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## ABSTRACT

This document describes a research study of the status of basic adult literacy services in New England, particularly the inadequate link between adult basic education (ABE) and work- force preparation programs. The report describes a system that has failed to adapt to the region's increased need for articulation among English as a Second Language Programs (ESOL), adult education and secondary education. Following an executive summary and a section describing the need for ABE services, there are sections on four major areas considered to be significant if New England is to transform adult basic education from an inadequately funded, stand-alone cottage industry into a institutionalized, professional delivery system characterized by effective partnerships. These are the major areas: (1) funding and capacity; (2) mission and performance measures; (3) pathways to advancement; and (4) special populations. The report concludes with 14 recommendations for change, including the following: develop a clear mission for ABE that includes a public role in economic development and poverty reduction; create pathways to educational and economic advancement; create sustainable adult education systems for prison inmates; provide adequate funding; and publish state report cards. There are nine tables. Notes, list of interviewees and the research methodology are appended. The bibliography lists 22 references. (AJ)

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# Rising to the Literacy Challenge

## Building Adult Education Systems in New England

by Marty Liebowitz, Amy Robins,  
and Jerry Rubin, Jobs for the Future

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April 2002

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in New England**

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and Jerry Rubin, Jobs for the Future**



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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Preface</b> .....	v
<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	vii
<b>PART I. Need for Adult Basic Education Services</b> .....	1
The New Literacy Challenge .....	3
<b>PART II. Funding and Capacity of State ABE Systems</b> .....	5
Funding Issues .....	6
Instructional Capacity .....	9
<b>PART III. Mission and Performance Standards</b> .....	14
Alternative Visions .....	14
A Comprehensive Approach .....	15
WIA, Performance Standards, and Outcome Measures .....	16
<b>PART IV. Pathways to Advancement</b> .....	19
Creating Pathways to Advancement from ABE .....	19
<b>PART V. Special Populations</b> .....	24
Immigrants: Adult Basic Education and English as a Second Language .....	24
The Corrections System: Meeting the Adult Basic Education Challenge for Inmates .....	26
<b>PART VI. Recommendations for Changes</b> .....	28
Mission and Performance Measures .....	28
Pathways to Advancement .....	29
Services for Special Populations .....	29
Funding and Capacity .....	30
<b>Notes</b> .....	31
<b>References</b> .....	32
<b>List of Interviewees</b> .....	33
<b>Appendix: Methodology</b> .....	34
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	35

# Rising to the Literacy Challenge

## Building Adult Education Systems in New England

### PREFACE

by Blenda J. Wilson

The urgency behind *Rising to the Literacy Challenge* is deceptively simple: New England cannot sustain a thriving economy or a healthy polity when 41 percent of its adults cannot participate effectively in the economy. The well-being of the entire region is at risk when four out of ten adults cannot read a bar graph or interpret a flight schedule or understand a credit card bill.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation commissioned Jobs for the Future to research the status of basic adult literacy services in New England for several reasons: first, this research would help inform the Foundation's grants program in adult literacy; second, Jobs for the Future's expertise represents an important link between adult education and work force preparation programs; and finally, we believed that the credibility Jobs for the Future brings to this inquiry would assure that the report would influence public leaders and organizations beyond the Foundation. *Rising to the Literacy Challenge* more than fulfills our expectations; it is a rallying cry for a renewed commitment to providing adults with the competencies necessary to function in our contemporary society. We are indebted to Jobs for the Future for the clarity and insight it has brought to this important public policy issue.

Contrary to the poignant media images that depict adult illiteracy as an individual problem that can be overcome by personal determination and will, Jobs for the Future documents that ours is a system of under-resourced, isolated institutions whose services and mission have remained relatively unchanged for more than 100 years. The report describes a system that has failed to adapt to the region's increased need for articulation among ESOL programs, adult education, and secondary education; it describes a system that virtually ignores the need to link sustainable adult literacy services and occupational skills training for the

increased population of prison inmates with an average sixth-grade literacy level. In short, ours is a system that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for an individual to navigate among many providers of separate pieces of what ought to be a coherent continuum of education and training.

However, *Rising to the Literacy Challenge* is not a report limited to describing problems. It is more importantly a clearly documented call for the creation of articulated pathways to educational and economic advancement for adults from entry-level literacy training or ESOL services all the way to postsecondary skills and credentials. Jobs for the Future recognizes that many different organizations can contribute to this goal. The report highlights examples of current efforts to create seamless transitions for adult learners through partnerships among various organizations.

The shortage of literate, skilled adults in New England is a significant public policy challenge, but one that can be overcome through local partnerships among multiple educational and skills training institutions. *Rising to the Challenge* provides both a wake-up call and a set of recommendations to accomplish that goal. The Nellie Mae Education Foundation and Jobs for the Future hope the report will promote dialogue and collaboration in planning and funding comprehensive approaches to adult basic education, skills training, and postsecondary education. Lawmakers, public agency leaders, educators and program providers, employers, and, indeed, funders, *together*, can achieve a more literate, more highly skilled adult population in New England.

Blenda J. Wilson, Ph.D.

April 15, 2002

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# Rising to the Literacy Challenge

## Building Adult Education Systems in New England

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**N**EW ENGLAND faces a major skills crisis that both limits the ability of adults to meet their families' basic needs and threatens the region's long-term economic health. More than 4.2 million adults—41 percent of the adult population—lack the literacy skills to succeed as workers, parents, and citizens in today's knowledge-based society (see Table A).<sup>1</sup> Among them are adults who lack a high school diploma, immigrants with low English proficiency, and high school graduates who lack the skills needed for the new economy.

Based on the findings of the regional analysis described in this report, a number of recommendations arose on the need for adult basic education in New England and the region's capacity to meet it. First among these is an ambitious yet achievable short-term benchmark: increasing capacity to meet the demand for adult basic education and for providing resources and incentives for improving system performance and student outcomes. This would make it possible to provide the more intensive services necessary for those actively demanding services to achieve meaningful learning gains.<sup>2</sup>

### A NEW MISSION FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

Adult basic education services can play a critical role in helping solve the region's skills shortage by preparing adults with low literacy skills for family-supporting employment. More than one million New England adults lack a high school diploma or have limited English language proficiency. Most of these adults have very low literacy skills and are

**Table A. Need for ABE Services in New England**

	Population at NALS Level 1 and 2*	Number Accessing ABE and ESOL**	Unmet Need
Connecticut	1,100,000	30,844	1,044,000
Maine	400,000	12,430	388,000
Massachusetts	1,920,000	24,053	1,900,000
New Hampshire	310,000	5,962	303,000
Rhode Island	370,000	5,592	362,000
Vermont	160,000	4,436	157,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,260,000</b>	<b>83,317</b>	<b>4,154,000</b>

\* Source: NALS data, as calculated by Stephen Reder, "Synthetic Estimates of Adult Literacy Proficiency," available at [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org); 1992 statistical estimate based on population 16+.

\*\* Source: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island 2001 state statistical reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Vermont 2000 state statistical report to the U.S. Department of Education. A participant is an adult who receives at least 12 hours of instruction. See the Appendix: Methodology for more information.

### KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations for system change presented here are designed to transform adult basic education in New England from an inadequately funded, stand-alone cottage industry into a more institutionalized, professional delivery system that has effective partnerships with other educational and skills training institutions.

The recommendations are divided into the four areas covered by this report:

- Mission and performance measures;
- Pathways to advancement;
- Special populations; and
- Funding and capacity.

**Table B. An Achievable Short-Term Benchmark:  
Provide 150 Instructional for Those Actively Demanding Services**

	Current Resources*	Cost of 150 Hours for Those Actively Demanding Services	Additional Resources Needed
Connecticut	\$34,647,039	\$48,246,000	\$13,598,961
Maine	\$3,682,815	\$12,192,000	\$8,509,185
Massachusetts	\$49,507,121	\$84,018,000	\$34,510,879
New Hampshire	\$3,314,227	\$7,230,000	\$3,915,773
Rhode Island	\$3,914,974	\$15,000,000	\$11,085,026
Vermont	\$3,756,053	\$20,568,000	\$16,811,947
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$95,139,414</b>	<b>\$187,254,000</b>	<b>\$88,431,771</b>

\* Includes public resources only; does not include other funds that may supplement programs.

Source: 2001 state narrative reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Jobs for the Future interviews with state directors of adult education. Funding figures are from PY2001, with the exception of Maine's, which are from PY2000.

unprepared for postsecondary education or skills training programs that would lead toward success in the labor market.

Adult basic education enables adults with low literacy to achieve high school level skills and credentials. When ABE services were first offered 100 years ago, few Americans graduated from high school and basic literacy was sufficient education for most jobs paying enough to support a family. Adult basic literacy services, by themselves, could enable adults with low literacy to develop the skills and credentials necessary for family self-sufficiency.

However, ABE services designed solely to help adults improve their skills and attain credentials up to a high school level no longer meet the needs of individuals—or of the higher-skill-level labor market. In the past 20 years, structural changes in the economy

## **MISSION AND PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR ABE PROGRAMS**

**FINDING:** There is lack of consensus within the New England ABE community about the mission and purpose of adult basic education. How the differences are resolved will strongly affect the ability of ABE to contribute to achieving public priorities for economic development and poverty reduction.

**FINDING:** The ABE mission and scope of services have remained relatively unchanged for more than 100 years. If ABE's mission and services better matched the social and economic realities of a knowledge-based society, adult basic education would play a more effective role in helping to solve the skills shortage that threatens New England's economic future.

**FINDING:** Structural changes in the economy have created a new purpose and vision for adult basic education: to help adults develop the postsecondary skills and credentials that are required for most family-supporting employment.

**FINDING:** True integration of ABE with other educational and skills training services for adults requires a partnership among equals, built on mutual self-interest and a mutual commitment to the adults they serve. Progress is unlikely to occur until ABE providers and state directors believe that integration is in the best interests of the adults and other stakeholders they serve.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

■ **Create a clear mission for adult basic education that explicitly includes a public role for ABE in economic development and reducing poverty.** Adult basic education goals and performance standards should promote a dual mission: 1) to help individuals meet their personal learning goals, improve their economic outcomes, and promote advancement to further education and skills training; and 2) to meet labor market and employer skill needs.

■ **Develop outcome-based performance standards that drive change.** States should develop performance standards that measure the short-term and long-term educational and economic outcomes central to ABE's dual mission.

■ **Develop interagency data systems.** Performance standards are only meaningful if relevant outcome data can be collected, analyzed, and used to implement improvements in curricula and learning.

have created a new purpose and challenge for adult basic education. Today, higher skills and credentials are required for most family-supporting jobs, and skill requirements continue to increase. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the skills needed to drive economic development and growth.

Under these dramatically different social and economic conditions, adult basic education has an equally valuable, but different, role to play, building upon its expertise in providing quality education for adults with very low literacy. That role is to help adults develop the literacy, math skills, and English language proficiency that prepare them for the further education and skills training needed in today's economy.

To achieve this mission, adult basic education will have to change from a stand-alone system, disconnected from other education and workforce development systems, to one that plays a vital role in partnerships with other educational and skills training institutions, together creating pathways to advancement to postsecondary skills and credentials. By moving in this new direction, adult basic education will be better prepared to play an effective role in meeting two key, interrelated public priorities:

*Reducing the level of poverty* by helping adults with low literacy take an important step toward developing the skills and credentials needed for family-supporting employment; and

*Promoting economic development* by reducing labor market skill shortages.

## MEETING THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION CHALLENGE

Adult basic education, as presently funded and organized, is ill-equipped to meet New England's skills shortage or to ready adults with limited literacy skills for employment that can support a family. While promising practices can be found in New England and other regions, few partnerships among adult basic education services, community colleges, and skills training programs provide clear, institutionalized pathways to advancement that adults can navigate all the way from basic literacy to postsecondary education and skills training. ABE services can no longer meet the needs of adults—or the labor market—as a stand-alone system that helps people

**Table C. Demand for Adult Literacy and ESOL Services**

	Population at NALS Level 1 & 2*	Estimated Demand= 20% of NALS 1 & 2**	Adults Accessing and ESOL Services***	Unmet Demand
Connecticut	1,073,000	214,600	30,844	183,756
Maine	400,000	80,000	12,430	67,570
Massachusetts	1,924,000	384,800	24,053	360,747
New Hampshire	309,000	61,800	5,962	55,838
Rhode Island	368,000	73,600	5,592	68,008
Vermont	161,000	32,200	4,436	27,764
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,235,000</b>	<b>847,000</b>	<b>83,317</b>	<b>763,683</b>

\* Source: NALS data, as calculated by Stephen Reder, "Synthetic Estimates of Adult Literacy Proficiency," available at [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org); 1992 statistical estimate based on population 16+.

\*\* Source: Based on the Massachusetts Adult Education Committee's finding that 20 percent of adults at NALS level 1 and 2 acknowledge a need to improve their literacy skills and are either actively or latently in demand of ABE services.

\*\*\* Source: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island 2001 state statistical reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Vermont 2000 state statistical report to the U.S. Department of Education. A participant is an adult who receives at least 12 hours of instruction. See the Appendix: Methodology for more information.

develop skills and attain credentials only up to a high school level.

For adult basic education to play an effective role in meeting the new literacy challenge in New England, change must come in four key areas:

### 1. Develop a clear mission for ABE and establish performance measures consistent with that mission.

Adult basic education has a central role to play in helping more New England residents to achieve economic self-sufficiency and in securing the region's economic future. Adult basic education goals and performance standards should promote a dual mission: 1) to help individuals meet their personal learning goals, improve their economic outcomes, and promote advancement to further education and skills training; and 2) to meet labor market and employer skills needs.

### 2. Create pathways to advancement through partnerships with other educational and skills training institutions.

Adult basic education is no longer a final destination that enables students to develop all the skills and credentials needed for family-self-sufficiency. Rather, its role today must change to preparing adults with low literacy for further education and skills training and, in partnership with employers and with other



educational and skills training institutions, to creating seamless pathways that provide accessible transitions from ABE services to further education and skills training leading toward postsecondary credentials and industry-recognized certificates.

### **3. Give special populations access to continuum of literacy services.**

As the demand for English language classes continues to rise, many local literacy providers are being forced to make difficult tradeoffs between meeting the

demand for ESOL classes and serving ABE students. Immigrants are a critical new labor source for the slow-growing New England region.<sup>3</sup> For many, gaining English language skills is a critical first step towards transitioning to life in the United States. Programs that link work and learning and provide a continuum of learning opportunities will help immigrants achieve self-sufficiency and make significant contributions to our regional economy.

The number of inmates with low levels of literacy and educational achievement is significant. Connecticut,

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## **PATHWAYS TO ADVANCEMENT FROM ABE TO FURTHER LEARNING AND BETTER JOBS**

**FINDING:** Few institutionalized partnerships between adult basic education and other educational and skills training institutions in New England are designed to create seamless pathways to advancement from adult literacy to postsecondary education. With the growing importance of postsecondary skills and credentials, these pathways are critical to meeting labor market skill needs and helping adults qualify for family-supporting employment.

**FINDING:** State policies and funding provide neither incentives nor resources for ABE services, postsecondary education, and skills training programs to build partnerships that create pathways to advancement. There are promising examples of pathways to advancement, but these will remain the exception rather than the rule without strong incentives to change and the resources necessary to do so.

**FINDING:** Building pathways to advancement through institutionalized partnerships is a mutual responsibility that requires concerted action by adult basic education and other educational and skills training institutions.

**FINDING:** Rather than considering community colleges as an alternative to the current system of adult basic education, there is clear potential to build pathways to a full continuum of adult education and skills training by supporting innovative partnerships between ABE providers and community colleges.

**FINDING:** Collaboration with employers to assess workplace skill needs and develop curriculum and contextual learning practices can ensure that adults learn skills that are actually in demand. While some ABE providers are responding to employer needs, they lack the resources and know-how to proactively set up workplace-based programs, and few systems are in place to support structured relationships between adult basic education and employers.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

■ **Create pathways to educational and economic advancement.** Local initiatives should be launched in several the New England states to create articulated pathways to advancement through institutionalized partnerships among adult basic education services, community colleges, skills training institutions, and employers.

■ **Expand high-quality, workplace-based learning.** Comprehensive systems of workplace-based learning should be developed, building on exemplary practices in New England and other regions, that provide contextual learning, teach high-performance skills, expand access to economic opportunities, and address labor market skill needs.

■ **Develop partnership strategies for integrating adult education and skills training.** States should promote and support local partnerships among multiple educational and skills training institutions by creating interagency mechanisms to plan, fund, and oversee a comprehensive approach to adult basic education, skills training, and postsecondary education.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont have responded by creating ABE programs at several of their prison facilities. Those inmates receiving education and skills training have demonstrated a lower recidivism rate than those who do not receive such services. By providing quality education and training programs in prison as well as transition programs that connect inmates to work opportunities upon release, we can reduce recidivism and help those with a prison record become contributing members of society.

#### **4. Provide adequate funding and capacity to meet the demand for adult basic education services.**

The estimated demand for ABE services in New England is approximately 850,000 adults (see Table C). Adult basic education now serves about 83,000 adults, or about 10 percent of the demand. It does so without providing enough instructional hours for students to

achieve learning gains of even one grade level. Increasing state and local resources to provide a level of instruction that would have a meaningful impact on the educational achievement of those 83,000 adults is a challenging but achievable short-term benchmark.

Demand for services persists, even given the dramatic changes since research for this report began in March 2001, when large local and state budget surpluses were common and a tight labor market made it difficult for employers to find qualified workers at every level. Clearly, major shifts have occurred, yet the skills shortage has not disappeared and poses a serious, long-term threat to the economic health of New England and its families.

It is now more important than ever to provide adequate and stable funding for adult basic education programs. These resources are needed to allow pro-

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## **TARGETED SERVICES TO MEET THE LITERACY NEEDS OF SPECIAL POPULATIONS**

**FINDING:** Demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages is rising more rapidly than demand for other ABE services and has outpaced capacity.

**FINDING:** Increased demand for ESOL is crowding out other adult literacy services. Immigrants with limited English proficiency are more proactive in getting services, and many providers have chosen to put resources into ESOL services and reduce other programs.

**FINDING:** ESOL students often start at very low literacy levels. There is a need for a full continuum of high-quality ESOL services that allows students to progress through multiple levels of ESOL classes and enter articulated pathways to adult literacy and adult secondary education. ESOL should be a step toward further education and skills training, not a final destination.

**FINDING:** For prison inmates, who have an average sixth-grade literacy level, there is a great need for sustainable adult literacy services that are linked to occupational skills training. Effective transitions to further education and skills training when former inmates reenter their communities are critical to success, as are supports that assist with reintegration to society (e.g., housing, family counseling, substance-abuse prevention).

**FINDING:** There is evidence that high-quality ABE can reduce the likelihood that inmates will return to prison after they are released.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

#### **■ Provide a full continuum of quality ESOL services.**

There should be easily accessible pathways within adult basic education from ESOL to adult literacy, and from adult literacy to adult secondary education programs that lead to high school credentials.

#### **■ Create sustainable adult education systems for prison inmates.**

Services should build on and expand the school district model being used in those New England states that create fully functioning schools within prison facilities and provide stable resources. To reduce recidivism, adult education services for prison inmates should provide effective transitions to further education, skills training, and reentry to their communities following release.

grams to conduct long-term planning, increase the capacity of their services, support system changes needed to address program performance and student outcomes, and improve the ABE workforce which is primarily comprised of part-time teachers who are poorly paid and inadequately trained. Moreover, the

involvement of a broad range of stakeholders who are committed to advancing the role of adult basic education in improving economic outcomes for individuals and in meeting labor market skills needs is critical for building both public support and resources for ABE services.

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## **FUNDING FOR AND CAPACITY OF ABE SERVICES**

**FINDING:** Adult basic education services in New England resemble a stand-alone cottage industry with few connections to further education and skills training.

**FINDING:** ABE instructors are, for the most part, poorly paid, part-time teachers who receive inadequate professional development and operate without certification standards.

**FINDING:** Declining state and federal revenues pose new challenges to funding for adult basic education. Yet strong, broad-based support for ABE services and improvement in performance are particularly important during economic downturns.

**FINDING:** Concerns for meeting labor market skill shortages and helping adults prepare for family-supporting employment are primary motivations for increased public support and resources for adult basic education. If economic development and poverty reduction are not important goals for ABE, it may lose a key source of increased public support.

**FINDING:** None of the states studied had a clear, unified policy for providing support services through ABE programs. The range of approaches included offering no support services, providing direct in-house services, and partnering with community based organizations. Meeting the personal, family, and work-related needs of ABE students is key to their continued participation in ABE services and to their ultimate ability to achieve literacy goals and objectives.

**FINDING:** Adult basic education services in New England have too little funding to meet the need for services or to provide an intensity of instruction for all students necessary to make a learning gain of at least one grade level.

**FINDING:** More money is needed, but money alone is not the answer. Transforming ABE services into sustainable systems will require funding that is predictable, long-term, and structured in ways that support innovation, improve instructional practices, and build partnerships that create pathways to advancement.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

■ **Create outcomes-based funding systems.** States should provide strong incentives for change by linking resources for system change to improving performance on specified short-term and long-term outcomes. These outcomes would include, for example, the numbers of students attaining high school credentials, finding employment, advancing in a career, and participating in further education and skills training, as well as the degree to which program graduates meet employer skill needs.

■ **Publish state report cards.** To drive change, promote continuous improvement, and build outcome-based accountability, state report cards can track and encourage progress in improving system performance and attaining key outcomes in ABE.

■ **Make adult basic education a more professional field.** States and ABE providers should collaboratively address key teacher-related issues that are barriers to improving instructional practice, reducing teacher turnover, and making the field attractive to qualified instructors as a long-term career.

■ **Support cooperative efforts to provide support services.** It is not practical for every ABE provider to directly provide student support services, yet these services are critical to student success. Collaborative efforts that allow ABE and other providers within a city or region to share support services would be more efficient. Funding should be made available to help providers establish community connections and identify resources for students in need.

■ **Provide adequate funding to meet demand for services.** As a short-term benchmark, state and local governments in New England should increase funding over three years to a level sufficient to provide 150 hours of instruction for those actively demanding services—an additional \$88 million.

■ **Provide resources to improve system performance.** States, community foundations, and other public and private institutions should support system change by making strategic investments to improve system performance and achieve better student outcomes.

## PART I

# Need for Adult Basic Education Services

**N**EW ENGLAND faces a major skills shortage that poses a long-term threat to the region's economic health and limits the ability of many adults to meet their families' basic needs. More than 4.2 million adults—41 percent of the adult population in New England—lack the literacy skills to succeed as workers, parents, and citizens in today's knowledge-based society (see Table 1). Among them are adults who lack a high school diploma, immigrants with low English proficiency, and a significant number of high school graduates who lack the skills needed for the new workforce environment.

Data from the National Adult Literacy Survey show the gravity of need. We consider that a score below Level 3 on the NALS reflects inadequate literacy skills, given broad agreement, on the part of the National Governors Association and many others, that the new economy requires literacy skills at that level or above to succeed in family-supporting employment.<sup>4</sup> In New England, 1.5 million adults are at NALS Level 1: they can read a little but not well enough to fill out an application, understand a food label, or read a simple story to a child; another 2.7 million are at Level 2: they can identify key pieces of

**Table 1. Population Needs and Rate of Access to Services**

	Population at NALS Level 1 & 2*	Percent of Total Population	Number Accessing ABE & ESOL**	Unmet Need	Percent of Need Met
Connecticut	1,073,000	41%	30,844	1,044,000	2.9%
Maine	400,000	42%	12,430	388,000	3.1%
Massachusetts	1,924,000	40%	24,053	1,900,000	1.3%
New Hampshire	309,000	36%	5,962	303,000	1.9%
Rhode Island	368,000	47%	5,592	362,000	1.5%
Vermont	161,000	37%	4,436	157,000	2.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,235,000</b>	<b>41%</b>	<b>83,317</b>	<b>4,154,000</b>	<b>2.0%</b>

\*Source: NALS data, as calculated by Stephen Reder, "Synthetic Estimates of Adult Literacy Proficiency," available at [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org); 1992 statistical estimate based on population 16+.

\*\*Source: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island 2001 state statistical reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Vermont 2000 state statistical report to the U.S. Department of Education. A participant is an adult who receives at least 12 hours of instruction. See the Appendix: Methodology for more information.

information and perform simple calculations such as those on an order form.

Adult basic education programs in the six New England states currently serve over 80,000 adults, or 2.0 percent of those who lack adequate literacy skills.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

1. Structural economic changes have significantly raised the skills required at every level of employment, including entry-level work. Many jobs that pay enough to support a family now require postsecondary education.
2. New England faces a long-term skills shortage that seriously threatens the region's economic health. More than 4.2 million adults—41 percent of the adult population in New England—lack the skills required in today's knowledge-based economy.
3. The current role and services of adult basic education in New England do not meet labor market skill needs or improve economic outcomes. With the growing importance of postsecondary education, partnerships that join ABE services to other educational and skills training institutions could create seamless pathways to advancement from adult literacy to postsecondary education.

Thus, just 2 out of every 100 adults who are in need receive services. In short, over 4.1 million New Englanders in need of services cannot get them.

Exacerbating the crisis is a trade-off between the number of people served and the intensity of services. For example, while Massachusetts served only 1.3 percent of adults with literacy skills below NALS Level 3, this was the result in part of a strategic decision to provide more intense services to fewer people. Other states serve a higher percentage but with services that are far less intense (see Part II).

Lack of adequate literacy skills is a problem nationally, not just in New England. The National Adult Literacy Survey found that 21 to 23 percent of the U.S. adult population, or about 44 million people, scored at Level 1. An additional 25 percent, or 50 million American adults, scored at Level 2. While some Level 2 literacy skills would have sufficed for many family-supporting jobs as recently as 20 years ago, success today requires NALS Level 3 skills. Approximately 95 million adults lack those skills.

Included in the NALS figures are the ever-growing numbers of immigrants and refugees with limited English skills. Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island have experienced the largest immigration of the six New England states, with net immigration from abroad of 147,834, 73,389, and 16,339, respectively, from 1990 to 1999.<sup>5</sup> In these states, foreign immigration has been critical to maintaining a labor

force adequate to fuel continued economic growth. For that reason, addressing the basic skills challenges of immigrants is critical to the region's economic health.

Other studies have found a similar gap between the skills of many Americans and the skills employers require. According to an annual survey conducted by the American Management Association, more than 33 percent of job applicants tested for basic skills by U.S. corporations in 1999 lacked the necessary reading, writing, and math skills to do the jobs they sought. This represented a significant increase from 1997, when the percentage of skill-deficient applicants was only 22.8 percent (American Management Association 2001).

"Employers are continually surprised by the lack of basic skills they find among their employees," reported a representative of the Maine Governor's Training Initiative when interviewed by Jobs for the Future. "Jobs have changed, and people now need different skills but don't have the foundation to build on." Over and over again, employers say they need employees with basic language and math skills adequate for performing work tasks and providing the foundation for learning higher-level technical and general workplace skills. Only an integrated skills development system that offers a continuum of training from basic literacy to advanced job skills can meet that need.

Still, it is unrealistic to ask adult basic education providers who currently serve 80,000 adults to serve an additional 4.1 million students. Instead, Jobs for the Future has defined *demand for services* as the number of adults who lack literacy skills and acknowledge a need for services. As Table 2 shows, this estimate places the current demand at 847,000 adults in New England; adult literacy and ESOL services now meet approximately 9.8 percent of that demand. This number provides a realistic baseline for creating benchmarks of progress.

This demand persists, even given dramatic changes since research for this report began in March 2001, when large local and state budget surpluses were common and a tight labor market made it difficult for many employers to find qualified workers at every level. Clearly, there have been major shifts, yet the skills shortage has not changed and continues to pose a serious, long-term threat to the economic health of New England and its families. It is now more important than ever to increase the capacity of adult basic

**Table 2. Demand for Adult Literacy and ESOL Services**

	Population at NALS Level 1 & 2*	Population in Demand of ABE and ESOL Services (20% of NALS Level 1 & 2)	Adults Accessing ABE and ESOL**	Unmet Demand	% of Demand Met
Connecticut	1,073,000	214,600	30,844	183,756	14.4%
Maine	400,000	80,000	12,430	67,570	15.5%
Massachusetts	1,924,000	384,800	24,053	360,747	6.3%
New Hampshire	309,000	61,800	5,962	55,838	9.6%
Rhode Island	368,000	73,600	5,592	68,008	7.6%
Vermont	161,000	32,200	4,436	27,764	13.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,235,000</b>	<b>847,000</b>	<b>83,317</b>	<b>763,683</b>	<b>9.8%</b>

\* Source: NALS data, as calculated by Stephen Reder, "Synthetic Estimates of Adult Literacy Proficiency," available at [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org); 1992 statistical estimate based on population 16+.

\*\* Source: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island 2001 state statistical reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Vermont 2000 state statistical report to the U.S. Department of Education. A participant is an adult who receives at least 12 hours of instruction. See the Appendix: Methodology for more information.

education to meet demand for services while simultaneously improving program performance and student outcomes. Moreover, the involvement of a broad range of stakeholders who are committed to advancing the role of adult basic education in improving economic outcomes for individuals and in meeting labor market skill needs is critical for building both public support and resources for ABE services.

### THE NEW LITERACY CHALLENGE

Underlying the new literacy challenge are structural changes in the economy and the reorganization of work that have dramatically raised the bar for the skills needed at every level, including entry-level work. Large numbers of low-skill, high-wage manufacturing jobs have disappeared, replaced to a large extent by service-sector jobs that pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits while requiring higher skills. Employers expect more, and more varied, competencies from employees, as well as the ability to learn new tasks and adapt to changing job requirements. As firms have restructured to be more competitive, the responsibilities of front-line workers and the breadth of tasks expected of them have increased significantly (see Table 3).

### Growing Importance of Postsecondary Education

More than ever, education is the great divide separating the economic haves from the have-nots. This is as true for communities and their economies as it is for individuals and families. And postsecondary education is increasingly replacing the high school diploma as the primary gatekeeper to this divide: rather than an end in itself, a high school diploma is increasingly valuable as a step toward further educational and economic advancement. The earnings gap between adults who have postsecondary credentials and those who do not has widened significantly in recent decades. While an estimated 80 percent of new jobs in America will require some postsecondary education, only 42 percent of entering ninth graders leave high school with the skills that are necessary for college (McCabe 2000).

This new literacy challenge—significantly higher skill requirements and the increased importance of postsecondary education—calls for a response from adult basic education services that were designed when few Americans graduated from high school and basic literacy sufficed for family-supporting employment.

**Table 3. New Skills for Today's Workplace**

Element	Old System	New System
<b>Workplace organization</b>	Hierarchical	Flat
	Function/specialized	Networks of multi/cross-functional teams
	Rigid	Flexible
<b>Job design</b>	Narrow	Broad
	Do one job	Do many jobs
	Repetitive/simplified/standardized	Multiple responsibilities
<b>Employee skills</b>	Specialized	Multi/cross-skilled
<b>Workforce management</b>	Command/control systems	Self-management
<b>Communications</b>	Top down	Widely diffused
	Need to know	Big picture
<b>Decision-making responsibility</b>	Chain of command	Decentralized
<b>Direction</b>	Standard/fixed operating procedures	Procedures under constant change
<b>Worker autonomy</b>	Low	High
<b>Employee knowledge of organization</b>	Narrow	Broad

Source: U.S. Departments of Commerce, Education, the National Institute of Literacy, and the Small Business Administration 1999.

### Changes in the Welfare System

Fundamental changes in the welfare system have also increased the need for ABE services and created new challenges. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act limits an individual to five years of public benefits and replaces that safety net with employment. Large numbers of adults with inadequate literacy skills now must enter the workforce to support themselves and their children, even as their ability to participate in education and skills training is more limited. About 41 percent of the pre-PRWORA welfare caseload had less than a high school education, and the percentage of low-literacy adults would be much higher if actual skill levels were tested (Zedlewski 1999).

The challenge that changes in the welfare system pose to ABE services is illustrated by the Vermont Adult Learning Program in St. Albans, Vermont. Until July 2001, Vermont's welfare program operated under an exemption from the work requirements of the nation-

al welfare reform law. Under the exemption, the Vermont Adult Learning Program and other adult literacy programs in the state operated *Getting Ready to Work*, an effort designed to build academic and job-related skills for recipients pursuing high school diplomas or GEDs and employment. Now, state agencies and literacy providers are struggling with how to prepare this population for work, and quickly. St. Albans is part of a collaborative partnership trying to address these issues. Meeting the education and life skills needs of these participants will be a major focus for St. Albans in the coming months.

### **Blurring Boundaries Between Education and Skills Training: A New Meaning of Literacy**

With the traditional boundaries between education and workforce training blurring, *both* academic competencies and high-performance skills have become essential in *both* school and the workplace. For example, the National Institute for Literacy's *Equipped for the Future* standards, which describe "what adults need to know and be able to do in the 21st century," create a new meaning of literacy (Stein 2000). Moving beyond a narrow definition of basic skills as the

"3 Rs," the standards place communication, decision-making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning skills at the center of literacy:

- *Communications skills*: Read with understanding, convey ideas in writing, speak so others can understand, listen actively, and observe critically;
- *Decision-making skills*: Use math to solve problems, make decisions, and plan;
- *Interpersonal skills*: Cooperate with others, advocate and influence, resolve conflict and negotiate, and guide others;
- *Lifelong learning skills*: Take responsibility for learning, reflect and evaluate, learn through research, and use information and communications technology.

Change is also evident in K-12 education, where high-performance competencies, previously thought of solely as workplace competencies, are coming to be seen as essential for success in school as well as the workplace. A number of states, including New Hampshire and Connecticut in New England, are incorporating high-performance skills into standards-based reform and state learning standards.

## PART II

# Funding and Capacity of State ABE Systems

**A**dult basic education, as presently funded and organized, is ill-prepared to play an effective role in helping meet New England's literacy challenge.

In many respects, it bears more resemblance to a cottage industry than to a coherent, sustainable, service delivery system. In Massachusetts, the Governor's Task Force to Reform Adult Education and Worker Training described the workforce development system, including adult basic education, as a "non-system" that "has grown up over the years on an ad hoc, piecemeal basis, resulting in dozens of discrete, often disconnected programs run by a wide variety of independent, but overlapping state and local agencies . . . [A]lthough there are many high-functioning programs, the whole

adds up to less than the sum of its parts" (Governor's Task Force 2001).

In Vermont, an interagency committee concluded that ABE capacity is limited by inadequate funding, fragmented and fragile service delivery structures, weak performance accountability, and a range of services that lacks the breadth and intensity of learning opportunities adults need. The chief of the Bureau of Career and Adult Education in Connecticut expressed her frustration at the lack of an ABE system. Programs vary in the number of hours they are open, their student/teacher ratios, and the variety of programs they offer. As programs seek to meet local needs, some will

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### **KEY FINDINGS**

1. Adult basic education services in New England have too little funding to meet the need for services or to provide an intensity of instruction for all students necessary to make a learning gain of at least one grade level.
2. More money is needed, but money alone is not the answer. Transforming ABE services into sustainable systems will require funding that is predictable, long-term, and structured in ways that support innovation, improve instructional practices, and build partnerships that create pathways to advancement.
3. Adult basic education services in New England resemble a stand-alone cottage industry with few connections to further education and skills training.
4. ABE instructors are, for the most part, poorly paid, part-time teachers who receive inadequate professional development and operate without certification standards.
5. Declining state and federal revenues pose new challenges to funding for adult basic education. Yet strong, broad-based support for ABE services and improvement in performance are particularly important during economic downturns.
6. Concerns for meeting labor market skill shortages and helping adults prepare for family-supporting employment are primary motivations for increased public support and resources for adult basic education. If economic development and poverty reduction are not important goals for ABE, it may lose a key source of increased public support.
7. None of the states studied had a clear, unified policy for providing support services through ABE programs. The range of approaches included offering no support services, providing direct in-house services, and partnering with community-based organizations. Meeting the personal, family, and work-related needs of ABE students is key to their continued participation in ABE services and to their ultimate ability to achieve literacy goals and objectives.



be able to expand their range of services to include connections to employers and support services, while others will struggle to provide basic programs.

There is growing awareness of the need to transform ABE into an integrated, institutionalized system. For example, the Governor's Task Force called for integrating Massachusetts' policy-making and resources, creating integrated performance measures that cut across programs and agencies, and integrating service delivery at the local level through industry sector teams that involve multiple companies, agencies, and programs (Governor's Task Force 2001).

The obstacles to an integrated system fall into two major categories: funding and instructional capacity.

### FUNDING ISSUES

Four interrelated issues lie at the heart of how funding limits the capacity of adult basic education in New England to rise to the new literacy challenge—and the changes that are needed for funding to drive system reform:

- More funding is clearly needed. The present level of funding only meets the needs of a fraction of the adults who lack adequate literacy skills. Nor is current funding enough to provide the instructional hours that would enable all those who do receive services to make a learning gain of at least one grade level.
- Unpredictable, short-term funding prevents ABE providers from making long-term plans and invest-

ments. Stable, long-term funding is necessary for adult basic education to become a true system.

- Too few resources are available for innovation, improving instructional practice, or building structured partnerships with postsecondary institutions and employers in ways that create seamless pathways to advancement from adult literacy to postsecondary skills and credentials.
- There is a general lack of outcome-based performance standards that measure economic outcomes and advancement beyond ABE. Performance-based funding mechanisms can provide incentives for change if additional resources are tied to improved performance and if results are based on priorities for change, such as short-term and long-term employment and entry into education and skills training beyond ABE.

The ABE system in New England is funded to a large extent by a relatively unpredictable appropriation of state and federal dollars; these funds are awarded on a competitive basis, primarily to non-profit providers, community-based organizations, and school districts. Although several states provide multi-year grants, these awards are subject to funding availability and program performance reviews. As a result, it is very difficult for most ABE providers to do long-term planning, consider major capital investment, or undertake innovative programming without substantial outside support from foundations and other private sources. The situation is quite different for other publicly funded adult education: for community colleges and state college and university systems, major state appropriations go directly to large institutions with permanent infrastructure.

The primary sources of ABE funding in New England are federal dollars through the U.S. Department of Education, matching state dollars (primarily from state departments of education and corrections), and matching local dollars from school districts and local towns (see Table 4). Some states provide limited ABE resources through a variety of targeted economic development programs.<sup>6</sup>

### State and Local Support

A look at state and local support for adult literacy services illustrates the priority each state places on these programs. In New England, only Connecticut

**Table 4. Public Resources, Program Year 2001\***

	Federal	State	Local	Total Public Funding*	State & Local as % of Total
Connecticut	\$4,720,018	\$15,578,539	\$14,348,482	\$34,647,039	86.3%
Maine	\$1,596,263	\$1,915,833	\$170,719	\$3,682,815	56.7%
Massachusetts	\$8,679,530	\$30,227,525	\$10,600,066	\$49,507,121	8.6%
New Hampshire	\$1,529,304	\$498,089	\$751,623	\$2,779,016	44.9%
Rhode Island	\$2,464,974	\$450,000	\$1,000,000	\$3,914,974	44.9%
Vermont	\$927,106	\$2,419,927	\$409,020	\$3,756,053	75.3%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$19,917,195</b>	<b>\$51,089,913</b>	<b>\$27,279,910</b>	<b>\$98,287,018</b>	<b>79.7%</b>

\* Includes public resources only; does not include other funds that may supplement programs.

Source: 2001 state narrative reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Jobs for the Future interviews with state directors of adult education. Funding figures are for PY2001 with the exception of Maine's, which are from PY2000.

and Massachusetts have increased their ABE funding enough in recent years to significantly improve the way services are delivered. With an innovative funding structure and a strong state commitment to ABE, Connecticut has increased total ABE funding from \$1 million in 1983 to over \$15.5 million in 2001. State funding for ABE services in Massachusetts increased from \$600,000 in 1982 to \$30.2 million in 2001. New Hampshire increased the adult literacy budget 25 percent in the biennial budget two years ago and received a 50 percent increase in the FY 2002/FY 2003 budget to \$750,000. In stark contrast, Vermont, Maine, and Rhode Island have essentially flat-lined ABE for several years. Vermont advocates fought for a 7 percent increase in the FY 2001 budget; facing state budget constraints, they won a 3 percent increase and are developing strategies to gain the other 4 percent in the FY 2002 budget cycle. Maine included a 6 percent increase in the FY 2002 budget but is facing a potential cut of up to 3 percent in its FY 2003 budget.

The percent of total spending provided by state and local governments is another indicator of the level of commitment to adult basic education (see Table 5). In Connecticut, state and local resources account for 86 percent of total ABE spending; 82 percent in Massachusetts; and in Vermont, state and local governments commit approximately 75 percent of total ABE resources. But state and local spending make up only about 40 percent of ABE resources in New Hampshire and Rhode Island.

Other measures of commitment are the average expenditure per enrolled student and the average number of hours of instruction provided. Massachusetts had the highest average expenditure, \$1,784 per student, followed by Connecticut at \$1,126 per student. At the other end of the spectrum, Maine has just \$376 in available expenditure per student.

Intensity of services is yet another measure of commitment. The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth has found that 150 hours of instruction are necessary to achieve a learning gain of at least one grade level among 75 percent of students (MassINC 2000). No New England state comes close to providing that intensity of services. Massachusetts does best, with an average of 103 instructional hours per student; the next highest, Connecticut, provides an average of 74 hours of instruction.

**Table 5. Indicators of Commitment to ABE, Program Year 2001**

	State and Local as % of Total Public Funding*	Average Expenditures** per Enrolled Student	Classroom Hours per Student per Year
Connecticut	86.3%	\$1,126	77
Maine	56.7%	\$376	37
Massachusetts	82.6%	\$1,784	121
New Hampshire	44.9%	\$466	58
Rhode Island	37.0%	\$700	56
Vermont	75.3%	\$720	21

\* Includes public resources only; does not include other funds that may supplement programs.

Source: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont 2001 state narrative and statistical reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Jobs for the Future interviews with state directors of adult education. Funding figures are from PY2001 with the exception of Maine's, which are from 1999-2000. Vermont's statistical data is from the 2000 state statistical report to the U.S. Department of Education.

\*\* These figures are the total ABE resources for program as well as administrative and overhead costs divided out over the total number of students enrolled.

**Table 6. Public Resources to Provide 150 Instructional Hours Those Actively Demanding Services\***

	Total Current Resources**	Cost per Student	Hours per Student	Cost of 150 Hours for Those Actively Demanding Services	Additional Resources Needed
Connecticut	\$34,647,039	\$1,126	77	\$48,426,000	\$13,598,961
Maine	\$3,682,815	\$376	37	\$12,192,000	\$8,509,185
Massachusetts	\$49,507,121	\$1,784	121	\$84,018,000	\$34,510,879
New Hampshire	\$2,779,016	\$466	58	\$7,230,000	\$3,915,773
Rhode Island	\$3,914,974	\$700	56	\$15,000,000	\$11,085,026
Vermont	\$3,756,053	\$720	21	\$20,568,000	\$16,811,947
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$98,287,018</b>			<b>\$187,254,000</b>	<b>\$88,431,771</b>

\* The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth found that 150 hours of instruction are necessary to move 75 percent of students up one grade level (MassINC 2000). The Massachusetts Adult Education Committee found that 20 percent of adults at NALS level 1 & 2 acknowledge a need to improve their literacy skills and just 10 percent of that population actively seeks out ABE services. This chart reflects the cost of providing 150 hours of instruction to the 10 percent of those adults who need services and are actively seeking them.

\*\* Includes public resources only; does not include other funds that may supplement programs.

Source: 2001 state narrative reports to the U.S. Department of Education and Jobs for the Future interviews with state directors of adult education.

Jobs for the Future has estimated that it would cost an additional \$88 million for the six New England states to meet a challenging yet achievable short-term benchmark: providing an average of 150 hours of instruction for those actively demanding services (see Table 6). Bringing all states up to the level of 150 hours of instruction per student would result in a marked improvement in learning gains. This would be an important step toward meeting the acknowl-

edged demand for adult literacy and ESOL services with an intensity of services that would allow students to make meaningful learning gains.

National experts and nearly everyone in the region interviewed for this report agree that hours of instruction, both for basic adult literacy and for ESOL, are critical to success, as defined by achieving learning gains and moving up through educational attainment levels. But despite a consensus that more hours are better, and data that appear to support that view, there are few standards anywhere in the nation for the number of hours that constitute an “adequate” adult education. In all six New England states, programs continually must choose between providing a greater intensity of instruction or touching as many students as possible.

The governing philosophy of quantity vs. quality varies widely, however, from state to state and from program to program. Massachusetts has made a strategic decision to provide a higher intensity of services for fewer students. It provides the most hours per student but also serves the fewest adults with limited literacy, 1.3 percent.

### Inadequate Funding

Inadequate funding is a two-fold problem. First, only 1.9 percent of all adults who lack adequate literacy skills receive services. Second, no state provides services that are intense enough even for those who receive help. Compared to the number of adults who lack adequate literacy, rather than to the number of students served, the issue becomes even more dramatic: average expenditures range from \$8.99 for every New Hampshire adult below NALS Level 3 to a high of \$32.29 per adult in Connecticut (see Table 7).

**Table 7. ABE Expenditures per Low-Literacy Adult\***

	Average Expenditure per Resident at NALS Level 1 & 2
Connecticut	\$32.29
Maine	\$9.20
Massachusetts	\$25.73
New Hampshire	\$8.99
Rhode Island	\$10.64
Vermont	\$23.33

\* Calculated based on NALS data, and public resources shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6.

In every New England state, attempts to increase ABE funding face serious political obstacles, with three major reasons for resistance to substantially higher public funding. First, legislators—and voters—are concerned that ABE is substituting for what they already pay for within the public school system. Second, there is concern over the perceived public cost of immigration. Finally, as many state ABE directors will admit, ABE systems have not made a convincing case for increased public investments. They have not performed serious cost-benefit analyses, and they rarely demonstrate the direct public value of ABE investments.

The potential for declining state and federal revenues during an economic downturn could heighten the challenges to adequately funding adult basic education. As pressure increases to cut state budgets, it will be more important than ever to demonstrate the public value of ABE services in promoting economic development.<sup>7</sup>

### Promising Funding Strategies

Transforming ABE into a sustainable system will require not only more funding but also changes in how adult basic education is funded. It will depend upon funding that is more predictable and long-term. And it will require resources for innovation and change, as well as funding mechanisms that provide incentives for performance improvement.

There are promising funding strategies to build on in each of these areas. Some come from the ABE field, while others come from other educational and skills training fields. Some come from New England, while others come from different regions.

Connecticut and Maine, unlike the other New England states, tie state and federal funds to school district matches, a mechanism that adds some funding flexibility. Maine provides its ABE funding through school districts, using a formula that takes into account the amount of resources communities designate for adult literacy services, then awards state dollars accordingly. The more local support, the larger the state grant. Vermont, Massachusetts, and Maine provide additional long-term funding by allocating funds to providers for longer periods of time. Vermont and Massachusetts provide five-year grants and Maine, four-year grants.

Connecticut also allocates ABE funds to school districts, and it has ABE instructors as school district staff.

The state funds leverage local resources: Connecticut's requirement for local school district matches, in combination with the strong state support for ABE, provides a stable base of state and local funding that is the highest among the New England states.<sup>8</sup> Each school district must provide ABE services (i.e., ESOL, ABE, citizenship education, and high school completion), and the state bases reimbursement on a population/income sliding scale, from 65 percent in poorer urban areas to nothing in the wealthier suburbs.<sup>9</sup>

Connecticut's substantial local-district-matching requirement allows it to utilize federal ABE funds separately from locally and state-funded services. Federal ABE funds under Title II are competitively bid and target family literacy, workplace education, workplace preparation, and innovative program development. For many districts, though, the match is a serious challenge. While Connecticut allows districts to raise match funds from general interest adult education programs, school districts do not receive their full state grant if they cannot raise their match.

Connecticut illustrates how adult basic education can be a cost-effective strategy to increase high school graduation rates. For example, the per-student cost of the Middletown Adult Education Program, an alternative high school program, is \$2,300 to \$3,000, about one-third of per-pupil spending in the public school system. Because school districts are required to achieve certain graduation rates, connecting dropouts to MAEP has become a cost-effective means of achieving outcomes, and it has gained significant support from local school districts. The districts provide educational services to youth, so they have consistently committed resources to building MAEP as part of their mandate.

From outside the ABE field, entrepreneurial community colleges are making customized training for employers a major new source of revenue, using an approach to seeking new customers and developing new revenue sources that holds promise for ABE providers as well. This approach would be particularly appropriate for delivering workplace-based ABE services to employers.

A related funding issue is that few resources are available for ABE program innovation, improving instructional practices, or creating connections and partnerships. Many providers face an ongoing struggle just to

continue providing services and have little capacity to focus on innovation, organizational development, or continuous improvement. Until states target resources at innovation, ABE services will have little capacity to change. The state of Washington directs 30 percent of all welfare education and skills training funds toward developing and implementing curricula and programs focused on retention and advancement.

Performance-based funding mechanisms create the incentives needed for system change. If the goal is to increase the capacity of ABE services, then resources must connect with improved performance and outcomes in these areas. For example, the California Partnership for Excellence is a mutual commitment by the state and the community college system to provide increased funding in return for meeting challenging benchmarks for the number of students who receive degrees and certificates, transfer to four-year institutions, complete apprenticeship and vocational courses, and improve basic skills at least one level. This innovative agreement between the state and the community college system provides significant resources to community colleges for innovation, capacity-building, performance improvement, and partnership development.

## **INSTRUCTIONAL CAPACITY**

Significant teacher-related challenges must be addressed in order to increase the professionalism of ABE and make the field more attractive. Instructors are generally dedicated and well-educated, but they are also largely part-time and lack standardized certification, adequate professional development, or opportunities for full-time career employment. Few certification standards are tied to competencies required for adult basic education, and few programs prepare qualified ABE instructors. To a large degree, the long-term success of New England's ABE systems depends upon the ability to recruit, retain, and develop quality instructors.

Four teacher-related challenges need to be addressed to substantially improve ABE delivery systems. These issues are:

- The lack of full-time teaching positions;
- The need for certification standards and professional development;
- The need for new instructional practices; and
- The need for support services.

### **Lack of Full-Time Teaching Positions**

ABE services do not offer enough full-time positions, at competitive salaries and benefits, to attract enough long-term, qualified instructors. For the most part, ABE teachers are part-time instructors or, in New Hampshire and Vermont, largely volunteers.<sup>10</sup> Yet even the statistics on the number of instructors underestimate the problem, because “full-time” is defined simply as a teaching more than 20 hours per week. Jobs for the Future found that many teachers listed as full-time actually work less than 35 hours per week, and many ABE programs operate with a skeletal full-time staff.

The issue of part-time versus full-time is complex. All interviewees agreed that the value of full-time, qualified teachers dedicated to adult basic education could not be overstated, and many programs indicated that they would like to hire more full-time teachers. Part-time positions provide programs with flexibility and help create greater diversity among staff, but they do not offer long-term stability, and many ABE programs face chronically high staff turnover. This has become increasingly important as many ABE instructors approach retirement.

Most state program directors and ABE experts agree that, budget limitations and flexibility aside, adequate funding to support well-paid, full-time staff can only help the ABE system in the long run. Transforming ABE into an institutionalized system will require the creation of additional full-time positions, with competitive salaries and benefits that can attract qualified instructors with a long-term commitment to the field.<sup>11</sup>

### **Certification Standards and Professional Development**

Perhaps even more important than creating additional full-time positions is addressing the issues of teacher professional development and certification. A rigorous certification process can be built around a core set of teaching and content competencies, as well as requirements for ongoing professional development. And a good certification process can be structured to include part-time and volunteer instructors. Certification standards tied to teacher preparation and professional development can form the core of a high-performance ABE system.

Maine and Connecticut have the region’s best-developed ABE teacher preparation and certification requirements. Maine requires that teachers have a K-12 teaching certificate *and* an adult education certificate. Most teachers with secondary education credentials can meet the standards for the adult education certificate. ABE instructors in Maine must take certification classes in English, social studies, math, and science. They apply to the state for an adult education certificate and must participate in twelve hours of skill development classes each year. Every five years, ABE instructors must reapply for certification. Connecticut ABE teachers must have certification in adult education.

New Hampshire requires certification for teachers in its Adult High School programs, but a local program may have that requirement waived. Other ABE or adult tutorial program instructors have no certification requirement. Rhode Island does not require certification to teach ABE, and each program sets its own standards. Vermont does not require a certification to teach ABE, but most ABE teachers hold K-12 certifications, and some programs require their instructors to have K-12 certification.

In 2001, the Massachusetts legislature enacted legislation that creates teacher licensing guidelines, but the state does not require ABE teachers to hold a license because these guidelines are new. However, individual programs can set their own standards for teachers, and a license may become more desirable as providers seek teachers who possess certain skills and can help achieve the outcomes necessary to obtain state funding.

Instructor certification and professional development go hand in hand, and the ABE field itself understands the need for increased professionalization through continuous training and skills upgrading. At the 2000 Adult Literacy Summit sponsored by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, teacher focus groups determined that it was an essential priority to “establish a comprehensive network of professional development opportunities so all adult educators can gain and regularly upgrade appropriate skills and knowledge” (National Literacy Summit 2000).

Interviews with ABE professionals, as well as the available literature, suggest that instructors desperately need upgraded professional development in several areas, including working with learning disabled adults, motivating adult learners who failed in classroom set-

tings, integrating home and work contexts into teaching materials and methods, and teaching ABE skills at the workplace. According to the Connecticut Commissioner of Education, staff development may be the most important challenge for the future of ABE in his state.

Yet adequate systems are not in place even in Maine and Connecticut, states well advanced in ABE teacher preparation and certification. In Stamford, Connecticut, for example, the local community college offers the area's only class to prepare ABE teachers, and that class is offered only once a year, from 4:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. On the other hand, Connecticut has initiated an important step toward professional development for ABE instructors through a partnership with the Capitol Region Education Council, a quasi-public organization that trains ABE instructors in workplace-based ABE instruction. CREC is supported by a grant from the state ABE office, a critical feature made possible by Connecticut's unique funding structure.

Massachusetts awards \$3 million a year to one central and five regional resources centers that provide ABE programs with program and staff development. The System for Adult Basic Education Support is a formalized professional development program that offers comprehensive training and technical assistance for adult education and literacy providers.

Maine's Center for Adult Learning and Literacy receives federal and state funding for professional development of ABE instructors and program directors. The center sees its mission as keeping abreast of developments in the state and national adult literacy communities, and connecting those developments to practitioners in the field. The center has eight training priorities: reading instruction, standards development, integrated technology, ESOL, learning disabilities, family literacy, data collection, and assessment of learners' progress. This past year, the center placed a priority on training for teaching adults with learning disabilities, and it has sought funding to support professional development on that topic.

In the long run, improving the quality of ABE instruction will require significantly higher preparation and certification standards. This is likely to lessen the ability of programs to recruit instructors unless resources are increased enough to make salaries competitive with those for other teaching opportunities.

## The Need for New Instructional Practices

The literacy challenge in New England requires instructional practices that can help students meet more rigorous standards for academic and high-performance skills. Adult basic education will need to incorporate not only characteristics of promising practices for ABE but also for community colleges and alternative programs for out-of-school youth. It must also build on what research shows about how adults learn and, in particular, how they learn the high-performance skills valued in school and in the workplace.

The fact that millions of adults in New England have dropped out of high school or graduated without adequate skills demonstrates the need for teaching practices that are more effective. For many people, the passive, fragmented, and abstract learning common in schools impedes mastery and application of learning. Many adults respond better to instructional methods that are contextualized, activity-based, and relevant to real goals.

YouthBuild, a nationally acclaimed alternative education program for out-of-school youth, demonstrates the educational power of a meaningful context for learning. Young people who were not successful in traditional high schools learn reading, writing, and math in the context of developing the skills to renovate abandoned housing, often in their own communities. In addition, YouthBuild students develop communication and leadership skills by working with residents to promote community development.

A study of exemplary programs that integrated basic skills training into welfare-to-work programs identified promising instructional practices and organizational strategies for high-quality ABE services (Murphy and Johnson 1998). These practices and strategies point to a new direction for developing a system of adult basic education services that can meet the new literacy challenge in New England (*see box, next page*).

Jobs for the Future's research on effective community college practices for serving low-income students points to promising avenues for promoting educational and economic advancement that are equally important for adult basic education (Liebowitz, Haynes, and Milley 2001). ABE programs that seek to help ESOL students or adults who enter with very low literacy skills need to provide pathways that create effective bridges between multiple levels of ESOL, multiple

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## Promising Adult Basic Education Practices and Strategies

- Student goals drive teaching and learning. Individual learning and career plans help students develop short- and long-term education and career goals. These plans, in turn, provide motivation for lifelong learning in pathways to advancement within and beyond adult basic education.
- Academic and occupational learning are integrated so that adults learn academic competencies and high-performance skills in a real-world context that is tied to their goals. Learning in the classroom is combined with hands-on learning in the workplace and community.
- Contextual learning is the centerpiece of curriculum and pedagogy. Real-life issues of work, family, and community provide a rich context to make learning relevant and meaningful. Curriculum and teaching materials incorporate occupational context to make learning relevant.
- Multiple federal, state, and private funding streams are integrated into a seamless set of comprehensive services that meet the diverse needs of the people and communities they serve.
- There is a strong institutional focus on continuous improvement through ongoing staff development and use of outcome-based performance data.

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levels of adult basic education, and adult secondary education where adults can gain high school skills and credentials. With the growing importance of postsecondary education, it is critical to develop structured partnerships with postsecondary institutions and employers in order to provide clear connections to educational and economic advancement beyond adult basic education.

It is in the work-based learning realm that ABE providers may have the most interesting opportunities to accelerate student learning and better engage and serve employers. For the most part, the workplace-based ABE providers Jobs for the Future interviewed described services that are essentially identical to those taught in classrooms, except that they are more convenient to employees and employers and respond to an explicit, employer-identified need, such as ESOL or basic math.

There are many examples of workplace-based initiatives that integrate workplace language, concepts, issues, and culture into ABE course materials. For example, the innovative Malden Mills project in

Lawrence, Massachusetts, integrates ABE learning with workplace content, with evidence of great gains from increased motivation through incentives and direct practical application. In Providence, Rhode Island, work-based classes are a major part of the Genesis Center's ABE program, and the center dedicates the time of one full-time staff member to developing relationships with local employers and identifying opportunities for on-site training programs. Currently, the center operates three such programs: a basic ESOL class, a GED preparation class, and, in an innovative twist, a Spanish class for managers. According to the program director, many employers now recognize that employees need access to adult literacy courses, and he believes that many more employers may be coming to the center for services.

## The Need for Support Services

ABE providers, like their counterparts in the K-12 system, are increasingly called upon to provide a range of support services to their students. Some of this demand comes with new populations, such as immigrants who experience a wide range of personal, family, and work-related challenges as they are integrated into their new communities. Other demands relate directly to the challenges facing individuals at the lower end of the skill and job market; such service requirements occur even in largely rural New Hampshire and Maine.

Many people with low literacy skills face other potentially disruptive problems as well. In most cities, welfare reform and welfare-to-work programs have provided first-hand experience with those problems: lack of access to child care, adequate housing, and transportation; mental illness and substance abuse; domestic abuse; and poor health, with high occurrences of asthma and certain other diseases. Adult basic education programs, which are chronically underfunded for their primary mission, rarely have the resources to diagnose and support people dealing with these issues, yet access to support services is critical for keeping students in the classroom.

Learning disabilities present an additional factor to consider—one that is directly relevant to learning and literacy. Adults who have difficulties with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, or writing are likely to experience problems that significantly affect their academic achievement and their lives in general (National Institute for Literacy 1998).

While adult basic education students undoubtedly have a wide and growing range of support service needs, there is also a wide range of views within the ABE system about whether it can or should be expected to take on support service demands.<sup>12</sup> This range of views was expressed across programs, within states, and no state studied had a clear, unified policy for service delivery among programs. Obviously, the primary factor determining whether a program undertook to deliver support services, besides its overall philosophy, is access to resources. Those programs that prioritized support services tended to be entrepreneurial, raising funds from a wide range of public and private sources to supplement state and federal ABE funds.

Particularly in urban areas, ABE providers are often an important link between immigrant and low-income families and support services; the more “wrap-around” services they can provide their students, the better

educational results they will achieve. Students at the Genesis Center, one of the best examples of this “wrap-around” approach, view it as a community center. In addition to a full complement of ABE and ESOL services, the center provides on-site childcare, health programs (e.g., diabetes screening, safe sex workshops), housing assistance, a social worker, and basic health care for children, including immunizations.

A middle-ground approach is to partner with other social service providers. Second Start in Concord, New Hampshire, has an on-site day care center. It also provides counseling for its students through referrals to agencies the center has worked with for many years. Taking a different approach, the Providence Adult Learning Center partners with its host facility, the Providence YMCA, which runs a full-service day care center. Because of this “co-location,” students can leave their children in day care while they are taking ABE classes.



## PART III

# Mission and Performance Standards

**T**HERE IS lack of consensus within the New England ABE community about the mission and purpose of adult basic education and the outcomes it should achieve. Differences arise in three key areas:

- Should individual adults be the sole customer of ABE services? Or should adult basic education also serve public roles in economic development and poverty reduction?
- Should the mission of ABE focus on education as an end in itself to help adults achieve their personal goals, whatever those might be? Or should education be linked to meeting labor market skill needs and improving the economic opportunities of individuals?
- Should adult basic education be an independent, stand-alone system? Or should ABE services be integrated with other educational and skills training institutions to create pathways to further advancement beyond adult basic education?

These tensions—about what services ABE should provide and for whom—are rooted in the history of adult basic education. They have taken on new meaning with the 1998 passage of the federal Workforce Investment Act, which is designed in part to integrate ABE and workforce development services into a more comprehensive system of education and training. How the tensions are resolved will significantly affect the role that adult basic education plays in improving economic outcomes for individuals and reducing the region's skills shortage.

### ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

At the heart of the issue are two fundamentally different visions of adult basic education.

The traditional ABE model envisions an independent educational system focused on enhancing the personal lives of illiterate and uneducated adult individuals through education as an end in itself. Individuals are the only “customer,” and instruction is driven by helping adults achieve their own personal goals. This

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### KEY FINDINGS

1. There is lack of consensus within the New England ABE community about the mission and purpose of adult basic education. How the differences are resolved will strongly affect the ability of ABE to contribute to achieving public priorities for economic development and poverty reduction.

2. The ABE mission and scope of services have, for the most part, not kept pace with the needs demanded by the modern world. If ABE's mission and services better matched the social and economic realities of a knowledge-based society, adult basic education would play a more effective role in helping to solve the skills shortage that threatens New England's economic future.

3. Structural changes in the economy have created a new purpose and vision for adult basic education: to help adults develop the postsecondary skills and credentials that are required for most family-supporting employment.

4. True integration of ABE with other educational and skills training services for adults requires a partnership among equals, built on mutual self-interest and a mutual commitment to the adults they serve. Progress is unlikely to occur until ABE providers and state directors believe that integration is in the best interests of the adults and other stakeholders they serve.

model is based on a belief that ABE services, by themselves, can enable adults with low literacy attain the skills they need as parents, citizens, and workers.

One state ABE director interviewed exemplifies the traditional view. He strongly opposed the integration of adult basic education with the workforce development system. Rather, he believes, ABE should meet the needs of individual students, whatever those needs might be. Improving the economic outcomes of students should not be part of the mission. This state does not view ABE as a strong force for economic development, and ABE officials there lobbied hard against incorporating ABE into the federal Workforce Investment Act.

According to this state director, adult basic education deals “with broader issues . . . such as self-esteem, academic progress, and basic tasks like getting a driver’s license.” The ABE philosophy focuses on helping people get the skills they need to live the lives they want. Moving too far toward workplace learning, becoming involved in economic outcomes, and building connections to employers might threaten the integrity of the adult basic education mission and the needs of the people ABE serves. To fulfill the mission, it is necessary to set up “firewalls” between adult basic education and workforce development.

This vision emerged over a century ago, when few Americans graduated from high school and basic literacy provided access to most family-supporting employment. At that time, workforce development focused on narrow, short-term job training that did little to improve employment and wages, and even less to help adults improve literacy skills.

Does the rationale behind this vision remain valid, and can this approach meet the needs of adults in today’s social and economic environment? Equally important, can this approach to ABE generate public support and additional resources in a time when economic development and poverty reduction are key public priorities?

Structural changes in the economy have fueled a second, more recent, source of public interest in adult literacy. Employers require a significantly higher level of skills than before, even for entry-level jobs, and a high school education no longer provides access to most jobs that can support a family. Efforts to adapt adult basic education to these new social and economic realities have generated a mission that goes beyond

education as an end in itself and links education to meeting labor market skill needs and improving economic opportunities. Moreover, this second model gives ABE a public mission, as well as an individual one, and it suggests multiple customers: not just individuals but government and employers as well. This vision integrates ABE services and other educational and skills training institutions into a comprehensive system of adult education, providing seamless pathways to advancement from adult literacy to postsecondary education.

Thus, another state ABE director interviewed by Jobs for the Future concludes that the ABE mission has to be adapted to meet current social and economic realities. As in the first state, the goals that students articulate drive ABE services: it continues to be a priority to honor the broad purposes that people bring to adult education and to help them achieve their goals. Nevertheless, this director believes that ABE’s commitment to student goals today requires helping students develop skills that improve economic outcomes. Most students, he says, come to adult basic education with employment-related goals and, for that reason, the ABE-workforce development partnership has been evolving for several years.

## **A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH**

Within the ABE world, stark divisions in overall philosophies, program design, and allocation of resources often hinge on a sharp distinction between ABE’s two roles and missions. Interviews with ABE providers and state ABE directors and the analysis of task force and commission reports all suggest that the different visions of adult education will lead to vastly different results.

Yet these two visions may, in fact, be compatible. After all, the relationship between workplace success and individual success in life is strong and clear. Jobs for the Future visited several ABE programs that are grappling with how to meet employability goals without losing the commitment to students’ personal development goals. *Their efforts to meet both employment and personal enhancement needs, and in a way that helps meet the skill needs of local economies and employers, lie at the heart of a new paradigm for adult basic education.* This more comprehensive approach has been proposed by interagency task forces and commissions in several New England states.

## Massachusetts: The Governor's Task Force to Reform Adult Education and Worker Training

One example comes from Massachusetts, where the Governor's Task Force to Reform Adult Education and Worker Training was created to address the mismatch between the demands of a rapidly changing workplace and the limited skills of many workers (Governor's Task Force 2001). A mandate to improve adult education *and* worker training defines the Task Force's mission to create a system of education and skills training that builds on the strengths of ABE, workforce development, and postsecondary education. Eleven state agencies—K-12 public education, higher education, economic development, workforce development, employment and training, transitional assistance, and health and human services—collaborated in the design of an integrated system of lifelong learning opportunities.

In 2001, the Task Force recommended an additional \$22 million in funding for adult basic education GED and literacy programs in order to improve the skills of adults with low literacy to the point that they could participate in further education and skills training. The recommendations also articulated a clear role for ABE in the context of a broader adult education and worker training system. Since the Task Force completed its work, the state's Workforce Investment Board has become the forum for continuing to put these recommendations forward.

## Vermont: The Adult Essential Skills Education System

Vermont has also created an interagency commission to recommend plans for integrating separate services into a coherent system of education and training—one that would provide a comprehensive continuum of essential skills education, occupational preparation training, worker training, postsecondary education, and continuing education (Study Committee of the State Board of Education of Vermont 2000). The Commissioner of Education, ABE providers, technical education providers, the Commissioner of Employment and Training, higher education, and the Human Resource Investment Council collaborated to propose a comprehensive state approach to adult education and skills training.

Vermont's proposal for an Adult Essential Skills Education System integrates the traditional ABE

mission with goals for economic outcomes and educational advancement beyond ABE. The system would provide access to occupational training leading to an ability to obtain a living wage and access to higher education leading to a postsecondary degree. A comprehensive definition of adult essential skills is concretely defined by a set of performance standards and outcomes:

- *Traditional ABE goals*, including gains in essential skills, completion of secondary school or GED diplomas, increased involvement in children's education and literacy, and increased expression of an informed point of view on social or political issues; and
- *Broader goals* for economic outcomes and educational advancement beyond ABE, including work readiness credentials; college credits; employment, retention, and advancement; and postsecondary or advanced level training.

Reflecting this definition, Vermont has now adopted the National Institute for Family Literacy's Equipped for the Future standards, and the state is implementing the recommendations via a transition board.

## WIA, PERFORMANCE STANDARDS, AND OUTCOME MEASURES

The ABE mission—to help adults with low literacy skills achieve their own personal goals—is so broad that it can incorporate both visions under the same umbrella. This leaves programs wide latitude in defining their own mission, setting their goals, and deciding what services to provide. The program goals and priorities of one New England state demonstrate this dilemma:

*Adult Basic Education and Literacy programs will empower individuals, strengthen families, and help participating adults to: develop their knowledge and potential, perform more effectively in the workplace, achieve personal life goals, and, for those who are parents or interact with children, contribute in a positive way toward the educational development of those children.*

As noted, though, important differences become evident when explicit performance standards and outcome goals operationally define broad mission statements. For example, how will helping adults perform more effectively in the workplace be measured, and

how will programs be held accountable for achieving desired results?

It was the Workforce Investment Act that brought the long-standing tensions about the mission of ABE to the surface. Adoption of WIA was driven by research showing that short-term job training, without basic skills instruction, and adult basic education, without workplace-based skills development, are both less effective than integrated education and training efforts. WIA seeks to create a model that integrates adult basic education with a changed workforce development system that has stronger links to employers and local labor market skill needs.

A key WIA goal is to integrate many separately funded and administered workforce development programs, including adult basic education, into one cohesive workforce development system.<sup>13</sup> WIA calls for the coordination of the 14 programs related to workforce development—but it maintains separate funding and administration for some programs, including adult education.

Title II of WIA, which funds adult basic education, provides a set of common outcome measures, specified by the National Reporting System, that states must report on for both adult basic education and workforce development activities.<sup>14</sup> These include:

- Demonstrated improvements in literacy skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking the English language, numeracy, problem solving, and other literacy skills;
- Placement in, retention in, or completion of, post-secondary education, training, unsubsidized employment, or career advancement; and
- Receipt of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent.

To achieve these goals, ABE and workforce development services must operate in a more connected way. By itself, adult basic education cannot achieve outcomes for postsecondary education and career advancement. But it can make an important contribution to achieving these outcomes: structured partnerships joining ABE with other educational and skills training institutions can lead to seamless pathways to advancement from adult basic literacy to postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, there are limited resources within the ABE tradition to draw on. Within recent memory,

two national programs—the “human capital” option in the JOBS (Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training) welfare reform legislation of the late 1980s and the Workplace Literacy Program of the 1990s—have attempted to join literacy and work goals. Neither program was perceived as successful. JOBS was replaced by “work first” welfare reform and Congress did not reauthorize the workplace literacy program. Both stimulated innovative pilot programs in various places around the United State. For the most part, however, traditional ABE curricula and instructional methods failed to adapt to the challenge.

### The Workplace Connection

This history shows that education *by itself* can do little to reduce poverty or develop essential workplace skills. If adult basic education is to take on an additional mission to improve economic outcomes and meet labor market skill needs, it must develop new, more effective practices.

One such practice is to connect adult basic education with the workplace. Yet ABE classes are usually disconnected from the workplace in a number of ways, all of which can discourage adults whose primary goal is to prepare for a decent job. Most of the curricula and texts in ABE classes were developed for purposes other than work or employment. They follow a typical school curriculum, which is generally devoid of references to the world of work. The classroom usually is far from job-training sites and without programmatic connections to those sites. ABE teachers typically lack relationships with employers and generally represent a separate world.

In separating skill development from an important location where those skills are applied, the workplace, ABE cannot take full advantage of the contextual applied learning strategies that are more effective than traditional classroom instruction for many adults with low literacy. Moreover, despite WIA’s potential to overcome this obstacle, its impact on integrating adult basic education and workforce development in New England has been limited thus far. The ABE and workforce development systems remain largely separate in all six states. Although most states fund workplace education efforts, no state has integrated services in ways that would systematically link ABE clients to workplace training or link those entering workplace training programs to ABE resources if they need them.

*Three major barriers hamper true integration:*

- ABE and workforce development remain funded and administered by separate units of government, both at the state and federal level.
- There is lack of consensus within the ABE community that integration would be a positive step.
- WIA comes with too little funding to provide the incentives or resources necessary to drive change toward program integration. WIA Title II is a small portion of total ABE funding. Significant progress is

unlikely until states link other ABE and workforce development resources to program integration and comprehensive outcome measures.

The limited success of efforts to integrate ABE and workforce development points to an overarching lesson: true integration will remain elusive until the ABE community—providers as well as state directors—believe that it is in the best interests of the adults they serve. This requires a partnership among equals, built upon mutual self-interest and mutual commitments to meeting the needs of the adults they serve.

## PART IV

# Pathways to Advancement

**T**O MEET the needs of individuals *and* the public, adult basic education must prepare adults for education and skills training beyond ABE. It can only do so through collaboration in structured partnerships that create articulated pathways to advancement—a seamless continuum of education and skill development from adult basic education to postsecondary education and advanced skills training.

The key to effective integration is not whether ABE, skills training, and postsecondary education are located within a single institution, but whether there are seamless pathways that adults can navigate from adult basic education to postsecondary education and skills training. Adapting the ABE mission to new social and

economic realities means having an impact upon the educational and economic outcomes of adults after they leave ABE programs.

### **CREATING PATHWAYS TO ADVANCEMENT FROM ABE**

In studying adult basic education in New England and community colleges throughout the nation, *Jobs for the Future* has found two promising approaches to creating pathways to advancement for ABE:

- Internal pathways within community colleges; and
- Pathways developed through partnerships between ABE providers and other educational and skills training institutions.

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### **KEY FINDINGS**

1. Few institutionalized partnerships between adult basic education and other educational and skills training institutions in New England are designed to create seamless pathways to advancement from adult literacy to postsecondary education. With the growing importance of postsecondary skills and credentials, these pathways are critical to meeting labor market skill needs and helping adults qualify for family-supporting employment.
2. State policies and funding provide neither incentives nor resources for ABE services, postsecondary education, and skills training programs to build partnerships that create pathways to advancement. There are promising examples of pathways to advancement, but these will remain the exception rather than the rule without strong incentives to change and the resources necessary to do so.
3. Building pathways to advancement through institutionalized partnerships is a mutual responsibility that requires concerted action by adult basic education and other educational and skills training institutions.
4. Rather than considering community colleges as an alternative to the current system of adult basic education, there is clear potential to build pathways to a full continuum of adult education and skills training by supporting innovative partnerships between ABE providers and community colleges.
5. Collaboration with employers to assess workplace skill needs and develop curriculum and contextual learning practices can ensure that adults learn skills that are actually in demand. While some ABE providers are responding to employer needs, they lack the resources and know-how to proactively set up workplace-based programs, and few systems are in place to support structured relationships between adult basic education and employers.

It can be argued community colleges should be the hub of a revamped adult basic education system, supported by their resources of professional educators and their ability to provide a full continuum of advancement within a single institution. However, this is a complex issue, and community colleges and community-based ABE providers each have important strengths. There are obstacles to building internal pathways to advancement within community colleges, just as there are obstacles to building pathways through structured partnerships.

Some community colleges see basic skills development for adults as central to their missions and are beginning to play a larger role in ABE, ESOL, and remedial education in many parts of the country. Many Massachusetts community colleges provide ABE and transition-to-college programs funded by the state and are an integral part of community planning efforts across the state. However, most of New England's community colleges are less likely than those in other regions to consider basic skills development to be part of their mission. Rather, their educational programs focus on higher-level skill development, tied to the acquisition of associate's degrees and professional certifications.

Moreover, many community colleges and their faculties are poorly equipped to teach adults with severe literacy challenges (although exemplary practices are evident in some schools). Community colleges are often fragmented institutions, and seamless pathways are the exception rather than the rule. Developmental or ESOL programs are often operated through special departments staffed by adjunct faculty, in many cases drawn from the ABE/ESOL community rather than the college itself.

The boundaries that separate ABE from higher education and skills training can be as great within community colleges as those that separate community-based ABE programs from community colleges. And community-based ABE providers often have far stronger links to their service communities and are better positioned to draw out the more reluctant adults in need of ABE services.

The challenge, then, is to create a paradigm of advancement that builds on the strengths of both community colleges *and* community-based ABE programs to create an adult education system that is greater than the sum of its parts. Rather than consider community

colleges as an alternative to the current ABE system, *it may be more practical and productive to provide a continuum of adult education and training by supporting innovative connections between ABE providers and community colleges.*

Innovative community colleges should be very interested in partnering with effective ABE providers. First, as colleges seek new sources of students, such collaboration could help lessen the need for costly remedial services. And ABE providers should be interested in partnering with effective community colleges: this could add a dimension to their student services and be a source of revenue.

Building effective connections will require change within both ABE services and community colleges. It is likely that strong commitment from political leaders, additional resources, policy changes, and outcomes-based performance measures will be needed to drive the development of new partnerships. Building institutionalized partnerships is a mutual responsibility that requires concerted action by ABE services and other educational and skills training institutions.

Yet ABE providers and other educational and skills training institutions seeking to build partnerships often lack the resources, infrastructure capacity, and expertise to do so. For example, even as some ABE providers respond to employer needs, they lack the resources and know-how to proactively set up workplace-based programs, and no systems are in place to support structured relationships. School-to-career and TechPrep partnerships demonstrated the critical importance of intermediary organizations and structures that implement "connecting activities" between schools and employers (CED 1998). This will be no less true for building structured pathways between adult basic education and other educational and skills training institutions.

Nor do state policies in New England provide incentives for ABE providers and community colleges to work in partnership to build clear pathways to advancement. Lack of integration among multiple state agencies and funding streams—each with their own performance standards, eligibility guidelines, and regulations—is an obstacle to structured collaboration. In contrast, California offers a promising example of how state policies can promote and support integration from outside the ABE systems. Four state agencies—Health and Welfare, Trade and Commerce, Community Colleges, and K-12 Public Instruction—

jointly created California's integrated workforce development plan. The state has chosen to integrate existing partnerships for education reform, workforce preparation, and economic development rather than create new institutions. California has also provided funds to create local and state partnerships that could serve as models for reform.

In New York State, the Youth Council that serves the Corning/Elmira region provides an example of integration in the youth-development field. It requires all youth-service providers who wish to apply for funding to do so in partnerships. In a day-long bidders' conference, the Youth Council showed providers how they might collaborate to deliver services. Partnership agreements would have to go beyond traditional letters of support to spell out what each of the partners would specifically do to ensure that young people would have access to all 10 youth program elements specified in the Workforce Investment Act. Through a Request for Proposal process that only supports partnerships, the Youth Council now funds four broad-based partnerships that have capacity to provide an entire array of services for in-school and out-of-school youth in a comprehensive way.

### **Few Pathways to Advancement in New England**

Jobs for the Future's research in New England found few links that connect ABE services with community college systems. Where community colleges engage in ABE services, primarily in Connecticut and Massachusetts, they do so largely in isolation from other providers. Almost none of the directors of adult basic education programs, state workforce development agencies, or employer associations we interviewed cited community colleges as an important factor in the ABE system; most interviewees dismissed them as "non-players." There are few accessible transitions to help ABE graduates pursue further educational and economic advancement at the community college level.

Some New England states and the Nellie Mae Education Foundation do support promising efforts to facilitate transitions from ABE to community colleges. However, these are small-scale efforts, and they are not institutionalized practice in ABE or community colleges. Effective linkages are needed on a far larger scale. There is a particular lack of structured partnerships that can provide seamless pathways to advance-

ment from ABE to college degrees and industry-recognized certificates.

A particular barrier in New England is that its community colleges often play a different role than they do in other regions. In contrast to many community colleges across the country, most New England community colleges see themselves primarily as educational institutions for adults seeking a two-year associates degree or, eventually, as a bridge to a four-year degree. In other regions, community colleges often provide education and skills training linked to employers and workforce preparation. While many, if not most, New England community colleges have departments that provide customized business and industry training, and many have developed modularized vocational programs, the dominant model remains the two-year, degree-granting institution.

### **Promising Practices for Creating Pathways to Advancement**

Jobs for the Future found several institutions or programs that demonstrate promising approaches to building pathways to educational and economic advancement. For example:

- Project Link creates pathways through an effective partnership between Berkshire Community College and ABE providers in western Massachusetts.
- Portland Community College, in Oregon, creates pathways within the college.

Jobs for the Future also found a need to increase workplace-based learning through expanded partnerships with employers and industry associations. Workplace learning can improve the quality of instruction by providing a relevant context for learning. Collaboration with employers to assess workplace skill needs and develop curriculum and contextual learning practices can ensure that adults learn skills that are actually in demand.

### **Project Link and Berkshire Community College**

Project Link, a partnership between Berkshire Community College and ABE providers in western Massachusetts, facilitates transitions for ABE students to postsecondary education. The program involves close collaboration between the college and the providers in recruitment, assessment, and student



support services. The college's student services, admissions, and tutorial services departments connect Project Link students with the broader college community. In addition to developmental courses, students attend a seminar designed to enhance their ability to succeed academically and socially in a college environment.

Project Link has established important partnerships with all ABE providers in Berkshire County. ABE directors are active members of the Project Link advisory board, and the program coordinator sits on two county-wide committees that work in cooperation with ABE programs. The project works closely with providers on a regular basis, with 92 percent of project referrals coming from ABE providers. As a result of this collaboration, the goal of improving students' transitions to college is embedded in each the work of ABE providers, fundamentally altering the purpose and mission of adult basic education.

Massachusetts state policy provides supports for programs like Project Link. Of the \$8 million in state ABE funds going to community colleges, \$700,000 are allocated to the state-supported Transitions Initiative designed to increase the success of ABE students in making the transition to community colleges.

### **Portland Community College**

In Oregon, Portland Community College is creating internal pathways to advancement from ABE to post-secondary education and skills training by conceptualizing learning, by combining work and learning, and by building connections with employers. Through its alternative high school programs, PCC is the largest grantor of high school diplomas in the city.

High school dropouts and students who never attended secondary school can complete high school diplomas or GEDs while also gaining college credit and making the transition to postsecondary education. Students who enter the College Bound High School Completion program select a broad career pathway as a context and focus for their high school studies. The pathways are fully aligned with the college's degrees, transfer programs to four-year institutions, and the Oregon Department of Education's Certificate of Advanced Mastery. As students work on their high school diploma by taking college-level courses, they also complete courses leading to the postsecondary degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year college.

By the time students complete a high school diploma, they have made significant progress toward an associate's degree or, in some cases, actually completed the associate's degree at the same time.

PCC has extensive programming designed to provide under-prepared students with the skills and basic education needed to matriculate to degree-granting programs. Its Developmental Education Department works closely with degree programs to provide targeted curricula that prepare students to enter the appropriate program. PCC Prep's College Bound Program brings the reading, writing, and study skills and student management habits of high school completion students up to the college-entrance level. A bridge curriculum teaches basic skills using industry-specific examples. The college's extensive ESOL, ABE/GED tutoring, and multicultural academic programs and its workforce development programs provide a broad array of high-quality basic skills and ESOL services.

### **Workplace-Based Learning**

In every New England state, at least a few ABE providers connect directly with employers in order to increase the literacy skills of their employees. The level of direct employer services varies widely, but in no state did Jobs for the Future find a systematic, consistent priority on working with employers.

*There are several barriers to expanding the scale of workplace learning:*

- Many ABE providers who would like to collaborate more closely with employers say they simply do not have the funds or staff capacity to reach out to them and must place a priority on serving their current students. It requires resources to develop new curricula, provide professional development in new instructional strategies, and build effective connections with employers and employer organizations. Even states with significant workplace education resources, such as Rhode Island and Massachusetts, require that partnerships between employers and ABE providers be in place before applying for grant support for a program.
- Many employers, particularly in smaller workplaces, do not recognize their workforce literacy needs. A surprising number of employers do not take action on workplace literacy issues as part of business strategy.

- Individual skill seekers, not employers, are the primary customers of ABE providers, and it is not unusual for employers to be unaware of the workplace literacy resources that may be available. As a result, employers may miss real opportunities to improve the skill level of their workforces and increase productivity and quality, while ABE providers may miss important new sources of revenues and business.

Several factors determine the level of workplace literacy services among ABE providers. In states without clear and strict priorities or resources for workplace education, the level largely depends upon a director's interest, creativity, and entrepreneurship. Another factor is the degree to which employers are aware of and can articulate their employees' literacy levels. Several ABE providers say they would be very interested in providing services to employers, particularly on a fee-for-service basis, but they have received few requests for such services. A representative of the Governor's Training Initiative in Maine explained that few employers know the literacy needs of their employees and that employees often hide their literacy limitations. Moreover, to the extent that employers invest in training, those resources go disproportionately to higher-skill employees.

While no New England state has created a system that links ABE to employers, several have developed innovative programs that encourage and support employer-based ABE services. Valley Regional Adult Education Program (VRAE) in Shelton, Connecticut, for example, brings employers, employees, and educators together in three-way collaborations known as Partnerships for Progress.

Businesses call on VRAE to develop skills-enhancement programs that are relevant to employee needs, responsible to the demands of the adult learner, and

delivered at the workplace. It has developed a six-step process to evaluate employer needs, and over 10 companies have sought VRAE's services in the last year. In 2001, VRAE received the Chester Klevins Award for Workplace Literacy from the Commission on Adult Basic Education, a national professional organization.

Providing financial incentives, largely in the form of matching grants to employers or to ABE providers working with employers, is one of the most effective means a state has for increasing employer utilization of ABE services. Rhode Island gives such grants both to employers and ABE providers. The Human Resource Investment Council awards direct grants to companies of up to \$25,000 for any type of training, including literacy, as well as to "clusters" of companies in common industry sectors. Where resources are available, New England employers utilize ABE providers for literacy and ESOL training. However, where grants go directly to employers, as in Rhode Island, companies may elect to use other providers, such as community colleges or private vendors.

Another approach to increasing workplace-based adult basic education is to provide resources that help programs provide workplace services more effectively. Maine's Governor's Training Initiative receives about \$3.5 million annually from the state to identify and subsidize employer-sponsored, incumbent-worker training, including ABE and ESOL services. In Connecticut, the Capitol Region Education Council receives a grant from the state ABE department to train ABE providers and teachers in assessing workplace literacy needs, performing task analyses, and designing workplace literacy programs. In addition to the training, the council has created a network of effective workplace ABE practitioners who are beginning to share best practices, expand knowledge of ABE services at the One-Stops, and work across programs when employer requests arise that cannot be met.

## PART V

# Special Populations

### **IMMIGRANTS: ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

Low-income, immigrant adults represent a special challenge for the adult basic education system. While overall spending nationally for adult education grew by 49 percent between 1992 and 2000, spending on ESOL grew far faster than all other program components. Between 1994 and 1998 alone, enrollment in ABE and adult secondary education dropped 9 and 28 percent respectively, while ESOL enrollment grew 58 percent (Fix and Zimmermann 2000). ESOL students made up 17 percent of all adult education enrollees in 1980; by 1998, their representation in adult education had increased to 48 percent nationally. This growth was a key factor in the Clinton administration's proposal to create a separate \$75 million English language and civics initiative in the FY 2001 budget (Fix and Zimmermann 2000).

The foreign-born account for 10 percent of the U.S. population but make up a disproportionate number of those living in poverty: 16.8 percent versus 11.2 percent for native-born (U.S. Department of Commerce 2001).<sup>15</sup> The foreign born also comprise a significant number of the unemployed and underemployed in the United States. In 2000, 4.9 percent of foreign-born adults in the civilian labor force were unemployed, compared to 4.3 percent for natives. Similarly, 36.3 percent of foreign-born full-time, year-round workers earned less than \$20,000 versus 21.3 percent of natives (U.S. Department of Commerce 2001). Further, 2000 census figures show that the foreign-born population age 25 and over was less likely to have graduated from high school: 67 percent versus 86.6 percent for natives. One-fifth of the foreign born had less than a ninth-grade education (22.2 percent) compared to 4.7 percent of the native population (U.S. Department of Commerce 2001).

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### **KEY FINDINGS**

1. Demand for English for Speakers of Other Languages is rising more rapidly than demand for other ABE services and has outpaced capacity.
2. Increased demand for ESOL is crowding out other adult literacy services. Immigrants with limited English proficiency are more proactive in getting services, and many providers have chosen to put resources into ESOL services and reduce other programs.
3. ESOL students often start at very low literacy levels. There is a need for a full continuum of high-quality ESOL services that allows students to progress through multiple levels of ESOL classes and enter articulated pathways to adult literacy and adult secondary education. ESOL should be a step toward further education and skills training, not a final destination.
4. For prison inmates, who have an average sixth-grade literacy level, there is a great need for sustainable adult literacy services that are linked to occupational skills training. Effective transitions to further education and skills training when former inmates reenter their communities are critical to success, as are supports that assist with reintegration to society (e.g., housing, family counseling, substance-abuse prevention).
5. There is evidence that high-quality ABE can reduce the likelihood that inmates will return to prison after they are released.

Nationally, the 28 million immigrants living in the United States represent growth from under 5 percent of the U.S. population in 1970 to more than 10 percent today (Camarota 2000). The New England states have all experienced the impacts of immigration to varying degrees. The largest net growth in the immigrant population from 1990 to 1999 has been in Massachusetts (147,834), Connecticut (73,389), and Rhode Island (16,339). These increases are even more significant in light of the relatively slow growth among New England states over the past decade (Rhode Island grew 4.5 percent, Connecticut grew 3.6 percent, and Massachusetts grew 5.5 percent compared with national average growth of 13.2 percent). In all three states, foreign immigration has been critical in maintaining a labor force adequate to fuel continued economic growth (MassINC 2000). The rural states of Maine and Vermont have experienced the region's smallest growth in international immigration (3,895 and 4,959, respectively); in New Hampshire the number rose 6,995, with the growth concentrated primarily in Nashua and the surrounding southern region of the state.

Addressing the basic skills challenges of immigrants is critical for the region's economic health. Limited English proficiency among immigrant adults is widely recognized as a major obstacle to obtaining economic self-sufficiency. For example, English language acquisition is an important determinant of immigrants' earnings because it facilitates the transfer of schooling and experience obtained abroad to the U.S. labor market (Park 1999). Chiswick and Miller (1992) have documented a 46 percent difference between the wage rates of immigrants who speak English and those who do not: "As much as half of the relative wage growth experienced by immigrants in the first twenty years after arrival may be attributed to gains from learning the English language."

### **Meeting the Demand: The ESOL-ABE Tradeoff**

With current immigration trends, ESOL has become the fastest growing type of adult literacy program in the United States (Cohen 1994). In fact, the demand for ESOL services outstrips supply in many areas, particularly in cities. More often than not, more ESOL students are waiting to be served than existing programs can accommodate, and the average waiting list is considerably longer than those for adult basic edu-

cation or adult secondary education programs. Program enrollment for ESOL generally exceeds enrollments for ABE and adult secondary education classes.

In 2000, 43 percent of the students in adult literacy classes in Connecticut and Rhode Island were attending ESOL classes. The more rural states are less affected, but the number of immigrants accessing their services is growing significantly even in Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. New Hampshire enrolled 34 percent of its total adult literacy students in ESOL classes while experiencing only a 0.5 percent net increase in immigration since 1990. For Vermont and Maine, with 11 percent and 12 percent of their students in ESOL classes, respectively, even rural providers face significant challenges.

When Jobs for the Future interviewed them, Connecticut and Rhode Island providers discussed trade-offs they felt forced to make between providing ESOL and ABE services. In their experience, ESOL students were generally more proactive than ABE students about seeking services. As a result, these providers put more resources into meeting the ESOL demand, even though the need for ABE services has not decreased. However, ABE students tend to be more reticent about seeking services, and providers have little incentive to actively recruit ABE students when responding to ESOL absorbs so much of the resources.

Even though the numbers are smaller, rural adult basic education providers face challenges of their own in trying to meet the needs of ESOL students. The Vermont Adult Education Program in St. Albans, in the northwest corner of the state, does not offer ESOL locally; it refers students to Burlington for instruction. This referral approach is also a way of consolidating small numbers into class-size groups, but it raises issues around transportation needs and how students incorporate commuting time for ESOL classes into schedules of family and work life, as well as the adjustment to living in the United States.

Increased immigration also poses challenges for ABE and ESOL instructors. Programs may serve adults who speak up to 20 different languages, including Spanish, Haitian, French, Vietnamese, Khmer, Laotian, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, and Mandarin and other Chinese dialects. Although ESOL classes are conducted in English, students with no English skills present serious challenges to teachers who do not know their language at all and attempt to integrate them into a class-

room environment. ESOL students tend to cover a wide spectrum of skill levels, and many of them are not literate in their own native language, let alone English. Therefore, programs must typically provide two or even three levels of ESOL instruction.

Moreover, many immigrants arrive in ESOL classes with a range of cultural barriers to learning, such as resistance to women's education. Instructors must gain "cultural competence" for a wide range of cultures, which takes time and resources. Thus, programs find themselves struggling to find and hire adequately skilled ESOL instructors in a very tight labor market, then face severe resource limitations for continuing education.

### **THE CORRECTIONS SYSTEM: MEETING THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION CHALLENGE FOR INMATES**

The U.S. prison system was founded in the nineteenth century on the principle that a "corrections" system could rehabilitate or "correct" prisoners, leading to their reentry into mainstream society. Since then, the pendulum has vacillated between incarceration as punishment and incarceration as rehabilitation. In the 1980s, as the nation's prison population soared and research raised questions about how well rehabilitation reduces recidivism, the pendulum swung toward the prisons-as-punishment view in most states. However, prison systems appear to be increasingly interested in reentry programs that support the reintegration of released inmates into community life. Also, there is evidence that some state prison systems are moving beyond traditional vocational education programs toward a more integrated approach combining education with workforce training tied to industry requirements (*New York Times* 2001).

With rising inmate populations, prisons have become an increasingly important potential home for adult basic education services. Given the strong correlation between educational attainment and incarceration levels, states that do not provide comprehensive education services for inmates are at risk of supporting a growing cycle of permanent incarceration.

The development of comprehensive education and its integration with workforce training for inmates has found strong adherents in several New England prison systems. Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont are all taking innovative approaches to

inmate education, reflecting a serious desire to integrate the release of inmates into communities with the provision of the education and skills development needed to avoid returning to prison. The key features of these states' inmate-education policy are:

- The establishment of prison school districts;
- The creation of fully functioning schools within prison facilities;
- The connection between education and workforce development; and
- The provision of transition services that tie inmates' education to community reintegration.

Prison school districts afford Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont the resources, flexibility, and focus to create comprehensive, effective educational and training programs for inmates. In contrast, Maine and Rhode Island appear to take a more traditional, ad hoc approach that relies on limited GED and vocational rehabilitation classes at prisons. Massachusetts funds education services through Sheriffs Departments, so support is not provided uniformly across the state. In counties with sheriffs who actively support educational services for the inmate population, such as Hampden County, prison education programs can gain tremendous financial and political support.

The Granite State Prison High School, part of a stand-alone school district, provides inmates of New Hampshire State Prison with comprehensive academic and vocational instruction. Based on an inmate's sentence and background, individual educational plans are developed. The GED is a minimum goal, but the larger goal is for participants to earn a high school diploma and learn work-related skills.

Granite State students can take both academic and vocational courses. The program provides an educational continuum that begins with pre-high school courses preparing students for work at the high school level. The school, which became accredited in 2000, offers a structured program of study. In response to inmate needs, it has the look and feel of a real high school, but the instructional methods and content are adapted to accommodate inmates' many different learning needs. Students can participate in vocational classes as well as college classes offered by New England College. Because inmates are no longer eligible for federal Pell Grants, the college offers classes at cost to those interested.

Prior to creating its prison school district and Granite State High, New Hampshire held local school districts responsible for the cost of educating school-age individuals arrested in their city or town, whether or not the inmates originally attended school in that community. School district budget constraints meant that prisoner education opportunities were limited at best.

An important feature of the approach to inmate education taken by Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire is the creation within prison walls of comprehensive schools like Granite State. Rather than rely on disconnected GED courses, these schools provide a full range of educational opportunities, including ESOL and adult basic education, GED preparation, state-recognized high school diplomas, and vocational training programs.

Another important feature is the integration of inmate academic and vocational instruction. Although the degree of integration varies, all of the programs integrate classroom instruction and occupational training, and all provide opportunities for inmates to move from academic to vocational courses. Connecticut has gone furthest with integration and New Hampshire the least.

A fourth important feature is the creation of transition services for inmates being released. While the range

and intensity of services vary across facilities, inmates in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Vermont have an opportunity to receive transition assistance. In Connecticut, Unified School District #1 has developed a formal transition program for inmates who have participated in educational programs. At each of seven prison sites, the school district has a transition counselor who links inmates about to be released to potential employers, helps prepare inmates for interviews, arranges job fairs, and follows up with inmates at three, five, and seven months after release.

The Director of Transition Services for Unified School District #1, a former teacher in USD#1, is convinced that the transition services are a key feature in reducing recidivism. Evidence on that point is limited, but a formal analysis done by the New Hampshire correctional system and informal analyses in Connecticut suggest that recidivism is significantly reduced for prisoners participating in educational services.

The major challenge for these correctional educational systems is meeting demand. Each of the school systems has a long waiting list, and none anticipates ever being able to enroll all inmates interested in pursuing educational opportunities.

## PART VI

# Recommendations for Change

**T**HE RECOMMENDATIONS presented here are designed to transform adult basic education in New England from an inadequately funded, stand-alone cottage industry into a more institutionalized, professional delivery system that has effective partnerships with other educational and skills training institutions. The goal is to create articulated pathways to educational and economic advancement that adults with low literacy can navigate from entry-level adult literacy or ESOL services all the way to postsecondary skills and credentials.

The proposed changes will require action at the state level to create new policies and funding strategies. They will also require change within ABE and other educational and skills training institutions to create innovative best practice models that can drive system change and build partnerships for creating seamless transitions from ABE to further education and skills training.

The recommendations are divided into the four areas covered by this report:

- **Mission and performance measures;**
- **Pathways to Advancement;**
- **Special populations; and**
- **Funding and capacity.**

### **MISSION AND PERFORMANCE MEASURES**

**Develop a clear mission for ABE and establish performance measures consistent with that mission.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Create a clear mission for adult basic education that explicitly includes a public role for ABE in economic development and reducing poverty.**

New England states should develop clear adult basic education goals and performance standards that promote a dual mission:

- To help individuals meet their personal learning goals, improve their economic outcomes, and promote advancement to further education and skills training; and
- To meet labor market and employer skill needs.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Develop outcome-based performance standards that drive change.**

States should develop performance standards that measure the short-term and long-term educational and economic outcomes central to ABE's dual mission. Building on Workforce Investment Act performance standards and measures proposed by the Vermont Adult Essential Skills System, outcome measures might include: learning gains in essential skills, high school diplomas or GED certificates, work readiness credentials, college credits, placement in employment, retention or advancement in employment, enrollment in postsecondary or advanced level education or training, increased involvement in children's education and literacy, and increased expression of informed points of view on public issues (Study Committee of the State Board of Education of Vermont 2000). Such outcomes provide incentives for collaboration because they can only be achieved through effective transitions among adult basic education, workforce development, and postsecondary education and skills training

**RECOMMENDATION:****Develop interagency data systems.**

Performance standards are only meaningful if relevant outcome data can be collected, analyzed, and used to implement improvements in curricula and learning. Because the desired educational and economic outcomes cut across multiple state agencies and must be monitored over time to measure long-term impact, states should create interagency data systems that can track educational and economic outcomes and assess long-term advancement. Some states, such as Florida, have developed promising practices for collecting data that report wage, employment, and postsecondary education and skills training outcomes in a single, user-friendly system.

**PATHWAYS TO ADVANCEMENT****Create pathways to advancement through partnerships with other education and skills training institutions.****RECOMMENDATION:****Create pathways to educational and economic advancement.**

Local initiatives should be launched in the New England states to create articulated pathways to advancement through institutionalized partnerships among adult basic education services, community colleges, skills training institutions, and employers. Initiatives should be guided by an explicit systems reform agenda to build sustainable partnerships focused on creating pathways to advancement and to drive change in policy, funding strategies, and performance measures.

**RECOMMENDATION:****Expand high-quality, workplace-based learning.**

Comprehensive systems of workplace-based learning should be developed, building on exemplary practices in New England and other regions, that provide contextual learning, teach high-performance skills, expand access to economic opportunities, and address labor market skill needs. Workplace-based learning should be rooted in structured partnerships between ABE services and industry associations, or major employers organized by sector, that provide career ladder pathways to higher-level skills development.

**RECOMMENDATION:****Develop partnership strategies for integrating adult education and skills training.**

States should promote and support local partnerships among multiple educational and skills training institutions by creating interagency mechanisms to plan, fund, and oversee a comprehensive approach to adult basic education, skills training, and postsecondary education. Local collaborations that cut across multiple state agencies and funding streams are more likely where adult basic education, workforce development, economic development, public education, community college, and human service agencies work in concert to develop a coherent continuum of seamless education and skills training services for adults.

**SERVICES FOR SPECIAL POPULATIONS****Provide adequate services to meet the needs of special populations.****RECOMMENDATION:****Provide a continuum of quality ESOL services.**

Adult basic education should include a full continuum of services for adults who speak languages other than English. There should be easily accessible pathways within adult basic education from ESOL to adult literacy, and from adult literacy to adult secondary education programs that lead to high school credentials. In addition, innovative policy and funding strategies are needed to ensure that increasing demand for ESOL services does not crowd out other adult literacy services.

**RECOMMENDATION:****Create sustainable adult education systems for prison inmates.**

Services should build on and expand the school district model being used in those New England states that create fully functioning schools within prison facilities and provide stable resources. To reduce recidivism, adult education services for prison inmates should provide effective transitions to further education, skills training, and reentry to their communities following release.

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## FUNDING AND CAPACITY

### **Provide adequate funding and capacity to meet the demand for adult basic education services.**

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Provide adequate funding to meet demand for services.**

As a short-term benchmark that would represent a significant step forward, state and local governments in New England should increase funding over three years to a level sufficient to provide 150 hours of instruction for those actively demanding services. This investment—an additional \$88 million in spending for ABE services in New England—would make it possible to provide the more intensive services necessary for students to achieve meaningful learning gains.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Provide resources to improve system performance.**

States, foundations, and other public and private institutions should support system change by making strategic investments to improve system performance and achieve better student outcomes. Resources should be awarded through a competitive process to implement promising practices that are explicitly designed to drive system change. The goal is to improve capacity to meet labor market skill needs, promote advancement beyond adult basic education, and improve the economic outcomes of individuals.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Create outcomes-based funding systems.**

States should provide strong incentives for change by linking resources for system change to improving performance on specified short-term and long-term outcomes. These outcomes would include, for example, the numbers of students attaining high school credentials, finding employment, advancing in a career, and participating in further education and skills training, as well as the degree to which program graduates meet employer skill needs.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Publish state report cards.**

To drive change, promote continuous improvement, and build outcome-based accountability, state report cards can track and encourage progress in improving system performance and attaining key outcomes in ABE. *Performance* measures would include the number of adults served, the average number of instructional hours provided, and the level of state and local funding. *Outcome* measures should include: demonstrated learning gains; attainment of high school credentials; placement, retention, and advancement in employment; and placement, retention, and advancement in postsecondary education and skills training. Adult basic education cannot achieve these outcome results by itself; the report is also a measure of the extent to which states can develop a comprehensive system of adult education and skills training.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Make adult basic education a more professional field.**

States and ABE providers should collaboratively address key teacher-related issues that are barriers to improving instructional practice, reducing teacher turnover, and making the field attractive to qualified instructors as a long-term career. There is a need to create additional full-time teaching positions and at more competitive wages and benefits. State certification standards and ongoing professional development are needed to improve instructional practice and increase learning gains.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

### **Support cooperative efforts to provide support services.**

It is not practical for every ABE provider to directly provide student support services, yet these services are critical to student success. Collaborative efforts that allow ABE and other providers within a city or region to share support services would be more efficient. Funding should be made available to help providers establish community connections and identify resources for students in need.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See the main body of this report for all sources and the methodology used to determine demand for ABE services and the number of instructional hours necessary to achieve learning gains of at least one hour.
- <sup>2</sup> The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth has found that 150 hours of instruction are necessary to move 75 percent of students up one grade level (MassINC 2000). The Massachusetts Adult Education Committee found that 20 percent of adults at NALS level 1 & 2 acknowledge a need to improve their literacy skills and just 10 percent of that population actively seeks out ABE services. This chart reflects the cost of providing 150 hours of instruction to the 10 percent of those adults who need services and are actively seeking them. This approximation of the real demand for services provides a reasonable way of defining the problem. We used this method of defining active demand because the alternative method, looking at waiting lists, is quite complicated: not all states keep waiting lists, and not all states that do keep waiting lists measure them the same way.
- <sup>3</sup> This report uses English for Speakers of Other Languages—ESOL—to describe programs provided to non-native English speakers to improve English language skills. Another commonly used term is English as a Second Language—ESL. ESOL, which is becoming more widely accepted, accommodates non-native English speakers who may be learning English as a second, third, or fourth language.
- <sup>4</sup> The NALS analysis includes elderly adults who are not in the labor force. The percentage of adults who lack adequate literacy skills is confirmed by other studies.
- <sup>5</sup> The rural states of Maine and Vermont have had significantly less net international immigration (3,895 and 4,959, respectively). New Hampshire's increase of 6,995 international immigrants was concentrated primarily in Nashua and the surrounding southern New Hampshire region.
- <sup>6</sup> Private dollars are available to a varying degree from foundations, religious institutions, and private donors. Given the large number and diverse types of these private donors, and the resulting lack of a systematic way to approach their role, this research did not investigate those sources of funding.
- <sup>7</sup> For example, a Massachusetts FY 2002 Conference Committee Budget Recommendation proposed a 50 percent cut in the state appropriation for ABE, from \$30 million to \$15 million, which would trigger a loss of more than \$10 million in federal funds that Massachusetts would otherwise receive FY 2003. As a result of a significant advocacy effort, 98 percent of the state funding was restored; the final cut was only \$700,000.
- <sup>8</sup> Even with Connecticut's unique system of funding, though, the state Director of Adult Basic Education argues strongly that the state is far from meeting the actual need for ABE services.
- <sup>9</sup> Legislation under consideration would increase the reimbursement by 10 percent across the board, so that all districts would get at least some state dollars.
- <sup>10</sup> In New Hampshire, 256 teachers are paid while 745 are volunteers. In Vermont, 77 teachers are paid and 358 are volunteers. Paid teachers may provide more hours of instruction to more students, but the use of volunteer teachers is clearly part of the overall teaching strategy.
- <sup>11</sup> Massachusetts has instituted a new system for improving the salaries and benefits of ABE teachers through its contracts for state funds.
- <sup>12</sup> See Part III for a discussion of the range of views in New England about the proper mission for ABE.
- <sup>13</sup> Federal legislation proposed in 1996 would have combined federal funding for job training, adult education, and vocational education into a single program. This politically charged proposal did not pass.
- <sup>14</sup> The National Reporting System began as a voluntary effort on the part of state directors of adult education, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Education's Division of Adult Education and Literacy, to improve accountability among adult education programs. The proposed voluntary nature of the NRS changed in August 1998, when the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act within the Workforce Investment Act became law. This act established accountability requirements, including that states develop outcome-based performance standards for adult education programs, as one means of determining program effectiveness. The NRS mandate was then expanded to establish the measures and methods to conform to the Workforce Investment Act.
- <sup>15</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau defines native-born as individuals born in the United States or in a U.S. Island Area, such as Puerto Rico, or born abroad of at least one parent who was a U.S. citizen.

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## LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

*Many people took considerable time to share their extraordinary work in the field of adult literacy with us. The authors would like to thank the following interviewees for their invaluable insight, information and ideas.*

- Lee Arnold, Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training  
John Barnett, Connecticut Department of Labor  
Evelyn Beaulieu, Maine Adult and Community Education  
Patricia Bellart, Providence Adult Learning Center  
Robert Bickerton, Massachusetts Department of Education  
Leanne Greely Bond, Maine Development Foundation  
Thomas Coderre and staff, Genesis Center  
Marsha Cook, Maine Department of Education  
Brenda Dann-Messier, Dorcas Place  
Becky Dyer, Maine Department of Education  
Gail Dyer, Governor's Training Initiative  
Art Ellison, New Hampshire Department of Education  
Jenny Estey, Northwest State Correctional Facility  
Allen Evans, Vermont Human Resources Investment Council  
Brenda Gagne, Noble Adult and Community Education  
Barbara Goodwin, Massabesic Adult and Community Education  
Steve Gordon, New Hampshire Department of Education  
Terry Gustavson, Rhode Island Adult Literacy Council  
Lorna Joseph, Connecticut Department of Labor  
Silja Kallenbach, New England Literacy Resource Center  
Janet Kelly, Read/Write/Now  
Ellis King, Maine Department of Corrections  
Mary Leahy and staff, Central Vermont Adult Learning at Barre  
Robert Lucenti, Vermont Department of Corrections  
Lisa Martin, Maine Metal Products Association  
Robert Mason, Rhode Island Department of Education  
William McGonagle, New Hampshire Department of Corrections  
Raina Morasco, Valley Regional Adult Education Program  
Arthur Muldowney, Middletown Adult Education Program  
Joe Murphy, Connecticut Association for Adult and Continuing Education  
Trish Ohler, Maine Department of Labor  
Diana Pacetta-Ullmann, Connecticut Department of Correction  
Roberta Pawloski, Connecticut Department of Education  
Duncan Phillips, New Hampshire Workforce Opportunity Council  
Judy Resnick, Connecticut Business and Industries Association  
Sandra Robinson, Vermont Department of Education  
Theodore Sergei, Connecticut Department of Education  
Kay Sharon, Vermont Department of Education  
Jim Snodgrass, Second Start  
William Toller, Hampden County Sheriff's Department  
Susan Townsley, Connecticut Department of Labor  
Mary Tripp, Chittenden Correctional Facility  
Andrew Tyskiewicz, Capitol Region Education Council  
Jim Verschueren, Dover Adult Learning Center  
Louise Wright and Staff, Vermont Adult Learning Center at St. Albans

## APPENDIX

### METHODOLOGY

Jobs for the Future began the research for this report by identifying and interviewing key adult literacy contacts in each state (*see list of interviewees*). Contacts we identified included staff in the state department of education, the workforce development system, the corrections system, state and regional literacy organizations, local providers of adult literacy services and others.

The primary source for much of the data presented in this report was the Annual Narrative and Statistical Reports sent to the U.S. Department of Education for both program years 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. In most cases, the adult basic education directors provided this data to Jobs for the Future.

Another key data source was the National Adult Literacy Survey of 1992, which includes a wealth of information about literacy throughout the United States. Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the survey included demographic and literacy information from roughly 13,600 randomly selected individuals over the age of 16. In addition, to gain a better understanding of state-level data, the department surveyed about 1,100 adults from 12 states; most states, including all the New England states, chose not to participate in this latter activity because of the financial cost of doing so.

To provide a window into literacy among the remaining states, NALS researchers constructed what are called synthetic estimates based on the national survey. These estimates provide information about the percent of each state's residents whose literacy scores are at NALS Levels

1 and 2. These numbers are important because the National Governors Association has said that the demands of the new economy require skills at NALS Level 3. To give an example, NALS Level 3 skills give an individual the ability to solve a story problem in math requiring arithmetic operations on two or more numbers. A NALS Level 2 individual could solve a story problem requiring just one arithmetic operation, when the numbers and the operation required are stated in the text of the problem.

Supplemented with 1990 census data, the estimates give a statistical image of literacy and educational attainment, as well as other demographic information, about each state's residents. However, they have certain limitations as estimates. The numbers include individuals aged 65 and over, which slightly skews the available information, both because seniors have somewhat lower rates of literacy and because policymakers are more interested in raising literacy levels among those still in the workforce.

Adjusting for this limitation and gaining a more nuanced understanding of literacy in a given state is no simple matter. Rather, it requires the development of a fairly sophisticated data set, such as was developed to complete *New Skills for a New Economy* (MassINC 2000). MassINC combined the NALS data with Current Population Survey data and 1990 census data to remove individuals over the age of 65 from the data set and to provide more detailed demographic information (e.g., English proficiency, educational attainment) about various groups, including the state's immigrant residents.

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An Experts Panel was an excellent sounding board and provided feedback on technical matters as well as bigger-picture considerations. This panel, convened by the foundation and consisting of a cross-section of interests from all six states, consisted of Robert Bickerton, Brenda Dann-Messier, Gail Dyer, Marc Herzog, Tripp Jones, William McGonagle, Judy Resnick, Kay Sharon, and Diana Pacetta-Ullmann.

At the Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth, Dana Ansell offered advice on data. At Jobs for the Future, Richard Kazis, Hilary Pennington, and Marlene Seltzer assisted with conceptualizing this report, and many other staff members made significant contributions, particularly Amy Burke, Carla Richards, and Judy Taylor. Marc Miller brought his expertise to the editing process, Catherine Rivera proofread the report, Lisa Dickinson provided desktop publishing assistance, and Debra Wilder obtained survey information and provided general assistance on the project.

The report was designed by Anne Read.

**Jobs for the Future** seeks to accelerate the educational and economic advancement of youth and adults struggling in today's economy. JFF partners with leaders in education, business, government, and communities around the nation to: strengthen opportunities for youth to succeed in postsecondary learning and high-skill careers; increase opportunities for low-income individuals to move into family-supporting careers; and meet the growing economic demand for knowledgeable and skilled workers.

**The Nellie Mae Education Foundation**, based in Braintree, Massachusetts, is the largest philanthropy in New England focused exclusively on promoting access, quality, and effectiveness of education. Established in 1998, the Foundation provides grants and other support to education programs in New England that help improve academic achievement and access to higher education for low-income and underserved students. The Foundation also funds research that examines critical educational opportunity issues that affect underserved students, families, and adults, and it convenes educators, policymakers, and community members to discuss and influence pivotal education issues. Since 1998, the Foundation has provided \$23 million in grants and support to education programs in the region. In 2002, the Foundation will provide \$10 million in grants and other support to organizations throughout New England.

**Marty Liebowitz**, a program director at Jobs for the Future, works on policy and practice related to education reform, workforce development, and institutional change in community colleges. Before joining JFF, he was director of research and development for Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound, a national education organization partnering with urban districts to promote comprehensive school change focused on project-based learning. His professional experience includes serving as senior policy analyst for the Commissioner of the Boston Department of Health and Hospitals and policy analyst for public education for the Mayor's Policy Office, City of Boston.

**Amy Robins** is a senior project manager at Jobs for the Future, where she has focused on strategies to advance low-wage workers in today's economy. Prior to joining Jobs for the Future, she helped develop, implement, and manage a \$15 million Welfare-to-Work program at the Seattle-King County Workforce Development Council. During the Clinton Administration, she served as an assistant to the director of the Women's Bureau at the U.S. Department of Labor. She also served as a legislative aide for the U.S. Congress for five years.

**Jerry Rubin** is Vice President, Building Economic Opportunity, at Jobs for the Future. He has more than 20 years of experience designing and implementing economic development and workforce training initiatives for low-wage workers, low-income individuals and families, municipal and state governments, and private industry. He founded and was president of the Greater Boston Manufacturing Partnership, which provided manufacturing improvement consulting and workforce training solutions for small and mid-sized manufacturers and their employees. Before founding the GBMP, he was chief of staff and director of policy and planning for the Economic Development and Industrial Corporation of Boston, the city agency for economic development and workforce training.



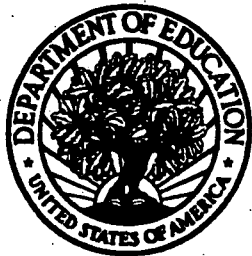
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