

# Time for the U.S. To Reskill: Developing a National Action Plan to Improve the Foundation Skills of U.S. Adults

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**CONSULTATION PAPER**

**U.S. Department of Education**

**Office of Vocational and Adult Education**

**December 2013**

## Introduction

On October 8, 2013, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) released the results of the Survey of Adult Skills, an international survey that is part of the Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). This direct assessment was conducted in 23 countries with nationally representative samples of adults ages 16 through 65. The Survey of Adult Skills is a household survey to assess the cognitive and workplace skills needed for success in the 21st-century global economy. The results are designed to help public, private, educational, and philanthropic sectors work with a shared language and set of benchmarks to enhance cooperation around the development and implementation of economic, education, and social policies that strengthen adult skills. The Survey is intended to be administered every 10 years, making this a baseline report to set benchmarks against which countries and sectors can measure their improvement efforts.

In an effort to examine the economic and social case for reskilling adults in the United States, the OECD, at the request of the U.S. Department of Education, analyzed the findings using U.S. data from the Survey and prepared a report entitled *Time for the U.S. to Reskill? What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*.

The report found that while other countries have been showing improvements in equipping its adult populations with the skills needed to be productive in their society, the United States has remained relatively unchanged in the decade since the last report, thus falling further behind their international counterparts. The findings, in particular, shine a spotlight on a part of our population that has historically been overlooked and underserved: the large number of adults with low basic skills. U.S. data also indicate that our education system is not doing enough to help adults compete in the global market place. Adults who have trouble reading, doing math, solving problems, and using technology will find the doors of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce closed to them. As a nation, we need to be more strategic and systematic in our effort to reach these adults.

On November 20, 2013 the U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) launched a national engagement effort to explore ways to increase our capacity to improve the foundation skills of adults in the United States. The purpose of this consultation document is to provide background on the issue and seek input from a diverse group of stakeholders who have an interest and a significant role to play in addressing the skill levels of adults. The perspectives, commitment, and collective effort of stakeholders are necessary to transform our country's infrastructure for adult learning and expand its reach and impact so we can improve the foundation skills of adults.

The paper proposes key questions and prompts that can be used to guide discussions at OVAE's engagement events. Engagement events will be held between November 2013 and January 2014, culminating in a National Action Plan to improve the foundation skills of U.S. adults, which will be released in the spring of 2014.

## Background and Definitions

Ensuring robust economic growth, a thriving middle class, and broadly-shared prosperity will require a significant expansion of the skills and knowledge of adults in the United States over the next few decades. However, even as millions more adults seek the postsecondary education and training necessary to secure

good jobs that pay family sustaining wages, employers continue to report difficulty in finding the skilled workforce they need. In a time of intense global economic competition and increasing income inequality at home, the United States must find innovative and cost-effective ways to help adults gain the education and credentials they need to participate fully in our economy and society.

It is vitally important to engage more adults in postsecondary education or advanced training. However, many lack the basic foundation skills necessary to be able to do so. Access to high quality adult education is both an economic necessity and moral imperative to help adults transition from basic to more advanced skills, and ultimately reach the top rungs of postsecondary training and credentials, and fulfilling careers.

The U.S. Department of Education's *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act* program, enacted as Title II of the *Workforce Investment Act of 1998*, is the primary federal program that provides basic skills and English literacy instruction for out-of-school youth and adults. The program seeks to assist students in acquiring the skills and knowledge necessary to become productive workers, parents, and citizens.

The program, a successful federal, state, and local partnership, serves approximately 1.8 million individuals who are high school dropouts, limited English proficient, or lack the foundational skills to function effectively in society. The investments at the state and local levels, in addition to federal funds, have allowed the adult education program to reach a much larger number of participants than federal funds would have the capacity to accomplish. Therefore, the federal government alone cannot address the skills gap among the nation's adults, instead this needs to be a shared responsibility between adult learners and various other stakeholders at the federal, state, and local levels.

### What are foundation skills?

Foundation skills are defined as a combination of literacy, numeracy and English language (i.e., listening, reading, writing, speaking in English, digital literacy and the use of mathematical ideas); and employability skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life.

### What is adult literacy?

Literacy is defined as "an individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute, and solve problems, at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual, and in society."<sup>1</sup>

### What is numeracy?

Numeracy is the ability to access, use, interpret, and communicate mathematical information and ideas; and to engage in and manage mathematical demands of a range of situations in adult life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P.L. 105-220, *Workforce Investment Act of 1998, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act*. August 7, 1998.

<sup>2</sup> OECD Skills Surveys: Summary of assessment domains in the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC). Retrieved November 27, 2013 from <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/Summary%20of%20assessment%20domains%20in%20the%20Survey%20of%20Adult%20Skills.pdf>.

## The Survey of Adult Skills

In the United States, 5,000 individuals were surveyed to create a nationally representative dataset. An additional 5,000 people will be surveyed in the United States for a supplement that will be added to the dataset in 2015. The supplemental groups include unemployed adults (ages 16–65), young adults (ages 16–34), older adults (ages 66–74), and incarcerated adults (ages 16–74).

The Survey of Adult Skills draws from a rich background questionnaire to measure relationships among respondents' educational background, parental educational attainment, work history and skills, occupational attainment, use of information and communications technology, and cognitive skills. It measures these relationships in the domains of literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

The direct measure of cognitive and workplace skills in this study creates a much more nuanced perspective on skills than the more commonly reported measure of educational attainment. For example, the attainment category of "some college," which appears on many surveys of adult skills, says very little about the knowledge, skills, and abilities of an individual, and is rarely accompanied by information on the courses taken, training completed, and skills gained. Having more information about skills, including where they are learned and how they are used, as this survey provides, will inform educators, workforce development stakeholders, human resource personnel, employers, and policymakers about the mechanisms that are effective in increasing the skill and talent inventory in regions, sectors, and across the country.

### Key Findings

General patterns<sup>3</sup> of performance in the U.S. data include:

- Below international average in all subject areas
- Ranked better in literacy than in numeracy or problem solving in technology-rich environments
- Higher percentage at low proficiency levels than international average
- Percentages of top performers similar to or slightly lower than international average, depending on the subject
- Performance gap between young and older population smaller than the average gap internationally

The item framework used in the Survey of Adult Skills, which is a part of the PIAAC, is aligned to previous international literacy assessments, allowing trend analysis for the past 20 years. The average U.S. literacy score for adults on the PIAAC is not significantly lower than it was in 2003–08 as reported on the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), but is lower than the average score was in 1994–98 as reported on the Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL). The average U.S. numeracy score on the PIAAC is lower than it was in 2003–08 as reported in the IALS.

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<sup>3</sup> Goodman, M., Finnegan, R., Mohadjer, L., Krenzke, T., and Hogan, J. (2013). *Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem Solving in Technology-Rich Environments Among U.S. Adults: Results from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies 2012: First Look* (NCES 2014-008). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Retrieved November 26, 2013 from <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch>.

## Implications

These Survey findings show that the United States has significant basic skill weaknesses within the adult working-age population in comparison to other industrialized countries. This skill profile has negative implications for the growth and strength of the U.S. economy and middle class. Although two-thirds of the low-skilled respondents in the U.S. sample are employed, they are not employed in jobs with high wages.

The findings show that work tasks influence skills. Adults who report frequently using literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in their daily work routines have greater proficiencies in those skills. The reverse is also shown in the data: workers in low-skilled jobs may have fewer opportunities to use and enhance their skills.

Weak skills have implications for civic life as well, as has been demonstrated in previous surveys of adult literacy. Adults with weak skills are less likely to vote or volunteer in their communities, and more likely to suffer poor health. In fact, adults with low skills are four times more likely to report “fair” or “poor” health than those with strong skills. This relationship is twice as strong as the international average.

Moreover, a concerning trend emerges in this dataset. Unlike most other countries surveyed, in the United States, younger cohorts’ skills are not surpassing the older cohorts’ skills. This has serious implications for the future of our workforce and underscores the need for continuing education and training.

## OECD Policy Recommendations

OVAE requested OECD to prepare the report, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill? What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*. This report analyzes data from the Survey and details the status of American adult competencies within our economic, demographic, and social structures and makes policy recommendations to boost adult skill levels. The report offers seven broad policy recommendations for the United States to consider.

**Recommendation 1:** The first is to “**take concerted action to improve basic skills and tackle inequities affecting sub-populations with weak skills.**” This recommendation addresses the fact that there are significant weaknesses in the skills of the U.S. population, particularly among identified subgroups, where the long-term consequences of the achievement gap can be seen in the adult population. For example, Hispanics and blacks are three-to-four times more likely to have low literacy skills than whites. While the achievement gap in K–12 schooling has been closing steadily, it is not erased and the adult population’s skill profiles still bear the signs of early inequities. The OECD calls on the United States to coordinate and align federal, state, private and philanthropic efforts to improve workforce development efforts and maximize the effectiveness with which efforts reach the scale and efficacy required to make real and lasting changes to the current skills profile.

**Recommendation 2:** The second recommendation, to “**strengthen initial schooling for all....**” also derives from the long-term effects of poor K–12 schooling, which remain a drag on adults’ skill proficiencies. Current education reforms, such as attention to early learning, dropout prevention, and adoption of more rigorous standards, should be strengthened, accelerated, and evaluated for their continued effectiveness in preparing students with strong skills. The OECD points to the experiences of other countries, such as Korea and Finland, that leveraged early PISA findings (an international skills survey conducted among 15-year-olds) as a wake-up call to marshal education reforms that have yielded lasting improvements. The reforms

undertaken and the measures of their success are described in a previous OECD report, *Strong Performers and Successful Reformers in Education: Lessons from PISA for the United States*.

**Recommendation 3: “Ensure effective and accessible education opportunities for young adults”** is the third recommendation. It echoes President Obama’s call for more Americans to complete at least one year of postsecondary education and training in order to succeed in the 21st century global economy. It also reflects the efforts that are underway to reform high schools by making career and technical pathways available to more students. The OECD recognizes that although the pipeline to education exists, many low-skilled and low-income youth and adults are not able to complete their degrees or training programs. Reforms to college access, cost, and developmental education are urgently needed.

**Recommendation 4: “Link efforts to improve basic skills to employability.”** This fourth recommendation draws on previous OECD work in career and technical education, recognizing that the integration of basic skills and occupational training can be a powerful accelerator for disengaged or low-skilled youth and adults. The integrated model opens what OECD calls a “virtuous cycle” of synergistic learning and motivation. This recommendation requires cooperation with employers and industry groups to embed work experiences of all kinds into education pathways and to keep job-specific skills updated in the curriculum.

**Recommendation 5: “Adapt to diversity,”** the fifth recommendation, notes that within the U.S. adult profile is a range of distinct sub-populations with a variety of needs, including young immigrants with language barriers, disconnected youths, adults with learning disabilities, and dislocated workers facing digital literacy challenges. Accordingly, the adult low-skilled population is not homogenous. The OECD recommends developing a range of interventions specifically targeted to the needs and strengths of the various learners and their capacities to engage in education and training.

**Recommendation 6:** The sixth recommendation, to “**build awareness of the implications of weak basic skills among adults, their links with other social factors...**” refers to those social factors linked to skills as revealed in this survey. These include positive civic behaviors such as voting and volunteering, as well as improving health status and prevention behaviors. In the United States, the correlation between poor health status and low literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills is twice as strong as the international average. In fact, U.S. adults with low skills are four times more likely to report only “fair” or “poor” health. This combination presents great challenges to both the individual and the health providers to communicate and address the prevention, management, and treatment of disease and unhealthy behaviors.

**Recommendation 7:** The final recommendation, to “**support action with evidence,**” recognizes that the U.S. capacity for research and evaluation is unsurpassed and calls on the research community to pay more attention to the education and training of low-skilled youths and adults to identify a repertoire of effective, replicable, and scalable practices.

## Need for Action

Improving the skill levels of youth and adult populations matter to our global competitiveness and our ability to grow the U.S. economy. We also know that the true engine of American’s economic growth is a rising and thriving middle class. To ensure that every U.S. adult has the opportunity to find a good job that

pays family sustaining wages, the United States needs to find ways to invest in its current and future workers.

As the findings suggest, the skills issue has significant impacts on the life chances of individuals and their families, as lower skills are linked to poorer economic and social outcomes such as employment prospects and earnings outcomes, as well as poorer health and lower civic engagement. Individuals who lack foundational skills find themselves on the margins of society with limited access to services and are often left behind. In addition to the considerable impact on individuals, their families and their community, the skills gap also has far reaching consequences and implications for society as a whole and the country's competitiveness in the global market place. Therefore, it is essential for the United States to prioritize its investments in the skills development of U.S. adults, whether through quality formal education or lifelong learning and training opportunities, and skills development must be relevant and linked to the needs of the local economy.

In order to build a sustainable economy and grow the middle class, a national action plan must focus on the following guiding principles as a foundation for reform:

- A national action plan must be based on a model of ***shared responsibility*** across, federal, state and local governments; business, labor and industry; education and workforce agencies; community based organizations; and the philanthropic community to address the need to significantly impact the availability of learning opportunities for low-skilled adults;
- A national action plan must seek to increase ***equity, learner access, and learner success***;
- A national action plan must seek to increase ***quality of instruction***;
- A national action plan designed to dramatically improve the skills of U.S. adults should be ***data-driven and evidence-based***; and
- A national action plan must instill a commitment to ***new innovations, ideas and interventions*** to make a meaningful impact and support new solutions that can be brought to scale.

## Framework for a National Action Plan

**Build awareness that foundational skills development affects all other areas of life.** Strong skills are not only education and employment issues, but are vital to the American way of life. A democratic society rests upon the social inclusion and contribution of citizens. Every American needs to assume shared responsibility for voting, public services, the rule of law, and public health and safety campaigns. Positive health and well-being are strongly linked to literacy and numeracy skills. The OECD Survey of Adult Skills' results reinforce our knowledge that parental education and proficiency with English are strongly linked to children's academic performance.

- How can we strengthen the connection between foundation skills and other areas of life?
- What emerging technology solutions would help build awareness amongst adults with low skills?
- What types of partnerships are needed to build this type of awareness?

**Strengthen the link with the economy (foundation skills & employment).** Putting the tens of thousands of adults with low skills on the path to credentials that will qualify them for jobs earning middle-class wages requires a strong partnership with business, labor and industry. Career pathway models provide contextualized learning to specific industry sectors and make stronger linkages between basic and occupational skills training, while connecting individuals to comprehensive support services.

- How can employers and labor be more involved in making strategic connections between work and adult foundation skills training? How can we increase foundation skill development on the job, or at the workplace?
- How can we help adults build both foundation and occupation skills in high-demand career fields, including in the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) fields, to pursue specific occupations and credentials more rapidly?

**Expand opportunities for adults to improve foundational skills.** Based on results of the Survey of Adult Skills, it is clear that the United States needs a better strategy to provide opportunities for adults to improve foundation skills through a shared responsibility model. Stronger partnerships with business, industry, and labor, and also with state and local governments, foundations, and others concerned with the health, well-being, and democracy of America are important to increase access to learning opportunities.

- How can we expand the availability of learning options for adults?
- How can federal resources for adult learning be used to leverage other federal, state, and local resources, as well as private-sector resources?
- What emerging technology solutions can help us further personalize and accelerate adult learning?

**Close the achievement gap.** The achievement gap, so well-documented in K-12 educational research over the past 50 years, has dire consequences for the U.S. adult population. Although encouraging progress has been made to narrow the K-12 achievement gap on some measures and milestones, the cumulative effect of years of disparities result in huge skill inequalities in the adult population, particularly by race and

ethnicity, even when educational attainment is similar. Other minority groups disproportionately showing low skills in the Survey of Adult Skills' results are adults with learning disabilities and immigrants.

- How can we focus resources on specific groups of U.S. adults that have low skills?
- How can we provide intervention strategies that will be successful in re-engaging specific minority populations in educational opportunities?
- How can we build stronger partnerships with groups already working in underserved, minority communities?

**Scale what works.** Considering the diverse makeup of those at the lowest skill levels, the United States needs to evaluate and identify interventions for their effectiveness in assisting diverse groups of individuals who have low skills, such as disconnected and older youth, displaced workers, immigrants, and those who have been out of school for many years. More research and data are also needed on return-on-investment models that identify the benefits of skills acquisition for economic and individual well-being that take into account the quest for increasing equity.

- What type of state, local, and federal systems need to be put in place to effectively scale interventions that have proven return on investment?
- How can innovation be incentivized to iteratively develop and evaluate models of interventions?
- What are the promising practices and emerging technologies we should consider scaling up?

**Improve the quality of teaching and instruction.** The demands for learning have changed through the decades. Adults need “just in time skills,” and they need to master them as efficiently as possible. Teachers of adults with low skills need not only the knowledge and skills necessary to facilitate 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, but also the tools, support, and professional working conditions to enable a world-class adult education workforce.

- How do we recruit, train, retain and compensate effective teachers and leaders who can assist with providing high-quality instruction?
- How do we ensure the placement of college and career readiness standards at the center of all instruction and assessment in adult education programs across the country?
- What role can institutions of higher education play?
- How can we leverage the power of technology to improve teaching, learning, and assessment?

## Links to Additional Information

Visit the U.S. Department of Education's website <http://www.timetoreskill.org> for information related to the engagement process for developing a national action plan to improve the foundational skills of U.S. adults.

Visit the OECD website at <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/> for data files and analysis tools, reports, and more information about PIAAC internationally. Download a free copy of the report, *Time for the U.S. to Reskill? What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*, from [http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill\\_9789264204904-en](http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill_9789264204904-en).

Visit the NCES website at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/> for data files and analysis tools, reports, and more information from a U.S. perspective. To host a presentation on PIAAC results (web-based or in person), please contact [piaac@air.org](mailto:piaac@air.org).

Visit the PIAAC Gateway website at <http://piaacgateway.com> to access PIAAC resources and information across multiple sites, including findings, press releases, media coverage, publications, audio and video resources, and the latest PIAAC updates. Watch for the release of the Education and Skills Online (February 2014), an interactive online tool that will allow users to produce individualized reports.

To view the presentation by Andreas Schleicher, Deputy Director for Education and Skills and Special Advisor on Education Policy to the OECD Secretary-General, which summarizes the PIAAC findings, see <http://www.slideshare.net/OECD/EDU/time-for-the-us-to-reskill-what-the-survey-of-adult-skills-says>.

Visit the NCES YouTube page at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UgRwgFD-Ynk> to view the NCES Executive Summary video on the PIAAC study.

Visit the U.S. Department of Education's website at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/factsh/us-country-profile.pdf> to view the U.S. Country Profile, Tapping the Potential: Profile of Adult Education Target Population. Find your state's profile at <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/state-profiles.html>.

For questions you may have on the engagement process for the national action plan, please email: [OVAE@ed.gov](mailto:OVAE@ed.gov).