

Jump Start

★ **The Federal Role in Adult Literacy** ★

by

Forrest P. Chisman

**Final Report of The Project on
Adult Literacy**

**Sponsored by the Southport Institute
for Policy Analysis**

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INTRODUCTION

by Alan Pifer

Chairman, Southport Institute for Policy Analysis

This report summarizes the findings of the Project on Adult Literacy sponsored by the Southport Institute for Policy Analysis. The Project is an independent, nonpartisan undertaking whose purpose is to examine the federal government's role in promoting adult literacy—what it is and what it should be. The Project began operations in July 1988 and will continue its work into 1989. Directed by Forrest P. Chisman, the Project is based in Washington, D.C., and has been supported by grants from nine private foundations and one individual donor.

The Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, located in Southport, Connecticut, is a nonprofit, tax-exempt research institution established in 1987 to provide objective, nonpartisan analysis of public policy issues in certain fields—especially federal social policy. The Institute's involvement in the literacy field is an extension of work conducted by Forrest Chisman and me from 1983 to 1988 in a broad investigation of the future directions of federal social policy. One of the major findings of that enterprise was that enhancing the nation's human resources must be the foremost priority of federal domestic policy in the years to come. Mr. Chisman and I explained that finding in our 1987 book, **Government for the People** (W.W. Norton & Co.).

While the need for an independent assessment of federal policy in the adult literacy field was first suggested by the Business Council for Effective Literacy, BCEL has not influenced nor is it responsible for the contents and recommendations of this report. We are, nevertheless, most grateful to the Council for its suggestion.

Since neither Mr. Chisman nor I had any special expertise in the adult literacy field, we invited a number of experts on literacy and related areas to become members of an informal advisory group to the Project. Mr. Chisman and his staff not only sought the counsel of these experts, but also interviewed more than a hundred other experienced individuals in Washington and around the country and conducted other extensive research. In addition, seven expert consultants were commissioned to prepare background papers on various issues affecting the federal role in adult literacy. The consultants met as a group five times in the fall of 1988, and each consultant convened a one-day meeting of about half a dozen experts to provide advice on his or her topic. These deliberations were most helpful to the director in forming his conclusions, and the consultants' papers are being published by the Institute in conjunction with this report.

The analysis and conclusions of this report are, however, solely those of its author, Mr. Chisman. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the

Southport Institute for Policy Analysis or of any other organization or person associated with the Project. Members of the Project's advisory group were, however, asked to read the report in manuscript form, and the following have indicated that they concur with the basic directions of its findings and recommendations, although they may not be in full agreement with the author in all respects. They are:*

Ernest L. Boyer, The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

Helen B. Crouch, Literacy Volunteers of America, Inc.

Paul V. Delker, Strategic Educational Systems

Gerald D'Amico, Commonwealth Literacy Campaign, Massachusetts

Harold W. Howe, II, Harvard University Graduate School of Education

Samuel Halperin, The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family and Citizenship

Reatha Clark King, General Mills Foundation

Judith Koloski, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education

Richard Long, International Reading Association

Garrett W. Murphy, Division of Continuing Education Programs,
New York State Education Department

Michael O'Keefe, Consortium for the Advancement of Private Higher Education

Arnold H. Packer, Interactive Training, Inc.

Piedad Robertson, Bunker Hill Community College

Kathleen Ross, Heritage College

Alfredo G. de los Santos, Jr., Maricopa Community Colleges

Marian L. Schwarz, Mayor's Office of Youth Services, City of New York

James M. Souby, Council of State Policy and Planning Agencies

Gail Spangenberg, Business Council for Effective Literacy

Michael P. Timpane, Teachers College, Columbia University

Diane W. Vines, California State University

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*Institutional affiliations are listed for purposes of identification only. They do not indicate institutional endorsements of this report.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF JUMP START: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy

A Time for Action

Nineteen eighty-nine is the year of opportunity for adult literacy in the United States. A combination of regard for the welfare of individuals, civic values and a growing appreciation of the nation's bottom-line interest in a more skilled workforce has created a coalition of concern that cuts across political parties, ideologies, regions, and all walks of life.

The economic aspect of the need to improve literacy in the United States has added a new sense of urgency to longstanding concerns. **Seventy-five percent of the American workforce in the year 2000 are adults today:** they are out of school and most are in the workforce. By the most conservative estimates **20–30 million of these adults have serious problems with basic skills:** they cannot read, write, calculate, solve problems, or communicate well enough to function effectively on the job or in their everyday lives.

There is no way in which the United States can remain competitive in a global economy, maintain its standard of living, and shoulder the burden of the retirement of the baby boom generation unless we mount a forceful national effort to help adults upgrade their basic skills in the very near future.

Mounting such an effort will require overcoming years of neglect. **At present the field of basic skills education is intellectually, institutionally, and politically weak and fragmented.** While there is a great deal of experience-based knowledge to build on, there is too little systematic research or evaluation and diffusion of ideas. For the most part, instructors are poorly supported and inadequately trained.

Responsibility for basic skills training is fragmented at all levels of government. At the federal level, the departments of Education, Labor and Health and Human Services administer major programs, and other departments also have responsibilities in the field. Yet, at most, \$1–2 billion is available at the federal level, and much less is surely spent. This means that adult literacy has been **a very low priority for almost everyone in Washington.**

The federal role in advancing adult literacy must be to help jump start a more substantial national effort than currently exists. Primary responsibility for addressing the problem must remain with state and local governments and with nongovernmental institutions. State governments have a particularly important role to play as coordinators of service delivery systems. But federal programs currently determine the directions of large parts of the national effort, and there are enormous stakes involved for all Americans. The federal government must play a leadership role by energizing other institutions and providing a sense of direction for the field.

A NEW OUTLOOK

Before the federal government, or the nation as a whole, can make substantial progress, Americans must adopt **a new outlook toward adult literacy.** We must realize that **there is enormous latent political support for vigorous initiatives** in this area from business, labor, all levels of government, and the public at large. But to make good use of that support, **we must form a better understanding of how to approach this complex field.** In particular, we must understand that:

- Valuable as it is, **school reform will not solve the problem** of adult literacy—the 20–30 million adults with inadequate basic skills are already out of school;
- **Volunteers alone cannot solve the problem,** nor are they a “cheap way out”—but they are one of several essential ingredients in the literacy system, and they need support; while supporting them we must also enlarge and enhance our professional teaching corps;
- **Business alone will not solve the problem**—although business, labor, and the public sector working together in partnerships can accomplish a great deal;
- **Technology is not a dehumanizing factor** nor is it a substitute for teachers—it is an essential ingredient in any adequate nationwide literacy effort;
- There is no single ideal service delivery system for literacy—**the national effort is and must be pluralistic;**
- There are at least **two dimensions** of the literacy problem: the **difficulties experienced by all of those with limited basic skills and the difficulties of the 3–4 million Americans with limited proficiency in English (the “ESL population”)**—and our systems for serving the latter are far more refined. But **unless we invest more to address the language problems of immigrants and of Hispanic-Americans, the nation is headed toward a major economic and social crisis,** because these groups are the fastest-growing segments of our population and workforce.

THE NATIONAL FOCUS

As we adopt a new outlook on literacy, we must **focus greater national attention on the most seriously neglected national priority in this**

field: basic skills of the workforce. Although this is the aspect of the literacy problem with the greatest near-term economic importance, **paradoxically most public and private programs are not available to people who are on the job.** Almost all federal resources are targeted on the unemployed or other disadvantaged groups. We must not abandon those efforts, but we must build an emphasis on workforce literacy if the nation is to meet the economic and social challenges of the years to come. And we must demand systems that help learners attain large gains in basic skills: programs that help people to make major advances at work and in other aspects of their lives, rather than simply nominal achievements.

Fortunately, **the measures required to come to grips with the problem of adult literacy in the near term are neither very expensive nor very difficult,** compared with the measures required to tackle other major economic and social problems. The primary need is for leadership: setting clear national goals and reorienting priorities to achieve them. New annual spending at the federal level of \$550 million or less would be sufficient to make a quantum leap forward.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

To jump start a national effort to enhance literacy that is commensurate with the national need, **the federal government must adopt measures along the following lines:**

- **Executive branch leadership:**

- The **president should establish adult literacy, and workforce literacy in particular, as a major priority of his administration;**
- He should appoint a **special six-month task force to develop a strategic plan that will specify the nation's goals and the means of achieving them;**
- He should establish a **Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy** with responsibility for coordinating federal efforts toward meeting national goals: getting the most out of existing programs and launching new initiatives.

- **Legislative initiatives:**

To focus national attention on the array of policy issues that must be addressed, the administration and Congress should introduce the **Adult Basic Skills Act of 1989.** The Act would:

- **Build a stronger intellectual base for adult literacy** by: 1) establishing a quasi-governmental **National Center for Adult Literacy** charged with conducting basic and applied research, providing technical assistance to literacy programs and instructors, and monitoring the field for policy-makers; and 2) requiring the three departments (Labor, Education and Health and Human Services) with major responsibility in this field to set aside substantial funds for policy research from their existing budgets;
- **Promote innovation in training and technology** by: 1) creating a program of matching grants to state and local governments for investments in these essential components of the field (this program should begin on a small scale and escalate gradually over several years up to a ceiling); 2) ensuring that the technology now in place is fully utilized

and available to all who can benefit from it; and 3) creating a literacy leader training program to encourage more young people to make adult literacy a full-time career;

— **Reinforce federalism** by: 1) providing governors with an eight percent set-aside fund from education and training programs to promote innovative ventures; 2) requiring governors who receive those funds to develop, implement, and monitor state literacy plans that will coordinate and upgrade service delivery systems, including upgrading the quality of the teaching force; 3) providing matching grants to states to develop state resource centers that will provide technical support for enhanced state efforts; and 4) allowing states to make greater use of volunteer groups and other nongovernmental organizations;

— **Enhance the effectiveness of existing federal programs and place greater emphasis on workforce literacy:**

1) In the **Job Training Partnership Act** by: creating a new title authorizing basic skills training for the employed, initially funding the new title to support large-scale system demonstrations in workforce literacy, and loosening up requirements in the present adult programs of JTPA to allow more extensive literacy services;

2) In the **Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act** by: making basic skills competence a major goal of vocational education programs and a requirement for participating in job-specific training, and by funding the adult training and retraining provisions of the Vocational Education Act;

3) In the **Adult Education Act** by: fully funding the Adult Education Program, doubling its appropriation to meet the flood of demands for ESL services, elevating the director of the program to the level of Assistant Secretary, providing the director with responsibility for coordinating Education Department basic skills services, and allowing governors the latitude to appoint any official of their choosing to coordinate state services under the Act;

4) In the **Family Support Act** by: requiring welfare agencies to provide basic skills instruction to all participants in the JOBS program who need it, both before they find employment and for some period of time after they are employed;

5) In **other federal programs** by: fully funding the **Even Start** family literacy program, reauthorizing the **VISTA** program and providing new funds for experiments with innovative uses of volunteers, mandating studies of the **basic skills needs of the federal workforce and of industries vital to the national interest** and developing programs to meet those needs, and establishing an ongoing **government-wide process of program enhancement**, through the new Cabinet Council, aimed at meeting the economic and social requirements of the nation for enhanced literacy over the coming decades.

PART I

The Problem, The Opportunity, And The Federal Role

I. THE TIME HAS COME.

Nineteen eighty-nine is the year of opportunity for adult literacy in the United States. Literacy has become a “hot topic” and high priority for politicians at all levels of government, business leaders, civic activists, reformers and ordinary Americans. The nation is poised to make a quantum leap forward in addressing the problems of this long-neglected field. And it is imperative that we seize the opportunity to do so—right now, in 1989. Here are the reasons why.

Seventy-five percent of the people who will constitute the American workforce in the year 2000 are adults today. They are out of school. Most are beyond school age. Most are working.

This 75 percent adds up to about 100 million workers.

Of the 100 million, tens of millions are seriously handicapped in their work and in their everyday lives by a lack of basic skills. They cannot read, write, compute, solve problems, communicate, or perform other basic intellectual functions well enough to gain or hold good jobs, to participate effectively in public life, or to meet many of the challenges of everyday living in an increasingly complex world.

Experts differ about exactly how many adult Americans are struggling with basic skills problems. The number depends on what standard is employed. Yet by most measures the number is at least 20–30 million, and by many measures it is far higher. To say that twenty million-plus adults have serious problems with basic skills is a safe and very conservative estimate.

For the most part these are **not** people who are unable to read, write, compute, or solve everyday problems at all. They are **not** the entirely unskilled “illiterates” who have received so much attention from the press. Relatively few Americans fall into that category—3–4 million at most. And although

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other priorities should in no way diminish our efforts to assist them, they constitute only a small part of the national problem.

The twenty million-plus are adults who simply have not mastered basic skills very well. They can read, but often not well enough to use a reference book or understand much of what is in a daily newspaper. They can write, but often not well enough to compose a business letter or fill out an application form. They can compute, but often not well enough to balance a checkbook or prepare an invoice. Their problems can be described in many different ways, and each person has a different set of problems. But they have this much in common: they lack the skills to function effectively in an increasingly demanding social and economic environment.

Who are they? Many are members of disadvantaged groups. They are likely to have low incomes, troubled job histories, broken families and a host of other serious personal problems. A large portion are immigrants or native Americans with limited proficiency in English and often limited abilities to read and write in any other language. But a surprisingly large portion are ordinary working-class Americans who somehow manage to disguise their lack of basic skills by remaining in dead-end jobs with little prospect of improving their lot.

Why should we care? Obviously, there are many reasons. Common decency demands that we extend a helping hand to anyone whose opportunities are needlessly foreclosed. And a democratic nation is weakened when large numbers of its citizens face serious impediments to participating fully in public life.

These have always been compelling reasons, but they are no more nor less compelling than the reasons for caring about a great many other social issues. In recent years, however, a library of studies produced by government, industry, and independent research groups have created a new sense of urgency about the fate of the twenty million-plus. This body of work has shown that, seen as an economic problem, adult literacy is one of the most serious issues of our times.

All other concerns aside, there is no way in which the United States can maintain the health of its economy, fend off foreign competition, improve productivity, and, in general, maintain its standard of living unless we substantially increase the skills of our workforce. And the twenty million-plus are those whose skills must increase the most.

We cannot afford to write them off. They are absolutely essential to the well-being of each and every one of us.

By the early years of the 21st century, market forces will almost certainly ensure that the quality of jobs and the incomes they produce exactly match the quality of the American workforce. We have a choice between a high-income, high-productivity nation based on a high-quality workforce, or a second-class economy based on a second-rate workforce. The fate of the twenty million-plus is one of the major factors that will determine which of these two alternative futures comes to pass.

Fortunately, this point no longer needs to be elaborated or argued. But another point is too often neglected.

This country is racing toward a demographic deadline. In about the year 2010 members of the baby boom generation will begin to retire. By all estimates, supporting that enormous cohort of the population—approximately

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75 million Americans—in its retirement years will require an economic effort of unprecedented magnitude in the United States. The single most important factor that will determine whether the nation is able to shoulder this burden is how strong an economy we have in place by about 2010.

If in the next twenty years we achieve high levels of growth in productivity and real Gross National Product, the demographic deadline need not be of great concern. But unless we meet or surpass the rates of growth in our better postwar years, there is a very real possibility that the American standard of living will simply wither away.

If we do not achieve high levels of growth, the economic pie will not be large enough to provide ample portions for all. Both many retirees and many active workers will be left with a meager lot. Generational conflict, conflict between the affluent and the less well-off within generations, increased racial tensions, and social disruptions of other sorts will be almost inevitable.

And the United States will become a second-rate nation, fulfilling the predictions of historical doomsayers that we will follow the path of other great powers toward national decline.

America must do a great many things to avoid that unhappy rendezvous with demographic destiny. And among the most important things it must do is to ensure that the twenty million-plus adults who are seriously deficient in basic skills become fully productive workers and citizens well before the rendezvous occurs. Without their best efforts over the next twenty years, there is little hope for the economic and social future of this country.

II. THE GOAL

Clearly the problem of adult basic skills is a presidential-level issue. It should also be an issue of the greatest importance for Congress, state and local governments, business, and the independent sector. It is in every sense a national issue.

And the goal is clear. **We must ensure that by the year 2000, or soon thereafter, every adult has the skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high-productivity economy, to the best of his or her ability.** Regrettably, precise measures of exactly what that means have not been developed, although it is certainly possible to develop them, and the nation should give high priority to efforts aimed at doing so.

Whatever those measures may prove to be, we should not merely be striving for a hodgepodge of skills or test score attainments. Most studies indicate that to function effectively at work and in their everyday lives, individuals must have an increasingly high level of integrated basic skills: skills that reinforce each other, skills that the individual can apply to changing conditions at work and elsewhere. Some experts refer to this goal as “learning how to learn” or “higher-order skill attainment.”

Leaving aside the jargon, **the national goal must be competency**, on the job and in everyday life. The mission of any meaningful national effort must be to change lives: to significantly enhance the opportunities of those with limited basic skills. We will have failed unless we find the means to help them function effectively in today’s society and to become employable and

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trainable in good jobs—jobs that provide decent wages and opportunities for advancement.

Of course there will be jobs in the year 2000 that do not require high levels of skills. But the evidence is unanimous that their numbers will greatly diminish and the incomes they provide will be marginal at best. That aside, in a nation where equal opportunity is a cardinal value, we cannot consign anyone to a second-class economic status.

Moreover, the skills required by particular jobs can often be deceptive. An expert on industrial training tells the hopefully apocryphal story of a secret visit by managers of a nuclear power plant: the managers had discovered that some of their maintenance crews could not read warning signals that might indicate the reactor was overheating. High-level skills may be required only occasionally, but those occasions can be so important that they warrant a major investment in and by themselves.

In short, there is little danger that we will create an overskilled workforce in this country. But there is the greatest peril if we do not elevate the level of basic skills among the twenty million-plus whenever and however we can.

III. THE NATIONAL EFFORT TODAY

The basic skills problem has not passed unnoticed in recent years. “Literacy” has become a topic of great interest to the press and many politicians. In September 1983 President Reagan announced a National Literacy Initiative. A plethora of literacy bills and provisions within bills were introduced in the last session of Congress. Both presidential candidates in the recent election spoke out on behalf of the twenty million-plus. The governors of thirty-eight states and the mayors of some major cities have launched literacy initiatives, at least a dozen of which are quite substantial. Leaders of business and labor have taken up the cause and often led the charge. National foundations and large national voluntary groups such as the United Way have put the issue on their list of priorities. A joint effort by ABC television and the Public Broadcasting Service (Project Literacy U.S.) has brought the basic skills problem to the attention of virtually the entire American public.

And as important as all of this, hundreds of thousands of ordinary Americans have lent a hand through volunteer organizations that have recognized and struggled with the basic skills problem for decades and through community-based organizations (CBOs), small non-profit groups of almost every conceivable kind dedicated to civic activism.

Most of these efforts have traveled under the somewhat misleading banner of “literacy”—a term which, for many people, connotes solely the inability to read and write at the most elementary level. But most of the leaders in this field recognize that mathematics, problem-solving, and communications abilities are also essential basic skills. And they also recognize that people who have problems with basic skills fall along a spectrum ranging from those who are unable to perform even the most elementary functions to those who require only a little help to fully master the skills they need at work and in their everyday lives. Taken as a whole, the current national effort provides help to at least some people at all points on this spectrum, and there are at least some programs that address problems with the full range of basic skills.

Despite many good efforts and encouraging words, the United States is a long way from coming to grips with the problem of adult basic skills.

But despite all these good efforts and encouraging words, the United States is a long way from coming to grips with the problem of adult basic skills.

The vast majority of the twenty million-plus are not reached by any program that would help them in any way. At most 3–4 million people are served each year, and the average expenditure per learner is less than \$200. Compare that with an average expenditure of more than \$4,000 per year for every public school child in the United States. Moreover, serving 3–4 million adults barely makes a dent in the problem, because by most estimates at least 1–2 million people leave school with deficient basic skills each year, and at least one million new immigrants enter the United States.

In short, the national effort is not even remotely commensurate with the national need.

Moreover, the national effort is unlikely to improve very greatly without major changes in the basic skills field.

Overall, the field is intellectually, institutionally, and politically weak and fragmented.

The knowledge base. We do not know a great many of even the most elementary facts about the basic skills problem with any degree of precision. Although various means of measuring basic skills have been devised, all of them are widely regarded as unsatisfactory in some important way. As a result, we do not know with any precision how many people have deficient basic skills, who they are or how serious their problems may be. Order-of-magnitude numbers are the best we can do. The lack of adequate measurement tools also means that we have only very crude ways to assess the abilities or progress of individual learners, to evaluate the effectiveness of programs, or to measure the progress of the nation as a whole toward national goals.

For example, tests of grade-level reading ability are still commonly used to assess the problems and progress of learners in basic skills courses. This is despite the fact that research indicates these tests do not capture even the reading abilities of adults, let alone the broader range of basic skills problems which may be causing them difficulties. And the reason why such tests are used is, in part, because no fully adequate alternative has been developed and also because that there has not been a sufficient effort to help teachers and program administrators use the alternatives that exist.

Moreover, we have remarkably little research-based knowledge about what works in basic skills education for adults, and we fail to make very good use of what we do know. Many programs report high dropout rates and minimal gains by participants. While 3–4 million people enroll in basic skills programs each year, many programs report that 50–70 percent drop out after the first few weeks, and most of those who remain achieve at best small gains in their reading abilities. Other programs seem to be able to retain most of their participants and achieve large gains. There is too little systematic understanding of what makes the difference. That is, someone seeking to start a new basic skills program and looking for the best possible design would be hard-pressed to find reliable advice rooted in a solid research base.

We do know that teaching basic skills to adults requires a different approach from that now used in teaching children. After years of effort in this field, there is a large body of experience-based knowledge about what some of the more promising approaches may be. And we know that high-quality programs using the best available knowledge are more likely to attract, retain,

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and provide substantial assistance to adults. But there has been far too little effort to collect, systematize, evaluate, and disseminate the knowledge we have—to make it widely available and put it into practice.

There has been far too little effort to build a high-quality system of basic skills instruction in the United States.

We also know that most of the national teaching force in this field consists of schoolteachers working part-time and volunteers—neither of whom have extensive formal training in basic skills education for adults. But it is hard to be critical of the teaching force, because so little effort has been made to translate the results of research and experience into usable form and place it at their disposal. It is even hard to evaluate the teaching force, given the limitations on our knowledge about what works best in this field. For example, the common belief that volunteers are less effective than part-time professionals has yet to be proved.

Technology, in the form of computer-assisted instruction, has begun to penetrate the basic skills field. And it shows great promise in motivating learners, helping them to achieve larger and more rapid gains and reducing costs down the road. But despite some positive experiences to date, we know far too little about how best to use computers to teach basic skills or how much investment of what kind is merited. And we know even less about what contribution other forms of technology, such as radio and television broadcasting, cable, or teleconferencing, can make.

None of these deficiencies in our knowledge or the use of our knowledge about basic skills instruction are difficult hurdles to surmount. But it is essential to surmount them if we are to build and apply a knowledge base from which the field can grow. It is essential if we are to map out directions for progress with any degree of confidence or even know if progress has been made.

Yet the national investment in building an intellectual base for basic skills training has been minuscule. At most, a few dozen first-rate researchers have turned their attention to the problem—many of them on a part-time basis. At most, a few million dollars per year are spent by government, industry, foundations, and voluntary groups on research. There are no centers of excellence and few structured programs of investigation. There is no system for evaluating and disseminating the body of experience-based knowledge we have. This is in glaring contrast with the legions of researchers and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on elementary and secondary education research and the dissemination of information derived from it.

The institutional base. It is practically nobody's business to advance the research agenda, but it is practically **everybody's** business to serve the needs of the twenty million-plus. Seen from a different perspective, this abundance of willing hands adds up to a pattern of institutional fragmentation in which basic skills are a low-level priority for almost everyone.

At the federal level, responsibility has for some time been divided between the departments of Education and Labor. At Education, most of the responsibility rests with the tiny Adult Education Program (for which \$162 million was appropriated for fiscal 1989), buried in the Office of Vocational Education. Some basic skills training is also provided under the general Vocational Education Act (the Carl D. Perkins Act), although no one appears to know how much. At Labor, more than \$1 billion appropriated to serve disadvan-

tagged adults and dislocated workers under the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) can, in principle, be used for adult basic skills education, and in recent years there has been increasing interest in using it in this way. But the Act and the adult performance standards developed to implement it create incentives for rapid placement of trainees, with the result that little of the available funding is, in fact, used for basic skills development, which can be extremely time consuming.

Recently, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was propelled into the basic skills field in a major way by assuming responsibility for administering \$1 billion per year for four years to help newly legalized aliens meet the requirements of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Some portion of these funds may be spent for English language instruction or other basic skills training at the discretion of state governments. And even more recently, the Family Support Act of 1988 (welfare reform) authorized \$600 million in federal funds, rising to \$1 billion over several years, for the new JOBS program aimed at helping welfare recipients to become self-supporting through employment. At least some of the JOBS funds can be used by states for basic skills instruction.

There are also a number of smaller programs in all three departments, as well as in the departments of State, Agriculture, and Justice, and in the ACTION agency. In addition, the Defense Department reportedly spends \$10–20 million per year on upgrading the skills of military personnel.

But nobody knows exactly how many federal dollars are spent on adult basic skills, in part because many of the federal programs leave that decision to state and local governments, and reporting is far from perfect. Including the Immigration Reform and JOBS programs, making a generous allowance for spending under JTPA and factoring in all of the numerous legislative and administrative restrictions in these and other programs, \$1–2 billion **might be available**, although much less is certainly spent.

But level of spending is probably a less serious problem than diffusion of responsibility. At least three federal departments have major responsibility for basic skills programs. In each of them, that responsibility takes the form of small programs or aspects of programs, each with their own priorities, constituencies, and delivery systems. Lack of coordination and “turf problems” are legendary. During the Reagan administration there were a few small but meaningful joint ventures between the departments of Labor and Education in the basic skills field. Hopefully, they were the beginnings of a larger trend, but the larger trend has yet to materialize.

Who in Washington is in charge of helping the twenty million-plus? Everybody and nobody.

Institutional fragmentation is as bad or worse at the state and local government levels. In most states, federal Education Department funds are channeled through state education agencies; JTPA funds are administered by locally based Private Industry Councils (PICs); HHS funds are administered by state welfare and education departments. A few states and localities have appropriated funds of their own, equal to or exceeding federal resources, and these are sometimes channeled through yet another set of agencies. The norm at the state and local level is that basic skills training is a low-level priority distributed among several different bureaucracies, which often have very different priorities and too little contact with each other.

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But there is also good news at the state level and in some large cities. State governments have been the national innovators in overcoming problems of fragmentation as well as other difficulties that afflict the basic skills field. A large number of states have developed statewide literacy plans and programs, usually based in the governor's office. And in at least a few states these efforts are beginning to produce better-coordinated efforts, as well as to provide the services needed to upgrade the performance of the field. There are also promising developments along the same lines in New York and some other cities. Hopefully these few states and cities are the bellwethers of the future, but at the moment they are a distinct minority.

Businesses, unions, volunteer groups, community-based organizations, and other civic groups have also been active in the basic skills field, both nationally and at the state and local levels. A few large businesses have developed their own in-house training programs for basic skills. Others have made contributions in cash or in kind or contracted for services with community colleges and other providers. But, overall, the business effort has been ad hoc and small in its totality.

Community-based organizations sometimes run exemplary programs, but their efforts are also small and ad hoc. Volunteer groups, most of which are associated with the two large national volunteer organizations, Laubach Literacy Action and Literacy Volunteers of America, provide one-on-one tutoring, and some small group instruction, for 100,000–200,000 learners per year—an impressive record for voluntary action, but far from a solution to the national problem.

And at the bottom of this fragmented heap of institutions is the person who must actually do the work: the basic skills instructor.

There are practically no full-time adult basic skills teachers in the United States, for the simple reasons that very few public or private programs operate full time, pay a competitive wage, or provide benefits. Most teachers are part-time professionals or volunteers. Their primary training and career paths are outside this field.

In these circumstances, a surprisingly large number of teachers appear to be committed to the field. But as practitioners, they are often isolated and neglected. They have few opportunities to improve their expertise, either by learning from their colleagues or by receiving in-service training that would keep them current with the state of the art.

Operating with limited budgets, the managers of basic skills programs correctly perceive that every dollar spent on teacher training is a dollar unavailable for providing services. Because they are usually held accountable for the number of hours of instruction provided, or some other crude measure of service, they rarely invest their dollars in teacher training, despite the fact that most teachers say they very much need and want more help.

The bottom line is that the plight of the twenty million-plus in the United States is a low-level priority for which responsibility is diffused among multiple institutions, almost all of them poorly supported, at every level of government and within the private sector. There are few incentives for the institutions to work together and practically no mechanisms by which they might do so. When they do, it is usually because of the unusual foresight and initiative of a few individuals operating despite the institutional clutter.

T*he bottom line is that adult literacy is a low-level priority for which responsibility is widely diffused among multiple institutions, almost all of them poorly supported, at every level of government and within the private sector.*

There is no way that this country can make a dent in the problems of the twenty million-plus by a jumbled system of funding, service delivery, and responsibility such as this.

The political base. Institutional fragmentation translates into political weakness. There is practically no lobby for literacy. Each of the federal agencies responsible for the issue have traditionally placed it well down on their list of priorities, usually submerged under some other mission, and those other missions are as disparate as the purposes of government. There is no clearly stated national goal or plan and no mechanism for developing one. There is no federal spokesman for literacy—no place where the buck stops in Washington.

While a few states and cities have done a good job of pulling their efforts together, there is little pressure for progress in most places. And where progress has been made, it often hangs by the tenuous thread of the personal interest of a governor or first lady. Nor have the states and localities, either individually or through their national organizations, placed adult skills high on their priority list for lobbying at the national level.

A few businessmen provide leadership and make substantial contributions to adult literacy. But there is no business lobby for the twenty million-plus—no organization, no agenda, no plan.

Among people close to the grass roots—the administrators, teachers and organizers of adult literacy—there are a great many very impressive leaders. But there is no national organization that focuses primarily on policy development in this field. Two or three dedicated Washington representatives of organizations that overlap this area are able to contribute some part of their time to the effort. The same is true in most states and localities. Adult literacy has neither a clear agenda nor the resources to advance it.

IV. A NEW OUTLOOK

To meet the demographic deadline that is bearing down on us, the United States must pull together its currently weak and disjointed efforts to upgrade the skills of the twenty million-plus. Nineteen eighty-nine is the year of opportunity for adult literacy in the United States, because it is the year in which we can and must make major breakthroughs in this field.

But to do so, we must change the way in which we think about the basic skills problem in at least four important ways.

1) **We must improve our understanding about the nature of the problem and the types of measures that will address it most effectively.** Specifically we must recognize that:

- **School reform will not solve the problem of adult basic skills.** The twenty million-plus are out of school and unlikely to return. They are **adults**. School reform is a critically important goal for a great many reasons. Not least of these is the fact that, if successful, it can reduce the rate of growth in the number of adults with basic skills problems. But the economy of the year 2010, the demographic deadline, will depend largely on the efforts over the next 20 years of people whom school reform cannot help. This may seem obvious. But too many discussions and reports on basic skills end up with recommendations for school reform alone. We must clear our minds of this illogic and focus squarely on the problems of adults.

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*W*e must change the way in which we think about the basic skills problem.

By far, the greater part of basic skills education in the United States today is provided by full- or part-time paid teachers in classroom settings.

Of the estimated \$30 billion spent on corporate training each year, only a small fraction is devoted to basic skills.

- **Volunteers alone cannot solve the problem, nor are they a “cheap way out.”** The major national volunteer organizations keep saying that there are limits to how much they can do and that volunteers are not free, but nobody seems to listen to them. The fact of the matter is that, by far, the greater part of basic skills education in the United States today is provided by full- or part-time paid teachers in classroom settings. The reason for this is simple: productivity. One teacher conducting group classes can help twenty to forty learners or more each day. In contrast, volunteers are usually paired with a single student. Moreover, the national volunteer organizations keep repeating that it costs a substantial amount to recruit, organize, train, and support volunteers. It is simply not true that anyone who can read can teach anyone else to read—or, at least, he or she cannot teach very effectively without training and support—and the leaders of volunteer organizations are the first to insist on this.

Given the shortage of national resources and the importance of the voluntary tradition in American life, this nation would be foolhardy to turn its back on volunteers. They are absolutely essential. But the nation would also be foolish to see them as an easy way out of the basic skills problem. We have no choice but to build up a teaching force that contains increased numbers of full-time and part-time paid instructors as well as well-trained volunteers and to find the best ways to combine the efforts of all three types of providers. The better basic skills programs have accomplished this, and they must become the norm.

Although this makes common sense, too many proposals addressing the basic skills problem are solely calls for more volunteers.

- **Business alone will not solve the basic skills problem.** Although it is very much in the interest of corporate America to upgrade the quality of its workforce, it is highly unlikely that most businesses will develop in-house programs that meet the needs of most of the twenty million-plus. By all indications, business leaders are currently in a quandary about how to handle the problem. Some large companies, such as the three major automobile manufacturers, Polaroid, Aetna, Domino's Pizza, Control Data, Onan, and a number of the regional telephone companies, have developed exemplary programs. In many cases these initiatives were developed jointly with organized labor or at the instigation of unions, and they generally involve close working relations between business and labor. But of the estimated \$30 billion spent on corporate training each year, only a small fraction is devoted to basic skills.

And there is good reason for this. Economic theory indicates that companies will invest in the job-specific skills of their employees, but not in basic skills. This is because the payoff to any particular employer of an investment in basic skills is long term and those skills are highly portable—employees can move on to another company with no net gain at all to the employer who paid for in their training. Moreover, the turnover rate of low-level employees—those who are most likely to need basic skills instruction—is usually high. And this also reduces the likelihood that employers will invest in upgrading their skills as well as the ability of employers to do so.

Basic skills development is a classic public good, like elementary and secondary education, and many business leaders describe it in this way. They urge the public sector to live up to its responsibilities in this area

and offer assistance of every kind. Other businessmen are frustrated by the tardy public sector response, face near-term problems, distrust public officials, or feel pressure from labor groups.

In all likelihood, some large companies will develop and enlarge their basic skills programs over the coming years—particularly those in labor-shortage areas or with strong unions—and some will not. The role that business plays will depend in part on what response the public sector develops, but it is unlikely that most large companies will address the basic skills needs of their workforce adequately over the next few years in any circumstances.

Even if they did, most American workers are employed by small firms, and almost all new job creation is in the small-business sector. There is little chance that, on its own, a company with one hundred or fewer employees can afford to mount a basic skills program of any significance. There have been some hopeful initiatives to develop consortia of smaller companies, and these certainly should be encouraged. But, by and large, it is unreasonable to expect that we can meet the needs of the vast majority of the twenty million-plus unless we are prepared to develop more adequate public programs.

This does not mean that public-private partnerships are impossible or undesirable. They are essential. They may take the form of released time for employees, job-site training, corporate contracting with public agencies such as community colleges, business donations of manpower and equipment, joint projects with organized labor, or many other forms. The business community clearly can and should devote considerable resources to the effort. If corporations, in fact, invest \$30 billion per year in training, a commitment of even 10 percent of that amount to basic skills instruction would make an enormous difference.

But public-private partnerships on any scale are possible only if the public sector greatly expands its capacities and works more aggressively to build bridges to industry.

- **Technology is not a dehumanizing element in basic skills education, nor is it a substitute for teachers.** Given the scope of the basic skills problem, technology—particularly computer-aided learning systems—must be part of the solution, simply because it promises greater economies of scale and the benefits of self-paced instruction. At present, the application of technology in the basic skills field is in its infancy, but the initial indications are extremely promising. Most learners and teachers like to work with computers, and properly employed, computer systems allow teachers to devote more, not less, time to the needs of individual learners. Also, it appears that more rapid learning gains can be achieved, and as the quality of both hardware and software improves and the cost declines, large gains in cost-effectiveness in many situations appear to be possible.

At present, the major problems with technology appear to be the lack of an adequate experience base about how to make the best use of computer systems as well as the lack of any good way for teachers and program managers to evaluate the many different learning systems that are coming onto the market. A promising start at addressing these issues has been made through a number of informal efforts, by some vendors, and by a number of small organizations largely supported by private foundations, but a great deal more remains to be done.

Given the scope of the basic skills problem, technology must be part of the solution.

Another threshold problem is the difficulty that underfunded basic skills programs operating on annual budgets have in finding the resources to make the up-front investments that using technology requires. In addition, it appears that present policies do not encourage the best use of the technology we already have. Schools, libraries, and other public facilities as well as most businesses own hardware, and sometimes software, that could be readily applied to basic skills training after hours. And too often specialized learning centers purchased by one program are not available to others. Generally, there is no ill will involved in this inefficient use of technology, simply a lack of incentives for more creative policies.

A final problem is that we have yet to explore what contribution technologies other than computers can make to basic skills education. There have been some promising experiments with using television for these purposes in both the United States and other countries. And the potential economies of scale involved in broadcasting or other forms of telecommunications are so great that we are clearly remiss for not making a greater effort to discover how we can put them to use in the basic skills field.

But, regardless of these problems, technology in its various forms must be a large part of the future of basic skills education. And it can have indirect effects of great significance. For example, precisely because the up-front costs of a properly equipped computer learning center are substantial, it is highly desirable for the basic skills programs in any locality to pool their resources in a common-user facility. Technology may serve as a nucleus for greater coordination of efforts at the working level of this highly fragmented field.

- **There is no single ideal service-delivery system for** basic skills education. On the basis of our national experience to date, it is very safe to assume that almost any type of institutional base or teaching system can be made to succeed or fail. Community colleges, school systems, community organizations, storefront operations, corporate training classes, proprietary institutions, volunteer tutoring programs, and every possible variation of these and other service-delivery modes are outstanding successes in some places, outright failures in others and nonexistent in a great many instances, at least insofar as basic skills training is concerned.

Some observers believe that community colleges are the best bet for long-term growth of the basic skills field, because those institutions already have a diversity of resources, a long track record of working with business and government on training issues and, usually, strong support from state and local governments. They also allow the learner to avoid the stigma of “going back to school” and provide a ready vehicle for transition from basic skills training to training and certification in specialized fields.

But in parts of the United States, community college systems are not well-developed, and in many places where they are, other institutions do a fine job of training. The American system of basic skills education is, and probably will be, highly pluralistic, and there is no reason to worry about that. There is plenty of work for everyone.

- **There are at least two dimensions to the basic skills problem: 1) the difficulties shared by all of the twenty million-plus, and 2) the special problems of people with limited proficiency in English (often called the English as a Second Language, or ESL, population).** It is estimated that 3–4 million residents of the United States have

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limited ability in English, and their numbers are increasing by more than one million each year, due to immigration and high birth rates in families where English is not the primary language.

The vast majority of the ESL population consists of American citizens, either native or naturalized, and they are absolutely indispensable to our nation's future. By the year 2000 more than 10 percent of our workforce will be native Hispanics or immigrants from literally all parts of the world (an increase of 75 percent over the next 12 years), and 25 percent or more of this group will need help with English proficiency. Many also have limited ability to read and write in their own native language and require assistance with other basic skills. There is no way in which we can build a productive workforce and a stable society unless we help these workers to develop the skills they need to participate fully in American life.

Fortunately, the ESL field is far ahead of most of the rest of the adult education effort. A high-quality teaching force has been developed, and instructional techniques, assessment tools, and delivery systems have been refined. We know with some degree of certainty how long it takes to help someone with limited ability in English to become functionally proficient, how to help them accomplish this, and how much it costs.

Equally important, the motivation of most ESL students is exceptionally high. Programs in California, Texas, Illinois, and other states are swamped with applicants. Most ESL students are in the workforce, and many go to extraordinary lengths to seek help. On average, retention rates and learning gains are high.

ESL is the success story of the basic skills field. And it is important, in looking at the field as a whole, to realize that there can be success. While ESL has its institutional and intellectual problems too, its major problem is resources. Currently, the demand for ESL instruction is overwhelming the Adult Education Program. Of the \$1 billion per year appropriated by Congress to normalize the condition of newly legalized aliens, only a portion will be available for language instruction, and eligibility is limited to people covered by the Immigration Reform and Control Act—only a portion of the ESL population. Moreover, in some areas there are no longer enough qualified teachers to meet the explosion of demand for ESL services, and by all indications this problem is likely to become worse.

ESL dramatizes another face of the basic skills problem: we must make an effort to reinforce our successes as well as to address our shortcomings.

2) With a clearer understanding of this complex field, we must place a much higher priority on the most seriously neglected national problem: basic skills of the current workforce.

Despite the peril that an ill-trained workforce presents to the United States, surprisingly little of the present national effort is targeted at people who are employed. The lion's share of federal funds available, or potentially available, for basic skills education is in the Job Training Partnership Act, which primarily serves the unemployed; in the Family Support Act, which targets welfare recipients; and in the Vocational Education Act, which is primarily a pre-employment program.

Only programs supported by the relatively small Adult Education Act are open to all comers, some of whom are employed and some of whom are not, and a few other small federal programs, such as support for libraries

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***E**SL is the success story of the basic skills field—its major problem is resources.*

and the education and training funds administered by the Food Stamps program may be providing some assistance to workers. The \$1 billion appropriated by Congress to help normalize the condition of newly legalized aliens also mostly serves people who are employed, although it is limited to a small target group, and it appears that only about one-third of these funds will be used for educational purposes in any event. JTPA provides governors with a special eight percent set-aside fund which they might possibly use to help the employed by stretching the program's regulations to the limits, but few states use the set-aside money in this way.

Obviously, it is important to help the unemployed develop skills that will make them productive workers. But the information available from surveys and reports of participation in training programs indicates that most adults under the age of 65 who have serious basic skills problems are on the job. Unless they are among the 1.6 million recently legalized aliens, they are ineligible for assistance from any sizable federal program other than Adult Education. Nor, for the most part, are they eligible for any state or local program, except those managed by school systems and community colleges that maintain open-admissions policies, and those programs usually cannot accommodate large numbers. Community-based organizations and volunteer groups are also important sources of help for the employed, but they too are severely limited in how far they can reach.

In short, the major focus of our national effort is off base. We are not focusing on one of the most significant parts of the problem: basic skills of the employed.

And this is all the more misguided, because a large body of evidence indicates that the employed are far more likely to benefit immediately from basic skills instruction than any other group. Workers with deficient basic skills can readily see the payoff in doing something about their difficulties. Particularly with the cooperation of a sympathetic and/or insistent employer or union, they are highly motivated learners. The workplace can be an ideal setting for basic skills instruction, and the economic benefits to the nation of upgrading people already on the job are the most rapid we can gain.

To our existing emphasis on basic skills of the unemployed, therefore, we must add a new emphasis on the basic skills of the workforce if we are to meet the demands of the year 2010. This does not mean that we should abandon or de-emphasize our other efforts in any way. Upgrading our workforce should not be the exclusive goal of basic skills programs, nor is it likely that it will be. But it is a critically important goal, and we have seriously neglected it in the past. We must launch major new initiatives to make up for this neglect, at the same time that we are enhancing our efforts in other ways.

3) We must change our expectations about what basic skills programs must achieve in at least two important ways.

- At present, basic skills education in the United States is largely an input-driven system. Its accomplishments are measured, if at all, by how much money it spends, how many people are served, and how many programs are supported. The JTPA program is an exception. It measures outputs, in terms of how many participants are placed in jobs, although it does not give great weighting to the quality of those jobs or how long individuals hold them.

T*o our existing emphasis on basic skills of the unemployed, we must add a new emphasis on basic skills of the workforce.*

But if a major goal is to upgrade the national workforce, these are surely the wrong measures. We must develop a system that is held accountable for how much the people who use it learn and whether they learn enough.

- At present, there are no clear expectations about how large learning gains should be. In most basic skills programs, any gain is considered a success. Helping someone to progress at least one grade level in reading ability—say from fifth- to sixth-grade ability—in one hundred hours of instruction is commonly reported as a success.

Surely this reflects a healthy humanitarian attitude that is fundamental to the adult education field as a whole. No doubt the life of someone who has moved from fifth-grade to sixth-grade reading ability is enriched in important ways, and we should be proud to live in a country that values such achievements.

But if we are to meet the demographic deadline of the year 2010 and the domestic and international economic challenges of today, we cannot be content with the attitude that any gain is a good gain in most cases. We must expect and demand much more of basic skills education. We must be clearer and more realistic about what must be learned. **And we must demand large gains.**

To be precise, we must demand a system that will accept any adult at any level of skills and move him or her along a continuum to at least the level of basic skills required to function effectively on the job and in everyday life, today and in the decades to come.

This will require investing more resources and more time in each learner, and in some cases we do not know how to do it. Initially we may have to serve fewer people with more intensive programs.

But **the national goal should be clear: To help learners achieve large gains, to help them improve their lives in major ways, not just to achieve nominal progress.**

4) With these as our goals, we must realize that the time is ripe to mount a national effort that will achieve them. **We must recognize the political potential of adult literacy.** As a public-policy issue, the basic skills problem is politically weak only because no one has taken the trouble to mobilize the enormous political forces that might be brought to bear on its behalf. These are of three sorts.

Business leaders are increasingly frustrated by the lack of adequately skilled workers. In labor-shortage areas, this is becoming a bottom-line issue for many companies. In other places businessmen can see the problem emerging. They know that the relatively small “baby bust” generation is now moving into the workforce, and they anticipate labor shortages down the line.

More importantly, all but the most shortsighted business leaders have come to realize that they can no longer afford the luxury of disposable workers. To keep their firms competitive in a global marketplace, manufacturing firms are rebuilding their production processes around increasingly complex systems that require higher levels of skill by all their workers. And service industries are seeking higher productivity by reclassifying jobs in ways that demand more of each employee. A major transformation is taking place in American business, and most executives realize that it must be based largely on the skills of their existing workforce—the nearly 75 percent of workers in the year 2000.

We must develop a system that is held accountable for how much the people who use it learn and whether they learn enough.

The basic skills problem is politically weak only because no one has taken the trouble to mobilize the enormous political forces that might be brought to bear on its behalf.

From this perspective, global competitiveness, gains in productivity and in profits, or even corporate survival, are literally impossible unless the nation comes to grips with the problems of the twenty million-plus, and business leaders are beginning to realize this. They have a powerful self-interest in getting behind a national effort to upgrade basic skills. Together with the interest of organized labor in the future of American workers, the self-interest of the business community can become political dynamite if brought to bear on public policy.

And a similar story can be told about the interest of public-service employers. Police and fire departments, nonprofit hospitals, and the bureaucracies of all levels of government employ millions of people. Budget constraints, increasing demands for service and new technologies make it imperative for them to seek higher productivity from their workers, and they are often particularly well-situated to participate in the policy-making process.

The second area of potential political strength is within the public-policy community itself. What led governors in states such as Arkansas, Illinois, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, and Virginia to launch statewide literacy initiatives? Their major objective was to promote the economic development of their states. They share the perceptions of businessmen about the future of American industry, and they recognize that no state can expect to attract and hold business investment unless it can provide a highly trained workforce. And the same perception has led both the state and city of New York, as well as a great many other jurisdictions, to invest in basic skills development.

Translating this to the national level, members of Congress and the executive branch have come to recognize that global competitiveness and productivity growth can be accomplished only if we upgrade the quality of our workforce. This has now become almost conventional wisdom in the departments of Labor and Education and among members of the congressional committees that oversee their work. And it is now becoming an interest of the agencies and committees concerned with science and technology, trade and commerce more generally.

Powerful political forces within state governments, within the federal government, and within the states to exert pressure at the national level are converging on the issue of adult basic skills.

In this context, it is of great significance that literacy is a strong personal interest of the new first lady of the United States, and that the new vice president was an author of the Job Training Partnership Act. Both have the opportunity to play historically important leadership roles in this field, if they choose to do so.

Finally, there is a popular constituency for literacy, although it is too often invisible or ignored. No one seeking to forge a political agenda in this area should neglect the fact that over the years many hundreds of thousands of Americans have had direct, hands-on experience with the basic skills problem by serving as volunteer tutors. The vast majority have apparently found this a highly rewarding experience and maintained a personal interest in the field. For any public leader concerned with the fate of the twenty million-plus, this is the functional equivalent of having hundreds of thousands of former campaign workers on tap.

N*ineteen eighty nine will be the year for adult basic skills if the president or Congress get to the head of the parade and make it so.*

And then there are the twenty million-plus, themselves, as well as their families and friends. It is generally assumed that they are less likely than average Americans to be politically active. Would this be true if politicians launched a strong basic skills initiative?

And perhaps most important of all, there are the many millions of people who have been sensitized to the basic skills problem by the Project Literacy U.S. initiative and other public-awareness campaigns.

In short, there are votes in literacy for anyone who tries to get them, or at least the issue is far from being a political dead end. Combining this with the bottom-line interest of business and the imperatives of policy-makers, it seems clear that 1989 will be the year for adult basic skills if the president or Congress get to the head of the parade and make it so.

V. PRIORITIES

To meet the needs of the twenty million-plus and the demographic deadline of the year 2010, the United States must create a coherent and effective system of basic skills education from a host of scattered and, for the most part, embryonic efforts. To accomplish this we must:

- 1) Establish clear national goals and track progress toward them;
- 2) Create stronger intellectual, political, and institutional focal points for the basic skills effort that will:
 - Strengthen its intellectual underpinnings, and
 - Create more effective and better-coordinated systems of service delivery and policy;
- 3) Focus squarely on the problems of adults and on workforce literacy;
- 4) Demand systems that produce large gains in basic skills and hold them accountable for achieving those gains;
- 5) Make the necessary investments in technology, training, and administration to bring all of this about;
- 6) Build on the strengths of the field now in place, particularly on the strengths of sub-national levels of government, industry, organized labor, volunteers, and community-based organizations and on our existing knowledge base.

If we do these six things, we stand a good chance of making a quantum leap in basic skills education in the United States. All six are eminently doable in the near term. We can make a good start toward them in 1989. Compared with the measures required to address other pressing national problems, the measures required to come to grips with the problems of the twenty million-plus are neither very difficult nor very expensive.

But these measures will require a strong and coordinated effort by government at all levels, by business and by the independent sector. No one type of institution can solve the problems of the twenty million-plus. The seeds of that effort have already been sown. We must summon the will to bring them to fruition.

Compared with the measures required to address other major national problems, the measures required to come to grips with the problems of adult literacy are neither very difficult nor very expensive.

The federal government's role in basic skills education must be to help jump start a more substantial national effort than has existed to date.

VI. THE FEDERAL ROLE

In the near term, the federal government's role in basic skills education must be to help jump start a more substantial national effort than has existed to date. It must help create the conditions within which states, localities, businesses, organized labor, volunteer groups, community based organizations, and individuals can solve the basic skills problem well before the year 2010.

In this field, as in elementary and secondary education and job-specific training, the federal government cannot be the primary problem-solver. There is not, and probably never will be, any single best way to address the problem of basic skills. A sound national approach requires tailoring programs to local needs and particular circumstances. This can be accomplished only by sub-national levels of government—states and cities—as well as other institutions working in cooperation on specific problems. And it can be accomplished only if they take the problem seriously enough to invest their dollars in it. In those places where basic skills education works best today, that is how it works. And that is how it must work over the long term.

But the federal government must play a leadership role. It must energize the system and catalyze new initiatives. The national stakes involved are too large for national government to neglect the twenty million-plus. And federal programs currently play a large role in determining the directions of the overall effort.

In particular, the federal government must help to establish a stronger intellectual and institutional base on which the national effort can build. The president and Congress must provide national leadership and national goals. They must establish a source of information and expertise badly needed by everyone working in the field, coordinate and target existing programs toward high-priority needs, and encourage large-scale, robust experimentation that will lead to new structures within which a system commensurate to national needs can grow.

Some of this can be accomplished by restructuring existing federal programs. Some of it will require new initiatives. None of it is very difficult or expensive. But it requires action now.

PART II

Specific Recommendations

Specifically, the federal government must combine executive branch leadership with a legislative program developed jointly by the Executive and Congress. A fully adequate national response to the basic skills problem will require a large number of interconnected measures on the part of the federal government and, probably, the expenditure of some new funds. **Fortunately, the most essential measures are both the least expensive and the easiest to implement. They are: 1) the establishment of a more effective system for coordinating the federal government's policies and programs; and 2) the establishment of a National Center for Adult Literacy** to provide information and services without which it is impossible to mount effective new initiatives or to improve existing programs.

But by themselves these measures are not enough. The nation can and must achieve far more, not just at some time in the indefinite future, but in 1989, while interest in the problem of adult basic skills is strong. The elements of a sound federal effort that can begin in 1989 are set out below.

A fully adequate national response to the basic skills problem will require a large number of interconnected measures.

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

1) **Presidential Commitment.** In the early months of his term in office, **the president should clearly establish the enhancement of adult basic skills as a major national priority and workforce literacy as a major priority of his administration.** He should devote at least one major speech to this purpose and reaffirm his commitment in speeches to governors, mayors, businessmen, labor, and voluntary associations. In addition to emphasizing the federal government's commitment, the president should challenge those groups to develop large-scale initiatives of their own and affirm the readiness of Washington to work with them in partnerships of all sorts.

2) Also in the early months of his administration, the president should establish a high-level **task force on adult basic skills, with a six-month deadline to: 1) evaluate present federal activities and the overall national effort; 2) develop a statement of national goals and set objectives for the federal government that will contribute to meeting them; 3) propose a process for coordinating federal activities; and 4) suggest new federal initiatives.** The task force should be chaired by the first lady, the vice president, or some other distinguished American. Members should include the secretaries of Labor, Education, HHS, and Commerce, as well as the director of the Office of Personnel Management, and other department heads as deemed appropriate. The membership should also include representatives of state and local government and leaders of business, labor, and the independent sector.

3) To promote executive branch coordination in the adult basic skills field and facilitate rapid federal action, the task force should recommend, and the president should appoint by executive order, a **Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy.** The Council should meet at least quarterly to set specific and measurable national goals and track progress toward them, monitor the overall national effort, coordinate programs within the executive branch and oversee their results, and develop new program initiatives.

A primary responsibility of the Council should be to devise, coordinate, and implement new government-wide initiatives in workforce literacy. Another major mission should be to ensure that the nation makes the most effective use of the programs, materials, manpower, and intellectual resources already available—that we pull together what we already have and get more mileage out of it. The Council should facilitate the sharing of resources across programs and departments, and it should also facilitate the integration of literacy efforts with programs to deliver other social services to individuals for whom literacy is only one of a complex of interrelated problems.

Finally, the Council should issue an annual report to the president and Congress on progress in addressing the problem of adult basic skills—both progress by the federal government and progress by the nation as a whole.

The council should be chaired either by a lead department (Labor or Education) designated by the president to take primary responsibility for coordination and new initiatives, or by the vice president. Its members should be the secretaries of Labor, Education, HHS, and Commerce, as well as the director of the Office of Personnel Management, and possibly the chiefs of other executive departments.

LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

Because the elements of a successful national response to the basic skills problem are highly interconnected, the near-term federal legislative program initially should take the form of a single bill, the **Adult Basic Skills Act of 1989.**

The Act would combine new initiatives with amendments to a number of existing federal programs, and for that reason it probably could not be passed as a single measure. But introducing it in that form would set the agenda for legislative action on basic skills problems in the near term, and it would

A major mission should be to pull together the resources already devoted to literacy and get the most mileage out of them.

provide a point of reference for members of Congress and the administration who are seeking to make progress in this field. It would also provide a rallying point for the political forces outside Washington that are ready to be mobilized for a greater national effort to upgrade adult basic skills—something for state and local officials, business and labor leaders, community activists, volunteer groups, community-based organizations, program administrators, instructors, and concerned citizens to fight for.

Although the Adult Basic Skills Act probably would have to be implemented by a number of separate pieces of legislation, it would provide a blueprint for how those measures should address the issue of basic skills in a comprehensive and coordinated way.

The Act should have four major purposes. Those purposes and the types of measures required to accomplish them are set forth in the following legislative plan. (See Table I for a concise summary.) The plan also includes specific recommendations for funding levels, percentage set-asides and other particulars. These are included for illustrative purposes only. Although all of the specific recommendations are within the realm of reason, it would be impossible to argue that there is only one good way to implement the types of measures proposed. The purpose of including them is to show that there is at least one good way and that the proposals are not just vague and hollow verbiage.

Collectively, the specific provisions suggested below would result in new annual spending by the federal government of about \$550 million: an amount that is substantially less than the \$1 billion provided by Congress to normalize the condition of newly legalized aliens in 1988, about the same amount provided for the start-up year of the JOBS program in the 1988 Family Support Act, less than a three percent increase in total federal spending for education and training, or about the same amount as the Office of Personnel Management's annual training budget for the federal government's approximately one million civilian employees.

In addition, these provisions would redirect several billions of dollars in federal, state, and local spending toward the development of adult basic skills.

But the nature of the measures proposed is more important than specific levels of funding. If need be, those measures could probably be cast in a form that would require little if any additional federal outlays, although this would probably require an awkward legislative process, and it would certainly require reducing the nation's commitment to other goals. And, any of the measures could certainly be implemented at a lower cost.

Moreover, a total expenditure of 3 per cent of the federal government's investment in education and training would simply keep the federal commitment to those activities current with inflation. Fully implementing the measures proposed below, therefore, could be viewed as nothing more than directing any inflation adjustment for education and training activities to a single high-priority national purpose: Upgrading adult basic skills.

With these caveats, the major purposes and provisions of the Basic Skills Act of 1989 should be the following.

***T**he Adult Basic Skills Act would provide a blueprint for how the federal government should address this problem in a comprehensive and coordinated way.*

TABLE I
THE ADULT BASIC SKILLS ACT OF 1989:
LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION	PURPOSE	APPROXIMATE ANNUAL COST
I. BUILDING AN INTELLECTUAL BASE		
A) Establish a National Center for Adult Literacy.	Conduct basic and applied research, provide technical assistance to professionals and policymakers, maintain a national data base to monitor the field.	\$30 million
B) Earmark \$7 million for basic skills research in the budgets of Labor, Education, and HHS.	Enhance and evaluate program effectiveness.	no additional outlay
II. TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY		
A) Remove restrictions on teacher training and technology investments found in AEA, JTPA, Voc. Ed., JOBS.	Improve programs by upgrading staff and increasing effective use of technology.	no additional outlay
B) Create matching fund for investments in training and technology.	Overcome barriers to investment at the state and local level.	\$88 million
C) Require greater sharing of federally supported services and equipment.	Promote economies of scale, resource coordination and cost-effective programs.	no additional outlay
D) Establish a literacy leader training fund.	Encourage the development of more full-time professionals.	\$10 million
III. REINFORCING FEDERALISM		
A) Create an 8% basic skills set-aside in AEA and Voc. Ed. programs; funds administered by governors.	Promote statewide investment in innovative basic skills programs and service coordination.	no additional outlay
B) Require statewide coordination plans for basic skills instruction.	Enhance coordination, system development, effectiveness, accountability.	no additional outlay
C) Provide seed money on a matching basis to create state resource centers.	Support state efforts to upgrade teachers, programs and policies.	\$26 million
IV. ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXISTING FEDERAL PROGRAMS		
Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA)		
A) Create a new title for workers needing basic skills training	Support large-scale system demonstrations to enhance workforce literacy.	\$100 million
B) Create new performance standards for Titles II-A and III that encourage more basic skills training.	Extend the reach of present JTPA program and promote improved service.	no additional outlay
Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act		
A) Establish basic skills competency as one primary goal of the vocational program.	Ensure that students gain basic skills required by the workforce.	no additional outlay
B) Require states to develop basic skill competency measures for all Voc. Ed. students.	" "	no additional outlay

RECOMMENDATION	PURPOSE	APPROXIMATE ANNUAL COST
Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act (Cont.)		
C) Require basic skills competency for participation in job specific training.	" "	no additional outlay
D) Fully fund from existing appropriations or new dollars the Adult Training, Retraining and Employment Program.	Establish new program focus and partnerships with business for adult basic skill needs.	no additional outlay
Adult Education Act (AEA)		
A) Establish an Assistant Secretary of Education for Adult Literacy.	Place responsibility for basic skills at the same level as in other departments, enhance coordination, program development.	no additional outlay
B) Fully fund the state grant program at its FY 1989 authorization of \$200 million.	Enhance quality and service of the most flexible federal literacy program.	\$64 million
C) Create separate funding for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs.	Relieve adult education programs from an overwhelming ESL demand, while assuring access to ESL services.	\$200 million
D) In 1992, transfer to AEA the education provisions from the expiring Immigration Reform legislation.	Ensure maintenance of effort for ESL services.	1992 Cost: Continuing \$300 million outlay
E) Remove funding cap on preparing students for high school equivalency.	Allow state and local needs to determine target populations.	no additional outlay
F) Give governors authority to designate an administrator of their choosing.	Enhance state coordination of all basic skills programs.	no additional outlay
Family Support Act		
Require basic skills assessment and instruction for JOBS participants.	Ensure JOBS participants lacking basic skills receive services that will increase employability.	no additional outlay
Even Start Program		
Increase Family Literacy efforts by fully funding Even Start.	Increase basic skills of adults and children by a common learning experience.	\$35 million
Federal Workforce		
Determine the basic skill training needs of the federal workforce and other industries vital to the national interest.	Enhance the effectiveness and productivity of government and other essential services.	no additional outlay
Volunteers In Service to America (VISTA)		
Reauthorize current programs and create new joint ventures with national volunteer & community-based organizations.	Stimulate innovative and more effective use of volunteers in literacy programs.	\$3 million
Program Enhancement		
Require all federal basic skills programs to develop and implement long-range plans for upgrading workforce skills.	Develop on-going process of policy development aimed at vital national needs.	no additional outlay

T*he most commonly voiced need in the adult basic skills field today is for more access to better information about how to provide improved services.*

I. BUILDING A STRONGER INTELLECTUAL BASE FOR BASIC SKILLS DEVELOPMENT BY ENHANCING RESEARCH, DEVELOPMENT, AND INFORMATION DISSEMINATION.

Probably the most commonly voiced need in the adult basic skills field today is for more access to better information about how to provide improved services. At present, research efforts to advance the state of the art are small and fragmented, there are few reliable and readily accessible sources of information about what is known, testing instruments and other basic tools of the trade are far from satisfactory, and information sharing among professionals is seriously inadequate.

Research, development, and information dissemination are common nationwide needs, and it is the height of folly to underinvest in them or to rely on efforts that are ad hoc and often duplicate each other. **A national center of excellence and expertise is desperately needed.** Developing it is easily **the highest priority for federal legislative action**, because without the services it could provide, any other measures to enhance the nation's efforts to upgrade basic skills are certain to fall far short of their potential. In fact, we will have no good way of even knowing how effective they are.

Providing support for the advancement of knowledge in areas of critical national importance is a traditional function of the federal government, as exemplified by the National Bureau of Standards, the National Science Foundation, the National Institutes of Health, and the Department of Agriculture's research and dissemination activities.

In the case of adult basic skills, the federal government has a triple stake in improving the state of knowledge: Meeting an important national need, increasing the cost-effectiveness of its existing programs through the development of better delivery systems, and gaining the information required to evaluate and improve old policies as well as to develop new initiatives.

As a result, the following measures should be taken:

1) **The federal government should charter a National Center for Adult Literacy.** The Center would have three major functions:

- **Research:** conducting basic and applied research on the process by which adults learn basic skills, instructional techniques, assessment tools, and the use of technology (including both computers and other forms of technology such as broadcasting), as well as other issues fundamental to advancing the state of the art;
- **Technical assistance and training:** tracking the development of basic skills programs; disseminating research findings and other information on exemplary curricula, training models, and the use of technology; providing assistance to federal, state, and local agencies as well as to business, labor, and voluntary groups that provide basic skills training or wish to develop programs in this field;
- **Policy analysis:** monitoring the level of adult basic skills in the United States and the progress of public and private efforts toward national goals—by collecting statistical information, maintaining a data base, issuing reports, and advising federal, state, and local governments on policy development.

As its first and highest priority the Center should develop and assist in the adoption of nationally recognized performance standards to measure the basic skills levels and progress of learners and to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. The lack of such standards is widely regarded as one of the most serious problems in the basic skills field. The objective should not be to create one summary test or measure. Rather, the objective should be to develop a family of assessment tools that will meet the varying needs of policymakers, program designers, teachers, employers and the learners, themselves.

The Center should recruit an in-house staff of experts in the basic skills field. Many of its functions should be performed by that staff, but it should also be authorized to make grants or contract for services and to sponsor demonstration projects, as appropriate. To be effective, the Center must be responsive to the needs of policy-makers at all levels of government, non-governmental groups concerned with basic skills, and practitioners. It should develop cooperative relationships with all of these and attempt to avoid duplication of efforts. And it should form joint ventures or contract with other groups to enhance their capacity when these are the most effective ways of achieving its goals. The Center should also be authorized to enter into contracts to provide specialized services and to charge fees.

Ideally, the Center should be a flexible, creative institution, combining the best elements of a think tank, a professional service organization, and a private foundation. To ensure responsiveness to the basic skills field as a whole, **the Center should be a not-for-profit quasi-governmental corporation** under the supervision of a board consisting of the secretaries of Labor, Commerce, Education, Health and Human Services and the director the Office of Personnel Management, as well as representatives of state and local government, business, labor, voluntary groups, and the research community. The chairman of the board, as well as the members who are not federal officials, should be appointed by the president, with the advice and consent of Congress.

The Center should receive an appropriation of \$30 million per year—\$10 million for each of its three functions.

2) **The departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services should be required to set aside no less than \$7 million each from their existing research budgets for research, technical assistance, and policy analysis to improve adult basic skills programs funded by their departments.** The departments should be free to use these funds to contract with the National Center for special studies or in any other appropriate way.

It would be unrealistic to expect that the Center or any other organization could meet all the research needs of operating departments, and it might well be disruptive of ongoing efforts to do so. Moreover, competition is a healthy stimulus to good work in research, as elsewhere, and the federal government would be unwise to establish a research monopoly at any existing institution in the basic skills field. The Cabinet Council should seek to ensure that the departments coordinate their research plans to achieve cost-effectiveness and cross-fertilization of ideas, and that they disseminate their findings as widely as possible.

***T**he Center should be a flexible, creative institution, combining the best elements of a think tank, a professional service organization, and a private foundation.*

For the most part, existing federal legislation forces programs to choose between either investments in training and technology or spending on services.

II. INNOVATION IN TRAINING AND TECHNOLOGY

The quality of adult basic skills instruction in the United States will depend in large part on the quality of the teaching force in this field and on whether technology can be effectively applied to reinforce the efforts of teachers and learners alike. There is every indication that most teachers both need and want more pre-service and in-service training and that they want to make greater use of technology. But for the most part, existing federal legislation forces programs to choose between either investments in training on technology or spending on services, and in some cases it is unclear whether investments in either are within the intent of federal authorizations.

No area of human endeavor can succeed without an investment component to keep it current with the state of the art, and basic skills education is no exception. As a result, the following steps are essential.

1) The Adult Education Act, the Job Training Partnership Act, the Vocational Education Act, The Family Support Act, and other federal legislation that provides substantial support for basic skills instruction should be amended to **remove any restrictions on what portion of state grants may be spent for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of instruction by teacher training or the purchase of technology systems or services.** These decisions should be at the discretion of state and local officials and Private Industry Councils.

2) Congress should establish a program of matching grants to encourage increased investment in teacher training and technology. For each of the programs mentioned above, **the federal government should match state and local investments in teacher training and technology for basic skills education on a one-to-one basis.** States and localities should also be permitted to use funds provided for teacher training under this program to upgrade salaries.

State and local governments should be allowed to use either existing program funds or other funds for their portion of the match. The federal government should appropriate new funds for its portion.

To allow time for phasing in this program, **the federal government should set the amount of funds it is prepared to match at some percentage of the appropriations for each program and increase the percentage in subsequent years.** A reasonable percentage to begin with would be **1 percent of existing program funds for training and 1 percent for technology**, escalating to 3 percent for each purpose over a period of years. This would require an initial expenditure by the federal government of about **\$88 million per year.***

*This amount is derived by calculating two percent of the 1989 appropriations, and the new appropriations recommended in this report, for certain portions of the following federal programs: JTPA (Title II-A: \$1,787.8 million; Title III: \$283.8 million; new title recommended below: \$100 million), Adult Education Act (current state grants: \$136.3 million; new state grant funds proposed below: \$63.7 million; new ESL state grants proposed below: \$200 million), Vocational Education (state grant funds: \$831.6 million), Immigration Reform and Control Act (\$300 million in SLIAG grant funds estimated to be spent for ESL or other basic skills services), JOBS program (state grants: \$600 million), Food Stamps (Employment and Training Program: \$75 million). These appropriations total \$4,378.2 million. There are obviously many other sensible ways to establish the base for these calculations.

All state and local spending under this matching plan should be exempt from the performance standards of existing federal programs, and to promote coordination of services, state or local applications for matching funds should require the approval of the state governor.

3) To encourage the greatest possible cost-effectiveness in the use of technology and other facilities, and to promote cooperation among basic skills programs: amendments to the legislation mentioned above should provide that **equipment and facilities of any adult basic skills program receiving federal funds should be available free or at cost to any other program receiving federal funds, and it should be available at cost to corporate efforts, community-based organizations, volunteer groups, or others not receiving federal funds.** Prohibitions in existing legislation or regulations that prevent this type of open access to equipment and facilities should be removed.

Also, any individual eligible for any federally supported basic skills program should be categorically eligible to use the equipment and facilities of any other program, on an as-available basis for basic skills instruction.

4) On an experimental basis, **a \$10 million literacy leader training fund should be established.** The purpose of the fund would be to increase the number of highly qualified full-time professionals in the adult basic skills field, and especially to develop a larger cadre of change agents: individuals with a combination of educational, managerial, and organizational ability who can take the leadership in the establishment and management of basic skills programs, in the training of instructors and in the development and implementation of public policy in this field.

III. REINFORCING FEDERALISM

At present, state governments are the major innovators in the adult basic skills field, largely due to the initiatives of governors and first ladies. States are ideal units for coordinating the currently disparate elements of service delivery in this field, creating various types of government-industry partnerships, and developing priorities and practices tailored to local economic and social circumstances. They are also natural units to take the leadership in upgrading the quality of the teaching force and providing hands-on technical assistance to local programs. In some cases, large cities can play these roles as well, and national policy should not neglect this possibility or fail to reinforce the efforts of cities that are willing to take on greater responsibilities. But, in most parts of the country, states governments show the greatest promise of taking the lead in developing new and better service delivery systems at the present time.

To expand and continue their good work, however, states will have to develop stronger and more durable institutional structures for leadership, technical assistance, and coordination. Eventually, responsibility for progress in the adult basic skills field will have to move out of governors' offices and into other institutional bases. Some states have taken this step. Their efforts should be reinforced, and other states should be encouraged to follow suit.

In short, the federal government should look to the states as the primary public institutions for coordinating and upgrading the de-

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livery of adult basic skills services, and it should strengthen their ability to perform that role. To that end, the federal government should enact the following measures.

1) **The Adult Education Act and the Vocational Education Act should be amended to provide an eight percent set-aside that state governors may use for innovative programs and the improvement of basic skills service delivery systems.** This set-aside would be similar to the eight percent set-aside in the Job Training Partnership Act and would serve the same purpose: It would strengthen the hand of governors in forging more effective and better-coordinated instructional systems. Use of these funds would not be restricted to AEA or Vocational Education programs. Rather, their purpose would be to upgrade the overall quality of basic skills training.

2) **To receive either the new eight percent set-aside or the JTPA set-aside, governors should be required to establish statewide mechanisms (of their choosing) to coordinate the delivery of basic skills instruction within their states and with other states.** Each coordinating body should be required to develop and submit to the governor a statewide plan with measurable goals for enhancing the level of basic skills within the state. The plan should cover at least all federally supported and state-supported programs, and the state coordinating body should be required to report annually on progress toward the goals it establishes. Each state plan should be submitted to the federal Cabinet Council on Literacy. At least initially, federal funding should be conditioned on the receipt of a state plan meeting certain formal requirements to be established by the Cabinet Council.

Among these requirements should be that all concerned parties must be actively involved in the state planning process, including state and local agencies, business, organized labor, voluntary groups that provide basic skills instruction, teachers, and the general public. State plans should also identify measurable goals and the means of implementing them for upgrading their system of basic skills instruction in every way. This should include specifying goals and means for improving teacher training, including the setting of standards for training, for enhancing the use of technology, for upgrading salaries and teaching conditions, for improving coordination and the sharing of staff and other resources among programs, and most importantly, for improving access to programs, the retention of learners and increasing learning gains.

State plans prepared under these requirements should be accepted in lieu of state planning and coordination requirements for basic skills services contained in other federal legislation. In effect, they would be required to adopt an adult strategy cutting across various program domains.

3) **The federal government should make matching grants to the states for the development of state resource centers for basic skills education.** The primary missions of these centers should be to upgrade the quality of teaching in basic skills programs; promote cooperation and coordination across programs; enhance cooperative learning among professionals; disseminate information from the National Center and other sources about best practices, measurement, and other issues of importance to professionals; provide assistance in establishing new programs; gather data on basic skills problems and the progress of efforts to meet them; and aid policy-makers in the development, implementation and monitoring of state plans and other policy initiatives. Among their other functions, state resource centers should

In effect, states would be required to adopt an adult strategy cutting across various program domains.

be the leaders in developing teacher training programs and systems for the diffusion and adoption of state of the art teaching methods.

For these purposes **\$26 million should be provided by the federal government in matching grants** to the states, scaled according to population, with a minimum grant of \$400,000 per state. States should be required to match federal funds at the rate of at least 10 percent in the first two years, and the state match should increase 10 percent per year thereafter, until it reaches the 50 percent level.

4) All federal legislation supporting adult basic skills programs should stipulate that **states may, at their option, use volunteer groups, community-based organizations, or for-profit contractors as delivery and management agents** in any way or to any extent they see fit, and **they may provide technical and financial support to volunteer groups, community-based organizations, or other agents** at any level and in any form they deem appropriate.

IV. ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EXISTING FEDERAL PROGRAMS THAT SUPPORT THE UPGRADING OF ADULT BASIC SKILLS AND PLACING GREATER EMPHASIS ON BASIC SKILLS OF THE WORKFORCE

To exert effective national leadership in the effort to enhance basic skills, the federal government must set its own house in order. This will require amending existing federal programs to make more funds available for basic skills training, increasing appropriations in some cases, allowing more flexible use of funds, placing greater emphasis on workforce literacy, and encouraging the development of delivery systems that are more results-oriented, accountable, and designed to produce large learning gains.

To accomplish this, the federal government will have to implement changes in virtually all of its programs that presently provide support for this field. In many cases, however, those changes will simply accelerate trends that are already under way in the evolution of federal programs.

1) **The Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA).** As currently structured, the major portion of JTPA serving adults (Title II-A and Title III—for dislocated workers) primarily serve the unemployed, or individuals who will soon be unemployed. Title II-A is by far the larger program, with an authorization of \$1.8 billion in 1989, 60 percent of which is available for adults. Federal performance standards for adults under II-A programs encourage the placement of participants in jobs within one year or less. This makes it difficult for program managers to invest resources in workforce literacy or in people who need extended periods of basic skills training, whether unemployed or not. By all indications, a large portion of JTPA participants need such training, and many program managers would like to provide it.

Like all other federal programs, JTPA doubtless has its problems. **But because it is based on the principles of government-industry cooperation and responsiveness to labor market needs, the program is**

***T**he federal government will have to implement changes in virtually all of its programs that presently provide support for this field. In many cases, however, those changes will simply accelerate trends that are already under way in the evolution of federal programs.*

fundamentally sound, and there is no good reason to deny local program managers the opportunity to extend its reach. As a result:

- **A new title authorizing basic skills training for the employed should be added to JTPA.**
- **Initial funding for that new title should be \$100 million per year for four years. The funds would be devoted to large-scale demonstration projects in workforce literacy,** with an emphasis on state-wide or industry-wide systems that could serve as a basis for continued funding under this title. Demonstrations should be with employees of both large and small business, with workplace and other delivery sites, with government-industry partnerships and public provision, with new technology and traditional approaches, and with various forms of performance standards and incentives.

At the discretion of the Secretary of Labor, funds under this new title could be used for demonstrations designed and managed by the federal government, by other levels of government or by other institutions. All demonstrations should include measurable output goals of skills attainment, employability, productivity gains, and other relevant measures of success, and requirements for reporting to state and federal agencies. Also, to the greatest extent possible, demonstration projects funded under this title should involve joint ventures or other cooperative efforts with other adult basic skills programs.

- The Labor Department should be required to issue **new performance standards for the adult Title II-A and Title III programs that would allow states the option to invest more of the funds supporting those programs in basic skills training and more extended training periods for participants** who require basic skills services, including continued eligibility for services after they are employed or have completed on-the-job training programs. The new standards should also allow states the option to base eligibility for Title II-A adult programs and Title III programs on the need for basic skills training as well as unemployment or other forms of economic hardship. (That is, among those adults otherwise eligible for JTPA programs, individuals with serious deficits in basic skills might be given first priority.) To exercise these options, states should be required to include appropriate provisions in their statewide literacy plans, and these provisions should be approved by the governor and the Secretary of Labor.

2) **Vocational Education.** The Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act must be reauthorized in 1989. The traditional goal of vocational education in the United States has been to provide job training at both the secondary and post-secondary levels for young people who do not intend to enter traditional college baccalaureate programs. Nationwide, the federal government provides 10 to 20 percent of the funds devoted to vocational education, but its priorities strongly influence the directions of state and local efforts. Because of changes in the workplace, employers are increasingly seeking entry-level employees with a sound grasp of basic skills, rather than job-specific training. Partly in recognition of this fact, an Adult Training and Retraining provision was introduced into the Perkins Act in 1984 that could support basic skills training. In the 1988 Trade Act this provision was further amended to allow public-private partnerships. Although authorized at \$50 million, the provision has never received an appropriation.

***B**ecause of changes in the workplace, employers are increasingly seeking entry-level employees with a sound grasp of basic skills, rather than job-specific training.*

In reauthorizing the Perkins Act, Congress should reorient it toward current workforce needs in a number of ways. Among the most important provisions Congress should make are the following related to basic skills:

- **One primary goal of vocational education should be basic skills competency.**
- With the assistance of the federal departments of Education and Labor, **states should be required to develop measures of the level of basic skill competency required by employers today and likely to be required in the years to come.** The development of such measures should be a prerequisite for receiving federal vocational education funds within two years.
- **Basic skills competency, or participation in a program that will lead to basic skills competency should be required for participation in any job-specific vocational education program** receiving federal funds. States should have the discretion to use any portion of the vocational education funds they receive from the federal government to support basic skills training for students enrolled in vocational courses.
- **The Adult Training and Retraining portion of the Carl D. Perkins Act should be fully funded at \$50 million,** either with new appropriations or from funds currently appropriated for other purposes.

3) **The Adult Education Act (commonly referred to as the ABE Act).** Although it is, paradoxically, one of the smallest federal basic skills programs, Adult Education is one of the most important, because anyone with basic skills problems is eligible to participate in it. It serves both people in need of assistance with the general range of basic skills and English as a Second Language (ESL) students. It also provides support for high school equivalency courses. The program has been needlessly underfunded over the years and relegated to a position of low visibility within the Office of Vocational Education of the Department of Education. In addition, the demand for ESL instruction in certain parts of the country has been so great in recent years that only about half of ABE's resources are available for general basic skills training.

ABE should be upgraded in every way and it should build on the successes of its ESL component without jeopardizing its general skills mission. In particular:

- **The position of Assistant Secretary of Education for Adult Literacy should be established.** The new Assistant Secretary should have line responsibility for the ABE and Even Start programs and staff responsibility for coordinating all of the education department's basic skills activities. This would place responsibility for basic skills programs at the Assistant Secretarial level in the Department of Education, as it now is in the departments of Labor and Health and Human Services.
- **The ABE state grant program should be fully funded at its authorized level of \$200 million (a \$64 million increase).**
- **An additional \$200 million should be appropriated solely for ESL instruction** supported by the ABE program. This would take the ESL burden off the program and maintain the present practice of devoting half of ABE's resources to the needs of people with limited English proficiency.

The Adult Education Act has been needlessly underfunded over the years, and the demand for ESL instruction has been so great that only half of its resources are available for general basic skills training.

- When the provisions of the Immigration Reform and Control Act that currently authorize \$1 billion per year for normalizing the condition of newly legalized aliens expire, **an additional \$300 million per year should be authorized and appropriated in 1992 for ESL instruction** under the ABE program. This is the portion of the Immigration Reform and Control authorization estimated to be devoted to educational purposes, and transferring it would ensure a national maintenance of effort in providing this important national service.
- **The provision in the present authorization for ABE that prohibits states from spending more than 20 percent of federal funds for classes aimed at preparing students for high school equivalency certification should be abolished or the limit should be raised significantly.** Decisions about how much emphasis to place on high school equivalency training are best made at the state level, and should change over time and according to local circumstances. Moreover, it is widely believed that the existing provisions are largely ignored by both federal and state officials who believe that a uniform national standard is not sound public policy.
- **Governors should have the discretion to designate someone other than their chief state school officer to administer the ABE program** in their states. This will increase the ability of those states in which the chief state school officer is not accountable to the governor to integrate this highly flexible program with other adult basic skills efforts in a state-wide plan.

4) **The Family Support Act of 1988 (welfare reform).** Under the JOBS program in the Act, states are afforded great flexibility to devote funds to education, training, job placement, and other services to welfare recipients aimed at enabling them to become self-sufficient through employment. Consistent with a greater national emphasis on workforce literacy, **Congress should require that states determine the basic skills levels of all participants in the JOBS program and that the individualized plans required by the program should include basic skills instruction for any participants whose skills are seriously deficient**, both while they are receiving welfare benefits and during the one-year period of employment during which the Act makes other social services available.

5) **Even Start** is a quasi-experimental program established by Congress in 1988 and administered by the Department of Education. Its goal is to promote "family literacy" through programs that provide training both to parents who have deficient basic skills and to their children. The assumption behind the program is that children reared in a home where reading and other basic skills are taken seriously will have a better chance of keeping up with their peers and that parents and children joined in a common learning experience will reinforce each other. This approach has proved extremely promising in small-scale experiments. Congress authorized \$50 million for the program in 1988, but appropriated only \$14.8 million. **Even Start is an important initiative in both basic skills instruction and expanding services to disadvantaged children. Its appropriation should be increased to its authorized level of \$50 million.** In addition, through the Cabinet Council or some other mechanism, a special effort should be made to try out the Even Start approach with welfare recipients under the provisions of the Family Support Act. And research on the effectiveness of the approach should be

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a priority for use of the research funds earmarked for basic skills in the Department of Education's budget.

6) **The federal workforce and other services vital to the national interest.** The federal government has a strong interest in the basic skills of the federal workforce. Although the Defense Department tests the skills of its recruits and provides some remedial programs, the Office of Personnel Management does not provide a program of basic skills training for any of the one million federal civilian employees who may require it. The federal government also has a strong interest in the workforce skills of industries, such as health care, that receive large amounts of federal funds, and other services vital to the national interest, such as transportation, utilities and public-safety services.

With regard to both its own workforce and the employees of other vital services, the federal interest in basic skills has two justifications: Effective performance of the job and possible cost savings. A more highly skilled federal workforce will provide better service to the public, as will a better workforce in the medical industry, in public safety, and in other important areas of our national life. And in all of these areas, more highly skilled workers will improve productivity and cost-effectiveness.

We do not know that large gains in effectiveness and efficiency can be achieved in this way, but there is no reason to believe that the federal government and other service providers are immune from the basic skills problems that affect the productivity and effectiveness of many large corporations. In any event, we should certainly find out.

As a result, **Congress should mandate a study by the General Accounting Office of the need for basic skills investment in the federal workforce and of basic skill levels in industries receiving substantial federal resources, or otherwise vital to the national interest, by the Office of Technology Assessment.**

And Congress should act on the recommendations of these studies. At least in the case of the federal workforce, this need not involve large new appropriations. In 1986 (the most recent year for which data are available) the Office of Personnel Management spent \$580 million on training for the approximately one million federal civilian employees. Redirecting resources may be all that is required to mount a significant effort to upgrade the basic skills of federal workers. In the case of other services vital to the national interest, diverting some existing appropriations to basic skills development might result in cost savings.

7) The **Volunteers In Service to America program (VISTA)** devotes about one-third of its funds (or about \$13 million) to the support of volunteer efforts in providing literacy services. Together with the Student Literacy Corps, established in 1988, at the instigation of Senator Edward Kennedy and others, Vista makes an important contribution to volunteer efforts. VISTA's authorization expires in 1989. It **should be reauthorized**, and its contribution to basic skills education should be enhanced. In particular, VISTA is an ideal program for learning more about new and more effective ways in which volunteers can be used in basic skills programs—for example, as paraprofessionals in technology-based programs or as coordinators of social support services. Because volunteers are an essential part of the nation's basic skills effort, finding the most effective way to use them should be a high priority, and **VISTA**

In the case of the federal workforce, enhancing basic skills need not involve large new appropriations. In 1986 the Office of Personnel Management spent \$580 million on training for the approximately one million federal civilian employees.

should receive an additional \$3 million appropriation for joint ventures with national volunteer organizations and community-based organizations to experiment with innovative uses of volunteers in literacy programs.

8) **Program enhancement.** Consistent with the goal of substantially upgrading the quality of the American workforce, **all federal programs providing basic skills training** (including but not limited to those mentioned above) should be required to:

- **develop plans for program enhancement** that, within 10 years, will enable the nation's basic skills training system to move at least half the participants in federal programs to at least the minimum level of basic skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by a high productivity economy and to function effectively in an increasingly complex society;
- **regularly report the extent of progress** toward these goals.

Federal departments responsible for these programs should, through the Cabinet Council, establish criteria for setting program goals, establish timetables, monitor progress and advise Congress on appropriate incentives and sanctions to facilitate this process.

A major goal of the Council should be to develop a system of basic skills education in which providers are rewarded for helping learners to achieve goals that will significantly improve their lives: a system that will come to grips with the social and economic problems facing the nation in a forceful way. **This can be achieved only by an evolutionary process. But it will be not achieved at all unless responsibility for reformulating the basic skills system is placed squarely in the hands of some agency or group and unless the goal is stated by Congress and the administration in unequivocal terms.**

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PART III

Conclusion

With a new Republican president, a strongly Democratic Congress and a great many unresolved issues on the table, the United States may be in for a prolonged period of political tug of war. Adult literacy is one issue on which both sides agree and on which the nation can and must make a quantum leap forward in the near term.

A combination of humanitarian concerns, regard for civic values, and a growing appreciation of the nation's bottom-line interest in a more highly skilled workforce have created a coalition of concern that cuts across political parties, ideologies, regions, and all walks of life. This report has stressed one aspect of that concern—the economic stake that all Americans have in upgrading basic skills, because it is the aspect that appears to be providing the strongest impetus for immediate action. But economic concerns should never be allowed to crowd out human values. We would be a very poor nation indeed if we did not value literacy and the light it throws on individual lives as among the greatest of goods in and by themselves. The author of this report has the highest admiration for the many people who have the greatness of heart and vision to see literacy in this way.

But, however problems of literacy are viewed, they are a national shame and a national waste. We should not tolerate them and we cannot afford them. Our public values and our standard of living are both at stake. And the greatest shame of all is that those problems are not very difficult to deal with. Despite the years of neglect by all but a committed few, despite the intellectual, institutional and political clutter, adult literacy is easily one of the most tractable of our major national problems. There is a remarkably broad consensus about what must be done and how to do it. The differences that exist are differences at the margin only, and there is no good reason why they should hold back progress by even one day. Moreover, the measures required do not demand enormous investments by any sector of society. They mainly call for a reordering of our priorities.

With widespread political support, powerful values at stake, and a near-consensus on both ends and means, adult literacy presents the nation with a rare opportunity to move ahead rapidly toward national achievements in which we all can take enormous pride. Nineteen eighty-nine is the year in which this can begin to happen, if public leaders take up the issue and make it their own. Even without the special measures suggested in this report, any one of the existing federal, state, local or nongovernmental agencies could make significant progress in this field simply by stretching their existing resources and authority to the full. And there is no good reason why they should delay doing so.

But, as with all public issues, the danger is that the opportunity to achieve major advances in adult literacy will pass us by. People will become discouraged by inaction. Interest will wane and consensus will fade away. Yet the issue will not disappear. Even if we achieve the national goals required to meet the demographic deadline of the year 2010, technical and social change will ensure that many people will always need to upgrade their basic skills. There will always be a literacy challenge, just as there will always be challenges to all other aspects of our educational system. We will fall farther and farther behind as a nation if we do not both respond to the near-term emergency and build a system of education for adults and children that will stand up over the long haul.

The time to act is now. It may not be possible to complete the literacy agenda in one year or even a decade, but we can set forces in motion that will ensure it will be completed sooner or later. If those who realize the truth of this fail to do whatever is necessary to seize the present opportunity and press vigorously for a powerful national response, the irretrievable loss to the nation and the individual tragedies of millions of their fellow citizens will be a burden they must bear.

We cannot afford to fail. And looking across the leadership at all levels of government, in business, and in the independent sector, as well as at the interest and involvement of the American public at large, it seems unlikely that we will fail if we recognize that an opportunity such as this may not come again.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author wishes to express his warmest thanks to a number of individuals and institutions without whose help this report and the Project that produced it would not have been possible.

First and foremost, thanks are due to Alan Pifer, for his sage advice, knowledge, and untiring efforts to secure financial support for this undertaking.

I am also deeply grateful to my colleagues, Carm Cooksey and Renee Woodworth, for their efforts well above and beyond the call of duty, their patience, and their highly professional work.

In addition, I would like to thank the seven expert consultants whose efforts formed the core of the Project. All of them provided far more of their time, support, and experience than anyone could reasonably have expected, and their deliberations were memorably stimulating events. They are:

Judith A. Alamprese—COSMOS Corporation
William B. Bliss—Language and Communications Institute
Jack A. Brizius—Brizius and Foster
Paul V. Delker—Strategic Educational Systems
Susan E. Foster—Brizius and Foster
Arnold H. Packer—Interactive Training, Inc.
William F. Pierce—W. E. Pierce and Associates

I would also like to acknowledge the important contribution made by the scores of individuals from all over the United States who freely gave large amounts of their time to help guide the Project's work, both in the small group sessions organized by the consultants and in individual meetings with members of the Project's staff. They are truly an inspiration for anyone concerned with the literacy field. And I would like to acknowledge the contribution made by members of the Project's advisory group, who provided a great many valuable insights and took the time to comment on the manuscript of this report.

Great thanks are also due to Harold McGraw, Dan Lacy, and Gail Spangenberg, of the Business Council for Effective Literacy, for their unfailing friendship and support.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the sources of financial support for the Project on Adult Literacy for their faith in the endeavor and, most of all, for their tangible expressions of concern with the problem of literacy, itself. They are:

Carnegie Corporation of New York
The Chase Manhattan Bank
The Exxon Corporation
The Gannett Foundation
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
The William R. Kenan, Jr. Charitable Trust
The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation
Harold W. McGraw, Jr.
The Rockefeller Foundation
The Xerox Foundation

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