But the effort is still far short of anything approaching adequacy. There is a shortage of properly trained and compensated teachers, of appropriate programs, of accountability measures, and of stable, far-reaching commitments. The field of adult education and literacy is still lacking all those forms of educational excellence to which the nation aspires in elementary and secondary education.

The most tragic parallel between the second literacy movement and the first is that both were cut short just as they were beginning to succeed. Having lost visibility in the public and private spheres, adult education and literacy has almost vanished from the national priority list, and as a result the literacy field is frustrated in its efforts to make major advances. This does not mean there has been no progress, only that any progress is achieved against overwhelming odds. Like the black schools of earlier eras, adult education and literacy has been given a small claim on public resources and largely left to fend for itself.

It is a cruel irony that the deficiencies of a system left half-built are often used to argue against investing in it further. Those who do not understand the case for it sometimes speak of adult education as a failed enterprise that is unworthy of serious attention. This amounts to blaming the victim. It is like using the limitations of the old black schools to argue for racial inferiority, or using the inadequacies of many of today's schools to argue against educational reform.

There is no inherent reason why the situation just described should improve. A nation that managed to ignore the education of black Americans for so long can just as easily neglect adult education and literacy now. But if it does so, it will have to live with the consequences— a sizable under-productive population with limited economic prospects, millions of alienated Americans, social divisiveness, and victimization of persons who are undereducated and lack the tools to represent their own interests in the political arena.

## Looking To The Future

Twice in its history the United States has stepped up to the plate of adult education and literacy, taken a few mighty swings, and then left the park before the game was over. In both instances, the case for literacy was the same, and it was unassailable. At bottom, the case was a matter of principle:

Adequate education is essential to the economic prospects, the social standing, the civic participation, the personal safety, and the self-esteem of every person. Central to American democratic values is the equal worth of each and every man and woman. To deprive these Americans adequate education is to diminish their worth – in their own eyes, and in very practical ways, in the eyes of the nation. This would be a grave violation of one of this country's most important founding principles.

What would it take to reverse the present course? The answer depends on how we define an adequate education for today's adult Americans. Economic research on this question is clear. The 6<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> grade education to which the freedmen aspired has been inadequate for years. Volumes of labor market research have shown for over a decade that there is precious little economic, social, or personal future for anyone in America today who does not have at least some post-secondary education. And this will become increasingly true in the years to come.

This means that the adult population of the United States needing basic literacy and further education services numbers in the many tens of millions. We delude ourselves if we believe that equal education opportunity in America means anything less than ensuring that all adults can cross the bar of achieving at least some post-secondary education, in one way or another. Some will not want to try. Some will fail. But the hard-headed goal for adult education and literacy in America should be to provide realistic opportunities for as many adults to succeed as possible.

Past literacy movements have aimed at much more than providing basic reading, writing, speaking, and math instruction, although these are of the greatest importance for those who need basic skills help. Their goal has been to provide realistic educational opportunity for all adult Americans in all aspects of learning and at all levels – a continuum of education that ideally can help any adult at any level of attainment ascend as far as he or she wants to go up the educational ladder. The continuum must begin with the most educationally disadvantaged – called “bringing up the bottom” in recent OECD studies — and extend throughout the range of adult educational needs and aspirations.

Will this be expensive? Yes! Will it take a great reordering of programs and priorities? Certainly! Can it be achieved quickly? No! But it needs to be one of the great challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And it must be undertaken carefully, systematically, and always with the ultimate goal in plain sight.

Today such a commitment may seem unrealistic, just as adequate education for other Americans seemed unrealistic in the 1890s. But for the same reasons that we committed ourselves to the cause of black education and to the second adult literacy movement, we need to recommit ourselves to this goal. And we must pursue it by the same means. The national good requires no less.

Socially conscious elites need to rejoin the cause. The press and the public need to be reenlisted. The major philanthropies must reopen their doors.

The federal government should become *much* more strongly engaged. School reform is important, to be sure, but it should not be used as an excuse to neglect adult education. We educate our children because they will become the workers, citizens, parents, and communities of tomorrow. But the educational needs of undereducated adults are just as real, and they are immediate. Adults at any time are the workers, citizens, parents, and communities *of today*.

*Today's adults also play a critically important role in creating the world in which our children will mature and which they will eventually inherit. If we wish to ensure that "no child is left behind" in education, we must ensure that the adults who guide them are not left behind either.*

### Concluding Thoughts

Adult education is a separate and unequal part of the national educational enterprise. Yet, education for adults deserves parity with any other form of education on the government's priority list. It is hard to think of a practical or principled reason that it should not have that status.

To achieve parity, the federal government must again become a leader. The same is true of the states – all of the states. At present they have the largest cash and manpower stake in adult education, and thus the greatest reason to demand that it succeed.

Community groups that serve the disadvantaged also need to become re-energized. There is no way to underestimate the importance of push from the grassroots to provide what the undereducated so manifestly need and desire.

We should learn from the lessons of the two great national literacy movements. It would be folly to keep relying on periodic, passing enthusiasms to bring about progress in adult education or any other aspect of American life. Adult education and literacy need to be more strongly bound to the national agenda.



Strong and durable laws are needed that will institutionalize the national commitment. These laws should clearly state that the goal of equal educational opportunity in America includes adults and they should provide the means to achieve that goal. Among the means should be much higher levels of funding, incentives to institutionalize commitment at federal and state levels, and measures of accountability that are appropriate and fair. These efforts should be designed to build and sustain a system of services more commensurate with the need, a system in which any undereducated adult can progress from the lowest educational level through some post-secondary education.

Another crucial lesson is that it is essential to institutionalize commitment in the private sector. Strong and lasting advocacy groups need to be formed, like those that support other successful public or private causes. These groups must possess the means and determination to mobilize and target political support for adult education and literacy – to demonstrate to political leaders that those adults in need of further education comprise a large bloc of constituents and voters. And, too, national leaders, charities, foundations, the press, and ordinary citizens must commit themselves to supporting these adult education advocacy groups.

We should not falter in insisting that the mission of adult education and literacy is grounded on the highest national principles. That is the irreducible rock on which to build. But we must also court the muse of self-interest more cunningly than we have before.

The arguments about the benefits of adult education to our economy, to public finances, and to civic life and public safety that were made a decade ago were never fully researched or supported. We need to invest *much* more in empirical investigations of how self-interest and principle intersect. However, although this is a high priority, we should not await the outcomes of such studies to move ahead. There is sufficient evidence already to mandate an irrevocable national commitment to equal educational opportunities for all adults.

The second literacy campaign came as far as it did because adult education and literacy was, as it should be, a truly bi-partisan issue. The cause is not driven by traditional liberal concerns for the plight of the disadvantaged or traditional conservative concerns for self-reliance. It is driven by the inalienable right of all Americans to be free and equal.

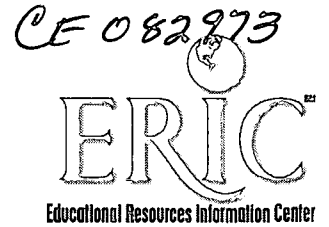
The events of September 11 challenged all of us to look to our fundamental values – to reach for the best that is in each and every one of us. The need for adult education and literacy challenges us to act on those values – to rise above personal interest, partisanship, or ideology so that every individual in this nation can share in and help shape the American dream.

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