

Developing a National Plan to Improve Skills of U.S. Adults¹

Background Reading for

Community Discussion: Developing a National Strategy for Adult Education

February 19, 2014

Why are we talking about a national plan now?

For over a year, a group of researchers went from door to door in 23 countries to meet with adults between the ages of 16 and 65. The researchers asked questions that required strong reading, math and technology skills to answer. These are the skills that adults need to succeed in the modern workforce and to be part of the civic and cultural life of our communities.

That group of researchers call themselves the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (also known as **PIAAC**).² They studied what they learned from these interviews with adults and compared that to what another group had learned about adult skills ten years ago. On October 8, 2013, PIAAC released the results of its survey of adults.

The survey showed that the United States has a lot of work to do in developing the basic skills of our adult population. Many other countries have made improvements in the past 10 years, but the United States has not. We are right in the middle for reading skills but in the bottom fourth for math skills. We have a little more than the average number of people with poor problem-solving technology skills. Unlike most other countries, our youth do not have stronger skills than those workers getting ready to retire. The study also showed that in the United States you are far more likely to have low skills if your parents did not finish their education. This is not so true in other countries.

If we want our country to move forward, to have a strong economy and vibrant communities, we need to change what we are doing. We need a national plan of action.

The **U.S. Department of Education** is developing that action plan now. They have identified six areas that they think need to be included in the plan.³ They want our ideas about those areas. We will be talking about these areas during the community discussion event on February 19.

What are the six areas of the national action plan?

1) Build awareness that foundational skills development affects all other areas of life. (Show people how stronger reading, math and technology skills help all areas of life, not just work.)

Adults need basic skills (literacy, math, problem solving in technology environments) for many reasons—not just because they are necessary for employment. Strong basic skills are needed for adults to vote, to get involved in their communities, to better communicate with health professionals (doctors, pharmacists, and others), and to get public services. Also, parents with stronger skills are better able to help their children succeed in school and better able to get their children the services they need.

¹ Based on U.S. Department of Education's paper, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill: Developing a National Action Plan to Improve the Foundation Skills of U.S. Adults* (December 2013)

² PIAAC is a program run by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which is part of the United Nations.

³ These areas are also called a framework for a national action plan.

- Think about all of the ways in which literacy and education make an adult's life better and easier, beyond just employment. How can we educate the public that strong basic skills are essential for all of these reasons?
- What sorts of organizations, businesses, or people can help us spread this message?
- What kinds of technology can help us spread this message among young people who have low skills?

2) Strengthen the link with the economy (foundational skills and employment). (Studies show that the best adult education programs blend basic skills education with preparation for a specific career path.)

The survey showed that even though most of the adults with low skills are employed, they do not have jobs with high wages. In order to help adults with low skills either become employed or get higher-paying jobs, we need to make sure that we have strong partnerships with employers (business, labor, and industry).

- How can employers be more involved in the educational process? What are some ways that employers can influence adult education?
- How can we improve on-the-job training so that it includes basic skills training?
- How can we help adults get the kind of skills they need to perform in high-demand careers (including the sciences, technology, engineering, and math)?

3) Expand opportunities for adults to improve foundational skills. (We need to increase the number of program seats available to adult learners as well as the types of places adults can go to learn and the ways they can learn.)

We need to increase educational opportunities for adults to improve their foundational skills.

- How can we increase educational opportunities for adults?
- Where can we get the funding to increase these opportunities? Think about federal, state, and local resources, as well as private funding?
- How can industry, labor, and business be involved in this process?

4) Close the achievement gap.

The 'achievement gap' describes the difference in academic performance between different groups of students (different groups might include minorities, immigrants, or students with learning disabilities). Usually, when people talk about the achievement gap, they are talking about K-12 education, but the gap in performance amongst these groups carries over into adult education.

- List of all of the different types of adults who need more basic education (youth, seniors, immigrants with strong education in their home country, immigrants without an education in their home country, people who lost their jobs because of the economy and can't get re-hired, etc.)
- How can we focus on specific groups of adults that have low skills?
- Pick groups that you know about and talk about ways to help more people get the skills they need as quickly as possible. What works? What makes people come to school, stay in school and succeed?
- How can we build partnerships with groups or organizations already working in underserved, minority communities?

5) Scale what works. (If a local group is achieving success, let's take it to the state level and even to the national level.)

The survey showed that there are many different kinds of people at the lowest skill levels (minorities, immigrants, students with learning disabilities, etc.). The United States needs to be able to reach all of the people at the low skill levels in ways that are specific to each group's needs. To do so, we need to do more research and collect more data on different types of programs that have already been successful in helping particular groups of adults. Then more resources can be spent on those types of programs.

- Consider the list that you just made of the different types of adults that need more basic education. Of the groups that you know about, what kinds of programs and processes are most helpful to them?
- How can we shine light on programs and ideas that work so that they can get the funding they need?
- What kind of research should we be doing?
- Are there new programs or technologies we should be using?
- What do programs or schools need to be able to serve more people and try out new ideas?

6) Improve the quality of teaching and instruction.

For adults to succeed, they need good, effective teachers who are up-to-date with the most current teaching methods. Teachers of adults with low skills need knowledge, training, tools, and support to be effective.

- How can we encourage good teachers to work in adult education programs and schools? How can we make sure that they are trained well?
- How can we make sure teachers continue to get training and get evaluated throughout their career? How can we be sure they are paid well?
- How do we make sure that adult education teachers are preparing their students for college and/or career readiness?
- How can institutions of higher education (like colleges, universities, and job training programs) be involved in this?
- What kinds of technology can teachers use to improve teaching, learning, and assessment?

This shortened version of the Consultation Paper was prepared by the
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<http://bit.ly/AoHAdvocacy>