

No Adult Left Behind

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### Abstract

Left out of the conversation for education reform, at least on the level of grade school, secondary school, and college are the adult education programs provided across the country. These programs receive a fraction of the funds and respect as mainstream programs do. However, they are sorely needed in Northwest Indiana. The region's early 21<sup>st</sup> century economy has changed from the 20<sup>th</sup> century and will continue to change reflecting a greater emphasis on the need to have a larger educated job pool. The region's economy is in a recession with a high unemployment rate, but the long-term threat is not a global or national recession, the real threat is that many adult residents lack basic skills that will allow them to adapt to the ever-changing economy and to pursue advanced skills that will continue to be needed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. Adult education is the best answer to addressing the adults currently being left behind. However, to have sustained effectiveness resulting in eventual college enrollment and graduation, the programs must dramatically shift from local school district control to institutions of higher learning.

### No Child Left Behind

Our world has changed throughout history. Moreover, the last one hundred years this change has accelerated affecting every aspect of our society. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century the momentum of change continues to speed along faster than the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This acceleration of change affects Northwest Indiana and its ability to be a leader economically, educationally and civically. Northwest Indiana produces more steel than ever before, but with fewer workers than in the past. The region's steel mills once employed over one hundred- thousand workers, while at the present time, they employ twenty thousand. A high school diploma was not required for a job in the region's steel mills during its heyday. Today, for the majority of job openings at the steel mills, a candidate will need a college education to be considered for employment. Northwest Indiana finds itself in a competitive global economy that continues to change, and as result, requires its workers that are not only trying to stay employed but are seeking new employment, to have basic educational skills and also to possess advanced skills. These are skills that are foundational to moving forward in a changing world, with adult education an integral key to giving adults the opportunity to secure these skills. To meet this global challenge locally, a strong world class program is needed that educates those lacking basic skills in reading, math, writing, economic knowledge, and civic literacy to ensure no adult is left behind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For this to come about the adult education system, along with the community college education system needs to be changed and restructured under higher learning.

#### **The Definition of Adult Education**

A (2005) profile of adult education defined "Adult Education) "As service or institutions below the postsecondary level for individuals who are 16 and over, and who are not enrolled, or required to be enrolled in secondary school. Eligible individuals must also lack sufficient

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mastery of basic educational skills to enable the individuals to function effectively in society; lack of high school diploma or equivalent; or be unable to speak, read, or write the English language” (Elliot & Lasater, p. 1-2). Adult education is supported nationally, statewide and locally. The federal government expands the above definition by including those who need to be retrained for employment. According to the Adult Education Act of 1966, the purpose of the act is as follows:

- 1) Assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self sufficiency;
- 2) Assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and
- 3) Assist adults in the completion of secondary school education (Elliot & Lasater, 2005. p. 1, 2).

Depending on the institution, adult education may include remedial education. Many colleges offer remedial education in the following three categories, non-credit, credit, or audit. Generally, the cost of adult/ remedial education programs for students at college institutions is higher than the adult education programs sponsored and administered by local school districts.

### **The state of Indiana’s Adult Education**

The state of Indiana’s Office of Adult Education supports the same categories as the federal government does. Locally, the school cities of Hammond, Merrillville, Gary, and Portage provide adult education. The most popular, encompassing, and successful of the above providers is Portage Adult Education. It is a model for the rest of Northwest Indiana and truly a model for the nation. Portage Adult Education provides Northwest Indiana residents the opportunity to complete their high school diploma, earn a GED or improve math and English

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skills to qualify for college or vocational training. Each year the program helps nearly 500 students graduate and realize their goals of higher education or finding a better job (Portage Adult Ed, n.d. n.p.). The institution is run professionally, well organized and customer friendly while applying rigorous standards. It is the only adult education provider to offer classes in the morning, afternoon and evening while also providing free tutoring and childcare for infants and preschoolers for only a dollar a day. At present, the cost of high school credit classes is thirty dollars per class. An article published in late (2009) in the *Times* newspaper highlights how expansive the Portage program is, where the funding comes from, in addition, to the percentage of their students enrolled in a GED or diploma program. Portage operates 24 sites in six counties throughout Northwest Indiana and has a total of 2,400 students. Fifty one percent of those students are seeking a GED, 35 percent a diploma and 14 percent are taking part in the English as a Second Language program. Most of the students who earn a GED or diploma go on to pursue some form of postsecondary education. Nearly 80 percent of the funding for adult education comes from the federal and state governments. The balance of funding is provided by Portage schools, the county, United Way, and various foundations (Kasarda, 2001, n.p.). The key statistical information is that most of the students pursue some form of higher learning. The second key is the funding issue. The above quote does not mention that the Portage Adult Education Program is struggling to maintain its services as are other adult providers in the region and state.

### **The funding crisis facing the region's adult education programs**

“At a time when our economy is lagging and layoffs are increasing at an alarming pace, we depend on our adult education programs to retrain the workforce for better paying jobs. Unfortunately, accepting students from outside of Portage has put a strain on the program's

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financial resources, threatening its ability to continue in the future” (Mosely, 2010. n.p.). The Hammond and East Chicago’s adult education programs do not offer high school credit classes. Merrillville in the last year just added a high school credit program offering classes only at night. Gary has a high school adult education program, but it has been poorly managed. The city offers classes only at night and has mentioned closing its doors permanently. The Portage Township School district is the only district in Porter County offering what Portage adult education offers. The result is a number of students seek adult education through Portage though they do not reside within the boundaries of Portage Township schools which sponsors and provides financial support out of their K -12 operating budget. The Indiana state legislative body formed a bipartisan committee that continues to study the funding problem for the state’s adult education programs. Gregg Simms, D-10<sup>th</sup> District, offered House Bill 1193 in 2008. According to Simms, it is “a measure that would guarantee that school corporations are reimbursed for out-of-district students. These funds would be recovered from school corporations where the student resides” (2008, n.p.) But with the state budgets reductions across the board to all educational providers, House Bill 1193 will continue to meet resistance. Another bill that failed to pass tried to correct the strict funding formula granting money to school districts based on students enrolled only in traditional K-12 programs.

A bill died this year in the Indiana General Assembly that would have provided an adult education grant to school corporations. A school district receives funding, in large part, based on the attendance of its students. When a student drops out of traditional day school, the funding the district receives from that student doesn’t follow them if they enroll in a night program. Program directors would like to see a share of that funding used for adult education” (Kirk, 2010. n.p.).

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Most school districts will find a tough time selling the public they represent on the need to fund adult education when school budgets are being cut and the funding formula does not lend credence to allocating significant budget dollars to adult education. Moreover, local school districts that do provide adult programming will also continue to struggle in convincing the general legislature to change current funding policies. Local school districts are just not listened to on this issue.

### **There is a Need for Adult Education.**

Increasingly, colleges realize the need to have remedial education not only as a part of their mission, but a larger part of their mission because many students enrolling directly after high school, or returning after years in the workforce, do not have the mastery of the basic skills to pass entrance exams (Stuart, 2009. p. 14, 15). Far too many of the nation's and region's population continue to drop out without acquiring a high school diploma or GED. Far too many in the region and state have low literacy skills. According to a national profile on adult education using information from the 2000 census, more than 40 million adults, or approximately 21 percent of population, possess limited literacy capability that is, they have not achieved a high school diploma or equivalent (Elliot & Lasater, 2005. p. 5.). Twenty-one percent is a staggering amount. This number is hindering our nation's economy. A 2003 National Center for Education Statistics report shows that 9 percent of the people in Lake County Indiana lacked basic prose literacy skills, meaning they could not read a newspaper, editorial or brochure. In Porter County, it was 6 percent. In Portage, some of the students enter at a first-grade level in math and reading and about half of the students haven't passed all or part of ISTEP-Plus (the standardized test required to receive a high school diploma) (McCollum, 2009, n.p.). If adults cannot read, they

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will struggle to fill out an application or write a resume with aptitude. They will struggle to follow written directions, participate in civic life, and educate their children.

### **Welfare and Prisons Populations**

“Three of 100 males aged 18 to 34 are incarcerated. Of the 2.3 million people behind bars in the state and federal and local jails in 2006, about 43 percent of 18 to 60 years of age lack a high school diploma or its equivalent” (Report of the Nat. Commission on Literacy, 2008. p. 5). Finding 43 percent of 18 to 60 year olds incarcerated to not have completed secondary education is telltale sign that those lacking even a basic high school degree are at increased risk of entering into the penitentiary system. The prison system has recognized the role education plays in turning inmates into more productive model citizens. A task force formed in the state of Maryland found that, “Research has shown a 19% drop in recidivism for Maryland inmates who participated in education during incarceration. Inmates who participate in education commit fewer crimes after release, are more likely to find work after release, and behave better while incarcerated” (Maryland State Dept. of Education B, 2001. p. 11). What is currently missing is a coordinated effort by the states to address those who are at risk of entering the prison system due to their lack of basic skills. Is there a correlation between those on welfare and those who lack these basic educational skills? According to the National Institute for literacy, nearly 50 percent of all welfare recipients lack a high school diploma (Auberach, 2008. p. 3). If the standard for even a low end paying service job is a high school diploma and the standard for a living wage job is a college degree, how are those on welfare expected to be able to move off welfare if they do not have a chance at acquiring a high school diploma, or college degree? They need adult education, not just welfare, or they will stay on welfare.



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**The crisis facing the economy is lack of education.**

Since December 2007, the economy of the nation is in a recession. As of January 2010 the U.S., on average, had just over a 10.4 percent unemployment rate. Indiana had an unemployment rate of 9.7 percent, compared to our neighbors in Illinois at 11.3 percent and Michigan at 14.3 percent. Lake County Indiana had 10.2 percent out of work and Porter County had 8.9 percent (U.S. Dept. of Labor). Many who desire to work have lost their jobs due to the economy. The economy locally and nationally is affected by those who lack the skills required for participation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy. State Rep. Chuck Mosley, D-Portage, in a news release stated, "At a time when our economy is lagging and layoffs are increasing at an alarming pace, we depend on our adult education programs to retrain our workforce for better paying jobs" (Mosely, 2010. n.p.). The region's population needs the skills that will enable them to compete in the highly technical skilled economy. Service and healthcare jobs have made big inroads into the state's economy. However, an article in *Indiana Business* on advanced manufacturing stated. "Today, Indiana still relies on manufacturing for approximately 20 percent of the state's jobs. However, those positions are increasingly being filled by skilled workers with specialized training in advanced manufacturing." (Hromadka, 2007. p.10, 12). Advance skills are needed. But if a large segment of the adult population is without even the basic skills, at some point our region will look less and less viable for companies to locate or stay here. A report published in the *Washington Post* highlighted why one state's business leaders are supportive of adult education reform coupled with increased funding. The leaders noted the shortage of skilled workers is driving businesses away, damaging the economy and the viability of their region (Trejos, 2006. n.p.).

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How does this compare with Northwest Indiana? One only needs to see how many companies have closed their doors or relocated elsewhere, especially in the region's older cities of Hammond, East Chicago, and Gary. The nation's and Northwest Indiana's leaders need to reform and invest in their education systems, in particular its adult education programs. to make sure its citizens are trained for 21<sup>st</sup> century employment.

### *The Critics*

There are critics of adult education programs and remedial education at the college level. The biggest are why governments are spending twice for what was originally funded to be learned in grade school through high-school (Stuart, 2009. p. 17). Again, many continue not receiving and mastering what they should have received and mastered in knowledge and skills at the elementary level or failed, for whatever reason, to acquire a high school diploma. Some of this may be attributed to failing schools. Six of the twenty-three schools in Indiana are on their fourth year of academic probation in Northwest Indiana (Lazerus & Schneider, 2010). Furthermore, older adults who have been out of school for a long period of time and have had a change in their employment will most likely need some remedial or refresher courses if they are trying to go back to school or shift to a job that is categorized as different from the one they held previously for a long time. I recall a conversation on remedial education I had in October (2008) with the president of Ivy Tech Community College, Tom Snyder. President Snyder mentioned when he meets with state legislators he often is asked the question, why is the state paying for remedial education? This education was to be accomplished in the primary grades. Tom then gets out some questions from the admission test that Ivy Tech uses to assess new students' knowledge in reading, math, and comprehension. Often he finds the state legislators who complained about providing remedial education failed to pass parts of the compass test when

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given to them. Employers have criticized how long it is taking for students to graduate or from those in the education field who believe it is a waste of time to focus resources on remedial education (Stuart, 2009, p. 17). There are many reasons why a student may not graduate on time: work hours, family, financial issues, and the school's inability to provide a flexible schedule of classes from morning to evening, Monday through Saturday. Lastly, the question our nation, state and region should be asking, is it really a waste of time to make sure no one is left behind who chooses not to be?

### **What can be done to reform Adult Education**

In the past and present time, adult education has been the step child to all other education. It is consistently underfunded, understaffed, and usually poorly administered. This is the case even in the best system in Northwest Indiana, Portage Adult Education system which is struggling to keep its doors open. The above struggles continue even though it has been established that the experts believe investing in adult education and higher learning is an investment in the economy, the nation, and an investment in its people. For adult education in Indiana to be a success, it should come under the auspices of higher learning, preferably the community college system. A 2006 article in *Community College Week* looked into ways of how to boost adult education. The recommendation was to not isolate adult education students in a single building but get them to see college programs at work (Pekow, 2006, p.4). The students need to feel a part of the college system.

Many community colleges are already involved in providing some kind of adult education. Ivy Tech Community College of Indiana offers continuing education courses in computers. They also provide remedial education, not just for their own students, but also for both the Indiana and Purdue Universities. Ivy Tech provides classroom space for GED classes

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but does not administer it. The solution to the adult education crisis in Indiana is for Ivy Tech to undertake adult education in such a manner from the local school districts resulting in that Ivy Tech will be solely responsible for administering the programs. Local school districts' only involvement would be on a referral basis. This solution would include having control over the alternative high school credit program that the school districts of Portage, Gary, and Merrillville presently provide. The exception in Indiana would be where Ivy Tech does not have a foot print, in other words, where Ivy Tech does not have a physical presence in an Indiana county. Then the local school districts may still provide adult education programming. What happens in Indiana may be a model for adult education in other states.

### **Remediation.**

Furthermore, to gain insight into how adult education may be reformed under the administration of higher learning is to look at the reform in remedial education. There is presently a push for reforming how remedial education is taught by instructors. Too often, traditional remedial education is too simple and basic and fails to incorporate in week five what was learned in week one. Students need to be challenged with more complex work even as they are working through their grammar mistakes. (Rose, 2009) Adult education falls into this same flaw as remediation does. In an article titled "Reinventing Remedial Education", Reginald Stuart states how most remedial education failed to focus on the gaps, taught much the same as repeating a high school class (2009, p.16). The article goes on to say that students are not blank slates; they do come with knowledge. Instead of reviewing all that was taught, the structure should be more individually focused over a short period where the student is given instruction in what he or she is lacking. Many students drop out of post secondary education because the high school format was not stimulating them. Delivering remedial instruction in the format that treats

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the student already containing vital knowledge but needing help to fill in the gaps with testing as an indicator of mastery will go a long way in providing the necessary basic education skills for students.

### **ease of transferring and mentoring.**

Most prospective college students do not have a clue how to journey through the meandering bureaucratic systems in place at most colleges. Applying for college and gaining admission can be a strenuous and an overwhelmingly burdensome task to any student. There is a need for mentoring as shown in an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on how Texas is trying to address the problems students have in transferring to four-year schools.

Nationally, about 6.7 million students enroll in community colleges each year, many of them intending to transfer to four year institutions. But in Texas, as in other states, less than a quarter of the students earning associate degrees end up applying to universities. The eventual result is widespread underemployment and a stagnating work force that doesn't keep up with population growth (Megan, 2009, p. A30)

What educators learned was many students do not know how to transfer. To remedy this, Texas education institutions have made transferring more users friendly in addition to providing peer mentoring. "We can't simply blame the students for what happens when they come to us," says Mr. Garnder. "We are ultimately responsible for many of the conditions, policies, practices, and pedagogies that shape the success or lack thereof of transfer students" Mangan, 2009, p. 4). If those with associate degrees are having trouble transferring to four year institutions, how much more difficult is it for those who earned a high school diploma or GED through an adult education program? How many never make it to their first class in college? If these students

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were enrolled in programs already under the administration of higher learning institutions, the transition should be much smoother.

Many of the students in adult education are there because they have veered off the mainstream path along the way. Many have fallen through the cracks of the system. Mentoring is critical in making sure these students successfully complete their post secondary and higher learning studies. Most are not getting it under the guidance of local school districts. High schools are not preparing students for success in college. "Parents would likely be shocked to learn that the relationship between the high school instructional program and college success is imprecise at best" Conley, 2005, p. 3). Conley goes on to say high school programs are not designed to enable students to succeed in college. The K-12 and college institutions developed separately. This was okay when the majority of the new labor market jobs required a high school diploma or less. However, now the "primary passport" to economic success is a college degree (2005, p. 3, 4). Local school districts already failed once with adult education students. Students deserve higher quality program that would be geared to success in college which higher learning could provide. Higher learning control would provide the relationship for at risk students that is missing between high schools and colleges. A 2006 study found that only 56 percent of entering students were finishing college. The conclusion is that too much discussion has been on starting and not finishing college (Dodson, 2009, p. 27). Clearly, there is a problem. The goal should not be only to get started but to finish. Adult education students are already in an at risk category. A successful community college program would provide appropriate mentoring from day one through graduation. The transition from adult, remedial and into college level courses would be made without hassles. The classroom size would be smaller and students would not find themselves lost in the bureaucratic system.

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*funding.*

Placing adult education in the hands of the community college system will reform how these programs are funded in Indiana. As it is right now, adult programming is funded separately from the regular K-12 programming. The community college system would do away with separate step child like treatment. Instead, the funding would be lumped in with the general budget request presented to the state that the community college system requests. These funding requests are first submitted to the Indiana Commission for Higher Learning. “Working closely with public and independent colleges and universities, the Commission for Higher Education coordinates planning and budgeting for higher education in Indiana” (Indiana Commission for High Higher Learning n.d.). The Commission for Higher Learning may be the institution that has the ability and power to bring results to the funding process for adult education that local school districts do not.

*The example of dual enrollments.*

Society usually is weary of generations interacting together especially nowadays. However, in the past the interaction of generations was described as wisdom. A critic might say that some of those in adult education are only age sixteen and it is not good to mix an adult with a sixteen year old. However, if students are sixteen and older they already can enroll in a local community college to earn dual credit under Indiana state law. In Indiana a student can generally earn up to 15 college credits while enrolled in the dual credit program. In some instances these courses can be held at the local high school. But in other cases they may all be taken at the college campus. “The State regards the offering of rigorous dual credit courses as an opportunity for encouraging high schools students to continue on to college and for allowing entering college students to get off to a good start, thus increasing the probability of academic success in college,

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ultimately leading to completion of an associate or baccalaureate degree” (Indiana Commission on Higher Learning, 2005, p.1) The goal is increasing academic success by exposing young adults early to the college curriculum and culture. A report by the Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education found “early exposure is critical” to increasing the success that students will enroll in college, graduate and if desiring to do so transfer to continue their studies (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009). This model of success can be replicated and increased in adult education programs if higher learning were more involved and responsible for the programs. Also an older adult seeking an education may be a good influence on younger adults or vice versa. I recall taking a college course while in high school with a fellow classmate out of the military saying he was impressed I started so early, wishing he had done the same. I have not forgotten his diligence, work ethic and encouraging words.

### **Conclusion**

Clearly the country and region of Northwest Indiana are in a long-term crisis. The economy has changed requiring virtually everyone to have basic skills in reading, comprehension, writing, and mathematics at the minimum level of a completed high school graduate level. In addition, the workforce bar for advanced skills continues to rise. Meanwhile, many in our region and country have not mastered the basic skills and struggle to find living wage jobs, not only to support themselves but also their families. The segment of the population lacking in basic skills is at increased risk for entering into the penal system, incarceration, and on welfare rolls. Adult education programs across the region and state try to fill in the gaps. Nevertheless, they are falling short due to lack of public support, funding issues, poor programming, poor customer service, and the lack of enough sites. These programs are just not reaching enough of the targeted population. Then again, when they do, there is no program in



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place to provide support for transferring into higher education and mentoring through the goal of graduation. A change of ownership, administration and venue are needed for a successful adult education program. Instead of local school districts overseeing and running adult education programs, the local community college system of Indiana would take on the responsibility. This would bring a higher coordinated learning emphasis to a system much over looked. The switch to the college system will provide the opportunity for adult education reform that colleges have done for their remedial programs. This new policy gives the best opportunity to provide long-term mentoring, inclusion and guidance to meet the goal of graduating not only with essential basic skills but a college degree. The region, state, and country need to make sure no adult is left behind in the 21<sup>st</sup> century education system. Adult education joined with higher learning in Indiana will meet the long-term problem facing the economy in solving the lack of basic and higher skills in the population. It will also set up an example to follow for other states in our nation.

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