

# Policy Issues In Literacy

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## Abstract

This paper was presented at the International Literacy Year Colloquium in October 1990, in Washington, D.C. It addresses policy issues that impact upon adult and workplace literacy in the United States. Major literacy activities of the Adult Education Department, such as leadership, public awareness, research, and other areas are addressed. The paper then provides a brief look at four model projects in various parts of the United States. The paper concludes with the declaration that education will always be about opening doors of opportunity for the individual.

## 1. Introduction

Today we observe International Literacy Year. Those of us involved in education and literacy face the challenge of literacy continually. It is not something that we face only on International Literacy Day, but every day of every year. We will continue to work on this throughout the next decade as we promote and provide educational opportunities for all of our citizens of every age.\*

More than forty years ago, the United Nations recognized the need for improved educational opportunities for every individual and sought a 100 percent worldwide literacy rate by the year 2000. We have made progress, but we have a long way to go. The governors and the President also recognized the need for setting goals when they established the six National Education Goals, one of which relates directly to literacy.<sup>1</sup> They set the year 2000 as the target for achieving the National Education Goals. The United Way also has a goal for adult literacy. They set the year 2010 as the year to eliminate illiteracy. But people recognize that full literacy is a moving target that will require lifelong learning in our increasingly technological and complex society.

## 2. Major Literacy Activities of the U.S. Department of Education

The following are some major issues that the federal government faces in adult education and literacy. I will give an idea of the priorities on which the government focuses in this area of education. There are similarities between our programs and the United Nations' goals. Others who participate in the International Literacy Year Committee have similar interests.

### 2.1. Leadership

People argue about the appropriate level of federal funding and general involvement in education, but an important activity for the federal government is leadership in education. It is critical for the President, the Secretary, and all in the Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) to highlight the need for active involvement in these programs. This administration and the Department of Education are committed to insuring a literate citizenry. President Bush has placed education about as high as possible on the national agenda. All the governors have joined with

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<sup>1</sup>Goal 1: By the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn.

Goal 2: By the year 2000, the high school graduation rate will increase to at least 90 percent.

Goal 3: By the year 2000, American students will leave grades four, eight, and twelve, having demonstrated competency in challenging subject matter including English, mathematics, science, history, and geography; and every school in America will ensure that all students learn to use their minds well, so they may be prepared for responsible citizenship, further learning, and productive employment in our modern economy.

Goal 4: By the year 2000, U.S. students will be first in the world in science and mathematics achievement.

Goal 5: By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.

Goal 6: By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning.

him in making this a priority in their states. The responsibility for setting the direction continues to be a federal and state partnership. There should be a continued emphasis and interest in that direction.

All six National Education Goals mentioned earlier are important. Our future success as a nation that can compete in a global economy depends on us meeting those goals. My work at the Department of Education and our discussion here relates primarily to goal number five. The fifth goal reads: "That by the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship."

It is a challenging goal that encompasses much of what we do in OVAE in literacy activities, training for the workplace, occupational and technical training, vocational education, and job skills. We are moving toward this goal in several ways. The following are some of the activities that we do to help reach that goal.

## **2.2. Interagency task force on literacy**

One of the first moves toward achieving the goal was the formation of an interagency task force. The President directed the Domestic Policy Council, an internal policy-making body at the White House, to establish an Interagency Task Force on Literacy. Activities of the Domestic Policy Council are kept internal. All the Cabinet members come together and discuss the policy and the directions for the country. When they decided that it was important to establish an interagency task force, we thought we should let everyone know about it because it should interest many people. The Cabinet gave us an exemption from some internal rules at the White House to allow us to talk about this task force and to let people know that agencies really are working together in this area. We established the task force in March 1990. I am cochair with Bob Jones, the Assistant Secretary for the Employment and Training Administration at the Department of Labor. With the help of these two agencies, we have the primary responsibility for literacy activities within the federal government.

We have strong involvement from several offices of the Department of Health and Human Services, the Departments of Agriculture, Defense, and Commerce, from the Office of Personnel Management, and from other governmental offices and agencies. The task force is becoming the focal point for literacy policy and for looking at ways to expand literacy activities. We are developing a national strategy for literacy in which all agencies can participate. We hope they will use this as a starting point to build on whatever efforts are now in place.

The Interagency Task Force on Literacy makes long-term and short-term recommendations to the Domestic Policy Council. The recommendations will stay on the agenda within the policy-making branch of the government. This is exciting. The Domestic Policy Council does not do something like this readily. Getting it created takes a lot of time, effort, and involvement.

All the agencies involved responded enthusiastically. Most members of the panel are highly placed in their agencies. These people dig in and get the work done. They are full of good ideas on how to bring the federal programs together and make the delivery systems responsive to the clients, families, students, and workers at the local level. Our goal is to find ways to put these systems together and make them work at the local level.

The task force also emphasizes improving our federal work force. The problem is the lack of training opportunities for federal employees, even at the level of improving basic skills within the federal work force. Under the Office of Personnel Management (OPM), we are proposing an assessment of the current federal work force, followed by the development or expansion of training opportunities. The federal work force should set an example that encourages the education and business communities to address workplace literacy and work force issues. We should not go to business and industry and say, "You should do this. You should do that," if we do not do it ourselves. We work closely with OPM to place a high priority on setting an example.

Individual government agencies are also doing this. The interest and excitement comes from starting at home. We can make a lot of progress from here.

### **2.3. Public awareness**

Another role of the federal government is public awareness. Leadership and public awareness go hand-in-hand. First Lady Barbara Bush is a great advocate for literacy. She makes our lives easier. We ask for her help often, and she always supports us. Her activities probably did more to raise the awareness of literacy in the last few years than did anyone else's. We try to build on Mrs. Bush's leadership in visibility and raising public awareness. Now most people know there is a problem with the literacy skills level of many adults.

We need to capitalize on some effective strategies and get the word to local communities on what does and does not work. We need to focus the public awareness campaign on identifying proven programs and disseminating the research and technical assistance that works.

Mrs. Bush thrilled us with her emphasis on family literacy. The Barbara Bush Foundation on Family Literacy recently gave its first year of grants. The grants are small because the money is raised from private sector activities. None of it is federally funded. The Foundation raised the money and advertised for applicants. They received hundreds of applications and had difficulty selecting recipients because all had wonderful ideas.

The YMCA had an idea to bring parents and their children together for educational programs. The Foundation spotlights what an organization like the YMCA can do in the area of family literacy. Another idea was a mobile van that goes around the bayous of Louisiana to work with needy parents and children. Again, these are small grants, but the ideas will greatly benefit the rest of the country. We will disseminate as much information as we can. Our office has information available to the public on the Barbara Bush Family Literacy Foundation.

### **2.4. Research**

The federal government also has a large role in funding and doing research. We did a lot of research in the last couple of years. Before 1988, we did not have budgets to do research. We have limited funds again, but Congress increased it. They have been very supportive. This is an area for major study. A major project started this year is a national assessment of literacy. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) is contracted to the Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. The survey will help us understand the nature of the literacy deficiencies in our population, and the characteristics of the population that lacks basic skills. The NALS is a five million dollar project over four years. It began last year with the design of the survey instrument and agreement on the definition of literacy for the survey.<sup>2</sup>

The definition of literacy is a functional one that recognizes many different literacy needs. It relates the needs of individuals to skill levels or practical needs of family or work. A committee of literacy practitioners and experts in the field drafted the definition. This definition is the basis for developing the survey instrument.

The survey instrument will be a fifty-minute task requiring pencil and paper to some extent, but also oral questions with open-ended, not multiple choice, responses. We are working closely with the Department of Labor, the governors, and the OPM to learn how states can build on the national survey. Many states show interest in conducting concurrent surveys to learn what the literacy deficiencies are of their citizens. The results of the survey will be reported in 1993. We will also build on the information from the 1990 census to make generalizations across the nation.

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<sup>2</sup>In 1985, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), under a grant to the Educational Testing Service, developed and conducted a household survey of the literacy skills of young adults, ages 21 to 25. To consider the many points of view regarding literacy, ETS convened panels of experts who helped set the framework for this assessment. Their deliberations led to the adoption of the following definition of literacy: "Using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential."

This will give a clearer picture of the nature and the extent of illiteracy. It will help guide our efforts in distributing federal funds and targeting populations most in need of services.

Another major research effort of the Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement is the funding of seventeen National Research Centers. This year a Center on Adult Literacy was awarded to the University of Pennsylvania in consortium with other organizations. This consortium will receive about ten million dollars over five years. They can develop an extensive research agenda with this. We will watch closely to ensure that they do not duplicate what is going on elsewhere in the Department or across the government. A center on the quality of the work force will have many literacy overtones, and a center on the family and early learning will relate to literacy. The Department of Labor, the Department of Human Services, and other federal agencies support these centers. This interagency effort pulls people together from across disciplines, focuses them on literacy, and makes sure we are all going in the same direction.

## **2.5. Technical assistance**

We try to coordinate areas that relate to human services and literacy and basic skills. A major three-agency project is aid in the implementation of the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program. JOBS is a major component of the Family Support Act, a major welfare reform law passed in 1988. It required states to implement JOBS state-wide by October 1990. Many states are starting small and growing. They need a lot of assistance on how to provide education and training services to welfare clients. The new law mandates that educational services must be available to AFDC recipients who lack basic literacy skills. It also emphasizes job training options. The new law encourages many Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients to return to training programs.

Adult education systems, job training systems, and school systems need to prepare to deal with an influx of AFDC recipients and with their specific needs. Education will be a major component in the intervention, but it needs to be a holistically designed intervention. It must look at all the needs of the person or family, and then design the best combination of intervention strategies.

Education can be provided at several different levels, or through several different providers or institutions. We must reach out to kindergarten through high school to get the sixteen to eighteen year-olds back in school, to those who provide alternative education settings for at-risk youth, and to family literacy centers. We can bring jobs, clients, and AFDC clients back into school and strengthen families. A family literacy focus is a major model under this program.

We started a five-year, \$7.2 million technical assistance project with the Departments of Health and Human Services and Labor. The project guides state and local welfare, education, and job-training providers to design and implement cooperative efforts under the JOBS program. We give them program information to help them design the best programs possible.

## **2.6. Private sector**

We work hard to involve the private sector in adult literacy, especially workplace literacy, which is a major problem. The Office for Private Sector Initiatives, established in 1981, reflects a change in focus. The office was renamed the Office of Corporate and Community Liaison to show that they deal with more than corporations. Organizations in the community, especially economic development ones, also need to be aligned with education. The partnership concept continues to grow.

The active partnerships in education grew from about forty thousand in 1983 to over 140,000 in 1989. They span the breadth of education: kindergarten to twelfth grade, adult education, community colleges, and universities. The role of the private sector is critical, especially in workplace issues. We are trying hard to work with businesses. We are asking businesses to assess their work force so they can provide training or assistance to their employees. The federal government can be an example.

### **3. Four Model Projects**

Some of these ideas led us to set priorities at the national level and implement them at the local level. We recently identified national adult education and literacy programs for the Secretary of Education. We set up a peer review process and asked states to recommend their best programs in adult education and literacy. The peer review panel then ranked the recommended programs. They selected ten award winners. We will disseminate the descriptions of those ten best programs as widely as possible. Others can learn from them and adapt them to their local situations. These programs might inspire a great idea for something never tried before. We announced the winners in October 1990. The following are brief descriptions of some of those award winners. They relate to many of our priorities and to programs that we fund directly.

#### **3.1. Second Start**

In Concord, New Hampshire, an adult basic education program called Second Start offers a range of educational services, including basic skills training, office skills, computer literacy, basic math, GED preparation, and testing. The special features of this program include an active referral network with area agencies. The key to its success is recruitment from the target populations and then referral to the needed services.

Another part of Second Start is participation on the coordinating team that will be the Family Support Act Education and Training Program. They actively work with the JOBS program administrators to attract welfare clients. They pulled it all together well. They deal with many other agencies and have a referral network that can help the client find exactly what he or she needs. Again, it relates to the holistic approach to dealing with clients.

#### **3.2. Combination of small programs in Bethlehem**

Another outstanding program is at North Hampton Community College in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. This program serves two counties in the Lehigh Valley of Pennsylvania, where there is a balanced urban and rural population. In this area, like much of the U.S., the industrial base is eroding. The community is responding to the need as quickly as possible. This program's strategy is to serve its diverse population through a variety of smaller programs with specialized purposes, including workplace and family literacy. Under this broad umbrella, they can readily respond to the needs of each community. They design either workplace or family literacy programs to meet the special needs of urban or rural groups.

#### **3.3. Omaha Adult Basic Education**

Other programs approach adult education from the special needs perspective. Programs that focus on educating the whole person are more likely to encourage students to express themselves and to improve their sense of self-worth. The Omaha Public Schools Adult Basic Education Program served more than 2,300 adults last year, including native Americans, homeless people, adults limited in English proficiency, and criminal offenders. The classes meet in different locations at convenient times for the diverse population. The programs focus on the special needs of each person through individual assessment. Individual deficiencies are determined as best they can, and receive appropriate intervention.

#### **3.4. Hammond's volunteer tutor program**

Volunteers play an important role in many of our programs. They are indispensable at the local level and deserve a lot of recognition. The Hammond Adult Education Center in Hammond, Indiana, uses a large and active volunteer tutor pool, including many students from Purdue University, which has a branch campus in Hammond. This program provides comprehensive educational services for out-of-school youths and adults age sixteen or older. It is geared to help young adults gain skills that will enable them to hold jobs and lead more productive and satisfying lives. The key to this outstanding program is the commitment and the time the volunteers put in.

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

I do not have time to go into all the wonderful literacy programs around the country. Information about them is available from a clearinghouse in our office. It is a small but broad clearinghouse on adult education, not just on literacy or English proficiency. We have a good library and catalogue on workplace literacy programs, family literacy programs, programs for handicapped adults, and programs for corrections. We are building it to improve the delivery of technical assistance to the field.

President Bush said: "Education in America will always be about opening doors of opportunity for the individual. As the nation looks ahead to the next century, education must remain at the top of our national agenda and become a life-long quest for all citizens." Literacy, or being literate, is no longer just having the ability to read as we have defined it before, but it is the ability to reach a person's full potential as a good employee, parent, or citizen. The reasons for improving one's education are as different as the people we contact in our daily routine. It is something we have to consider as we design our programs and work with people at the local level. There is no single way to provide literacy services. There is a myriad of needs. We must ensure that the federal government is responsive to all those needs at the local level.

Most important, literacy is empowerment. This is the key to what we do. We can open the doors and give the keys to the control over one's life and future to those in need. That is our main goal. These people need to be able to decide about their careers, jobs, children, and particularly, their children's education. If we can give useful tools to these citizens, we will have done the best that we could do.