

CLOSING THE GAP

*The Challenge of
Certification & Credentialing
in Adult Education*

by
Forrest P. Chisman

February 23, 2011



Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy

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FOREWORD

CLOSING THE GAP: The Challenge of Certification and Credentialing in Adult Education

is the final outcome of a CAAL project to consider the state of adult education certification and credentialing in America. It summarizes a Roundtable discussion of experts held in New York City on June 22, 2010 and sets forth findings from that meeting and other CAAL research. It considers short- and long-term issues in teacher credentialing, aiming to help improve programs and student outcomes. The report is supplemented by [Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty](#), a recent CAAL information paper by Cristine Smith with Ricardo Gomez of the University of Massachusetts. The latter, published on January 3, 2011, is available at CAAL's website.

Adult education is undergoing fundamental transformation in the U.S. As CLOSING THE GAP makes clear, teacher training and qualification issues should be addressed as an important strand of federal and state planning to make the adult education and workforce skills system responsive to 21st century needs. There is lively interest in this topic at the present time. CAAL hopes its reports will stimulate further discussion, stronger awareness of the issues, and concrete advances.

CAAL vice president Forrest Chisman directed this project and wrote the report. His powers of analysis, deep understanding of the field, attention to detail, and dedication are truly outstanding. I am grateful for his excellence as a CAAL principal, as are CAAL's directors and other professionals with whom we work. Thanks are also due to Cristine Smith and Ricardo Gomez, to the superb team who made up our June Roundtable (see Appendix), and to the many other professionals we consulted throughout this project. To a topic that is inherently complex and sometimes murky, they brought experience, rational discourse, love of adult education, and exploring minds. They understood what is, and tried to envision what could be.

Finally, this work has been possible because of the generosity of the Dollar General Corporation, the Joyce Foundation, the McGraw-Hill Companies, and many individual donors. CAAL appreciates their steadfast support in these difficult economic times. We are proud to have them as partners and extend sincere appreciation to each of them.

Gail Spangenberg
President, CAAL

SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

Over a period of several months in 2010, CAAL carried out a project to explore certification and credentialing in adult education, one of several topics on its agenda to help bring about thoughtful reform in adult education and workforce skills development. The major project findings are given below. Improving systems for credentialing adult education teachers is a large task. But it is essential for improving the effectiveness of adult education as a whole, and the suggestions given in CLOSING THE GAP seem eminently feasible.

- 1) A substantial portion of adult education teachers are not fully qualified to provide either traditional or new workforce-oriented instruction. Most are “experienced but not expert,” for two basic reasons: few have had extensive formal training in adult basic skills instruction and too few suitable in-service programs are available to them.
- 2) The gap between the knowledge and skills teachers have and need is one factor that severely limits the ability of the adult education system to offer the kind and quality of service low-skilled adults and the nation’s economy need. Too little attention has been given to this gap.
- 3) To close the gap, clear, comprehensive standards need to be established for the knowledge and skills teachers should have to teach adults, and related systems are needed to assess if required standards are met and to help teachers improve their abilities. The term “credentialing” encompasses these related functions.
- 4) Many states and programs have rudimentary, sometimes innovative, credentialing systems, and a few have introduced more substantial systems. None assess the specialized knowledge and skills teachers need to effectively teach adults and, because the programs are voluntary, few teachers obtain the more substantial credentials.
- 5) Numerous barriers prevent teachers from increasing their knowledge and skills, meet standards, and earn credentials. Considerable amounts of money and time are required to upgrade their abilities—whether through academic study or participation in extensive in-service professional development. Moreover, career ladders in adult education programs are lacking, too few full-time job opportunities exist, and pay is inadequate. Federal, state, and program entities need to meet these challenges and can approach it incrementally over time. Investments are needed to lift teachers’ salaries, create more full-time job opportunities, and support teacher development costs. A valuable first step would be for the federal government to increase, in reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, the percentage of state grant funds allowed for “program improvement” from 12 to 15 percent. States and programs must also change their spending priorities to invest more in enabling and assuring teacher quality.
- 6) Improving teacher credentialing systems should be part of a comprehensive adult education reform and strategic planning process (involving multiple stakeholders) because resources devoted to such activities depend on decisions about the future directions of adult education.

- 7) An orderly path to progress is needed and will require leadership that does not now exist. A leadership group should be convened as quickly as possible to take responsibility for developing adult education credentialing systems (with the help of committees made up of adult education and workforce skills groups, business and labor, postsecondary education, the social service and economic development areas, the research community, students, and perhaps other stakeholders).
- 8) It should be a top priority for new leadership to develop the knowledge and skills teachers must have to be proficient in various domains and at different levels of adult education (such as ABE, GED, ESL, numeracy, and workforce preparation). Guidance can be found in the standards established in K-12 education, the curricula of a few postsecondary adult education programs, existing in-service training materials, some of the innovative state efforts, and the highly regarded approach of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Consideration should also be given to best ways of assessing whether teachers meet established standards, with attention to both academic coursework (such as well-designed academic degrees in adult education or TESOL), and performance-based approaches (such as portfolios that document practices, self-assessment, and observation by master teachers). A menu of options should be developed from which states and programs can select the approach that best meets their needs.
- 9) The new leadership should customize degree programs and in-service professional development systems to meet teacher performance standards. An abundance of instructional and in-service material already exists to inform this effort. The primary challenges are alignment with teacher standards and mustering financial resources to provide teachers with incentives for participating.
- 10) Efforts to improve credentialing will benefit from more extensive and rigorous research. In particular, research is needed to gain a more precise understanding of the professional backgrounds and hiring arrangements of teachers, document the experiences and outcomes of innovative credentialing systems adopted by some of the states, determine the knowledge and skills teachers now have at different levels of proficiency, and, with attention to certain methodological limitations, show the effect that different teacher qualifications have on learner gains and retention.
- 11) The federal government could add value to the knowledge base by requiring that states report the academic backgrounds, professional development experiences, and terms of employment of their teachers as part of the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS). It would also be valuable for the federal government or some other agency to create a website dedicated to tracking both the progress of innovative programs and other credentialing developments in adult education.

CLOSING THE GAP

The Challenge of Certification and Credentialing in Adult Education

INTRODUCTION

On June 22, 2010, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) convened an invitational Roundtable to discuss certification and credentialing systems for adult education teachers. It focused on issues that must be addressed to improve the systems now in place and forms that improvement might take. In addition to CAAL senior staff, the group of 15 experts included researchers, state adult education directors, managers of state teacher certification programs, in-service teacher training programs, local program representatives, and an official of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Vocational and Adult Education. (See Appendix, p.30.)

CLOSING THE GAP draws on the major points of Roundtable discussion, and includes information drawn from other CAAL research and a background paper commissioned for the Roundtable.¹ Although CAAL did not seek consensus on any of the issues discussed, there was substantial agreement on many points. Nevertheless, this report’s conclusions are those of CAAL and the author and should not necessarily be attributed to any of the participants.

CLOSING THE GAP is divided into six major sections: Part I provides the context within which certification and credentialing systems should be considered. Part II discusses why it is important to improve those systems. Part III deals with the nature and limitations of present efforts to improve them. Part IV considers some of the characteristics most important to improving systems. Part V addresses barriers to implementing systems with these characteristics. And Part VI discusses and suggests key steps that can be taken in the near and long term to develop improved systems—in the interest of bringing about comprehensive reform in adult education.

PART I: CONTEXT

Teacher certification and credentialing are orphan issues in adult education. The two related functions have rarely been in the forefront of discussions about how to improve basic skills service. There is a paucity of literature on them and only a small foundation of practical experience on which to draw. However, they are centrally important components of a more effective and “professional” adult education system. And more effective mechanisms to perform these functions must be developed if the adult education system is to provide solid basic and workforce skills to the many millions of adults who need such services.

¹ [Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty](http://www.caalusa.org/certteach.pdf), Cristine Smith with Ricardo Gomez, January 3, 2011, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, www.caalusa.org/certteach.pdf.

A. TEACHER QUALITY

The context for considering certification and credentialing is the imperative to ensure that adult education teachers have the knowledge and skills they need to provide high quality instruction. Roundtable participants unanimously agreed with the general proposition that ensuring teacher quality (what teachers know and can do) is essential to the effectiveness of adult education. It is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for improving outcomes—such as learning gains and retention. Other necessary conditions include factors such as curriculum, program design/management, articulation, assessment requirements, supportive services, use of technology, and funding. However, the participants cautioned that neither teacher quality nor any of these other factors is a “silver bullet” for improving adult education. Even the most qualified teachers will be unable to help students achieve significant learning gains or motivate them to persist in programs that meet for only a few hours a week or that are structured around rote learning from workbooks. Regrettably, there are still programs like this, and a major goal of the field must be to upgrade all components of adult education. Conversely, programs cannot implement the components that make for success without employing highly qualified teachers.

Leaders of the adult education field have long believed that traditional services—instruction in basic literacy and numeracy, GED preparation, and life skills ESL—require a large and distinctive body of expertise on the part of teachers. This includes contextualized, learner-centered instruction, building learning communities, stimulating independent learning, managing open-entry classrooms with students of different abilities, and making use of formal and informal assessments to adapt instruction on an on-going basis. These and other skills must be grounded in an understanding of the subject matter being taught and adult and/or second language learning theory and practice. This is a tall order, and in recent years the knowledge and skills required to provide effective instruction have expanded as greater emphasis has been placed on high intensity classes, the use of technology for instruction, and new approaches to teaching math. In short, traditional adult education services in the new environment can only be effective if teachers have highly specialized knowledge and skills, and even the most experienced teachers have difficulty keeping up with new developments in this field.

The traditional emphasis of adult education on meeting individual student needs is shifting to a far greater emphasis on addressing societal concerns—such as employability. Compelling evidence abounds that the United States cannot hope to have the workforce it needs to compete in the international economy unless a significant portion of the many millions of Americans with low basic skills prepare themselves for 21st century jobs.² This means that they must improve their skills to meet the requirements of employers of various kinds and also to the levels required to succeed in occupational training and postsecondary programs.

Doing so requires upgrading the traditional basic skills that matter most for these purposes and teaching them in the context of workplace or postsecondary applications. It also requires teaching

² The best summary explanation of the imperative to upgrade basic skills for American economic growth and competitiveness is the 2008 report of the prestigious National Commission on Adult Literacy, [Reach Higher, America](#), and its numerous supporting research reports, available from www.caalusa.org. [Reach Higher, America](#) reports that as many as 88 million adults lack the skills and education needed to be considered ready for college, job training, and emerging jobs.

“soft skills” such as problem solving and teamwork, as well as computer literacy. And it involves orientation to options for improving employability. To meet these challenges, teachers must develop a sophisticated understanding of the various paths to increased employability and their particular basic skills requirements, and they must create or work within curricula customized to meet the needs of the workplace and postsecondary institutions. Often they must learn to collaborate with job training programs in integrated education and training or with employers in workplace literacy settings.³

This new emphasis in adult education requires teachers to develop new types of knowledge and skills. Effectively it changes the definition of what it means to be a fully qualified adult education teacher. And the new emphasis is not a passing fad. Increasingly, policymakers and program leaders are requiring workforce readiness to be the major focus of basic skills programs.⁴ To achieve this, even experienced teachers will have to ascend a steep learning curve of their own.

Roundtable participants pointed out that one result of the new emphasis on employability is that it elevates teacher quality from an issue internal to adult education to an urgent national need. Ensuring that doctors and lawyers have the knowledge and skills they need to be fully proficient in their work is regarded as a necessity for public health and safety. By the same token, ensuring that adult education teachers are proficient has become a matter of national economic welfare. Because unless teachers provide traditional adult education services effectively and also meet workforce requirements, the nation’s economic future is bleak. Without seeking the distinction, teachers in this field have gained an essential role in building our 21st century workforce.

B. THE GAP

Roundtable participants said that they believe a large portion of adult education teachers are not fully qualified to provide either traditional or new workforce-oriented adult education instruction. A small portion may be so under-qualified that it is a disservice to students for them to be responsible for instruction. However, a large portion are “experienced, but not expert.” Their knowledge and skills vary—depending to an extent on the nature of their prior training and experience.

A central problem of the adult education field is that few teachers have extensive formal training in teaching basic skills to adults. Although at least some education schools have offered degrees or

³ For the many implications for programs and teachers of strengthening the focus of adult education on employability see Reach Higher, America, op. cit. See also two reports by the National Center for Education and the Economy: One Step Forward and Adult Education for Work: Transforming Adult Education to Build a Skilled Workforce (National Center for Education and the Economy, 2009) available from www.jff.org. Also see the 2010 CAAL Policy Brief Local Perspectives on WIA Reauthorization available at <http://www.caalusa.org/LPP.pdf>, and the Center for Law and Social Policy’s Recommendations to Refocus WIA Title II on Career and Postsecondary Success (2010) available at www.clasp.org. Finally, see CAAL’s recent publication on collaboration between adult education programs and the business community, Doing Business Together: Adult Education and Business Partnering to Build Workforce Skills, available at <http://www.caalusa.org/Doing.pdf>.

⁴ This is the major focus of the reports mentioned in the preceding footnote. Importantly, it is the major focus of the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act introduced in the United States House and Senate in the 111th Congress and expected to be re-introduced in the 112th Congress, as well as legislation and policy initiatives in a number of states.

endorsements in adult education for many years, they have attracted very few students to these programs. Most adult education teachers have entered this field with academic backgrounds in K-12 education or other fields, and they have developed their knowledge and skills in teaching basic skills to adults through on-the-job training—often with the assistance of professional development activities offered by states and local programs, informal mentoring by other teachers, self-study, and trial and error. Because most have some kind of background in education, some of their prior knowledge and skills are transferrable. These include aspects of content matter knowledge and a grasp of the elements of pedagogy common to virtually all areas of education, such as how to devise lesson plans or operate within an established curriculum.

But the unsystematic way in which teachers make the transition to adult education means that few can be expected to have a thorough command of the specialized expertise required to give the most effective instruction to adults. This problem is compounded by the new demands for adult education to meet workforce needs. Because the state of the art in providing this type of service is still evolving, few teachers have extensive experience providing it and there are few sources of expertise to which they can turn for assistance.

Regrettably, there are no very revealing studies of how well qualified adult education teachers are or what form their qualifications take. (For a critique on major surveys of teacher qualifications, see the “Topographic Research” section on p. 24.) The conclusion that most teachers are not fully qualified is based on expert opinion. And that opinion is supported by teachers themselves. They make abundant use of professional development opportunities in virtually all aspects of the field and they frequently express the desire for more professional development, as well as the time to make use of it. They “vote with their feet” for better ways to improve their qualifications. Roundtable members emphasized that teachers are not to blame for shortcomings in their knowledge and skills. The fault lies with inadequate means of training, recruiting, and supporting the adult education teaching workforce. And ultimately (as discussed below) these problems arise from inadequate systems of staffing and compensation. Given the limited opportunities to develop their professional abilities, it is remarkable that adult education teachers have the level of skills that the best of them demonstrate. Still, too few teachers are as adept as they should be in providing creative, contextualized instruction to meet the differing needs of individual learners in the various domains of adult education.

PART II: THE IMPERATIVE FOR CREDENTIALS

A. STANDARDS AND MEASURES

If our adult education system is to provide the level of service required by low skilled adults and the nation’s economy, it is essential to close the gap between the qualifications teachers *have* and the qualifications they *need* to provide fully effective instruction. To accomplish this, states, programs, professional associations, and others responsible for the effectiveness of basic skills instruction must establish standards for the knowledge and skills teachers require. And they must also establish means

by which teachers can show that they meet those standards. Without clearly defined standards, any efforts to improve teacher quality will be groping in the dark. Neither teachers nor anyone concerned with improving their performance will know what they are attempting to accomplish. This is especially true because the teaching workforce in adult education is comprised of professionals with very different mixes of the specialized skills they need to be fully effective.

Likewise, establishing teacher standards will have little effect unless there is some way for individual teachers to show whether they have met them. Standards can only be used to improve teacher quality if they are a measure of the required knowledge and skills. They can only be used as a measure if there is some yardstick by which they can be applied, and if that yardstick is used.

Undoubtedly, most teachers want to do the best job they can. But it is impossible for them to know if or how they should improve their performance without some mechanism by which to measure it against standards of proficiency. It is also impossible for program managers to make informed decisions about which teachers to hire or the tasks to which they should be assigned without a mechanism for assessing their abilities. For example, at the simplest level, programs must know whether teachers have the skills required to teach ABE, ESL, or both, and whether they know how to incorporate workforce skills or computer literacy into their classes if the curriculum requires them to do so. Likewise, the job training programs with which adult educators are forming partnerships must have confidence that the teachers assigned to these joint ventures can adapt their instruction to focus on the basic skills that different occupations require. And companies that sponsor workforce literacy programs must have confidence that teachers understand their needs. Finally, professional development efforts will be much more efficient if they can be targeted on the knowledge and skills individual teachers most need to improve.

In short, a precondition of success in adult education is that states and programs establish standards of teacher quality and ways to determine whether teachers meet them.

B. TERMINOLOGY

The terms used to describe the process of establishing standards and measuring whether teachers meet them often carry symbolic and bureaucratic “baggage” both within and outside the field. That process is often described by terms such as “certification,” “credentialing,” “endorsement,” “professionalization,” standards, staff development, or other terms, to accommodate the various sensitivities involved, but the function is essentially the same: teachers must not only meet quality standards but they must be able to *show* that they can.

Roundtable members cautioned that there are negative connotations to the term “certification” in the adult education field, because many teachers associate it with what they view as ineffective and burdensome systems of certification in K-12 education. Likewise, Roundtable members pointed out that while the term “endorsement” is commonly used to connote the completion of specialized academic training at the graduate level, this is not the only means of helping teachers acquire the skills they need.

Finally, systems for establishing and applying performance standards can be viewed as a means of “professionalizing” the adult education field. Roundtable participants seemed to believe that the field would benefit from the increased stature it would gain in the eyes of both policymakers and its partners in other areas of education and the economy if it were regarded as more “professionalized.” On the whole, however, they gravitated to the term “credentialing”—perhaps because this is a “neutral” term that seems to signify precisely the process of measuring proficiency by any means and for any purpose. As a result, “credentialing” is the term that will be used in the discussion that follows.

PART III. NATURE AND LIMITS OF CREDENTIALING

A. CURRENT EFFORTS

Recent research by Dr. Joanne Crandall and others indicates that most states have at least the rudiments of a credentialing system in place.⁵ Thirty-two states require teachers to have either a Bachelor’s degree or a K-12 certification before they can begin to teach adult education. These and most other states require them to complete a certain amount of professional development (usually 6-18 hours) either before they begin service or shortly thereafter, and to participate in professional development activities throughout their period of employment. Although much of the initial professional development appears to be devoted to the administrative requirements of programs, it often includes an introduction to adult learning theory and state- or program-specific curricular guidelines as well as sources of further information for teachers who have no background in adult education.

In addition, community colleges—which serve about 30 percent of adult education students nationally—usually require that all of their full-time faculty, and often most of their adjuncts, have Master’s degrees in a relevant discipline. For example, ESL teachers at colleges must usually have a Master’s in teaching English to speakers of other languages, applied linguistics, or a related field—a qualification that many ESL experts believe prepares them to provide high quality instruction in virtually any aspect of the field.

Moreover, 15 states have adopted formal in-service credentialing systems. Most of these are fairly new, and most of them are voluntary. That is, teachers are *not required* to attain credentials as a condition of employment. But many of them require teachers to complete college coursework or its equivalent and/or to engage in projects that demonstrate their proficiency. Although only a small percentage of teachers participate in most of these voluntary programs, there are a few exceptions. More than 1,000 have taken part in Virginia’s credentialing program, which is only about 18 months old, and 10 percent have completed the first level of the program. Likewise, all adult education

⁵ Joanne A. Crandall, Genesis Ingersoll, and Jacqueline Lopez, Adult ESL Credentialing and Certification, Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008, available at: http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/tchrcred.html. See also, Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty, op cit.

teachers without a K-12 license in West Virginia must complete the state's adult education training program, for which the equivalent of six credits of college study is required within the first five years of employment. A review of these and other state credentialing programs discussed below can be found in the CAAL report by Dr. Cristine Smith referenced above.⁶

Finally, a number of states have adopted adult education standards for teacher quality. In most cases they are variants on the Instructional Competencies published by the U.S. Department of Education's Pro-Net project in 1999.⁷ For the most part, they identify pedagogical strategies teachers should adopt in basic skills instruction for adults, rather than the knowledge base they should have or specific techniques for instruction. For example, one of the standards adopted by Virginia is "Plan, design, and deliver learner-centered instruction." This is accompanied by an explanation of the importance of this approach as well as a number of "competencies" (such as "delivery of appropriately planned lessons that use evidence-based and contextualized instruction") and a discussion of the meaning and importance of that concept. At the Roundtable meeting, a representative of the new Virginia credentialing program indicated that it is structured to help teachers meet these standards, and participants from Massachusetts indicated that the credentialing system in that state is structured around meeting a similar set of standards.

At the national level, TESOL issued a set of standards for adult education ESL teachers in 2008 that includes specific examples of the application of each standard and the competencies associated with it as well as self-assessment exercises for teachers.⁸ And the U.S. Department of Education has expressed a strong interest in finding ways for states to develop better standards for teachers in all areas of education, including adult education.⁹

In short, most states recognize that adult education teachers should be credentialed to meet some standards of proficiency. And there is a growing interest in defining those standards as well as efforts in a number of states to establish more rigorous systems of credentialing based on proficiency standards. Efforts at the national level may well provide additional momentum to these state initiatives. All of these developments indicate that there is a greater receptivity to addressing the

⁶ Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty, op. cit.

⁷ The Pro-Net publication of primary interest for these purposes is: Renee Sherman, John Tibbetts, Darren Woodruff, and Danielle Weidler, Instructor Competencies and Performance Indicators for the Improvement of Adult Education Programs, American Institutes for Research, 1999, available at: www.calpro-online.org/pubs/pdccciiiep_73.pdf.

⁸ Standards for ESL/EFL Teachers of Adults, TESOL, 2008, not available online. May be ordered from TESOL at www.tesol.org.

⁹ See for example the statement of ED and OVAE Goals "OVAE Goals" in OVAE Connection, December 2, 2010. <http://www2.ed.gov/news/newsletters/ovaconnection/2010/12022010.html>.

challenge of credentialing in adult education by specific measures than there has been in the past. And they provide a foundation for further progress in many ways that will be discussed below.

B. ISSUES WITH EXISTING SYSTEMS

Although the adult education field does not approach the challenge of credentialing teachers with a blank slate, Roundtable participants believe that present efforts fail to meet the need to ensure high quality instruction. This is most apparent in state requirements for pre-service credentials of adult education teachers.¹⁰ The 15 states that have no pre-service requirements at all clearly have no mechanism to ensure teacher quality. The other 35 states plus the District of Columbia require either a B.A. or a certification in K-12 education. The B.A. requirement at least ensures that teachers have a higher level of education than their students, and K-12 certification indicates proficiency in teaching.

But neither requirement indicates that teachers have the specialized knowledge and skills needed to teach adults, and neither indicates proficiency in the various aspects of instruction needed to prepare low-skilled adults for job training or employability. Although many states augment these requirements with pre-service training, at most this training consists of a few days of workshops. Roundtable participants pointed out that many programs require volunteer tutors to complete training designed by ProLiteracy that is roughly of the same duration. Valuable as tutors may be, they do not need the high level of specialized knowledge and skills that paid classroom teachers must bring to their work.

As a result, it seems unlikely that the pre-service training provided by most states is extensive enough to assure that teachers with only a B.A. or a K-12 certification can provide effective instruction. In short, existing pre-service requirements fail to meet the need for credentialing adult education teachers, because they provide no indication of proficiency in teaching basic skills to adults.

As noted above, a number of states have post-service credentialing systems that focus on adult education. The Roundtable did not assess these systems on an individual basis. In general, the participants seemed to believe that they provide hopeful beginnings, but that none (in their present form) meet the teacher credentialing need. This is partly because most of these systems are voluntary and/or apply to only a portion of the adult education workforce. Only a small percentage of teachers take part in or complete the more rigorous aspects of voluntary systems. And other post-service systems contain important exceptions.

For example, the West Virginia system mentioned above applies only to teachers who do not have K-12 certifications. And in-service certification systems in most states do not apply to part-time teachers, who comprise an estimated 80 percent of the adult education workforce. Although community colleges often set high standards for their full-time faculty, there is no evidence about whether they apply the same standards to the much larger number of adjunct faculty in the adult

¹⁰ Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty, op. cit.

education field. Anecdotal information provided at the Roundtable indicates that colleges would like to establish the same requirements for adjuncts, but they are often unable to recruit enough adjunct faculty to meet those standards.

Finally, representatives of several states that have adopted post-service credentialing systems indicated that these are designed to ensure a “generalist” level of proficiency. That is, they are designed to make sure that teachers who obtain the credentials have at least the minimum proficiency required to teach ABE/ASE or ESL, but not necessarily in-depth expertise in areas such as teaching reading or math that specialists in these areas might have, or the wide range of knowledge and skills signified by an M.A. in teaching English to speakers of other languages. Roundtable participants welcomed the introduction of minimum requirements, but they also emphasized the value of higher level teaching skills.

Similarly, most teacher standards are stated in “generalist” terms. They identify certain functions adult education teachers should be able to perform but not the degree of proficiency with which they should be able to perform them. Although the TESOL standards provide examples of the application of each “competency” in the form of vignettes that describe particular teaching situations, Roundtable discussants from the ESL field believe that these standards will have to be translated into indicators of how well teachers have attained each competency—some type of measuring stick—if they are to be used for credentialing.

PART IV: REQUIREMENTS FOR A CREDENTIALING SYSTEM

The CAAL Roundtable did not attempt to specify all of the teacher credentialing requirements that would meet the needs of the adult education field. But in their discussion of the existing system and options to it, most participants were in substantial agreement about what at least some of those requirements are. Among the areas of agreement were the following:

- **Credentials should be specific to adult education.** The major shortcoming of the existing credentialing system is that in most states it relies primarily on either general academic credentials or K-12 certification for pre-service credentialing.
- **Credentials should be based on well-developed teacher standards.** Any system of credentialing should begin by establishing the knowledge and skills adult education teachers need to have, in enough detail that the standards can be used as a foundation for determining whether adult educators have them. Adult educators should be clear about what constitutes “proficiency” on the part of teachers before attempting to measure their abilities. Many existing statements of teacher standards emphasize classroom skills but place less emphasis on the knowledge base teachers should have, and many are stated in fairly general terms. It is important to specify both knowledge and skills and to be as precise as possible about the form they should take.

- **Standards and credentials should differ for ABE, ASE, and ESL teachers, and possibly for teachers who specialize in math, literacy, workforce preparation, and different areas of ESL (such as life skills).** Not only does the content of instruction differ among these various domains, but the relevant principles and strategies for teaching differ greatly as well. As one Roundtable participant put it, “I can see very little in common between what ESL teachers and teachers of ABE/ASE must be able to do. These are separate fields.” Another participant observed that “GED preparation is largely confined to a set curriculum that may not require much special preparation in adult learning, but it requires subject matter knowledge beyond that of ABE.” Likewise, participants noted the special pedagogical and subject matter challenges of teaching math as contrasted to reading and writing and of various aspects of ESL. In the K-12 field, teachers are expected to develop specialized expertise in these different subject areas, and it is possible that adult education teachers should be expected to do so if they are to provide effective instruction.
- **There should be different levels of standards, and credentials should reflect progressively higher levels of proficiency.** Because few of today’s teachers have trained systematically for adult education, they have different levels of knowledge and skills in different areas of their work. As a result, it is unrealistic to expect all of them to attain the level of proficiency that might be exemplified by graduate-level training in their specialty combined with years of experience teaching. At the same time, teachers should have the highest level of proficiency possible. Any realistic credentialing system should establish a minimum level of proficiency to ensure that teachers can help their students improve their basic skills and encourage them to persist in programs. States that have established “generalist” credentialing systems seem to have this aim in view. It should also include progressively higher levels of credentials, culminating in what a number of participants referred to as a “Master Teacher” credential. Several Roundtable participants described a “Master Teacher” credential as analogous to the certification offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards—a rigorous program of academic study and demonstration of teaching skills.¹¹
- **Credentials should serve a gatekeeper function.** No teachers should be employed who cannot meet at least minimum standards either at the time they are first recruited or soon after. Credentialing systems should be developed with this aim in view. The primary reason for credentialing is to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills required to provide effective instruction, which cannot be achieved unless all are required to meet at least minimum levels of proficiency. The voluntary credentialing systems in several states have piloted new approaches to assessing teacher quality. But voluntary credentialing is not enough to fill the gap between the proficiency teachers need and have. In the words of one Roundtable participant, “It is hard to argue that people should not have the qualifications to do the job they are hired to do.”

¹¹ For information about the National Board and its certification program, see www.nbpts.org.

- **Both part-time and full-time teachers should be required to have at least minimum credentials** and they should probably have to meet the requirements for higher level or specialist credentialing. At present, only full-time teachers are required to meet credentialing standards in many states. Even community colleges do not always require adjunct faculty to meet the same requirements as full-time staff. Because 80 percent of adult education instruction is by part-timers, improving and credentialing the skills of only full-time teachers would make little difference in ensuring high quality instruction. Most students will be taught by part-time teachers. As a result, if there is any justification for credentialing systems as a means of improving outcomes in this field, those systems should apply to both part-time and full-time teachers.
- **Teachers should be required to obtain higher levels of credentials over time.** Minimum standards should establish a floor for being employed in the adult education field, but the floor should not be a ceiling. A number of states (e.g., Massachusetts, Texas, Virginia) have adopted multi-level credentialing systems and other states (e.g., West Virginia and Minnesota) require annual coursework as a condition of employment. These same states place teachers with M.A. degrees at the top of their credentialing pyramid. Most state standards as well as the new TESOL standards stress the importance of teachers continuing to improve their skills. And Roundtable participants stressed that teachers can only become fully proficient if they combine formal education with years of practice. As a result, they emphasized that it is important to convert what are presently voluntary approaches to achieving progressively higher levels of certification into mandatory requirements.
- **If teachers are required to meet standards and obtain credentials, they should have a realistic way to get the knowledge and skills needed to do so**—through incentives to invest in academic programs that would prepare them to teach adults, in-service professional development, or both. The goal of credentialing should be to help them succeed, not to engineer failure. No system of credentialing will be fair to either incumbent teachers or new entrants unless it is accompanied by policies that help them overcome shortcomings in their knowledge and skills that keep them from obtaining at least minimum credentials and increasing that level over time. They must be guaranteed the professional support they need.
- **Any system of credentialing should recognize the knowledge and skills individual teachers have and provide them with “added value”** rather than require them to engage in professional development activities directed to the knowledge and skills they already have. For example, Roundtable participants noted that teachers who believe they can meet minimum standards might be reluctant to participate in a credentialing process at that level—although some may want to “brush up” on knowledge and skills they first acquired many years ago. In general, teachers should be encouraged to obtain the highest level of credentials they can obtain in the first instance and then continue to improve their proficiency thereafter.

- Because there are differences in teachers’ skills, **there should probably be multiple paths to credentialing**—including performance-based paths (such as inquiry and portfolio systems) as well as recognition of traditional coursework and degrees. A number of states (e.g., Massachusetts, Texas, Virginia) have tried to combine these approaches. These states alternate requirements for teachers to obtain content knowledge with requirements for them to demonstrate that they can apply it.

PART V. BARRIERS TO CHANGE

Although Roundtable participants identified some major characteristics that an improved system of credentialing should have, they pointed out that there are at least two major barriers to developing such a system. These are the *costs* associated with ensuring that teachers can meet any standards established and *attitudes* that some in the adult education workforce have toward credentialing.

A. COSTS

(1) Lack of Incentives for Teacher Participation

As discussed above, a key reason for concern about credentialing in adult education is that so few teachers have academic credentials to ensure they have the specialized knowledge, skills, and proficiency needed to provide high quality instruction to adults. That is, few have degrees or adult education endorsements or have completed specialized coursework. Of course, a major reason that so few teachers obtain specialized credentials in adult education is that neither states nor most programs require them as a condition of employment. But Roundtable participants believe that the staffing structures and terms of employment most programs adopt are as great a barrier to teachers obtaining academic credentials as is the lack of requirements, because few incentives are provided for teachers to assume the substantial cost of obtaining credentials of this kind.

As noted, there are few full-time teaching jobs in the adult education field. Although full-time teachers often enjoy steady employment at wages comparable to school teachers or community college faculty, the terms of employment for part-timers are far less favorable. Those terms differ greatly nationwide, but in most circumstances part-time jobs do not provide a living wage, and they rarely offer benefits or job security. Members of the Roundtable and others report that most part-timers are paid at the rate of \$20-\$50 per contact hour and employed for at most 6-9 hours per week when classes are in session—usually only during the regular school or college term. They also are not paid for class preparation time or for work after class—such as grading assignments or advising students—and in many cases they do not even have office space. In these circumstances, part-timers would receive annual compensation that falls well below any reasonable definition of a “living wage.”

The rate of compensation and/or numbers of hours available to part-timers is greater in some programs than in others, and some part-time teachers stitch together higher incomes by working large

numbers of hours at many programs. But Roundtable participants observed that few teachers can generate a living wage either way. One person dubbed employment by multiple programs a form of “exploitation.” On the positive side, many programs recruit full-time teachers from their part-time staff, and they may give preference to those who have some kind of specialized credentials. But in most programs there are few full-time openings—partly because there are so few full-time positions and partly because full-time teachers apparently remain in their jobs for a fairly long time. Thus, there is little headroom for most part-timers to move on to full-time status.

Absence of headroom combined with unfavorable terms of employment gives little incentive for part-timers to invest in acquiring academic credentials that would improve or attest to their skills. That investment can be very large. Participants noted that academic programs providing certificates in this field often require 6-8 three-credit courses of study at a cost of several thousand dollars per course. To achieve an M.A. in TESOL with an adult focus requires a far greater investment. Part-timers would take many years to recoup such an investment, if they could at all. So most are teachers for whom adult education is a second (and often secondary) job, retirees, or individuals who prefer part-time employment for personal reasons.

However, the problem of incentives is not limited to part-time teachers. A number of Roundtable members noted that there are also limited incentives for full-time teachers to invest in obtaining adult education credentials, or even in upgrading them—e.g., by obtaining M.A. degrees or certifications in such specialty areas as math or developmental education.¹² This is because few programs provide tuition reimbursement or released time for their teachers to pursue advanced credentials. Equally important, few programs provide monetary rewards, in the form of lump sum payments or higher wages, to teachers who attain higher levels of credentials. Furthermore, there are no career ladders for most full-time teachers, unless they wish to move to administrative positions. Clearly, these people have little incentive to invest in credentials beyond those required to obtain full-time jobs; they are not rewarded for doing so. It is not hard to see that lack of jobs that pay a living wage and of pathways to them affects *recruitment* into adult education.

In short, a major reason that so few teachers have specialized credentials in adult education is that program staffing structures and hiring terms usually do not reward them for the cost of getting those credentials. Moreover, most adult education teachers are employed part time precisely *because* full-time employment is so unrewarding. Part-timers are paid less than full-time teachers and receive no benefits. Thus, it costs programs less on a per-student basis to offer instruction by part-time rather than full-time staff. Or looked at another way, by using less expensive part-time faculty they can offer more instructional hours.

Virtually all adult education programs are struggling to find resources to provide more services to more students. They face a choice: either they can hire more full-time teachers and reward them for

¹² An exception would be full-time teachers in such states as West Virginia and Minnesota who may be hired on a probationary basis if they do not have K-12 certification and are required to obtain adult education certificates in a certain period of time. CAAL was unable to determine how common this requirement is nationwide, but inquiries in West Virginia and Minnesota indicate that few teachers are affected by it in those two states.

obtaining specialized credentials or they can serve as many students as possible with as many types of service as they can provide. In most cases, they are choosing to minimize the cost of their teaching force in the interest of increasing their number of students and range of services.

(2) Professional Development Opportunities Are Limited by Cost Factors

Academic studies are not the only way adult education teachers can meet proficiency standards. Theoretically, standards can be met as well through in-service professional development opportunities provided by classes, workshops, mentoring, or various types of project-based learning. Several states have demonstrated through innovative voluntary credentialing systems that in-service professional development can be structured into credentialing systems linked to teacher standards. But Roundtable participants observed that the amount of in-service learning available in most programs is in fact very limited. At present, most states and programs require full-time teachers to engage in only a few days of professional development each year. Although states/programs may pay the cost of professional development up to this level, including released time, it appears that they rarely pay for most teachers to engage in more extensive in-service learning activities. As indicated above, they seldom reward them financially or otherwise if they complete in-service programs. And, in most states examined by Roundtable participants and CAAL, the professional development requirements and opportunities available to part-time teachers are far less than those offered to full-time faculty.

Roundtable participants also observed that the amounts of professional development time required or offered by most states to most teachers is not nearly enough for them to demonstrate their proficiency level or to make significant improvements in their knowledge or skills. Although they did not attempt to estimate what level of professional development would be required for credentialing, some observed that the states with innovative voluntary credentialing systems require teachers who participate in those systems to make a commitment of time equivalent to a three-credit college course each year, or more.

Because of the limited opportunities available in adult education, most teachers would probably be reluctant to make such a large commitment of time without being reimbursed for it. The innovative voluntary programs in a few states sometimes reimburse teachers for attendance at workshops, but rarely for the far larger amount of time required outside the classroom. This may be a reason why only a small percentage of teachers participate in most credentialing programs. Nevertheless, Roundtable members saw these programs as hopeful indicators of what can be achieved by customized in-service learning. Until and unless programs of this kind can create incentives for more teachers to participate, the contribution of professional development to ensuring proficiency will be severely limited.

(3) Management Costs Are A Deterrent

Finally, Roundtable participants from two innovative credentialing systems reported that the cost to states of operating them is considerable. These costs include developing and providing many hours

of instruction for large numbers of teachers, supervising activities outside the classroom, tracking the progress of teachers, and trouble-shooting problems that arise. In states with medium-sized populations, these elements of operation can add hundreds of thousands of dollars to the professional development budgets.

In sum, it is hard to see how significant improvements can be made in systems for credentialing adult education teachers unless problems related to cost are solved. The investments required from programs, states, and the federal government must be far more than they are at present. Roundtable participants believe this type of investment is essential to ensure that teachers have the knowledge and skills they need and that the adult education system delivers the level and quality of service needed to meet the nation's needs.

(4) The Best Investment

Roundtable participants singled out one type of investment as having special importance. *They strongly advocated that local programs and all levels of government invest in creating many more full-time jobs for adult education teachers.*

As already discussed, no credentialing system can contribute to increasing teacher quality unless teachers are prepared to invest time and money to assure that they meet proficiency standards—whether through academic programs, in-service professional development activities, or both. But until there are more stable careers that pay a living wage, there is little chance that many of them will make this investment on their own.

Roundtable participants did not believe that all teaching jobs *must* be full time. But they thought that the availability of more full-time positions would make it easier for states and programs to require that full-time teachers have specialized credentials in teaching adults. If that were to happen, part-time instructors and new entrants could more realistically expect better jobs. Moreover, at least some participants believe that both part-time and full-time teachers who increase their levels of credentialing should receive increased compensation, in the form of either higher salaries or higher hourly wages.

In other words, Roundtable discussants believed that there should be career ladders in adult education by which those considering work in this field and incumbent teachers can attain progressively higher incomes and better terms of hire by attaining progressively higher levels of credentials. Of course, building career ladders means there will also have to be more positions at the top, without which there will be no ladder to ascend.

Helping Teachers Succeed. The Roundtable believed that states and programs should bear more of the cost of helping teachers meet credentialing requirements than they presently do. At the very least this should include greatly expanding the scope of in-service professional development systems for full-time and part-time teachers. It should also include linking those systems to standards used for credentialing. It may also necessitate scholarships and more paid released time to permit

engagement in professional development activities and academic coursework. One program represented at the Roundtable (College of Lake County, Illinois) has established an eight-course academic program for TESOL certification and waives tuition for any of its staff members.¹³

The cost of the measures touched on here might be met by increasing state and federal appropriations for adult education, with some portion of the increase dedicated to the creation of more full-time jobs. In fact, the need to ensure teacher quality is a strong argument for budget increases, even in a poor economy. Of course, as the Roundtable recognized, some states and programs might chose to hire fewer part-time faculty and dedicate a larger portion of their budgets to full-time positions, helping those teachers meet credentialing requirements and rewarding them for doing so. This might result in serving fewer students, but in some situations there might be better payoff in higher quality outcomes.

Change Can Be Incremental. A number of participants noted that the cost of improving credentialing systems does not have to be absorbed by the adult education system all at once. States and programs could phase in changes for staffing structures and credentialing requirements, and they could phase in enhanced education and training over a period of years. One option suggested might be to set a goal to increase the percentage of teachers who have various levels of credentials and/or the percentage of full-time teachers, by, for example, 10 percent each year. In fact, Roundtable participants observed that even in a more robust economic climate, states and programs will need many years to ensure that all teachers have the credentials required to provide the best possible instruction. And, even under ideal circumstances, at least some teachers will take several years to complete the academic courses or in-service activities required to meet standards. What is essential is for the adult education field to *make a commitment* to invest in establishing improved credentialing systems and to begin that journey in the near future.

Technology Can Be An Ally. Finally, participants believed instructional technology can be of central importance in helping states and programs reduce the cost of teacher training for credentialing. In fact, many of the courses required for academic credentials in adult education, and a great deal of high quality in-service training material of other kinds, is already available online at very reasonable cost—in some cases at no cost at all. For example, core courses in adult education are available online from a number of universities for \$1,000 per course or less—compared to \$2,000-\$3,000 or more for their classroom counterparts. Online courses reduce the time teachers must give to meet credentialing requirements by allowing them to schedule instruction whenever and wherever it is most convenient for them.

B. TEACHER ATTITUDES

The attitudes of adult education teachers toward credentialing systems may also be a major barrier to strengthening those systems. Based on the experience of Roundtable members and a survey

¹³ For a description of this program see: Suzanne Leibman, “College of Lake County” in [Torchlights in ESL: Five Community College Profiles](#), Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2007.

of adult educators conducted for CAAL by Cristine Smith,¹⁴ many teachers and administrators in this field seem to be wary of credentialing, especially if it serves a gatekeeper function. This may be due in part to the credentialing experience teachers have had in the K-12 system. The educational press is filled with articles reporting that many K-12 teachers believe they are increasingly being asked to meet inappropriate standards without the necessary support or financial incentives. The resistance to basing “merit pay” on student performance on standardized tests is one example of that concern.

Of course, “merit pay” and other demands being placed on K-12 teachers are not examples of credentialing in the sense discussed by the Roundtable. K-12 teachers have long been credentialed through a combination of academic programs and high stakes tests required for teaching licenses in all states. However, adult educators may be wary of *any* measures to increase teacher quality by requiring them to meet *any* standards as a condition for initial or continuing employment. They may not trust government and administrators either to establish standards and credentials that are fair to them or to make adult education better, not worse.

If teacher resistance to improved credentialing systems is due to such factors, then it might be possible to address it in two ways: by ensuring that teachers have the instructional resources they need to meet new standards and by including them in deliberations about what those standards should be and how they should be implemented. Further, concerns from K-12 experiences could well be addressed by phasing in credentialing requirements so that teachers have the time and resources to meet them (and by creating economic incentives as discussed above).

Roundtable participants believed, in general, that most teachers want to improve their abilities if only to keep up with new developments and that they will welcome opportunities to do so if their legitimate concerns are addressed. Most good teachers, they said, recognize the need for all professionals to refresh even skills they have applied successfully for many years.

In short, teacher resistance would probably be reduced if credentialing systems could be designed to help them overcome problems they face in their work while improving their satisfaction with working conditions and what they accomplish. In that case, the boundary between mandatory and voluntary credentialing systems would be blurred.

Veterans and New Entrants. Roundtable participants involved in managing credentialing systems pointed out that some veteran teachers are reluctant to engage in continuing professional development simply because they believe they have nothing more to learn and some may be close to retirement. Others may in fact have accumulated high levels of expertise over long careers, and effective credentialing systems should include ways for them to demonstrate this. Adult education should try to ensure that the vast majority of teachers can meet at least minimum standards or higher over a period of years.

¹⁴ Certification of Adult Education Staff and Faculty, op. cit.

Roundtable participants also said that some new teachers are “trying out” their interest in adult education. They may be reluctant to invest in getting academic credentials or in participating in the in-service professional development required for other forms of credentialing. There is a high turnover of new teachers who decide this field is not for them, and investments in either might be considered wasteful for those who do not stay in the field very long.

Of course, there are advantages and disadvantages in requiring all new teachers to have at least minimum credentials or to work toward them. It might be beneficial if new teachers were encouraged to consider if they want to make a serious commitment to adult education—and if they want to provide high quality service. Certainly, students deserve teachers who are qualified, or who are at least trying to improve their qualifications. However, if credentialing requirements have the effect of screening out prospective teachers, the result may be staffing shortages in some programs. This would be worrisome because many excellent adult education teachers began their careers by experimenting with employment in this field.

On balance, most Roundtable participants thought that the advantages of requiring new entrants to have or pursue at least minimum credentials outweigh the disadvantages. For one thing, it is virtually impossible to predict which new entrants into this or almost any other field of education will decide to make it a career. For another, if improvements were made in the terms of employment, turnover would likely be reduced because new entrants would probably find adult education a more appealing line of work. In addition, several participants suggested that concerns about staffing shortages and the qualifications of new teachers could perhaps be addressed by hiring them on a probationary basis for one or two years. Probationary teachers would be exempt from credentialing requirements, but they could only work under the supervision of more experienced teacher/mentors.

VI. THE PATH TO PROGRESS

A. COMPREHENSIVE REFORM

Teacher credentialing systems cannot be improved in a vacuum. It must be part of a process of comprehensive adult education reform.

To overcome cost barriers, federal, state, and local authorities must decide if they are *prepared* to allocate more resources to create additional full-time jobs, increase the compensation of part-time teachers, and provide the in-service training or tuition reimbursement teachers need to obtain credentials. They will have to choose whether to do this by increasing total funding for adult education and directing some of the increase to improving teacher quality, or by allocating more existing resources to this purpose and less to other purposes (e.g., maintaining the numbers of students served).

Total funding for adult education is widely thought to be inadequate in the extreme. Roundtable participants suggested that the maximum percentage of federal grants that can be used for “program

improvement” under the provisions of Title II of the Workforce Investment Act should be increased from 12 to at least 15 percent and that states should use some portion of this increase and more of their own funds to establish improved credentialing systems and help teachers get credentials. But decisions about total funding levels and how the funds are allocated will have to take place in the context of a comprehensive review of adult education and the future directions states and the federal government want to see it take.

At a more fundamental level, consideration must be given to such variables as the number and size of programs in a state, curricular standards, the extent to which programs are open-entry or high intensity, how they are integrated with occupational training and postsecondary education, what accountability measures are used, the nature of student support systems, and the institutional auspices for these supports (e.g., whether and how they should be provided by adult education, job training, welfare, or other agencies).

Decisions about the form adult education service takes will dictate the knowledge and skills teachers need to provide that service, and hence what standards should be used to construct credentialing systems. Teachers who work in programs that give more emphasis to high intensity instruction that prepares students for transitions to postsecondary education will need a different set of knowledge and skills than those who work in open-entry programs that provide “life skills” instruction just a few hours a week. And insofar as programs provide both types of service and teachers may be assigned to either type, they may require different knowledge-and-skill sets—or at least credentials that help them and program managers know which type of service they are qualified to provide.

Many changes are presently being considered at the local, state, and federal levels, and a decision to change any component of the current system will affect other components as well. For example, a decision to place greater emphasis on high intensity programs for transitions will affect the curricula programs should adopt and the accountability systems that should be established, as well as standards for teachers. For that reason, a strategic planning process for comprehensive adult education reform is essential.

CAAL and many other groups have advocated for some time that states, programs, and the federal government should undertake this type of comprehensive planning, and much strategic planning is in process. Some of us also believe that strategic planning for comprehensive reform should be required in the reauthorized Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Roundtable participants endorsed this type of strategic planning, although they did not discuss connections to WIA in detail.

Of course, consideration of measures to improve teacher quality through credentialing and other means should not be held hostage to a resolution of other strategic planning issues. Efforts to develop improved credentialing systems can be based on reasonable expectations about the directions adult education is likely to take. There seems to be widespread and growing agreement about what many of those directions should be, if not on all of their specifics. Decisions about credentialing systems can be revised as overall reform plans mature. In fact, discussions of how to improve teacher quality

would contribute significantly to strategic planning itself because the latter will necessarily have to deal with the design of good programs and questions about why good teachers often find it hard to help students persist and achieve learning gains.¹⁵

B. CREATING NEW SYSTEMS: KEY TASKS

How should states or others create improved credentialing systems for adult education teachers within the context of comprehensive reform? The Roundtable discussion generated a number of ideas that fall into one of three main task areas. Broadly, they are to (1) establish the knowledge and skills teachers need to have (standards), (2) establish procedures for determining if teachers possess minimum or higher-level standards (credentials), and (3) help teachers acquire the standards and credentials they may need for high quality instruction in adult education (teacher training).

(1) Standards

Establish standards for the knowledge and skills teachers must have to be proficient in various adult education domains, and establish different levels of proficiency within each domain.

Roundtable participants thought that this might be either a “bottom up” or “top down” process—beginning with minimal standards all teachers should meet, or with standards for “master teachers.” Probably it should be a combination of both, a mapping of different levels of proficiency with minimal and master teacher standards serving as the boundaries.

Taxonomy of Domains. An issue that must be addressed initially is what taxonomy of “domains” is most useful for establishing standards. Existing teacher standards in adult education either treat the entire field as a single domain or distinguish between standards for ESL and for teachers of ABE/GED. This may gloss over important distinctions in the knowledge and skills teachers need. For example, it would appear that GED teachers, who usually follow a fairly standardized curriculum covering a number of subject areas, need different proficiencies than those who teach ABE or life skills ESL, and it may be that standards for teaching students at different levels of ABE and ESL should be distinguished, as they are in the K-12 standards established by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and in many state certification systems for school teachers.¹⁶ Likewise, it may be useful to distinguish between standards for teaching language arts and for teaching math—because the content knowledge requirements are so different.

Finally, a different set of knowledge and skills is needed to teach adult education in programs that are “concurrent with” or “sequential to” vocational training or college transitions. These and

¹⁵ An extensive CAAL study of ESL instruction at one community college that has an unusually high percentage of full-time, highly credentialed teachers found that students underperform because of problems in program design. See [Pathways and Outcomes: Tracking ESL Student Performance](http://www.caalusa.org/pathways-outcomes/pathways-outcomesfull.pdf), CAAL, January 2008, <http://www.caalusa.org/pathways-outcomes/pathways-outcomesfull.pdf>.

¹⁶ For information about the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and its program, see www.nbpts.org.

other “domains” might be treated separately for purposes of establishing standards, or some type of special endorsements to core ABE and ESL standards might be devised.

Current Standards Are A Starting Point. There is an abundance of material on which any effort to define standards might be based. Existing “teacher quality standards” in adult education may not be comprehensive enough to capture the full range of knowledge and skills required, but they do provide a useful starting point. The TESOL standards for teachers of adult ESL appear to contain most of the elements that any domain should include, and they may be one good model for the development of other standards. In both their form and content, the TESOL standards appear to have been influenced by NBPTS, and standards in K-12 that relate to aspects of adult education (such as language arts, math, ESL, and career and technical education) may be valuable sources of ideas.

The curricula of university-based degree/certificate programs and courses specific to various domains of instruction are other good sources to consult, as are the wide variety of professional development modules in this field. University-based curricula and professional development modules are usually explicit about what knowledge and skills each of their curricular components intend to develop.

Any effort to define standards should also analyze the knowledge and skills required by the more demanding state certification/credentialing systems, especially the innovative voluntary systems adopted in recent years. And, obviously, the process of establishing standards should include structured consultation with respected teachers and task analyses of their work.

(2) Credentials

Establish procedures to determine whether teachers meet minimum or higher level standards.

This is probably the most difficult function. Roundtable participants discussed both academic coursework and various performance-based approaches to credentialing. They seemed to think that teachers who complete well-designed academic degrees (particularly at the M.A. level) in adult education or TESOL can be assumed to have the knowledge and skills they require—particularly if the degrees include a “practicum” of supervised teaching and/or if their graduates have at least a few years of adult teaching experience. They also seemed to think that academic coursework that provides adult education endorsements to K-12 teachers can be a valid means of credentialing.

At the same time, some participants seemed wary of credentialing systems based solely on the “inputs” of academic studies. They indicated that it is important for teachers to demonstrate that they can apply in the classroom what they have learned through coursework. To this end, systems were discussed for demonstrating proficiency through portfolios that document teaching practices, self-assessment reports, research projects, structured observation by master teachers and peers, and other means. And the importance of crafting systems of in-service professional development to support these types of performance measures was stressed. Of course, proficiency might also be demonstrated by student outcomes, although this would raise difficult issues of methodology, as discussed below.

Various forms of performance-based credentialing have been adopted by the voluntary credentialing systems in a number of states. This approach has been adopted by the NBPTS, although their credentialing can best be considered a “mixed” system because it is designed for advanced credentialing of incumbent teachers, who presumably already have both education degrees and state certifications. Like most of the innovative credentialing systems in adult education, it is voluntary, and, like them, it has attracted only a small percentage of the teaching force.

Thus, Roundtable participants did not express a preference for any particular credentialing approach but instead urged multiple paths.

(3) Teacher Training

Establish means of helping teachers attain both minimum and higher-level standards.

As discussed above, attempts to bring about widespread reform in adult education through improving teacher credentials is likely to have limited effect unless it includes a way to help teachers meet credentialing standards. Teacher training of various kinds should be considered an essential component of credentialing—and good models exist of academic coursework, in-service professional development, and performance learning (e.g., portfolios). The primary challenge is to align them with standards of proficiency (or determine how well they are already aligned), and apply financial resources to make them more widely available.

(4) Leadership

All of these tasks will be demanding. It probably will be beyond the capacity of individual states, and certainly individual programs, to create more effective credentialing systems. The federal government has always shunned the role of establishing national education standards—although it has encouraged others to take up this challenge, as shown by its recent support for developing curricular standards in K-12 under the auspices of the National Governors’ Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers. Roundtable participants suggested that one or more national groups take the leadership in developing models, including support materials that states and programs can adapt to their particular needs as they implement strategic planning.

CAAL’s review of how other professions have established standards and credentialing systems indicates that the process need not be complex, nor based on any specialized methodology, although it may be time-consuming. In virtually all professional fields, standards and credentialing systems are created by committees of experts, and they are based on the informed professional judgment of those experts. Importantly, practitioners and others are often asked to comment on drafts of the systems while they are under development, and the systems may be pilot tested before they are finalized. Credentialing committees are usually appointed by nonprofit organizations (such as NBPTS) that assume responsibility for developing standards and credentials in a particular field, and that are often affiliated with one or more professional organizations in that field.

No professional organization represents the entire adult education field, so an independent group of stakeholders would have to be formed to create committees to develop a comprehensive set of standards and a credentialing system. Among those stakeholders might be the state directors of adult education, local program directors, postsecondary institutions that offer adult education degrees/certifications, professional associations such as TESOL and COABE, research centers, subject matter experts, representatives of related assessment and credentialing organizations (such as the GED Testing Service), distance learning experts, and others. And “customers” who benefit from adult education services should also be included—e.g., students, postsecondary institutions, occupational training programs, and employers.

It is notable that TESOL established a committee to produce standards for adult ESL teachers. But apparently, that organization has historically been reluctant to develop and operate credentialing systems because of the administrative burden this would impose. Other stakeholders in adult education would probably be reluctant to create and manage standards and credentialing systems for the same reason. However, Roundtable participants suggested that the immediate need is for a group of leaders to review existing models and establish appropriate standards that states or programs can adapt to their particular needs. For these purposes, both TESOL and other stakeholders might be willing to participate in such a group and help select members of its committee(s).

Regardless of the leadership auspices, the make-up of individuals to serve on its standards and credentialing committee(s) is of paramount importance. In most education areas, members of these committees are highly regarded practitioners and academic experts in their field. However, it is instructive to consider the guidelines of the National Commission for Certifying Agencies (NCCA).¹⁷ According to NCCA, the key to sound systems of standards and credentials is to ensure that the committees developing them are as inclusive as possible. Specialists in a given field and from related fields, and consumers of services, should be included. In the adult education field, this would suggest that a wide range of stakeholders should not only initiate the development of standard setting and credentialing systems but also participate in committees that do the actual work.

In short, the first step on the path to progress is for one or more stakeholders to assume responsibility for strengthening adult education credentialing systems. Progress will require leadership that has been lacking in the past. Virtually all professions have been able to muster the leadership to ensure that their members have the knowledge and skills they need. If other fields have been able to accomplish this, there is no reason that adult education cannot do so.

¹⁷ The NCCA is a membership organization that accredits more than 100 certification programs, largely in medical specialties. Its members are the professional organizations for each of the specialties it accredits. For information about NCCA and its guidelines see www.credentialingexcellence.org.

C. RESEARCH

Although there has been little rigorous research on the credentialing of adult education teachers or on issues related to improving credentialing systems, there is a large reservoir of experience on which informed judgments can be made. That experience has been pulled together in various state and professional standards as well as in curricula for academic programs and professional development in this field. Knowledge also exists in the design and experience of innovative credentialing systems in a number of states. However, it will certainly be beneficial for leadership groups to have as much research information as possible.

Roundtable participants identified several research topics, as discussed below:

(1) Topographic Research

Efforts to improve adult education credentialing systems would clearly benefit from a better understanding of the credentials teachers already hold. Recent research indicates some of the credentials states require, and Roundtable participants mentioned a variety of others that some teachers have attained. But participants were uncertain about the portion of teachers nationwide who have what credentials. This is an important point because, whether or not credentials held are in the adult education field, they give some indication of the knowledge and skills teachers already have. Having better information would make it possible to determine how large the “gap” is between the existing qualifications of the adult education workforce and new qualifications to be established by any set of professional standards. This, in turn, would provide an indication of the types and level of investments needed to help teachers meet adult education standards.

In addition, improved credentials for adult education teachers may incorporate credentials developed for teachers in other fields. For example, ESL teachers may be considered fully qualified if they have attained K-12 licenses with ESL endorsements and have completed supplemental coursework on adult learning theory. Because improved credentialing should help teachers succeed, building adult education standards on credentials already attained is one strategy to pursue.

The major goals of a national topographic study should be to improve understanding of the education and credentials adult education teachers have obtained and the terms and conditions of their employment.¹⁸ Among the questions it should answer are:

- What percentage of adult education teachers have B.A. degrees, K-12 or other teaching certifications, and/or graduate degrees?

¹⁸ Over the last two decades, two nationwide surveys of adult education programs have asked questions about teacher qualifications: The National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs (Development Associates, Malcolm B. Young and Associates, 1995) and the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys (Educational Testing Service, Claudia Tamassia and Associates, 2007). Regrettably, both of these surveys asked only a few questions about the credentials adult education teachers have, and they suffered low response rates for various reasons.

- What percentage have specialized formal training in fields relevant to adult education? For example, how many are specialists in reading, math, or ESL at various degree levels?
- How many have specialist training in adult education, either through degree programs or from taking supplemental courses?
- Because many teachers develop their expertise on the job or through professional development opportunities, what percentage have been teaching adults for what lengths of time, in what domains (ABE, ASE, ESL), and at what student level(s)?
- In what in-service professional development activities have teachers participated, and what is the duration of those activities?
- How do the formal and informal credentials of teachers differ among the states (and what relationship do they bear to state credentialing requirements)—for full-time and part-time teachers and for teachers employed by different types of programs (e.g., LEA's, CBO's, community colleges, workplace programs).
- What are the terms of employment of full-time and part-time adult education teachers with various qualifications in different domains? For example, what are their teaching loads and compensation levels?

Gathering this type of information should not be difficult. State directors could request it from local programs, which may already have it on file or can circulate questionnaires to their teachers. And, for making decisions about forms of credentialing and cost investments, research of this sort need not meet high standards of scientific precision.

State Leadership and the NRS. However, a number of participants stressed that states might give higher priority to improving credentialing systems if they had to conduct a thorough review of the credentials their adult education teachers have and of their own plans to improve those credentials. It was suggested that the federal National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) should require states to report how many teachers have what types of credentials each year, and that state plans submitted to the Adult Education State Grant Program should include a description of whether and how each state intends to improve its credentialing system and increase the number of teachers who have credentials of various kinds.

(2) Evaluating Experimentation

As indicated above (and in the detailed report for CAAL by Dr. Cristine Smith¹⁹), several states have introduced innovative systems for credentialing adult education teachers. Although all of these are voluntary systems and large numbers of teachers have not yet taken part in most of them, it would

¹⁹ Certifying Adult Education Staff and Faculty, op. cit.

be highly valuable to conduct research that evaluates their progress and results. Most of these systems combine requirements for formal teacher instruction (through in-service workshops, college classes, or other means) with requirements to demonstrate teachers' skills through classroom performance—often in the form of special projects that use key teaching skills, by working under the supervision of mentors or in other ways. These kinds of performance assessments may be particularly valuable elements of improved credentialing systems, because they are the most direct demonstration of proficiency. As a result, the various innovative systems can be seen as laboratories for approaches to credentialing that might be adopted by states and local programs either now or in the future.

It would also be worthwhile to investigate the characteristics of teachers who do and do not participate in these systems, and why or why not, and to ask how they think the systems might be improved. If it could be gathered in a reliable fashion, information about whether the systems have an impact on teacher performance would undoubtedly be useful. Did teachers change their instructional practices as a result of participating in these systems, and if so in what ways? Classroom observations, ratings by supervisors and peers, and teachers' self-assessment are among the ways to determine this. Improvements in the learning gains of students might be used to help assess the effects of innovative credentialing systems, although, as discussed below, methodological problems that would arise may or may not be possible to overcome.

Website Documentation. An important first step would be to fully document these innovative systems on a website that is accessible to the entire adult education community. These documents would be updated on a regular basis with information about any changes that occur in system design as well as teacher participation and attainment of credentials. At present, such information must be obtained (often with difficulty) from the individual websites of innovative systems and follow-up contacts with the staff who manage them.

(3) Task Analysis

Task analysis is a type of research commonly used by business and professions to establish performance standards. It may be that this kind of research could make an important contribution to both developing and evaluating credentialing systems for adult education. Many of the occupational certification systems accredited by NCAA have been developed, at least in part, by some form of task analysis. Adult educators who have created basic skills programs for employers or job training programs are familiar with task analysis.

In general terms, “task analysis” has been defined as the study of what a person or group “is required to do in actions and/or cognitive processes to achieve a system goal.”²⁰ It takes various forms, and is sometimes referred to by other terms, such as “benchmarking.” The form that is probably most relevant to creating credentialing systems usually entails a structured process of observing the cognitive and behavioral tasks (the knowledge and skills) performed by professionals

²⁰ Kirwan, Barry, and Ainsworth, Les L. (Eds.) A Guide to Task Analysis, Taylor and Francis, 1992, p. 1.

identified as fully proficient in a particular field. Credentialing systems based on this procedure are essentially checklists of whether applicants for credentials can perform these tasks.²¹

Task analysis is not a precise science, however. It is a form of behavioral science that inevitably contains subjective elements—in how researchers identify the professionals selected for study and how they classify the “tasks” they perform. Despite this limitation, participants believed that research of this kind can be a useful tool in developing credentialing systems and improving understanding of adult education for other purposes.

(4) Outcomes Research

Student outcomes research might be one component of improved credentialing systems. Common sense suggests that teachers should be rated as more or less effective depending on how successful their students are, in terms of learning gains, how quickly they advance toward their immediate goals, how long they persist in programs, and how successful they are in achieving other goals, such as transitions to postsecondary education. But efforts to do this would face at least three methodological problems:

First, as noted above, teachers are only one factor that contributes to student success in adult education programs. Some others are the frequency and duration of classes, curricular guidelines, policies about when students can advance to higher level classes, in-take assessments, availability of technology for instruction, student assessment measures used, and the types of guidance and counseling available to students. Using student outcomes for credentialing would require controlling for these other components to determine the “value added” of teachers.

Second, most adult education students take several years to advance very far in improving their basic skills. If they persist, they will have different teachers at different times in most programs, and those teachers may have different proficiency levels. Thus, using student outcomes for credentialing would make it necessary to determine which teachers are responsible for learning gains and persistence, which is inherently difficult.

Third, many adult educators do not believe that the standardized tests used for reporting learning gains to states and the federal government accurately reflect the basic skills they teach or that students need to learn. Certainly, different standardized tests measure different skills. (For example, only one of the commonly used ESL tests, the Best Plus, measures all four ESL skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening).²² Many programs use measures of their own to determine when students

²¹ Task analysis is a fairly complex field that encompasses a large number of different kinds of research for many different purposes. Because this report is not primarily concerned with task analysis, its description of the subject is brief and simplified. For a thorough review of this field see Kirwan and Ainsworth, op. cit.

²² For a discussion of the differences in the skills measured by tests commonly used by ABE programs and the difficulties posed by using NRS reports of learning gains to determine the skills students have attained, see John Kruidenier, “Literacy Education in Basic Education,” Vol. 3: Chapter 4 of NCSALL’s Review of Adult Learning and Literacy (2002), www.ncsall.net?id=574. Massachusetts has tried to bridge the gap between assessment instruments and the skills the state believes should be taught in its adult education programs by developing the Massachusetts Adult Proficiency Tests that are linked to the state’s curriculum framework. See “Massachusetts Adult Proficiency Tests Technical Manual” at www.sabes.org/assessment/mapt.htm.

should advance levels. Because standardized tests are the most common means of measuring student outcomes, it may be doubtful that any credentialing systems based on these measures can accurately reflect the contribution of teachers (or any other program components) to improving basic skills. Adult educators should keep in mind that the K-12 system remains embroiled in disputes over whether teachers should be rewarded for the learning gains of their students if measured by tests that many teachers and independent experts believe are inadequate.

Some Roundtable participants believed there may be ways to overcome these methodological difficulties, although they did not specify how. Outcomes research could probably be a useful source of insight into teacher qualifications if its limitations are recognized. For example, one participant suggested that it would be useful to investigate whether the outcomes of programs with a high percentage of teachers who have traditional academic certifications (such as M.A.'s or K-12 licenses with adult education endorsements) differ from other programs that use and administer well the same outcome measures. Research might investigate the outcome differences between programs with high percentages of full-time teachers compared to those with high percentages of part-timers, or the differences between programs with a high percentage of teachers who have completed some of the new state credentialing programs compared to those with a low percentage of completion. If the program, rather than individual teachers, were the unit of analysis, the methodological difficulties of using outcome research may be reduced. Research of this type would not be definitive about indicators of teacher quality, but it could help inform the judgment of anyone developing new credentialing systems, and it certainly would provide information not presently available.

However, it should be noted that using programs as the unit of analysis would still not provide guidance on how to create credentials for individual teachers based primarily on student outcomes. Perhaps further deliberations about methodology and advancements in student assessment tests can provide a way to overcome this limitation.

On the whole, the use of outcomes research for credentialing is an issue that needs further examination. But in the meantime, the development of teacher standards should not be blocked. Standards have been adopted in all other areas of education despite the fact that issues of outcome research have not been resolved to the satisfaction of many teachers and experts, and there is no reason to hold adult education to a higher standard in this regard. The gains in information should outweigh the limits. The same thing can be said about other types of research on teacher quality.

Certainly the more stakeholders in adult education know about the elements of teacher quality, the better job they can do in creating improved credentialing systems. And, finally, as in any field, the agenda of possibly useful research is very large and should be undertaken for the indefinite future. Because presently inadequate credentialing systems need to be improved now, it is essential to proceed based on the best knowledge there is at any given point in time.

VI. CONCLUSION

Clearly, the challenge ahead on this front is formidable and will take time. But the goal of improving teacher quality to significantly improve the quality and outcomes of instruction is of high national importance, and actions called for in CLOSING THE GAP seem feasible. There is an abundance of experience at the state and program levels on which leadership groups and individual states can draw. As one Roundtable participant put it, “Somewhere out there somebody is doing the right thing on every aspect of credentialing. The task is to aggregate and evaluate this national experience.”

This may actually be a moment of rare opportunity. Few are satisfied with how well teacher credentials presently relate to the qualifications required for effective instruction in adult education. And it is widely accepted that adult education programs and professionals need to serve a wider range of outcome goals in today’s new environment. Through new leadership and understanding, many of the credentialing and standards measures proposed can be achieved, and, if they are, adult education credentialing systems will make a major contribution to the national welfare.

APPENDIX

ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

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