

Adult Education: Executive Summary

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According to 2008 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 26 million American adults between the ages of 18 and 64 have less than a high school diploma.¹ Although all 50 states administer educational programs for adults who lack basic skills, nationwide less than 2.5 million of these adults receive services annually.²

Tennessee has an estimated 571,938 adults between the ages of 18 and 64 without a high school diploma or its equivalent.³ Individuals with low literacy levels are more likely to face poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration. Children of low literacy parents have similar challenges and are less likely to complete high school or earn a GED.

The primary federal legislation affecting adult education is the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which focused federal attention on the need to retool America's labor force. Title II of the WIA, known as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), provides funds for state-administered adult education programs. This legislative brief describes generally the adult education system as defined by the AEFLA, considering governance and state administration of adult education programs, funding, need and participation, program effectiveness, providers of adult education, and professional development for adult education teachers. The brief makes some comparisons between Tennessee's adult education system and other states' systems. (See Appendices A through I.)

The AEFLA is administered at the federal level by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy.⁴ States administer their adult education programs through various agencies: 30 are in state Departments of Education; 14 are in community

college systems or other higher education entities; and seven (including Tennessee) are in agencies responsible for workforce development.⁵ See Appendix C for a list of agencies responsible for Title II adult education programs by state. All 95 counties in Tennessee offer adult education programs, which are supported at the state level by the Division of Adult Education (DAE) in Tennessee's Department of Labor and Workforce Development (LWD).

This brief considers only states' approaches to adult education through AEFLA. Nonprofits, businesses, and other state and local government agencies provide adult education services in communities throughout Tennessee and in other states, but they are beyond the scope of this review.

Conclusions

Compared to other states, Tennessee ranks high in need for adult education services and low in state funding for adult education services. Appendix B shows the numbers and percent of persons ages 18 to 64 with less than a high school diploma by state; Appendix D provides a list of federal and state funding for adult education. Tennessee provides the minimum 25 percent state match required by the AEFLA and has the lowest state funding per participant (\$95). However, the need for adult education in Tennessee is greater than in many other states: Tennessee falls in the top third of states ranked by number and percent of individuals between the ages of 18 and 64 with less than a high school diploma.

In addition, about 27 percent of Tennesseans between the ages of 18 and 64 with less than a high school diploma have less than a 9th grade education.⁶ Anecdotal evidence suggests that some of these individuals have much lower skill levels. (See page 5.)

Tennessee performs well in relation to other states with similar and somewhat higher state funding.

- **Tennessee enrolls about 7.25 percent of its target population in adult education, better than about half the other states.** States range from enrollments of 2.95 percent of their target population (Arizona) to about 19.15 percent (Minnesota). Tennessee enrolls a higher percentage of its target population than many states that provide state funding at a level between 25 and 40 percent of total adult education funding.⁷ (See page 10. See Appendices F and G.)
- **Tennessee also performs well based on the annual goals it negotiates with the federal Office of Vocational and Adult Education.** Each year, Tennessee uses its student performance data to negotiate performance goals with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education for the measures shown in Exhibit 4, which shows the state's goals and performance for 2007-08 and 2008-09. The literacy level performance goals (Core indicator 1) are based on the percentage of all enrollees who complete a literacy level within the program year; for example, 71 percent of ABE Beginning Literacy students were expected to complete at least one level and 78 percent achieved this goal in 2007-08. Core indicators 2 and 3 are follow-up measures based on the percentage of adult learners who identify specific goals for their enrollment and achieve the goals after exiting the program.

States are not penalized (in basic funding) for not achieving their performance targets; however, states not achieving their targets are not eligible to receive federal incentive grants. Tennessee has met or exceeded its goals and been awarded federal incentive grants every year since 2001 with the exception of 2006 and 2007. Incentive grants are awarded by the U.S. Department of Labor only if Adult Education, Employment and Workforce Development, and Vocational Education all meet their federal performance targets. (See pages 10-11.)

- **Tennessee reports a higher number of adult education participants with the goal of obtaining a GED than any other state except California. Among its adult education participants, Tennessee's state-supported programs produce a higher number of GED recipients than any other state except for California and Ohio.** Tennessee's state-administered programs enroll a greater number of students with somewhat higher skill levels—those at the adult basic intermediate level and above who may be in a better position to attain the GED and advance to postsecondary education or training. According to DAE staff, the agency's main goal is GED instruction and attainment. At current funding levels, it is reasonable that the state targets its efforts largely in one area. (See page 11. See Appendix I.)

Enrollment in Tennessee's adult education programs has decreased every year since 2004-05, when 48,924 adults were served; in 2007-08, 41,439 Tennessee adults received educational services.⁸

The decrease was largely the result of a federally required change in Tennessee's welfare program, Families First. An 11-year federal waiver, which expired in 2007, previously allowed Tennessee's welfare program to emphasize adult education and training more than does the federal law. While it operated under the waiver, Tennessee placed no limit on the duration of adult education or ESL participation for welfare recipients; in 2000, about 20 percent of Tennessee's Families First participants were involved in job training or education programs as their primary work activity, well above the national average of 7.3 percent.⁹ Prior to 2006, the Department of Human Services contracted with DAE to provide adult education services to Families First participants. As a result of the waiver expiration, DHS altered its bidding process for the adult education portion of the contract; according to DAE staff, the changes prevented it from bidding on the statewide contract, which resulted in a loss of between 15 and 20 percent of its adult education student population.¹⁰ (See page 12.)

No research exists concerning whether one form of state governance of Title II adult education programs is more successful than another.

However, a 2004 report from the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy discussed the perceived advantages and disadvantages attached to locating state adult education programs either in K-12 education agencies or boards, community college systems or higher education agencies, or workforce-related agencies. Exhibit 5 summarizes the discussion's main points.

The WIA gives states great flexibility in program administration. Since the passage of the WIA in 1998, some states—including Tennessee—have moved their adult education programs from one agency to another. Although most states administer adult education through their Departments of Education, some states, including Tennessee, have chosen to place adult education programs in other state agencies, “reflecting states’ greater policy emphasis on the importance of adult education for employment and access to postsecondary education.”¹¹

Prior to the passage of the state’s Workforce Development Act in 1999, Tennessee’s adult education program was housed in the Tennessee Department of Education. According to staff of the Division of Adult Education, many of whom have been with the agency since before 1999, placing the adult education program within the Department of Labor and Workforce Development has allowed adult education to be “fully integrated” into the state’s workforce development delivery system.¹²

As of September 2010, the federal government has yet to reauthorize the WIA, which expired at the end of fiscal year 2004. Ongoing stakeholder discussions around reauthorization include the need to forge a stronger link between Title I and Title II programs. States increasingly face the challenge of helping workers who have only basic skills transition into and succeed in postsecondary education or training that would allow them to move into higher wage jobs.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy’s 2008 report concluded that the nation’s current adult education system is “ill-equipped to meet 21st Century needs.”¹³ The report recommends that adult education in the U.S. should be redesigned as an adult education and workforce skills system with the mission of attainment of postsecondary and workforce readiness. In this context, the location of a state’s adult education program seems secondary to its capacity to fulfill the mission and goals for adult education and its ability and willingness to collaborate with other agencies, both public and private, in doing so. (See pages 12-14.)

Endnotes

- ¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey, Three-year estimates.
- ² National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, June 2008, p. 12, <http://www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org> (accessed Sept. 23, 2010).
- ³ U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey, Three-year estimates.
- ⁴ The AEFLA, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), is administered by the Office of Vocational and Adult Education in the U.S. Department of Education; Title I of the WIA is administered by the U.S. Department of Labor, which includes the One Stop Career Center system, focusing on employment. Title II agencies are mandated partners in the One Stop system and are required to be a part of local Workforce Investment Boards (WIB). Local WIBs coordinate local planning, while the One Stop system provides direct services to job seekers and employers. WIA Title II agencies provide direct services to adults with literacy deficits.
- ⁵ Note that the distinction between states with agencies in Departments of Education and in higher education entities is not completely clear. States configure their systems of education differently; for example, Florida's Department of Education includes its postsecondary institutions.
- ⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, 2008 American Community Survey, Three-year estimates.
- ⁷ Percentages are based on the 2008 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau. See Appendices D and F.
- ⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, National Reporting System, Tennessee, Statistical Tables, Program Year 2008, [Table 3: Participants by Program Type and Age](#). Note: Select the public login option.
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, "Characteristics and Financial Circumstances of TANF Recipients FY2000," Tables I-26 and V-14, as cited in Alisa Palmisano and Kim Potts, *Teaching Tennessee Adults*, Comptroller of the Treasury, Office of Education Accountability, March 2004, p. 18.
- ¹⁰ Marva Doremus, Assistant Administrator, Division of Adult Education, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, e-mail, Aug. 26, 2010.
- ¹¹ Amy-Ellen Duke and Evelyn Ganzglass, *Strengthening State Adult Education Policies for Low-Skilled Workers*, Policy Brief, The Working Poor Families Project, Summer 2007, p. 2, <http://www.policyarchive.org> (accessed July 29, 2010).
- ¹² Phil White, Administrator, Division of Adult Education, Department of Labor and Workforce Development, "Adult Education: Serving as a National Model for Complete Integration into Tennessee's Workforce Development System," Jan. 30, 2010, p. 2.
- ¹³ National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, June 2008, p. 1, <http://www.nationalcommissiononadultliteracy.org> (accessed July 22, 2010).



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