



**SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL – FEBRUARY 12 HEARING
of House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness
Submitted on behalf of the National Commission on Adult Literacy
by the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL)**

February 16, 2009

1. THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ADULT LITERACY, IN ITS FINAL REPORT *REACH HIGHER, AMERICA*, RECOMMENDS SERVING 20 MILLION ADULTS BY 2020. HOW CAN WE AFFORD ENOUGH TEACHERS AND STAFF TO SERVE SO MANY PEOPLE, AND HOW CAN WE EXPECT SO MANY TO ENROLL IN PROGRAMS?

ANSWER: The Commission recommends the use of technology on a dramatically increased scale. Along with a major infusion of new funds, both public and private, this is a significant part of the solution. Although the Commission’s report made its technology recommendation in general terms, the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL), the follow-up agent for the Commission, has begun a project that will have precise recommendations by late summer. Until we have the results of that work, we can’t provide specific advice, but we have made some preliminary suggestions, on request, to some House staffers. On the second part of the question, new kinds of public awareness activities will be needed to motivate students and the general public. CAAL will undertake a project in the coming months to begin the preliminary planning for the public awareness campaigns that will eventually be needed. In addition, in the new WIA legislation being drafted now in response to the Commission’s report, the federal government would provide encouragements to the states to develop appropriate public awareness activities as part of their own comprehensive planning for adult education and workforce skills development.

2. THE COMMISSION RECOMMENDS READINESS FOR ENTERING COLLEGE AND JOB TRAINING PROGRAMS AS THE PRIMARY EDUCATIONAL OUTCOME OF THE NEW ADULT EDUCATION SYSTEM. HOW WILL WE KNOW WHEN “READINESS” HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

ANSWER: The Commission recommends close partnerships with business as well as collaborations between all kinds of adult education and training providers, including community colleges and community-based organizations. These groups need to work in concert at national, state, and local levels to identify workforce needs, design programs to meet them, and assess whether workforce readiness has been achieved. In fact, the Commission recommends that, as a condition of financial support for low-skilled adult education programs, the new Adult Education and Economic Growth Act require the states to formulate plans to do this. Improved labor market research at the national level is also important. Also, some valuable tools are available to help assess “readiness.” For example, Workforce Certifications are under development by the National Association of Manufacturers (in cooperation with ACT) and by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce (building on work begun at NIFL). The CASAS Workforce Skills Certification System is also coming into use. Further, the National Center for Education and the Economy, with which CAAL is doing some follow-up work and which is the base for the work of the New Commission on Skills of the American Workforce, will shortly release a “down-in-the-weeds” book on what state and local programs and planners need to know and do to implement readiness activities and standards. In addition, the new legislation in development, which the Commission hopes will

fundamentally reform elements of WIA having to do with adult education and workforce skills, should make some provision for research and development in the workforce certification area.

3. MANY RECENT REPORTS FROM LEADING RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS STRESS THE NEED TO IMPROVE THE SKILLS OF THE AMERICAN WORKFORCE. HOW DO THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ADULT LITERACY DIFFER?

ANSWER: All of the major Commission studies on lifelong learning and human resource development for national economic purposes have recognized the importance of adult education, but it has not been a primary focus of their work. In fact, at the very first convening of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, one member, former Secretary of Labor Ray Marshall, commented that while adult education was in the footnote of all the important reports, the Commission needed to make it the main focus of OUR work and get it up out of the footnotes. The focus of most of the reports to date have been on improving the K-12 and postsecondary systems, and linking the two. The Commission thinks these recommendations are high priorities, but we found that, even if implemented, they would not have a large impact on the skills of the American workforce for decades to come. This is because of the demographics: the vast majority of the American workforce in 2020 and well beyond will consist of today's adults who are beyond the reach of the schools and postsecondary education. A large percentage of them lack the skills to enter postsecondary education or job training. Hence, to create the competitive workforce that everyone believes we need, it's essential to invest in adult education programs that provide pathways to training and college. Our Commission's work has filled a gap that others have not filled, and we have assurances from many organizations across the country that they agree with our conclusions and support the direction of our recommendations. Incidentally, those recommendations have even greater urgency today, at a time when the recession has created millions of displaced workers – many in low-skilled fields such as construction. In short, the Adult Education and Workforce Skills System we propose must be recognized as an essential partner in our national education reform efforts if we are not to leave behind many millions in our workforce.

4. IS THE SKILLS GAP REALLY THAT IMPORTANT?

ANSWER: The pervasive basic skills problem is critical to our economy and to workforce preparation, and we do not have an adequate system for dealing with this problem. In addition, the current WIA is not adequate in structure, funding, or implementation. The Commission has proposed legislation (and is working on it with House leaders now) that we hope will create an Adult Education and Workforce Skills System largely through major changes in WIA. The goals are to establish new educational outcomes for services; connect adult education, workforce skills, and other relevant entities in planning and service provision at all levels; and have verifiable performance outcomes geared to “readiness” for postsecondary education and job training. [NOTE: There were reform aspects in the current WIA Title I and II programs, but they have not gone far enough or have often not been enforced. As currently structured and funded, WIA is not adequate to the job we need to do now because the times have changed profoundly since it was created. The Commission looked specifically at WIA Title II (which encompasses the entire Department of Education adult education program), and at the four adult education programs of WIA Title I: adult education, dislocated worker program, Trade Adjustment Assistance, and out-of-school youth. In this reform effort, it is highly important to overcome silo and fragmentation problems that plague current federal efforts by connecting relevant federal adult education programs, especially the WIA Title I and II programs, which provide most of the service.]

5. CAN WE ACTUALLY TRAIN LOW-SKILLED WORKERS FOR HIGH SKILLED JOBS? HOW DO WE KNOW?

ANSWER: Yes. We know we can do it. Both the Commission and various resource organizations (such as CAAL, the Center for Law and Social Policy, and Jobs for the Future) have identified, studied, and profiled scores of programs in all parts of the country that do this effectively right now. For example, Washington State's I-Best program (one of those profiled by the Commission), provides community college-based dual instruction programs that teach basic and vocational skills concurrently. This program greatly reduces the time it takes to move adult learners up their career ladders. The common principles behind this and other programs are well understood – and about to be set forth in a new report from the National Center on Education and the Economy. The *problem* is that there are too few resources, and federal barriers stand in the way of taking these local efforts to scale. Also, both the federal government and the states must coordinate better the efforts of education and training programs (not just WIA Title I and II, but also TANF, corrections education, and others) and link them to needs of employers. The Commission's report proposes measures to overcome these problems.

6. WHAT EXPLAINS THE LOW NUMBER OF ADULTS CURRENTLY ENROLLED IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND ESL PROGRAMS?

ANSWER: Given the limited resources available in most states, the adult education system has provided a significant level of service, especially for ESL populations. And there are long waiting lists for service on all fronts. However, most states have not fully implemented WIA Title II provisions for workplace basic skills instruction. The Adult Education and Workforce Skills System called for in *Reach Higher, America* will require much more attention to workforce skills needs and certification. The Commission believes that the demand for adult education and workforce skills services will skyrocket and that program outcomes will be greatly improved if federal and state policy creates clearer pathways to better jobs and results in higher incomes and family-sustaining wages.

7. HOW WILL THE COMMISSION'S PROPOSALS CREATE JOBS?

ANSWER: The Commission's recommendations are an essential pre-condition to creating new jobs. New jobs can't be created if workers with appropriate basic skills aren't available. Many corporations are grappling with this problem. AT&T is one important, highly publicized example. Another is the Dollar General Corporation. The former CEO and chairman of Dollar General (lead funder of the Commission's work) spoke about this problem in that company several times during the Commission's deliberations. A comprehensive workplace skills program would be very supportive of workforce and economic development programs. Also, many more adult education jobs will be created by the new System, including instructors, counselors, program directors, and planners.

8. IN WHAT FEDERAL DEPARTMENT ARE ADULT EDUCATION AND BASIC LITERACY PROGRAMS MOST APPROPRIATELY BASED?

ANSWER: The Commission took no position on this issue. Members believe that the emphasis should be on interagency collaboration rather than moving boxes around on the federal organization chart, in the process creating unnecessary turf wars. The adult skills problems cut across the interests and domains of many federal departments. The Department of Education, under any scenario, has basic responsibility for community colleges, higher education generally, the schools, vocational training, Pell grants, and many other programs that must be coordinated to

create effective career pathways. The Department of Labor has some adult education services, as identified by the Commission. The challenge is not to shift them elsewhere but to connect them in more productive ways with those of Education. The Department of Health and Human Services will continue to have responsibility for TANF, which must also be linked to career pathway programs. Joint planning and coordination should be the priority.

9. THE COMMISSION REFERRED TO THE FASTEST GROWING OCCUPATIONS IN ITS REPORT. WHY IS THAT IMPORTANT?

ANSWER: The latest information available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics is from 2006. It needs updating and doesn't capture "green" jobs and more recent trends. But, according to the BLS: By most accounts, even in the recession, there is still a growing demand for large numbers of workers in all aspects of healthcare, personal services, and education nationwide, as well as demand in a wide range of occupations within local labor markets. And the Economic Stimulus package intends to stimulate demand in construction and many sectors. At present it is difficult to forecast the long-term trends. But the essence of the Commission's recommendations is that a career pathway system should be created that can respond quickly and flexibly to whatever workforce demands emerge in local labor markets in the years to come.

10. WHAT IS THE COMMISSION'S CORE FEDERAL RECOMMENDATION?

ANSWER: The Adult Education and Economic Growth Act is at the core of the Commission's recommendations. This Act needs to focus on the unemployed; low-skilled incumbent workers; immigrants with limited or no English; parents or caregivers with low basic skills; incarcerated adults; high school dropouts; and high school graduates not ready for college. These people are our parents and family units, aspiring new citizens, our neighbors, and both future and incumbent workers. [NOTES: (1) In this period of economic emergency, many millions of displaced workers have low basic skills and must be retrained for today's available jobs and jobs of the future, such as "green jobs." (2) We need to be careful how we apply the term "training," which usually refers to people at higher educational levels rather than the millions at the center of the National Commission's concerns whose basic skills need upgrading. Retraining cannot alone be effective unless we recognize the importance of upgrading adults with low basic skills and unless we have the resources and system to improve the basic skills of displaced workers to the levels required.]

11. HOW DOES THE COMMISSION DEFINE BASIC SKILLS?

ANSWER: For purposes of the new Act, the Commission believes that the current definition of "basic skills" needs to be redefined. It will not be enough in the new Adult Education and Workforce Skills System we recommend to provide instruction in basic reading, writing, math, and ESL. Such basics as how to communicate, acquire information, think critically, solve problems, use technology, and work in teams need to be part of the equation to achieve "readiness." This is one of the reasons that adult education groups (including community colleges) and workforce development groups must work more closely together.

12. WHAT IS THE STATE ROLE IN THE COMMISSION'S CALL FOR REFORM?

ANSWER: For federal leadership to deliver, the Act must require states to connect all key state interests (adult education, community colleges and postsecondary education generally, workforce skills, youth policy, and others) in comprehensive planning so as to coordinate and align systems consistent with their postsecondary education, workforce, and economic development goals. It

will be vital in many cases for governors' offices to be involved, *and* for authority for the required planning to actually be set into state legislation.

13. IN THE COMMISSION'S PLAN, WHAT ENTITIES HAVE RESPONSIBILITIES FOR DELIVERING INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES?

ANSWER: Community colleges, which now provide about one-third of adult education services in the nation, must step more to the forefront and be funded to do so. But all types of provider organizations are essential to the combined effort, including community-based and voluntary organizations, school districts, higher education institutions generally, business and labor, correctional education programs, family literacy groups, student alliances, and others – and they also need new and better resources to fill their roles. The big challenge is to “connect the dots” among these groups. If the Commission's recommendations to break down the fragmentation and waste created by silos are acted on, these groups will necessarily have to work much more together. Beyond that, technology, including distance learning, must also be deployed on an unprecedented scale, for instructional purposes and also to help meet program management and data collection needs.