

# The Federal Role in Adult Literacy Education

# 5

Since the mid- 1960s, the Federal Government has played a critical role in providing education services to adults with inadequate literacy skills.<sup>1</sup> Unlike elementary and secondary education, where a mature State and local infrastructure existed before the Federal Government entered the field, public adult education is in many ways a Federal creation.

The main engines of the Federal role in adult education are the categorical grant programs-chief among them the Adult Education Act (AEA)-that support adult literacy and basic skills education. The Federal role is more than the sum of its grant programs, however. The Federal Government influences adult literacy services in other important ways-through executive branch initiatives and regulations, Federal leadership and public awareness activities, census counts and studies documenting and defining illiteracy, research and development, and congressional and departmental budget decisions. This chapter traces the evolution of the Federal role in adult literacy over time, analyzes current Federal efforts, and considers Federal policy on technology in adult literacy.

## FINDINGS

- The Federal response to the problem of adult illiteracy consists of many categorical programs-at least 29, perhaps many

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<sup>1</sup> Federal programs use a variety of terms to describe educational services below the college level for adults who are not proficient in basic skills or the English language. "Adult education," "basic skills," "literacy skills," "English literacy," and "English language instruction" all appear in Federal law, sometimes undefined. In discussions of specific programs, this chapter employs the terms used in the relevant legislation. Otherwise, this chapter uses the term "adult literacy education" or "basic skills education" when referring to the broader OTA definition set forth in chapter 2 of this report.



more, depending on the definition used—that in some way aid adult literacy and basic skills education. Although the individual programs have solid records of accomplishment, together they create a Federal role that is complicated, fragmented, and insufficient, and which, by its very nature, works against development of a coordinated Federal adult literacy policy.

- Legislation enacted since 1986 has increased appropriations, created new programs, attempted to build capacity and coordination among existing programs, and assigned new literacy-related missions to programs with broader goals, such as welfare reform, immigration reform, job training, and prisoner rehabilitation. Whether adult education providers will have adequate tools and resources to carry out their new jobs will depend on how well the new laws are implemented and funded.
- Total Federal spending for adult literacy is hard to calculate because specific expenditures for literacy education are not available for the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS), Even Start, and other key programs. However, the Federal Government currently spends at least \$362 million for adult literacy and basic skills education, more than double the amount of 5 years ago. Although Federal literacy dollars are a critical source of sustenance for State and local programs, these dollars are small in comparison with other major Federal education expenditures and meager in terms of the total population in need.
- Though the U.S. Department of Education (ED) remains the primary Federal player in the adult literacy field, new legislation has expanded the influence of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Department of Labor (DOL) at the Federal level, and their counterpart agencies at the State level. These shifts in agency responsibilities portend changes in who is served, what services they receive, and what outcomes are expected of them.

New Federal initiatives are increasing the emphasis on workplace literacy, family literacy, and literacy for adults with special needs, such as the homeless, the incarcerated, welfare mothers, and certain refugees. By channeling more funding toward special groups, however, the Federal Government may be inadvertently limiting opportunities for millions of adult learners, including many limited-English-proficient (LEP) adults, who do not meet these criteria but have the potential to quickly become functionally literate, self-supporting citizens.

Different and sometimes incompatible Federal funding streams, eligibility restrictions, and accountability requirements are a considerable source of frustration for State and local literacy practitioners and drive State and local delivery systems in ways that may not always reflect adult learner needs or promote efficient management practices.

- Congress has sought to improve the quality and effectiveness of federally funded adult education programs by instituting outcome-based evaluation, and by strengthening teacher training, research, dissemination, and other components of the adult literacy infrastructure. Further work is needed to improve the knowledge base about adult learning, and to ensure that evaluation standards and quality indicators are appropriate, measurable, and consistent with long-term program goals.
- By sending mixed and sporadic messages about the use of technology in adult literacy programs, the Federal Government has failed to exert the leadership necessary to overcome a cautious attitude toward technology among some adult literacy practitioners and to realize the potential of technology to improve instruction and program management.
- Congress has enacted several requirements and incentives aimed at fostering coordination across Federal, State, and local literacy programs. In addition, States and local service providers are undertaking their own coordination initiatives.

Although promising, these efforts can only accomplish so much without further changes in law and departmental policy to make programs and requirements more consistent and complementary.

## GROWTH OF THE FEDERAL ROLE IN ADULT LITERACY

Since the founding of the republic, the literacy of adult Americans has been an abiding Federal concern. Although the nature of Federal involvement in adult education has changed considerably over two centuries, the rationale has remained much the same. Our democratic system presumes an educated citizenry. Literacy **affects our** economic prosperity, social welfare, national security, and the future of our children. And the persistence of illiteracy drains the public till.

### Historical Perspective

Through most of our history (see box 5-A), the Federal Government demonstrated its concern about adult literacy in very limited ways.<sup>2</sup> From the 19th through the early 20th century, general literacy instruction, like the rest of education, was not considered a Federal responsibility. Adult education programs were conducted by religious groups, settlement houses, charitable organizations, public schools, and other private and public institutions.<sup>3</sup> The Federal role **was** limited mostly to documenting literacy and illiteracy rates through the decennial censuses and providing some adult education for selected civil servants.

In the first half of the 20th century—as waves of immigrants reached American shores, as mass Army testing revealed serious basic skills deficiencies among World War I recruits, and as Federal surveys and special commissions called attention to the plight of educationally disadvan-



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*World War I mass testing found that 25 percent of army recruits were illiterate and lacking basic skills. It was not until World War II that literacy materials were developed and distributed to military personnel in response to test results and public pressure.*

*tagged adults—pressures* for Federal action mounted. In response, the Federal Government took several steps that might be considered early uses of adult education as a social policy tool. Among these were the enactment of education programs for immigrants in 1918 and for adult Native Americans in 1921, the initiation of a literacy campaign under the Works Progress Administration in 1936, and the development of literacy materials for military personnel at the end of World War II.

### The Modern Federal Role Takes Shape

In the early 1960s, as the Federal Government became more active in education, Congress paved the way for a stronger interventionist role in adult education. In 1963, Congress amended the Manpower Demonstration and Training Act to provide basic skills education for unemployed adults; then in 1964 it created a State adult education program under the Economic Opportunity Act, a

<sup>2</sup>The following **historical discussion was drawn from an** OTA analysis of Federal legislation and from National **Advisory** Council on Adult Education, *A History of the Adult Education Act* (Washington, DC: 1980); Marie Costa, *Adult Literacy/Illiteracy in the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1988); and U.S. Department Of Education, *History of the Adult Education Act: An Overview* (Washington+ DC: 1991).

<sup>3</sup>Carmen St. John Hunter with David Harman, *Adult Illiteracy in the United States* (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 13.

**Box 5-A—Highlights of the Federal Role in Adult Literacy: 1777 to 1986**

- 1777** First expenditure of Federal funds to provide instruction in mathematics and military skills to Continental Army soldiers.
- 1840** U.S. Census collects first literacy data by asking heads of families how many white persons over age 20 in household cannot read or write.
- 1879** Federal School for Engravers provides first education and training to civil servants.
- 1914** World War I testing reveals 25 percent of draftees are illiterate.
- 1917** Legislation requires potential immigrants over age 16 to pass a literacy test.
- 1918** Passage of Immigration and Nationality Act: funds to public schools for English language, history, government, and citizenship programs for naturalization candidates.
- 192a** Passage of On-Reservation Indian Adult Education Act: literacy training for Native Americans.
- 1929** President Herbert Hoover appoints Advisory Committee on National Illiteracy; committee spearheads privately funded campaign with goal of teaching 5 million adults to read and write.
- 1933** President Franklin Delano Roosevelt initiates three employment programs with basic skills components: Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Civilian Conservation Corps, and Works Progress Administration. In 1936, Works Progress Administration starts 4-year literacy campaign.
- 1945** The military develops literacy materials with functional approach based on military life.
- 1955** The U.S. Office of Education establishes an Adult Education section.
- 1963** Congress passes Library Services Act; amends Manpower Development and Training Act to support basic skills for unemployed adults and out-of-school youth; and passes Vocational Education Act.
- 1964** Passage of Economic Opportunity Act: establishes Adult Basic Education State grant program for adults 18 and over whose inability to read or write English impairs their employment opportunities. Program administered by Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). Congress also approves Library Services and Construction Act.
- 1966** Congress passes the Adult Education Act (AEA): establishes Adult Basic Education program with broader mission than OEO program. Shifts responsibility to U.S. Office of Education.
- 1969** U.S. Office of Education initiates Right to Read campaign. Its goal: eradicating illiteracy by 1980.
- 1970** Congress amends AEA to encourage States to establish secondary-school completion programs for adults without high school diploma.
- 1972** Amendments to AEA expand programs for Native American adults.
- 1974** Further amendments to AEA limit share for adult secondary programs, create special programs for limited-English-speaking adults and the elderly, reserve funds for experimental projects and teacher training, and require cooperation with other programs.
- 1975** Federally sponsored Adult Performance Level study declares that 20 percent of adult Americans are functionally incompetent and another 34 percent are marginally competent.
- 1978** Amendments to AEA seek to expand service delivery system, encourage support services, give special attention to adult immigrants, and authorize several new research activities.
- 1982** Census Bureau survey estimates between 17 and 21 million American adults—nearly 13 percent—are illiterate.
- 1983** U.S. Department of Education establishes the Adult Literacy Initiative.
- 1986** National Assessment of Educational Progress concludes that great majority of young adults ages 21 to 25 have basic literacy skills but sizable proportion lack "critical thinking" skills.

**SOURCES:** National Advisory Council on Adult Education, *A History of the Adult Education Act* (Washington, DC: 1980); Maria Costa, *Adult Literacy/Illiteracy in the United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1988); and U.S. Department of Education, *History of the Adult Education Act: An Overview* (Washington, DC: 1991).

War on Poverty program overseen by a new Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

The modern Federal role really took shape in 1966 with passage of the Adult Education Act, still the cornerstone of the Federal role today. Prior to 1966, few States had invested in adult basic education on their own.<sup>4</sup> The AEA transferred administrative responsibility for the State grant program from OEO to the U.S. Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and broadened the program to encompass basic education, English as a second language (ESL), and citizenship education. States received funds based on their numbers of adults without a high school diploma, and demand for services soon exceeded expectations. In subsequent years, the act was amended several times to encourage secondary-school completion programs, place more emphasis on special populations, build teacher training capacity, and broaden the base of service providers.

Beginning in the mid-1960s and continuing through the 1980s, Congress also enacted several other laws with implications for literacy policy: e.g., the Vocational Education Act, the Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), the JTPA, the Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) literacy program, and the Indian Education Act.

### Public Awareness, "Bully Pulpit," and National Leadership

President Herbert Hoover's 1929 advisory committee on national illiteracy was an early effort to publicize illiteracy problems and rally public, private, and volunteer support—the bully pulpit approach. The Right to Read initiative, begun in 1969 under President Richard Nixon, was another such campaign; 6 years later the effort was downgraded in the bureaucracy, its goal of eradicating illiteracy by 1980 far from



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**BOOKS**  
MAKE the home

*Many approaches have been used to gain public support and stimulate action to improve literacy. This 1938 poster by Rockwell Kent was part of the Federal Government's effort to stress the importance of reading.*

*being* achieved. In the 1980s, the Adult Literacy Initiative under the Reagan Administration once again sought to raise public awareness, promote volunteerism, and coordinate literacy activities across the Federal Government.<sup>5</sup>

The Federal Government also helped shape literacy policy through efforts to document and define adult competencies. The 1975 Adult Performance Level survey and the 1986 literacy survey of young adults conducted by the National

<sup>4</sup>James T. Parker, "Modeling a Future Basic Education," *Adult Learning*, vol. 1, No. 4, January 1990, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>A persistent criticism of these kinds of public awareness campaigns was that they offered the "illusion of genuine commitment" without meaningful new funding or consistent programmatic support, and as such would only "... sedate some people with the notion that 'something important' was now going to be done." Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1986), p. 51.

Assessment of Educational Progress helped call attention to the continuing problem of illiteracy and spur national efforts to rethink literacy in functional terms.

### Congress “Discovers” Adult Literacy: 1986 to the Present

In the late 1980s, “Congress discovered adult literacy.”<sup>6</sup> Passage of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which authorized the State Legalization Impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG) program supporting English literacy instruction, set off a wave of legislative activity that continued into 1991<sup>7</sup> (see box 5-B). The wave of legislative activity crested in 1988, the year in which the AEA and other major education programs came up for reauthorization and also an election year.

The laws enacted since 1986 expanded existing literacy programs, created new programs, and attached new literacy mandates to programs with broader purposes. Many gave public adult literacy programs “new jobs to do”: integrating immigrants into the mainstream through the Immigration Reform and Control Act; moving people off welfare through the Family Support Act; breaking the generational cycle of illiteracy through the Even Start Act; reducing recidivism among ex-offenders through the Crime Control Act; and increasing employability through the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act, and amendments to the JTPA.<sup>8</sup>

The executive branch also launched new literacy initiatives. President George Bush’s 1989 Education Summit with the Governors produced six ambitious education goals for the year 2000, including Goal #5:

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.<sup>9</sup>

HHS provided seed money to all Head Start grantees for family literacy activities. The Bureau of Prisons raised the compulsory education participation requirements for Federal prisoners to a high school diploma equivalency level. DOL channeled discretionary funding into workforce literacy projects.

These past 6 years of activity have transformed the Federal role in adult education. In one sense, Congress has “. . . tied the fortunes of the federal human service agenda to the effectiveness of the literacy system in performing the new jobs assigned to it.”<sup>10</sup>

To improve existing literacy programs and provide resources to fulfill these heightened expectations, Congress in 1991 passed the National Literacy Act (NLA) (see box 5-C). The NLA set forth a capacity-building agenda aimed at providing more resources, more professional staff, better coordination, higher program quality, and a stronger research base. It also amended the AEA, created the National Institute for Literacy

<sup>6</sup> Forrest P. Chisman et al., *Leadership for Literacy: The Agenda for the 1990s* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1990), p. 221.

<sup>7</sup> Many factors helped fuel this legislative vigor. Attention from the reed@ scholars, writers, and business people W the issues of illiteracy and declining American competitiveness and kept them in the public eye. The elementary and secondary school reform movement helped highlight weaknesses at other levels of education. Public, private, and volunteer literacy organizations began forming coalitions and identifying common goals. Perhaps most **important**, the political climate of the **first** term of the Reagan Administration—characterized by domestic budget cuts and few new social **programs—had** begun to **turn**, and it could be argued that the **Democrat-controlled** Congress was anxious to take advantage of a legislative window of opportunity.

<sup>8</sup> Chisman et al., op. cit., footnote 6, pp. 223-226.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of **Education**, *America 2000: An Education Strategy* (Washington, DC: 1991), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Chisman et al., op. cit., footnote 6, pp. 22S-226.

**Box 5-B-Key Legislation and Executive Actions: 1986 to 1991**

- 1986 **Immigration Reform and Control Act: amnesty to undocumented aliens living in the united states;** State Legalization Impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG) cover public assistance, health and education services for newly legalized aliens.  
  
Job Training **partnership Act (JTPA) Amendments: remedial education in** Title II-B program.  
**Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) Literacy Corps: more** VISTA volunteers assigned to literacy effort.
- 1987 **Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act: literacy programs** for homeless adults.
- 1988 Hawkins-Stafford School Improvement Amendments: Adult Education Act revised to improve planning and evaluation and better seine special populations. New programs: workplace literacy partnerships, English Literacy grants, Even Start program for educationally disadvantaged parents and preschool children, and bilingual family literacy program for limited-English-proficient families.  
  
Omnibus **Trade and Competitiveness Act:**basic skills education for dislocated workers under JTPA Title III and a Student Literacy Corps of undergraduate volunteer tutors.  
  
**Family Support Act: overhaul** of Federal welfare system; mandates literacy education for welfare recipients through new Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) training program.
- 1989 Education **Summit:** President George Bush and Government produce six National Education Goals, including goal that all adult Americans will be literate by year 2000.
- 1990 **Crime Control Act of 1990:** mandatory literacy (including English as a second language) for Federal inmates below 8th-grade literacy level.  
  
Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Amendments: greater emphasis on basic academic skills as part of vocational training.  
  
National and Community Service Act: Commission to spur volunteerism in literacy and other areas.
- 1991 National Literacy Act of 1991: improve Federal research, program quality, and coordination; authorizes several new programs.  
  
Higher Education Act Technical Amendments: program to help commercialdrivers pass mandated literacy test.  
  
Federal Bureau of Prisons regulations: compulsory education requirements for Federal prisoners raised to high school diploma equivalency level.  
  
Head Start Family Literacy Initiative: Department of Health and Human Services encourages all Head Start grantees to incorporate family literacy into their regular activities.

SOURCE: **Office of Technology Assessment**, 1993.

and several new programs, established a statutory definition of literacy. Whether the NLA will provide literacy programs with the additional funding and tools they need to fulfill the new demands remains to be seen. The Federal role is at a critical juncture.

**CURRENT FEDERAL ROLE**

What is the result of 25 years of direct Federal attention to the literacy problem? Few would deny that Federal seed money, especially the AEA, has encouraged the growth of public, State, and local programs and has benefited millions of

### Box 5-C—Major Provisions of the National Literacy Act of 1991

**New definition of literacy.** “An individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

**National Institute for Literacy.** This new Institute will conduct research, develop a national database, provide training and technical assistance, and advise on policy. Administered jointly by Department of Education, Department of Labor (DOL), and Department of Health and Human Services.

**State resource centers.** States will establish centers to foster coordination of literacy resources, develop new teaching methods, promote innovation, and provide technical assistance.

#### New Programs

- National workforce demonstration grants for large-scale projects involving unions and businesses.
- National Workforce Literacy Collaborative in DOL for technical assistance on workforce literacy.
- Grants to improve functional literacy and life skills of State and local prisoners.
- Public broadcasting program to produce family literacy programming and materials. (Unfunded)
- Challenge grants for community or employee literacy programs using VISTA volunteers. (Unfunded)

#### Amendments to Adult Education Act

- Extends act through 1995 and increases authorization of appropriations.
- States must provide “direct and equitable access” to Federal funds by a range of service providers.
- States will make “Gateway Grants” to public housing authorities for literacy programs.
- Secretary of Education will develop quality indicators by July 25, 1992; States will develop similar indicators for State and local programs by July 25, 1993.
- State set-aside for innovative projects and teacher training increased from 10 to 15 percent.
- States must evaluate 20 percent of the grant recipients in the State each year.

**SOURCES:** Public Law 102-73; Paul M. Irwin, Congressional Research Service, Education and Public Welfare Division, “National Literacy Act of 1991: Major Provisions of P.L. 102-73,” CRS Report for Congress 91-811 EPW, Nov. 8, 1991; and U.S. Department of Education, “The National Literacy Act of 1991,” *A.L.L. Points Bulletin*, October 1991, pp. 1-2.

adults who otherwise would have remained unserved.<sup>11</sup> Yet all together, some observers contend, “. . . the Federal initiative in adult literacy has been minimal, inefficient, and ineffective.”<sup>12</sup>

The Federal Government also has been a pervasive and powerful influence—arguably *the* most powerful influence—on the provision of adult education services at the State and local level. Federal programs and policies affect State and local funding, administrative structures, pri-

orities, target populations, services, and instructional approaches.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, a picture emerges of a Federal partner whose influence can be both beneficial and counterproductive (with the difference not always readily apparent); a partnership with as yet untapped potential to improve the coordination and delivery of adult education services.

Some cautions are in order. The State and Federal roles in adult education have matured

<sup>11</sup> U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, *House Report 100-95* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987), pp. 87-88.

<sup>12</sup> William F. Pierce, “A Redefined Role in Adult Literacy: Integrated Policies, Programs, and Procedures,” background paper for the Project on Adult Literacy, Southport Institute, 1988, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Some of the information in this chapter is based on OTA site visits to two States, Massachusetts and Texas, in January 1992. The site visits included interviews with State agency staff for education, welfare employment and training, libraries, technology, and a literacy council; and with local educational agencies, community colleges, city agencies, and community-based organizations.



somewhat contemporaneously, so it can be hard sorting out where Federal influence ends and State influence begins. Moreover, States take very different approaches to the same set of laws, programs, and guidance coming out of Washington, with States often adding interpretations and requirements on top of Federal ones. These differences among States are attributable not only to such factors as size, demographics, wealth, history, and political climate, but also to State leadership and philosophy. Some States have charted their own courses in adult education, independent of Federal policy, and serve as beacons for the Nation.

To assess the Federal role in greater depth, the Office of Technology Assessment (OTA) has analyzed major Federal laws and regulations and found several significant themes and trends that cut across programs and agencies.

### The Number of Federal Literacy Programs

As recent studies have shown, determining how many Federal programs support adult literacy is a difficult proposition.<sup>14</sup> Only a handful of Federal laws have adult literacy or basic skills education as their primary purpose. Others authorize literacy education as a means toward another end. Some Federal programs give State or local entities discretion over how much to spend on literacy activities. Should all of these be counted as Federal literacy programs? What about programs, such as those run by the military and the Bureau of Indian Affairs, that are not

specifically authorized by law but have been established by the executive branch under general legislative authorities for education? And what about programs that seek to *prevent* illiteracy? Taken to the extreme, the entire gamut of elementary and secondary education programs could be considered illiteracy prevention.<sup>15</sup>

Regardless of the definitions and categorizations used, it is clear that the Federal role in adult literacy is composed of many separate programs in several different agencies. The most recent study, which took a very broad view, found 77 programs in 11 Federal agencies that provided some degree of support for adult literacy education in fiscal year 1989; 23 of these were what the study called “primary” programs, in which “adult education is explicitly stated as a primary objective in the program’s authorizing legislation.”<sup>16</sup> Any analysis of the Federal role must at some point draw distinctions that could be viewed as arbitrary, and therefore any count of Federal adult literacy programs should be viewed as just a broad indicator.

OTA’s analysis of the Federal role relies on a somewhat smaller core group of programs that together comprise the bulk of the Federal effort in adult literacy and basic skills education (see appendix B). These programs include those with literacy as a primary, explicit mission, as well as a few others—like the JTPA, JOBS and refugee/immigrant programs—that have the potential for significantly influencing adult literacy and basic skills education.

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<sup>14</sup> See Mary E. Kahn, *Literacy Management Information Project Report* (Washington, DC: Washington Consulting Group, Inc., 1986); U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, *An Assessment of the Federal Initiative in the Area of Adult Literacy* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1987); and Judith A. Alamprese and Donna M. Hughes, *Study of Federal Funding Sources and Services for Adult Education* (Washington, DC: Cosmos Corp., 1990). The problems associated with defining the Federal literacy effort were illustrated by controversy surrounding publication of the *Literacy Management Information Project Report (LMIPR)*, which concluded that there were 79 literacy-related programs in 14 Federal agencies. The House Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education accused the report of promoting “misinformation” and released its own report, concluding that 48 percent of the programs mentioned in the LMIPR were not conducting adult literacy activities at all, and 32 percent did not have literacy as a major function.

<sup>15</sup> Paul M. Irwin, Congressional Research Service, Education and Public Welfare Division, “Adult Literacy Issues, Programs, and Options,” CRS Issue Brief IB85167, Apr. 5, 1991, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> Alamprese and Hughes, op. cit., footnote 14, p. 9.

OTA's analysis suggests three important findings about the number of Federal programs:

- Even a rather narrow approach to counting programs turns up 29 literacy-related programs in 7 Federal agencies—bolstering the contention that Federal literacy programs are fragmented and mismatched.<sup>17</sup>
- The separate categorical program remains the preferred congressional approach to addressing the national illiteracy problem, and the number of programs has increased in recent years. Most of the programs are relatively small (in Federal terms). Of the 19 programs with identifiable adult education funding, only AEA basic grants have appropriations over \$100 million; while 16 programs have appropriations under \$10 million.

How did the Federal role come to be characterized by multiple categorical programs spread across several agencies? This may reflect the multiple dimensions of the illiteracy problem—economic, occupational, social, cultural, and educational—that call for different responses. Federal legislation also tends to be “reactive,” attacking urgent problems with narrow, self-contained responses. Furthermore, categorical programs are easier to track, audit, and evaluate virtues in a climate with increasing demands for “accountability. Another reason may be the jurisdictional organization of Congress and the executive branch, which tends to discourage crosscutting legislation or broad, systematic policy development. A final set of factors is political.

Sponsoring a separate bill under one's own name is often a more attractive option for a member of Congress than offering an amendment to someone else's bill or refashioning an existing program.

Are there too many Federal programs? Many State administrators and local service providers feel that “. . . the proliferation of programs has too often resulted in a fragmented delivery system”<sup>18</sup> or in “. . . multiple delivery systems, none of which provide the comprehensive, long-term services needed to meet the challenge of improving the basic skills of millions of adults.”<sup>19</sup> The problem, they say, is not so much with duplication of services—with such great need, additional funding sources are always welcome. Rather, the problem lies with duplicative administrative tasks, different funding streams, incompatible service criteria, and an abundance of paperwork.<sup>20</sup>

State and local administrators reserve particular complaints for the small categorical programs, which some view as “short-term, unstable, fragmented” funding sources.<sup>21</sup> Some Federal discretionary grants must be recompleted annually, which makes budgeting and staffing of local programs difficult and unstable. Under those Federal programs that seek to demonstrate new or innovative approaches, funding often ceases once the new approach is tested, which discourages some grantees from applying at all.

## Agency Roles

Although program assignments to Federal agencies roughly follow jurisdictional lines,<sup>22</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Pierce, *op. cit.*, footnote 12, pp. 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> The University of the State of New York, State Education Department, *Adult Literacy: The Key to Lifelong Learning* (Albany, NY: February 1992), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> The placement of literacy programs within Federal agencies also affects the **Visibility** and focus of the effort. For instance, the AEA is administered by an ED division two levels below the Secretary, under an assistant secretary who also has responsibility for vocational education—a placement that some have characterized as being “. . . buried among higher priority programs within the Department of Education.” Similarly, in some States, the primary adult education coordinator or director reports directly to the Chief State School Officer, while in others the office is two or three levels deep within the bureaucracy. See Pierce, *op. cit.*, footnote 12, p. 18.

there is overlap. Both ED and the Department of the Interior administer literacy programs for Native American adults. Basic skills training for the workforce is addressed by ED and DOL. Programs for incarcerated adults exist in ED and the Department of Justice. Programs fostering volunteerism for literacy can be found in ED, the ACTION agency, and the new Commission on National and Community Service.

New Federal programs have enhanced the roles of DOL and HHS in the delivery of adult literacy services, although ED remains the major Federal administering agency. The growing influence of other Federal agencies has brought a new set of State entities into the literacy mix alongside State education agencies (SEAS), most notably agencies for welfare and employment training, but also agencies for libraries, refugee services, corrections, and higher education, as well as the Governors' offices. This shift has increased the complexity and, some say, the fragmentation of administrative structures. Each Federal or State agency has its own mission, constituency, and rules and regulations-which may or may not be compatible-and each tends to address literacy education ". . . from the vantage point of [its] own legislative mandate." <sup>23</sup> Many of these entities also have their own funding streams. As figure 5-1 illustrates, complex relationships can arise from the interweaving of multiple Federal and State agencies, funding streams, and service providers.

Some literacy administrators, usually those representing traditional adult education providers, see the involvement of new agencies as a negative trend. Because education is not the primary mission of welfare, employment, and training agencies, they note, these agencies are not usually staffed by education professionals and may not be attuned to the structures and approaches of adult education organizations and

institutions. Others see these new players as **bringing** a fresh perspective to service delivery and a whole new set of funding partners into the literacy mix.

In addition, a whole separate Federal-to-local funding stream exists, composed of programs in which the Federal Government makes direct grants to the local projects, bypassing the State. Whether these programs are duplicative funding sources, ". . . unlikely to leverage State financial organizational and administrative resources," <sup>24</sup> or whether they cut out a layer of bureaucracy depends largely on one's vantage point.

### Federal Dollars

*At least \$362 million* was appropriated in fiscal year 1992 for adult literacy from the Federal Government (see table 5-1). This is more than double the \$179 million appropriated in fiscal year 1988 for roughly the same group of programs (see figure 5-2). Closer examination of Federal funding reveals some interesting findings. Compensating for inflation, funding for literacy programs has grown 175 percent for the programs included in the \$362 million. This growth has not been uniform: appropriations for the AEA more than doubled after a period of stagnant funding; other programs, such as AEA English literacy grants, were cut; and some current programs included did not exist in 1988. <sup>25</sup> It could be argued that much of the increase in spending merely restored purchasing power lost earlier in the 1980s, as a result of budget cuts and freezes. Nevertheless, the increase is significant because it occurred during a period of limited growth in domestic programs and because even modest new dollars can bring meaningful benefits to the field.

Total Federal literacy funding is likely much higher than \$362 million. As the following

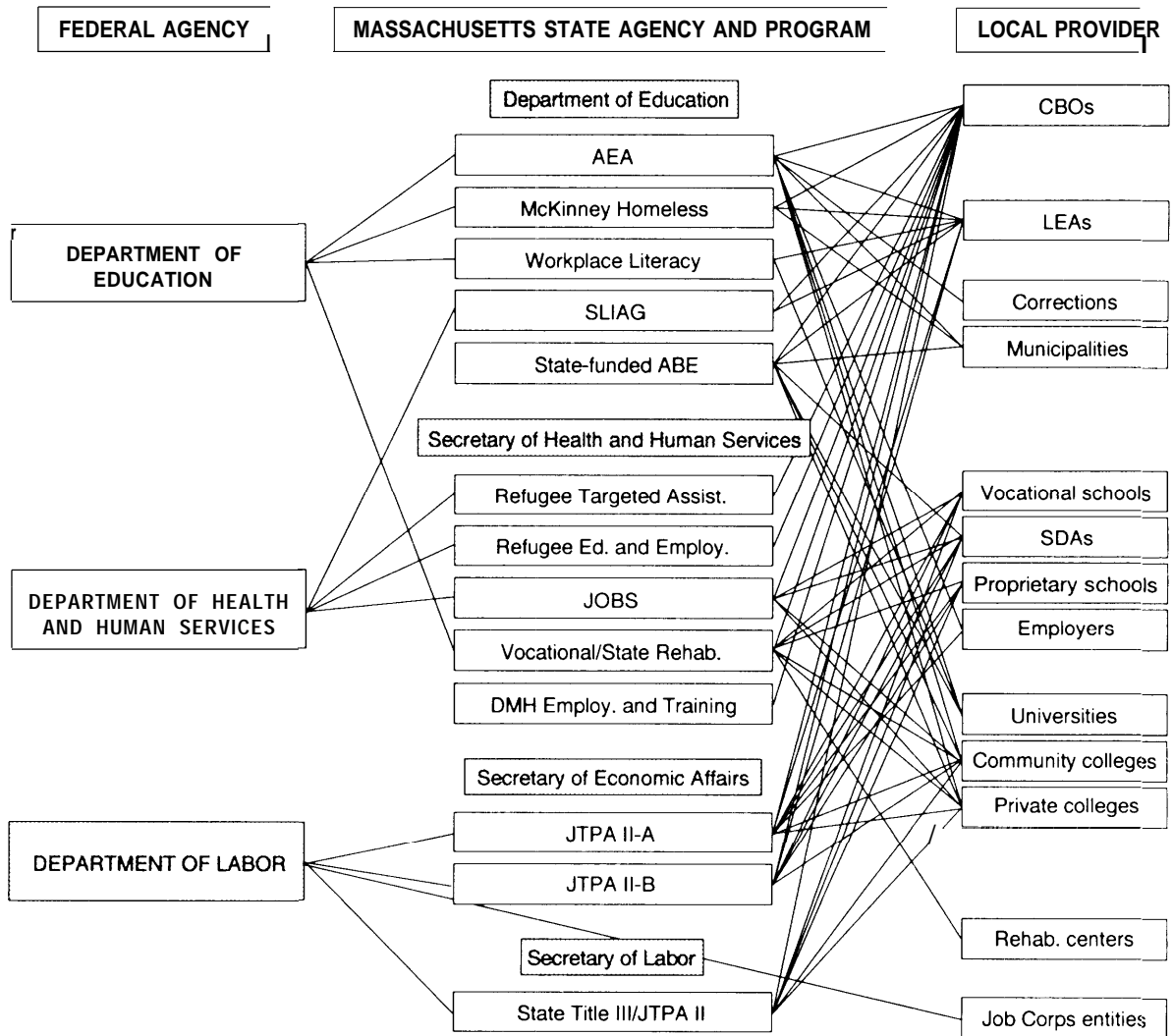
<sup>23</sup> Kahn, *op. cit.*, footnote 14, p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> National Alliance of Business, *Shaping Tomorrow's Workforce: A Leadership Agenda for the 90's* (Washington, DC: 1988), p. viii.

<sup>25</sup> Nancy Kober, "Profiles of Major Federal Literacy programs," OTA contractor report, July 1992.

Figure 51—Programs, Agencies, and Funding Streams: The Massachusetts Example

State participation in multiple Federal basic skills, workforce training, and related programs often produces complex interagency relationships and funding streams at the State and local levels, especially when the State funds its own programs with similar goals. The range of workforce development and basic skills programs in the State of Massachusetts, though far from the most complex State example, suggests the complex webs that arise from the interplay of different funding streams.



KEY

- |   |                                    |
|---|------------------------------------|
| AEA = Adult Education Act                           | CBO = Community-based organization |
| SLIAG = State Legalization Impact Assistance Grants | LEA = local education agencies     |
| ABE = Adult Basic Education                         | SDA = service delivery area        |
| JOBS = Job Opportunities and Basic Skills           | Rehab. = rehabilitation            |
| JTPA = Job Training Partnership Act                 |                                    |

SOURCE: Office of Technology Assessment, 1993, based on information developed by the Massachusetts Jobs Council.

Table 5-I—Appropriations for Major Federal Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Programs

	Fiscal year 1992 funding (in millions)	Fiscal year 1992 funding (in millions)
<b>Department of Education</b>		
Adult Education Act (AEA) Basic Grants .....	\$ 235.8	
AEA State Literacy Resource Centers .....	5.0	
AEA Workplace Literacy Partnerships .....	19.3	
AEA English Literacy Grants .....	1.0	
AEA National Programs .....	9.0	
Literacy for State and Local Prisoners .....	5.0	
Commercial Drivers Program .....	2.5	
Adult Education for the Homeless .....	9.8	
Special Programs for Indian Adults .....	4.3	
Even Start Family Literacy .....	(70.0) <sup>a</sup>	
Bilingual Family English Literacy .....	6.1	
Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA) Title VI, Library Literacy .....		
LSCA Title 1, Public Library Services .....	( 8 %)	
Student Literacy Corps .....	5.4	
Migrant High School Equivalency (HAP) .....	8.3	
<b>Department of Health and Human Services</b>		
Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) ...	\$(1,000.0)	
State Legalization impact Assistance Grants (SLIAG) . .	(1,122.9) <sup>a</sup>	
Refugee Resettlement Program .....	83.0 <sup>c</sup>	
Head Start Family Literacy initiative .....	9.0 <sup>c</sup>	
<b>Department of Labor</b>		
Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Title ii-A, Training for Disadvantaged Youth and Adults .....	\$(1,773.5a)	
JTPA Title ii-B, Summer Youth Employment and Training .....	(495.2a)	
JTPA Title III, Dislocated Workers .....	(577.0a)	
JTPATitle IV-B, Job Corps .....	(846.5a)	
National Workforce Literacy Collaborative .....	0	
<b>Department Of Defense</b>		
Army Basic Skills Education Programs (BSEP): BSEP I & II .....	\$ 6.5 <sup>d</sup>	
Navy Skills Enhancement Program .....	3.1 <sup>d</sup>	
<b>Department of the Interior</b>		
Bureau of Indian Affairs Adult Education .....	\$ 3.4	
<b>Department Of Justice</b>		
Bureau of Prisons Literacy Program .....	\$ 16.1 <sup>d</sup>	
<b>ACTION</b>		
Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) Literacy Corps .....	\$ 4.8	
<b>Total FY 1992 funding .....</b>	<b>\$ 362.4</b>	

NOTE: Amounts in parentheses are not included in TotalFY 92 funding.

a Amounts are for entire program; specific expenditures for adult literacy are not available.

b Deferred.

c Minimum.

d Estimate.

SOURCE: Nancy Kober, "Profiles of Major Federal Literacy Programs," OTA contractor report, July 1992.

evidence suggests, even small percentages of expenditures for adult basic skills under such large programs as JTPA, JOBS, and SLIAG can be significant:

- A 1990 DOL report estimated that in 19868 percent of JTPA Title II-A enrollees and in 1984 6 percent of JTPA Title III enrollees received basic skills training.<sup>26</sup> If even 1 percent of the \$2.35 billion currently appropriated for these two programs were used for basic skills, it would constitute in excess of \$20 million.

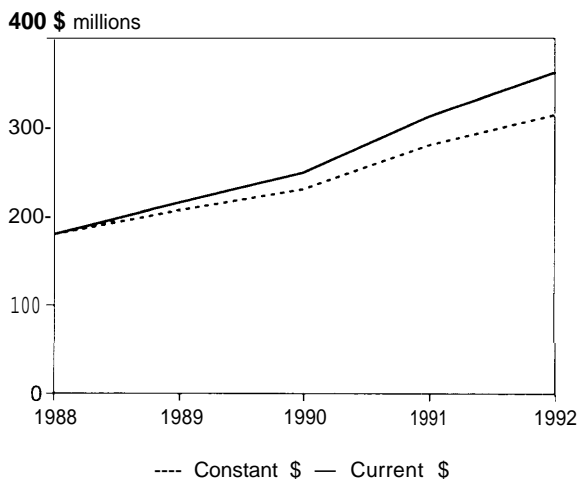
- Under the Job Corps program (Title IV of JTPA), \$40.8 million--or 7.2 percent of the appropriation for Job Corps center operations--was spent on basic education in program year 1990.<sup>27</sup>
- The 8-percent "Governors' set-aside" under JTPA totals \$142 million nationwide; nearly all States offer some adult literacy programs with this money.<sup>28</sup>
- Under the JOBS program, States report spending a total of \$14.5 million in *combined* Federal and State funding for adult basic and general equivalency diploma (GED) education, with

26 U.S. Department of Labor, "Major Federal programs Supporting Adult Literacy Efforts in the U.S. Department of Labor," unpublished report, 1990.

27 Gerri Fiala, director, Division of Planning, Policy, and Legislation, U.S. Department of Labor, personal communication, May 15, 1992.

28 Robert G. Ainsworth et al., *The JTPA Education-Coordination Set-Aside: States' Implementation of the program* (Washington, DC: National Commission for Employment Policy, 1991), p. 8.

**Figure 5-2-identifiable Federal Funding for Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Education, Fiscal Years 1988-92**



**NOTE:** Constant dollars have been calculated using the Implicit Deflator for State and Local Government Purchases of Services. Separate computations were made for the forward-funded programs authorized by the AEA by applying the price index for the succeeding fiscal year in which funds are appropriated.

**SOURCE:** Office of Technology Assessment, 1993.

the amount from Federal sources alone unavailable.<sup>29</sup> Expenditures of JOBS money for education through the high school level vary widely by State; one study found a range from \$0 to over \$4.8 million in fiscal year 1991.<sup>30</sup>

- JOBS expenditures on basic skills would be higher if States would “draw down” their full JOBS entitlements.<sup>31</sup>

The SLIAG program injected significant new money into the adult literacy stream. However, the fiscal year 1992 appropriations were deferred and the authorization is slated to expire.

Despite recent growth in Federal funding, the question remains as to whether the Federal Government is doing “enough” about the problem of adult illiteracy. Placing the Federal commitment in different contexts sheds some light on the issue. Although AEA funding has grown to \$270 million, it still constitutes just 1 percent of the total ED budget. Compared with other multibillion-dollar programs—vocational education, special education, Chapter 1, or student aid—the AEA remains modest (see figure 5-3). And compared with the total Federal funding commitment to other multifaceted domestic problems—building the Interstate Highway System, providing Food Stamps, or preventing and treating drug abuse, to cite just a few—the \$362 million in identifiable Federal expenditures for literacy appears disproportionately small (see figure 5-4).

Another way of looking at spending is in the context of need for services. From 1990 to 1991, the Federal AEA programs served 3.6 million<sup>32</sup>—between 5 and 10 percent of the illiterate population, depending on which definitions and estimates are used.<sup>33</sup> This is far less, for instance, than the percentage of eligible Chapter 1 children (60

<sup>29</sup> Wilbur Waler and Dennis Poe, Division of Program Evaluation Office of Family Assistance, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, personal communication May 1, 1992. This figure does not include self-initiated education, or the \$300 million HHS provides in childcare for JOBS participants.

<sup>30</sup> Jan L. Hagan and Irene Lurie, *Implementing JOBS: Initial State Choices* (Albany, NY: The Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government, 1992).

<sup>31</sup> GAO estimated that in fiscal year 1992 about 38 percent of the Federal appropriation—or nearly \$372 million—was unspent because States were not meeting matching requirements. See U.S. General Accounting Office, *Welfare to Work: States Begin JOBS, But Fiscal and Other Problems May Impede Their Progress* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 44. According to fiscal year 1993 HHS budget documents, \$832 million of the \$1 billion available for fiscal year 1992 was spent, leaving \$168 million, or 17 percent, unspent from that year’s budget authority.

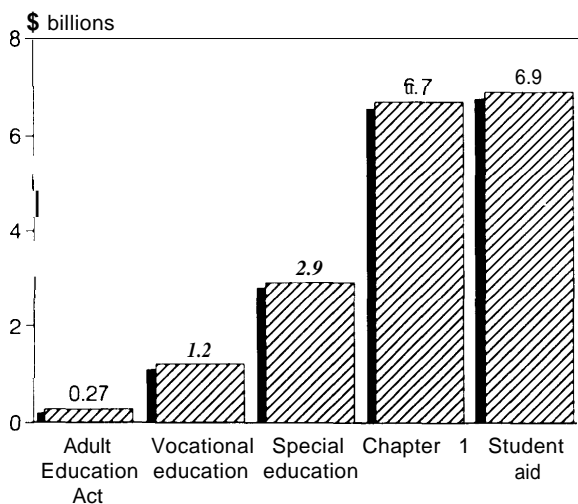
<sup>32</sup> Joan Seamon, director, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, Apr. 1, 1992. AEA participation counts are based on numbers of persons receiving 12 hours of services or more, and therefore include adults who are in the program for a relatively short time or who receive services of lesser intensity.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *A Summary Report: National Forums on the Adult Education Delivery System* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 27.

to 70 percent) or Head Start children (30 to 60 percent, depending on the age group used) estimated to be served.<sup>34</sup> As the pool of adults in need of services increases by an estimated 1 million annually due to legal and illegal immigration,<sup>35</sup> and perhaps another 1 million due to school dropouts, it must be asked whether Federal funding is running to stay in the same place.

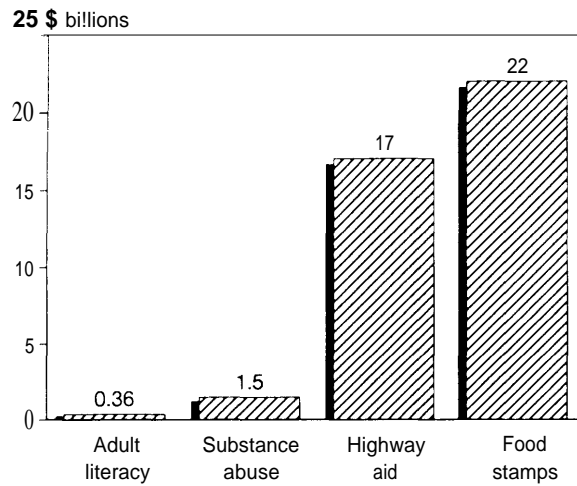
A reliance on funding from multiple Federal sources may exacerbate the touch-and-go funding situation of many local literacy providers. Federal discretionary grants or contract letters sometimes do not arrive until well after the project period has begun, a particularly troublesome problem in competitive grant programs and in reimbursement-based programs such as JOBS and SLIAG. AEA, JOBS, and JTPA also pass through dollars on different timetables.

**Figure 5-3-Funding for Select Department of Education Programs, Fiscal Year 1992**



SOURCE: Office of Technology Assessment, 1993.

**Figure 5-4-Funding for Select Federal Domestic Priorities, Fiscal Year 1992**



SOURCE: Office of Technology Assessment, 1993.

The situation is further complicated because some Federal programs are forward-funded (grantees know the amount of their awards before the beginning of the year in which the funds are obligated); some are current-year funded (funds arrive during the fiscal year); and some operate on a reimbursement basis (agencies receive reimbursements for funds they have already spent). State programs may operate on a different fiscal year than the Federal fiscal year, confusing the situation still more.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, Federal programs have different provisions for carrying over unobligated funds. AEA funds can be carried over for 27 months and JTPA funds for an additional 2 years. JOBS does not allow funds to be carried over but permits obligated funds to be liquidated during the 12 months following the end of the fiscal year.

<sup>34</sup> Jeffrey McFarland, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Education, personal communication, Dec. 5, 1991; and Terry Deshler, U.S. Congress, House Committee on Education and Labor, Subcommittee on Human Resources, personal communication, Dec. 5, 1991.

<sup>35</sup> "Illegal Immigration," *CQ Researcher*, vol. 2, No. 16, Apr. 24, 1992, pp. 363, 366.

<sup>36</sup> Some States, such as Texas, have put all their programs on the same planning cycle, regardless of when the State gets the dollars.

## New Emphases

The past 6 years of legislative activity have produced marked changes in emphasis in Federal literacy programs. In general, the new emphases recognize that there are diverse types of ‘literacies’ and that improved literacy can have a multiplier effect, in terms of better jobs, improved parenting, reduced welfare dependence, and less criminal recidivism.

*One new emphasis is workplace literacy.* Since 1988, several new Federal programs have focused on improving workers’ basic skills, including the workplace literacy partnership program, national workplace literacy strategies, and a commercial drivers program<sup>37</sup>-all in ED; and a national workforce literacy collaborative in DOL.<sup>38</sup> In addition, workforce development efforts target those on the margins of the labor market. New amendments to the JTPA and Federal vocational education legislation emphasize basic skills instruction as a component of job preparation for unemployed adults, displaced workers, displaced homemakers, single parents, and disadvantaged youth. Federal workplace literacy efforts amounted to about \$21 million in fiscal year 1992. It remains to be seen whether these efforts are sufficient to meet the educational needs of working adults with basic skills deficiencies—a

group some have called “. . . the most seriously neglected national priority in this [literacy] field.’<sup>39</sup>

*Family literacy is a second new emphasis in the Federal framework.* The Even Start program,<sup>40</sup> the Head Start family literacy initiative,<sup>41</sup> the Bilingual Family English Literacy program,<sup>42</sup> and certain provisions of the Library Literacy program<sup>43</sup> give an intergenerational focus to the Federal role that was largely absent before 1988. The JOBS program, too, might be said to consider intergenerational issues by targeting Aid for Dependent Children (AFDC) parents of young children. In comparison to need, however, the total Federal family literacy effort is still in the budding stage.<sup>44</sup>

*A third new emphasis is mandatory participation*—a marked departure from the traditional adult basic education (ABE) approach, in which participants enroll voluntarily and set their own goals. The most far-reaching mandates are in the JOBS program, which directs States to require certain welfare recipients—primarily young custodial parents with inadequate basic skills—to participate in educational programs, if childcare is provided and to the extent that State resources permit. The frill effect of this mandate has not been felt yet due to limited State funding and the ability of States to fulfill Federal participation requirements with volunteers.<sup>45</sup> A similar but

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<sup>37</sup> **The Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1986 required commercial drivers to pass a written and oral knowledge test or risk losing their license.** The deadline for compliance was April 1992.

<sup>38</sup> **In cooperation with other agencies, DOL is developing a new initiative to provide technical assistance to small and medium-sized businesses to help them cope with a variety of work restructuring issues; this initiative will encompass the functions of the National Workforce Collaborative and several other related functions.** Gem Fiala, director, Division of Planning, Policy, and Legislation U.S. Department of Labor, *personal communication*, Apr. 30, 1992.

<sup>39</sup> **Forrest P. Chisman, *Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy* (Southport, CT: The Southport Institute, 1989), pp. iv-v.**

<sup>40</sup> **The Even Start program under Chapter 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act targets educationally disadvantaged parents and their children ages 0 to 7 who live in low-income Chapter 1 school attendance areas.**

<sup>41</sup> **HHS now requires all Head Start grantees to incorporate family literacy into their regular activities.**

<sup>42</sup> **Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act authorizes this program for limited-English-proficient parents and children.**

<sup>43</sup> **Library Services and Construction Act, Titles I and VI.**

<sup>44</sup> **Funding for these programs totaled \$85 million in fiscal year 1992, of which \$70 million was for Even Start. The specific amount of Even Start money spent on adult literacy education (as opposed to children’s education, parenting education, and other authorized activities) is not available, but it is unlikely to be high, since regulations encourage projects to use existing literacy resources in the community.**

<sup>45</sup> **Hagen and Lurie, op. cit., footnote 30, pp. 15-16.**





*In many States, AFDC clients are being placed in education programs to improve their literacy skills. The New Chances Multi Resource Center in Minneapolis provides GED and life-skills instruction to teenage mothers with Federal funding from the JOBS programs.*

smaller program in the Department of Agriculture, the Food Stamp Employment and Training program, also mandates education and training for certain Food Stamp recipients. As noted in chapter 4, mandatory participation is becoming a trend in programs for incarcerated adults, as well.

*A fourth new emphasis is improving the quality, effectiveness, and infrastructure of adult literacy programs.* Over the years, Federal adult education programs have been criticized for devoting relatively little attention to teacher training, research, and data collection. The 1988 AEA amendments and the 1991 NLA set forth a new knowledge-acquiring, capacity-building, and

program improvement agenda for the Federal Government and the States. The 1991 act, in particular, authorizes a National Institute for Literacy, State resource centers, a National Adult Literacy Survey, and a national workplace strategies demonstration program, and requires indicators of program quality in AEA programs.

Many people in the field consider the new capacity-building provisions—particularly the National Institute and the State resource centers—to be the most significant provisions of the 1991 law.<sup>46</sup> Several new research and implementation issues have arisen as a result of legislation enacted since 1986 and could form the core of a

<sup>46</sup> Forrest P. Chisman, president, Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, personal communication, Jan. 8, 1992; Richard K. Long, Washington representative, International Reading Association personal communication, Jan. 9, 1992; and Joan Y. Seamon, director, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, Dec. 10, 1991.

research agenda for the National Institute and State resource centers. Areas for study include the effects of mandated participation, differences in learning styles among target groups, effective uses of technology for instruction and management, and the effects of competition for program slots when there are waiting lists.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the success of many of the new Federal programs hinges in part on how well and how expeditiously this ambitious new knowledge-acquiring and capacity-building agenda is implemented.

### Definitions of Services

OTA finds that Federal literacy laws, collectively speaking, take a haphazard approach to defining key services and activities. Different terms are used to mean roughly the same thing, and many critical terms are not defined at all. For example, all the following terms are used to describe allowable services in different Federal laws: adult basic education, adult secondary education, literacy training, basic skills education, basic skills training, remedial education, English as a second language, English literacy instruction, and English language instruction. In many cases, these terms are not defined in law or regulation; where they are, they are sometimes defined differently across programs.<sup>48</sup> Vagueness is especially pronounced in the JTPA: the terms basic education, remedial education, and literacy training are used in ways that imply different meanings, yet none are defined.

This inconsistency and vagueness may be attributable to the pluralistic needs of the eligible population, to the different historical roots of the various Federal literacy efforts, or to ever-changing perceptions of what constitutes an adequate level of literacy. Nevertheless, with key

terms left up to guesswork, the possibilities for multiple interpretations and misinterpretations abound, even as the chances of accurately assessing the extent of the problem diminish.

Section 3 of Public Law 102-73, the 1991 NLA, seeks to improve this situation by instituting a statutory definition of literacy with a functional orientation, one that ED intends to apply over the long term to all its programs:

An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential.

Whether other agencies will follow suit and adopt this as a consistent Federal standard remains to be seen.<sup>49</sup>

### Target Populations

Until fairly recently, most Federal aid to adult education was relatively untargeted. The bulk of funding was (and still is) distributed through AEA basic grants, open to any adult with educational need, regardless of income, country of origin, or other restrictions. Programs in other agencies dealt with a handful of special target groups, such as military personnel.

New Federal laws have increased the amount of Federal funding with restricted eligibility, shifting the Federal emphasis somewhat toward:

- Low-income adults, through the JOBS and JTPA programs;
- Parents of young children, through the family literacy and JOBS programs;
- Groups with special needs (i.e., State and local prisoners and the homeless); and

<sup>47</sup> The National Center for Adult Literacy, one of the Department of Education's federally funded research centers, can also contribute to the base of knowledge about program effectiveness, adult learning and motivation, and use of technology.

<sup>48</sup> For example, 'literacy' is defined in functional terms in the new National Literacy Act definition, whereas the JOBS regulations define literacy as a grade-equivalent level of 8.9. Similarly, 'limited English proficient' is defined in three slightly different ways in the AEA, family bilingual education, and JOBS regulations.

<sup>49</sup> Seamon, *op. cit.*, footnote 46.

- **Highly defined subcategories** of newcomers (eligible legalized aliens, refugees, and Cuban and Haitian entrants).

The general intent seems to be to drive more resources toward groups that Congress feels may have been neglected or undeserved by traditional programs.<sup>50</sup>

Targeted Federal programs seem to be accomplishing their intended effect of channeling more funds toward adults with special needs and encouraging States and local providers to reach out to groups, such as the homeless and welfare mothers, whose access to general ABE programs has been limited.<sup>51</sup> As a result of the JOBS Program, for example, more welfare clients are being referred to adult education programs and almost one-half of the States report shifting the emphasis of their welfare-to-work efforts away from immediate job placement toward basic skills and long-term education or training.<sup>52</sup>

An analysis of targeting provisions raises several issues, however. First, a question arises as to whether the growth of targeted programs means a diminished emphasis on other adults who may not fit into Federal “boxes” —working adults, certain LEP adults, educationally disadvantaged adults above the poverty line, adults with learning disabilities, and high school graduates who have not mastered basic skills. All of these groups must compete for spaces in AEA-funded programs, other public programs, or private/volunteer programs. Given current funding levels, it is unrealistic to imagine that they

will **all** be served. **Yet the Federal laws appear to expect** that literacy programs will be able to serve all of the new target populations without diminishing services to the groups traditionally enrolled in ABE. Some State and local practitioners feel that targeted programs require them to be more responsive to Federal guidelines than to the community needs.<sup>53</sup>

This inadequacy in the Federal framework is particularly pronounced regarding the LEP population, the fastest growing group in adult education. Here the Federal role is a “. . . combination of generosity and neglect.”<sup>54</sup> Those eligible under SLIAG and the Refugee Resettlement program benefited from significant Federal funding. The rest of the LEP population—including most immigrants, undocumented aliens, and native-born Americans—must seek help through the AEA or nonfederal programs, unless they are fortunate enough to live in a community that has received a Federal LEP discretionary grant or a bilingual family literacy grant. Although ESL enrollments in Federal AEA programs now comprised 35 percent of the total,<sup>55</sup> services still fall far short of need. According to one local ESL director in Massachusetts, the number of slots available for working LEP adults—the majority of their waiting list—has decreased as the proportion of their budget coming from special Federal programs has gone up. Adults eligible for SLIAG, refugee programs, JOBS, and needs-based programs can ‘jump’ the wait list, but this lengthens

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<sup>50</sup> **This trend** must not be overstated. The majority of **identifiable** Federal literacy funding, provided through **AEA basic grants**, is **still** relatively unrestricted, as are such programs as library literacy and VISTA. And the new emphasis on workplace literacy for employed adults might be considered a **trend** in a very different **direction**, toward serving the least economically disadvantaged who are **already** in the Job market,

<sup>51</sup> **It should not be forgotten that some new Federal ideas, such as workplace literacy and welfare reform, were actually pioneered by the States.**

<sup>52</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *op. cit.*, footnote 31, p. 4.

<sup>53</sup> The University of the State of New York, *op. cit.*, footnote 21, p. 15.

<sup>54</sup> Chisman et al., *op. cit.*, footnote 6, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *Teaching Adults With Limited English Skills* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), p. 1.

the wait for those left behind and discourages them from seeking help.<sup>56</sup>

Recent legislation has not clearly resolved whether limited Federal resources should focus on those adults with the most severe educational needs, who incur the greatest social costs, or on those closest to functional literacy, with the greatest promise of becoming productive workers in the shortest time. The current mix of Federal programs leans somewhat in the direction of the former, but with enough departures in favor of the latter to suggest that the Federal Government is trying to be all things to all people. As many program people note, when the number of 'priority' groups proliferates to a certain point, the whole concept of priority loses its meaning, and it becomes hard to distinguish the true priorities.

Are Federal JOBS requirements really expanding the total pool of resources for adult literacy education or merely changing the composition of adult classes by displacing "slots" available for nonwelfare adults? Many States, in compliance with HHS regulations<sup>57</sup> are placing JOBS clients in education services paid for by sources other than JOBS funds. In one 1991 study, 26 States reported that 40 percent or more of JOBS participants were placed in activities paid for by other providers.<sup>58</sup> Research also suggests that many States do not have enough program slots to fill the demand for JOBS services; over one-half of the States cited or expected shortages in alternative, basic, and remedial programs for JOBS clients, particularly in rural areas.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, the Federal concept of compartmentalization by target group is somewhat at odds with how most local programs prefer to operate,

accepting all comers and grouping by type and level of instruction.

## Administrative Entities and Service Providers

The Federal Government has played an important role in the development of public infrastructure to serve illiterate adults. Until recently, SEAS and local education agencies (LEAs) dominated the scene. The creation of new programs, the rise of DOL and HHS as key players, and the revamping of AEA distribution requirements are bringing about changes in State roles, administrative structures, funding streams, and the mix of service providers.

The 1991 amendments to the AEA require a range of service providers to have "direct and equitable access" to Federal funds. In effect this change signals a shift away from LEAs and school-based models toward community-based organizations (CBOs) and other diverse providers.<sup>60</sup> These amendments have potentially far-reaching implications for service delivery, as States revise their allocation systems to comply and as previously unfunded organizations compete for direct grants. The Texas Education Agency, for example, has drafted amendments to its AEA State plan that allow all eligible grantees to apply directly to the State for competitive grants, but that also encourage eligible recipients to participate in a consortium, with a single fiscal agent applying on behalf of several service providers. Massachusetts, by contrast, is likely to make very few changes in its competitive process.

Broadening the base of service providers as required by law may also give rise to a whole new

<sup>56</sup> Betty Stone, ESL director, Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences, Somerville, MA, personal communication, Jan. 28, 1992.

<sup>57</sup> HHS regulations require States to "... identify existing resources ... and assure that costs for these other services for which welfare recipients have been eligible are not incurred by the JOBS program." 45CFR 250.12.

<sup>58</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *op. cit.*, footnote 31, p. 23. Also see Hagen and Lurie, *op. cit.*, footnote 30, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> U.S. General Accounting Office, *op. cit.*, footnote 31, p. 31.

<sup>60</sup> researchers, as well as CBO advocates, argue that school-based adult education programs, because of their outreach methods, institutional settings, locations, and teaching approaches, are less likely to serve the most disadvantaged adults than CBOs and other private nonprofit providers.

set of service delivery issues: how to guarantee quality control throughout a larger, more diverse network; how to establish economies of scale and efficient management practices; how to provide technical assistance to local organizations that have not worked with Federal requirements before; and how to assure coordination and avoid duplication.

New legislation also increases the role of the private sector. The workplace literacy program, for example, makes businesses and labor unions direct grantees and primary partners in delivering services. Other programs give private-sector groups responsibility for planning, advising, coordinating, developing curriculum, providing technology, and, in the case of JTPA, overseeing programs.

Finally, the Federal role affords greater recognition to volunteer literacy efforts through such programs as the VISTA literacy corps, the library literacy programs, the Student Literacy Corps, and the Commission on National and Community Service, and through AEA amendments requiring States to describe how they will use volunteers to expand the delivery system.

### Services and Activities

Until recently the Federal Government has been cautious about prescribing the types of adult education services or the quality and intensity of those services. Aside from limiting the amount for adult secondary education and specifying which support services are allowable, the AEA has been relatively flexible. Critics have argued that the flexibility in the law regarding instructional services—together with limited Federal funding and an input-based evaluation system—has helped create an adult basic education model that provides low-intensity services for a short time to many people and that relies on part-time teachers and volunteers.

In general, the Federal framework seems to be edging toward greater prescription regarding activities and services. Under the refugee resettlement

program, for example, English language instruction must be related to “obtaining and retaining a job” and must be provided outside normal working hours to the extent possible. The Even Start program requires each project to contain certain minimum elements—such as screening, support services, and home-based programs. In at least some cases, this type of Federal prescription seems aimed at ensuring quality control.

These more prescriptive service requirements seem to be having an effect at the State and local level. Many local providers have responded to JOBS minimum 20-hour requirements by mounting a high-intensity program for JOBS and other clients who have time to devote to these programs. As implementation progresses, this program will provide a good case study of the effects of participation mandates and of a more intense level of services.

A related trend is toward specifying minimum levels of participation and a minimum intensity of services. For example, in the JOBS program, reimbursements are based on average numbers of clients who receive a minimum of 20 hours of service weekly, and individuals are deemed to be participating satisfactorily if they attend 75 percent of scheduled JOBS activities. The Bureau of Prisons also mandates a minimum of 120 hours of literacy instruction for inmates below the GED level. Although the AEA remains relatively nonprescriptive, the newly mandated indicators of program quality being developed by the Secretary of Education could also have an impact on modes of instruction and intensity of services.

Federal laws are also becoming somewhat more open about funding support services, such as childcare, transportation, outreach, and counseling. New Federal programs have also helped move services to nontraditional locations, such as job sites and homeless shelters. Federal family literacy programs, which emphasize services for both parents and children at a single site, are also helping to change traditional assumptions about how and where services are delivered.



*Regulations have raised the compulsory education requirements for Federal prisoners to high school diploma equivalency level. At the Maryland State Penitentiary, inmates use the library to expand their skills and pursue personal interests.*

### Accountability Requirements

Most Federal adult literacy programs contain a range of fiscal, reporting, and evaluation requirements aimed at ensuring that programs serve the intended clients and use sound financial and management practices. The most common fiscal requirements call for State and local matching, limit administrative costs, require maintenance of effort, and prohibit supplanting of State and local

funds. Of particular significance are matching requirements. These vary considerably across programs. JTPA, for example, is 100 percent federally funded; other programs are 50 percent or less. This means that the Federal Government has "... a differing locus of leverage. . ." for each program- "[o]bviously an agency can push harder when it kicks in the lion's share of the money." <sup>61</sup>

Most programs also have annual reporting and recordkeeping requirements, each of which may seem sensible in context, but which cumulatively may produce a substantial **burden for participating agencies.** State and local providers often find multiple Federal accountability requirements "... cumbersome, confusing, and costly . . ." <sup>62</sup> and a considerable source of frustration. Several State and local administrators report that because accountability is so different from one funding source to another, a program that gets three or four different discretionary grants must have as many accountability systems. One formal evaluation concluded that when local programs obtain funds from multiple sources, they pay an information burden price, since they often must collect the same information in slightly different forms to satisfy different reporting requirements. Further frustration occurs when Federal requirements change in midstream, even after a law is well in place. <sup>63</sup>

Needs-based programs and reimbursement-based programs, such as JOBS, SLIAG, and JTPA, seem to generate the most criticisms from local providers, <sup>64</sup> and programs administered by HHS and DOL seem to breed more complaints about requirements and paperwork than ED programs. Some of this maybe attributable to the sheer size of the HHS and DOL formula grant programs. Another likely reason is that Congress,

<sup>61</sup> Christopher King, "Commonalities Among Education, Training and Human Service Programs," *Making the Connection: Coordinating Education and Training for a Skilled Workforce* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1991), p. 13.

<sup>62</sup> Shirley Downs, *Streamlining and Integrating Human Resource Development Services for Adults* (Washington DC: National Governors' Association 1991), p. 19.

<sup>63</sup> U.S. Department of Education, op. cit., footnote 33, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

responding to public concerns about fraud and abuse, has made a concerted effort to tighten eligibility and related requirements in Federal welfare, job training, and social service programs. The result is an accountability approach that closely tracks individual clients, whereas education programs tend to use aggregate accountability and sampling.

Some local programs resolve the incompatibility of various Federal requirements by establishing self-contained classes of all SLIAG-eligible adults, for example, or all JOBS participants,<sup>65</sup> in order to leave a clear accountability trail (whether or not it is sound educational practice). Others forgo participation in certain programs, feeling that the added paperwork is not worth the burden.<sup>66</sup> Some States, such as Texas, have tried to standardize fiscal and accountability requirements for all adult literacy programs or develop a single eligibility process for needs-based programs, to the extent possible within the parameters of Federal laws.

Several points need to be considered when weighing criticisms of Federal accountability requirements. First, local people are not always clear about which requirements are federally imposed and which are State-imposed. Second, States interpret the same Federal requirements in very different ways and with different amounts of paperwork required. Third, those who complain, with legitimacy, about Federal paperwork and regulations still acknowledge the need for accountability for taxpayers' dollars.

### Evaluation Requirements

Evaluation requirements are a particularly important type of accountability mechanism and they, too, differ from program to program, ranging from the very loose (such as a requirement for

self-evaluation) to the very prescriptive (such as the JTPA performance standards or the bilingual family literacy technical evaluation standards). Most Federal literacy programs come down somewhere in the middle, with a broad requirement for grantees to conduct an evaluation using objective and quantifiable measures.

In keeping with a national trend toward standard-setting in education and stricter accountability in human resource programs, Congress has strengthened evaluation and program improvement requirements for a number of literacy-related programs.<sup>67</sup> Specific mechanisms differ by program. The JTPA, for example, places relatively few conditions on grantees before they receive funds but is specific about results (performance standards).<sup>68</sup> The JOBS program specifies inputs and outcomes, with individual needs assessments, employability plans, and participation requirements up front and standards of satisfactory progress later.

Performance or outcome standards, as pioneered by the JTPA, are becoming more common in a range of programs. The JTPA itself has become more performance-driven since 1983, with financial incentives and sanctions for failure to meet standards. In the JOBS program, HHS must develop performance standards by 1993. Other new amendments charge the National Institute for Literacy and the State resource centers with advising and providing technical assistance on evaluation and require States to evaluate 20 percent of their AEA-funded programs each year. In addition, the National Literacy Act of 1991 requires that:

... the Secretary, in consultation with appropriate experts, educators and administrators, shall develop indicators of program quality that may be used by State and local programs receiving

<sup>65</sup> Hagen and Lurie, *op. Cit.*, footnote 30 > p.10.

<sup>66</sup> Mark A. Kutner et al., *Adult Education Programs and Services: A View From Nine Programs* (Washington, DC: Pelavin Associates, 1990), p. 50.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

assistance under this title as models by which to judge the success of such programs, including success in recruitment and retention of students and improvement in the literacy skills of students. Such indicators shall take into account different conditions under which programs operate and shall be modified as better means of assessing program quality are developed.@

With all the evaluation data being generated by Federal requirements, there are still some gaps in the area of adult literacy. Much of the information produced by federally mandated evaluations focuses on specific Federal program issues, rather than on the best instructional practices and adult learning models. In addition, good mechanisms do not always exist for managing and analyzing evaluation data and disseminating it to practitioners.

State and local reactions to Federal evaluation requirements raise some important issues that merit consideration as Federal agencies implement new provisions to strengthen evaluation. At the local level, it is not uncommon for a JTPA participant and an AEA participant to sit beside each other in class, work with the same teacher and instructional materials, and yet be judged by different evaluation or performance criteria. From the local perspective, some of these differences may seem unnecessary and at times unfair, especially if some of the funding is tied to outcomes.

While State and local adult literacy professionals would like a higher degree of compatibility, they do not, as a rule, believe that all programs should be measured the same way. Criteria for judging a workplace literacy program, for example, are likely to differ from those used to evaluate a family literacy program.<sup>70</sup> In addition, there

appears to be continued support at the State and local level for accountability systems flexible enough to be “. . . driven by the individual learner’s goals,’ with measures that evaluate how well those goals are being met.<sup>71</sup>

A second issue is whether evaluation standards are consistent with long-range program goals. For instance, JTPA performance standards are sometimes criticized for overemphasizing job placement, earnings, and corrective action (a criticism addressed in the new reauthorization of the JTPA). Some practitioners say this discourages programs from providing longer term basic skills services to the most educationally disadvantaged, especially if the education services are not likely to lead directly to employment. State and local practitioners also express concern that overambitious standards in a variety of programs can lead to “creaming” of those most likely to succeed or to overenrolling clients in hopes that a sufficient number will meet the standards by the end of the program.

## ENCOURAGING TECHNOLOGY USE

The Federal framework sends mixed and sporadic messages about the role of technology in adult literacy programs, and States and local service providers have responded to these signals in different ways.

### Federal Provisions for Technology

Several provisions of law and regulation acknowledge, allow, or encourage the use of technologies for delivering literacy services or managing programs (see box 5-D). Some of these are longstanding in Federal law: the JTPA explicitly allows funds to be used for advanced learning

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<sup>69</sup> Public Law 102-73, Section 301, which amends Section 361 of the Adult Education Act.

<sup>70</sup> In Massachusetts, for example, a workplace literacy program in a manufacturing company judged effectiveness in part by reduction in scrap met while an English literacy program in a hospital interviewed patients about the quality of their communications with participating hospital staff. Bob Bozarjian, Massachusetts Department of Education, personal communication, Jan. 27, 1992.

<sup>71</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *op. cit.*, footnote 33, p. 19.



**Box 5-D-Key Technology Provisions in Federal Literacy Laws and Regulations**

<b>AEA State Resource Centers</b>	Centers may improve and promote diffusion and adoption of technologies. May provide training and technical assistance on effective use of technologies. No more than 10 percent of grant for hardware and software.																
National Institute for Literacy	<b>Institute will</b> conduct R&D on best methods, including technology. Will study use of technology to increase literacy knowledge base.																
<b>AEA Workplace Literacy</b>	Competitive priority to projects in retooling industries. Projects may update worker basic skills to meet technological demands. Secretary may consider whether applicants have “interactive video curriculum” in making national strategy grants. National strategy grant recipients may use funds to establish “technology-based learning environments,” but <b>Secretary may limit</b> expenditures for hardware and software.																
<b>AEA English Literacy</b>	<b>Secretary</b> considers use of new instructional technologies in making national demonstration grants.																
<b>AEA National programs</b>	<b>Secretary may</b> evaluate educational technology and software for adults.																
Literacy for State and Local Prisoners	Literacy programs must use advanced technologies impossible.																
<b>Bilingual Family Literacy</b>	<b>May</b> use funds for technology-based instruction																
DOL Workforce Collaborative	Collaborative will inform businesses and unions about use of technology in workplace literacy and produce video materials.																
<b>Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Title II-A</b>	<b>Funds may be used</b> for advanced learning technology for education. Funds may be used for commercial technology training packages if brought competitively and include performance criteria.																
No special technology provisions	<table border="0" style="width: 100%;"> <tr> <td style="width: 50%;">AEABasic Grants</td> <td style="width: 50%;">commercial Drivers Program</td> </tr> <tr> <td>McKinney Homeless</td> <td>ED Program for Indian Adults</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Even <b>start</b></td> <td>- -</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>student Literacy corps</b></td> <td>JTPA Title II</td> </tr> <tr> <td>JTPATitle III</td> <td>Job corps</td> </tr> <tr> <td><b>SLIAG</b></td> <td>VISTA LiteracyCorps</td> </tr> <tr> <td>JOBS (Welfare Reform)</td> <td>Refugee Resettlement~</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Head Start Family Literacy</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	AEABasic Grants	commercial Drivers Program	McKinney Homeless	ED Program for Indian Adults	Even <b>start</b>	- -	<b>student Literacy corps</b>	JTPA Title II	JTPATitle III	Job corps	<b>SLIAG</b>	VISTA LiteracyCorps	JOBS (Welfare Reform)	Refugee Resettlement~	Head Start Family Literacy	
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Head Start Family Literacy																	

**KEY:** AEA=Adult Education Act; DOL=Department of Labor; ED=Department of Education; JOBS=Job Opportunities and Basic Skills; SLIAG=State Legalization Impact Assistance Act.

**SOURCE:** Nancy Kober, “Profiles of Major Federal Literacy Programs,” OTA contractor report, July 1992.

technologies, and the Department of Defense is a leading user of adult learning technologies.<sup>72</sup> Other provisions affecting technology are more recent. The National Institute for Literacy and

State resource centers are encouraged to conduct research and provide technical assistance on technology. The relatively new workplace literacy partnership program also recognizes the

<sup>72</sup> Arnold H. Packer, “Retooling the American Workforce: The Role of Technology in Improving Adult Literacy During the 1990s,” background paper for the Project on Adult Literacy, Southport Institute, 1988, p. 39. See also U.S. Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, *Worker Training: Competing in the New Economy*, OTA-ITE-457 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1990), pp. 263-267.



*This videodisc program incorporates text and pictures to help adult literacy students improve reading skills at Temple University's Center for Learning and Adult Literacy Development.*

relationship between basic skills and workplace technology demands.

By and large, however, Federal adult literacy legislation has not kept pace with the reality or promise of technology. The AEA basic grant program contains no provisions explicitly authorizing use of technology, neither do Even Start, SLIAG, refugee resettlement, and homeless education. JOBS regulations mention funding for automated management systems but do not mention use of technology in service delivery. No programs contain capital budgets for equipment purchase or explicit funding for teacher training in technology.

Further, most statutory and regulatory provisions that do recognize technology are options, not mandates. In several programs, Federal administering agencies may consider the use of technology when making competitive grants. In other cases, State and local agencies may use Federal funds for technology. The mandates that do exist—such as those relating to the National Institute for Literacy and the DOL National Workforce Literacy Collaborative—generally af-

fat decisions at the Federal level, not the **State and** local level. The only quasi-mandate at the grantee level is in the ED fictional literacy program for State and local prisoners, which requires the use of advanced technologies “if possible.”

Federal intent regarding technology is further obscured by mixed messages. Some laws that explicitly mention technology as an allowable activity also place a cap on the amount that may be spent for hardware or software. (Examples are the State resource centers and the workplace literacy program.)

Moreover, the references to different technologies in laws and regulations are somewhat arbitrary and ill-defined. Various Federal laws mention all the following types of technology without defining them: state-of-the-art technologies, interactive video curriculum, technology-based learning environments, new instructional technologies, technology-based instruction, advanced learning technologies, and commercial technology training packages.

Other Federal requirements not directly related to technology may subtly discourage its use. For example, performance standards may dissuade service providers from making long-term equipment investments or trying out new technology-based instructional approaches, for fear these will not lead to immediate increases in student learning or employment.<sup>73</sup> Eligibility requirements may in effect prohibit federally funded hardware and software from being used by noneligible learners after hours. The absence of multiyear contracts in programs such as JTPA may discourage long-term investment in technology.<sup>74</sup>

Some Federal agencies are undertaking their own efforts to encourage wider and better use of technologies. DOL and ED have supported literacy-related technology demonstrations with discretionary money. States have used AEA section 353

<sup>73</sup> Packer, op. cit., footnote 72, p. 55.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

experimental funds to promote use of technology?<sup>75</sup>

Why has the Federal Government taken a cautious approach to technology? First, the Federal Government traditionally has tended to be suspicious about capital expenditures in education, especially for expensive equipment that may become obsolete or sit untouched because people are not properly trained. Second, because adult education funding is so limited compared to need, many policymakers see the technology issue as a tradeoff between “live” teachers or computers. Third, the pressure for greater Federal leadership is not there, because the adult education field is still in its adolescence regarding technology. Finally, many Federal agencies lack the technical expertise to develop a thoughtful technology policy.<sup>76</sup>

Federal leadership could do a great deal to help the field mature technologically, in terms of research, training, evaluation, dissemination, and adoption. The Office of Educational Research and Improvement National Center for Adult Literacy, the National Institute, and the State centers offer promising starting points, but these efforts are in the early stages.<sup>77</sup>

A final issue for Federal consideration is the use of technology for program management. The growth of Federal literacy-related programs with strict eligibility and documentation requirements has created new data collection and reporting burdens that could be greatly eased through technology-based management systems. Technology also holds promise for better coordination across programs and agencies. A related question is whether Federal policy should encourage broad integration and sharing of instructional and man-

agement technology across programs, or whether technology issues should be addressed independently by each program.

### State and Local Reaction to Federal Technology Policy

States and local service providers appear to respond in different ways to mixed Federal signals about technology. Some States and local sites are making increasing use of technology in their federally funded adult education programs.<sup>78</sup> In the JTPA program, the majority of service delivery areas use computers for instruction or management.<sup>79</sup> (Often this equipment was purchased with private contributions, Governors’ 8-percent money, or national demonstration dollars rather than regular JTPA funds.<sup>80</sup>) Yet despite the existence of successful and sophisticated models, the use of technology is not particularly widespread in federally funded adult literacy programs.

Why is this so? First, many State administrators and local service providers are reluctant to spend limited Federal dollars on equipment and software, believing that they are “too expensive” or would drain funds away from direct services.<sup>81</sup> When tight budgets force a choice between buying equipment and paying a salary, an investment in upfront equipment may seem out of the question.

Second, the absence of explicit authorization in many Federal programs for hardware and software or for technology-based instruction seems to have a chilling effect. Although only a few programs actually limit the use of funds for equipment, some State and local program people

<sup>75</sup> *Semen*, op. cit., footnote 32.

<sup>76</sup> packer, op. cit., footnote 72, p. 55.

<sup>77</sup> Further along are efforts at the State and local level, such as California’s Outreach and Technical Assistance Network (OTAN).

<sup>78</sup> “Technology in Adult Education: New Opportunities, New Challenges,” *A.L.L. Points Bulletin*, vol. 3, No. 2, April 1991, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> packer, op. cit., footnote 72, p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

believe such expenditures are discouraged by the Federal Government or interpret Federal silence as lukewarm support. Some State and local program people also seem to perceive, correctly or incorrectly, that Federal administrators are wary of equipment and software purchases, and that if programs make these purchases, they do so at risk of being closely monitored down the road.

Third, the nature of small, highly targeted, or competitive grant programs may present obstacles. In general, expenditures under targeted programs may be used only for services to eligible populations; unless the local target group is large, it may be hard to justify a technology expenditure. Moreover, as noted above, competitive grants are often a short-term and unreliable funding source, and a small one at that. A decision to purchase equipment and software might eat up the entire grant amount, leaving nothing for training, accessories, or instructional services and producing no measurable student outcomes when evaluations come due.

Fourth, some State and local program people feel that there is not yet enough research documenting the effects of technology-based instruction for adult learners, and that technology may not be appropriate for some types of learners. These beliefs seem to be reinforced when State and local people have had prior negative experiences with inappropriately used technology, inferior learning packages, or lack of training. This finding indicates a need for both better research and improved dissemination of existing research, as well as a willingness to experiment, make mistakes, and learn from them.

Fifth, State leadership also seems to be an important influence on the use of technology in federally funded programs. A lack of State encouragement can have a dampening effect at

the local level, while a more aggressive State policy can help overcome initial local reluctance. In Texas, for example, where the State has encouraged the use of technology, the majority of the adult education cooperatives reported having access to computers for instructional purposes and administrative purposes; almost one-third had access to integrated learning systems; and some had more than one system, with a wide variety of software being used.<sup>82</sup> Feedback and evaluations from technology-based programs have been quite positive, and Texas officials would like to expand their use. The major obstacle is a lack of funding for capital expenditures.<sup>83</sup>

## COORDINATION AMONG ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

Recent analyses of the Federal effort in adult literacy have concluded that it is fragmented, poorly coordinated, spread thinly across many agencies, and insufficient in some major ways.<sup>84</sup> Recognizing these problems, Congress has added a range of provisions affecting Federal, State, and local coordination to many literacy-related statutes, most recently the National Literacy Act (see appendix C).

### Federal Requirements

The largest programs—AEA, JOBS, and JTPA—have many coordination mandates. Among the most typical are requirements for consultation with other agencies and programs, joint plan review, consultation with broad-based advisory councils, and State plan descriptions of coordination methods. Many programs also include directives to coordinate or collaborate with relevant agencies or service providers at the Federal, State, and local levels. These requirements tend to be specific about the programs with which agencies

<sup>82</sup> Texas Education Agency, "Survey Of Computer Usage in Adult Education in Texas," draft report, 1992.

<sup>83</sup> Evelyn Curtis, education specialist, Texas Education Agency, personal communication, Jan. 30, 1992.

<sup>84</sup> See Robert A. Silvanik, *Toward Integrated Learning Systems: The Status of State Literacy Efforts* (Washington, DC: National Governors' Association, 1991); David Harman, *Turning Illiteracy Around: An Agenda for National Action* (New York, NY: Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1985); and Pierce, op. cit., footnote 12.

must coordinate or consult; most frequently mentioned are JTPA, vocational education, elementary and secondary education, vocational rehabilitation, special education, and employment and training programs.

Some statutes give Federal agencies, and to a lesser degree States, joint tasks to carry out. ED, DOL, and HHS are jointly charged with implementing the National Institute for Literacy and providing technical assistance for the JOBS program. Building on this base, the three agencies have undertaken additional shared efforts on their own: sponsoring joint regional planning meetings, initiating relationships at the regional office level, and sitting in on each other's informational meetings.<sup>85</sup> The National Institute for Literacy and the State literacy resource centers have also been given a range of coordination tasks.

The Federal framework also contains some funding incentives for coordination. The Governors' 8-percent education-coordination set-aside under the JTPA is one strong motivator. Other programs, such as workplace literacy, Even Start, and library literacy, attempt to build coordination from the ground up by requiring or urging local programs to be run as partnerships involving more than one agency. In several competitive grant programs, grantees that can demonstrate collaboration or coordination receive priority in selection. Several programs also *contain* provisions discouraging duplication of services.

Nevertheless, the Federal framework does not go as far as it might to foster coordination. Many of the smaller literacy-related programs do not require or suggest any interagency coordination.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the coordination provisions that exist do not usually specify the nature or degree of coordination expected. As past experi-

ence with coordination mandates demonstrates, it is relatively easy to prove **that a plan** has been reviewed, or an interagency meeting convened. It is harder for the Federal Government **to assess** whether meaningful coordination is occurring, let alone take enforcement action if it is not. Finally, there is a subtle contradiction in the Federal framework: the same Federal laws **that mandate** coordination have also **created an assortment** of programs **that**, by sheer numbers, make the coordination process more difficult and complicated.

Forging strong collaborative relationships is a **time-consuming** process and results may not show up immediately. Because of these difficulties, State and local agencies are in effect their own overseers, and the will to achieve results becomes a deciding factor.

## State and Local Impact

It is difficult to assess the real effect of Federal coordination requirements on State and local practice. Many successful models of coordination predate or were developed independently of Federal mandates. In addition, grant recipients can comply on paper without really changing their behavior. Nevertheless, coordination requirements in Federal law seem to be having some effect on State and local practice. Coordination requirements in the JTPA, for example among the earliest mandates-have helped produce a wide range of models and strategies,<sup>87</sup> and many relationships forged under these efforts have carried over into other areas. More recently, the JOBS program coordination requirements have compelled States to make interagency decisions about administration and service delivery.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Gerri Fiala, director, Division of Planning, Policy and Legislation, U.S. Department of Labor, personal communication, Jan. 9, 1992; and Seamon, *op. cit.*, footnote 46.

<sup>86</sup> Alamprese and Hughes, *op. cit.*, footnote 14, p. 21.

<sup>87</sup> See U.S. Department of Labor, *An Assessment of the JTPA Role in State and Local Coordination Activities* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991).

<sup>88</sup> Hagen and Lurie, *op. cit.*, footnote 30, pp. 9-10.

Salem Public Library, Salem, Oregon



*In many communities the library is an important partner in family, workplace, and adult literacy efforts.*

Flexible Federal dollars have also helped grease the wheels of coordination. The JTPA 8-percent education-coordination grants seem particularly important. In 1990, five States had specifically earmarked a portion of this set-aside to support an entity within the Governor's office to coordinate statewide literacy efforts.<sup>89</sup> LSCA Title I funds provide another example: in Kalamazoo, Michigan, for instance, these funds help support a literacy coordinator, maintain a literacy network, and provide a literacy clearinghouse.<sup>90</sup>

There appears to be widespread agreement that Federal mandates alone cannot make coordination happen; individual will and personalities are critical.<sup>91</sup> On the reverse side, no matter how

strong the will to coordinate, State and local initiatives can only go so far until they run up against a wall of Federal requirements that cannot be changed without legislative or regulatory action.

What changes do State and local practitioners recommend to eradicate these obstacles? Although some State and local administrators advocate program consolidation or Federal agency reorganization as solutions, these are by no means universal recommendations. A more common recommendation is for Congress and the executive branch to take steps to put the Federal house in order by standardizing requirements, eliminating unnecessary complexity, and charging Fed-

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<sup>89</sup> Silvanik, *op. cit.*, footnote 84, p. 9.

<sup>90</sup> Judith A. Alamprese et al., *Patterns @ Promise: State and Local Strategies for Improving Coordination in Adult Education Programs* (Washington, DC: cosmos Corp., 1992), p. 93.

<sup>91</sup> U.S. Department of Education, *op. cit.*, footnote 33, p. 14.

eral agencies to undertake joint ventures and forge collaborative relationships. Support for compatible reporting requirements seems particularly strong, with recommendations that Federal agencies decide on standard protocols for evaluations, performance outcomes, eligibility, and reporting timetables. Similarly, the recommendation to move toward compatible application cycles, carryover procedures, and finding cycles (including multiyear grants) is a popular one. Many people also feel that additional, flexible funding specifically for coordination would help.

## FEDERAL POLICY ISSUES

### Programs and Dollars

Several factors have shaped the Federal role in adult literacy education, but perhaps none more than funding limitations. In essence, the Federal Government has attempted to solve a large, multifaceted problem in a piecemeal fashion. The current array of modest to small programs provides something for almost every type of literacy need and not very much for any, with inefficiencies for all.

Since funding exerts some control over policy, it may make sense for Congress to frost faceup to the issue of whether adult literacy is a high enough national priority to warrant greatly increased outlays. If the answer is yes, this points toward one set of policy options, which may include a new wide-scale program, with higher visibility in the Federal bureaucracy, that expands, subsumes, or replaces existing efforts. If the answer is no, then policy discussions ought to center on how to use the dollars available more effectively.

One such option is to focus Federal leadership on a few, clear priorities, including any of the following:

- Raising the literacy level, and with it the competitiveness, of the American workforce; and
  - Reducing illiteracy in future generations through family literacy.
- Any of these choices would suggest a reduction in the number of Federal programs, and perhaps a dramatic refashioning of the Federal role. Some caution might be advisable before a “block grant” approach is taken, however; funding that is too flexible could easily become diffused across the vast pool of literacy needs, and diffusion is already a problem.
- In sharpening the focus of the Federal role, Congress might also consider whether the practice of attaching literacy mandates to programs with other goals has expanded funding, participation, and delivery mechanisms for adult literacy, or whether it has shifted the composition and added to the waiting lists of existing programs.
- A final issue is how the Federal Government can make more of its leveraging potential, for example by catalyzing additional private dollars for workplace literacy or providing incentive grants for States to develop cost-effective models of service delivery.

### Services, Quality, and Capacity Building

If Congress decides that this is an area where more aggressive Federal leadership could make a difference across the system, then several options seem feasible.

- Building on the missions of the National Institute for Literacy, the National Center for Adult Literacy, and the State resource centers, Congress could expand the funding and scope for research, evaluation, and dissemination of the best instructional practices, curriculum, technology, and training methods. This type of capacity-building agenda could serve as a homework for the entire Federal role.
- Professionalization of the literacy field could begin with a significant Federal staff develop-

ment and preservice training effort for instructors and leaders, as has been done in the mathematics/science education and medical fields. Such approaches as extending grants or loans to talented undergraduates, sponsoring summer institutes, strengthening university programs, and providing high-quality training opportunities could help **draw new people to the field** and upgrade the skills of existing practitioners, including volunteers. Attention would have to be paid, however, to the substandard pay and working conditions associated with adult education programs.

- In programs as diverse as Chapter 1 and vocational education, the Federal Government has enacted new “program improvement” provisions to identify the weakest local programs and prod them to change their practices. A similar approach could be considered for adult education, although first some consensus would have to be reached about what constitutes success and how to measure it. The forthcoming AEA indicators of program quality could serve as a starting point for a new assessment approach that looks at delivery systems, instructional approaches, and service intensity, in addition to learner outcomes.
- The Federal Government could do more to encourage policies supporting alternative delivery systems for adult literacy services, such as programs in the workplace, the home, or other nontraditional sites. This would require new approaches to crediting student time on task for mandated programs where participation is counted by hours of attendance in a classroom setting, but would offer greater flexibility to the learners.

## Target Groups

To date the Federal Government has avoided making hard choices about who should receive highest priority for Federal funds. As States strive to meet mandatory participation levels in the JOBS program, without fully reimbursing local

providers for the costs of JOBS services, it is possible that local programs may be forced to make the hard choices themselves, which could lead to polarization among different groups and a backlash against Federal mandates.

Congress could confront the issue directly by deciding on some clear priority groups. A key issue is whether to concentrate on adults who are closest to achieving functional competency and economic self-sufficiency, or on adults who have the most severe disadvantages.

## Technology

Federal leadership in adult literacy technology holds promise for improving instruction, coordination, and management. Stronger leadership could be exerted in several ways:

- Stimulating capital investment, through such approaches as a revolving loan fund, incentives for private-sector donations, and technology pools that serve several Federal programs;
- Removing disincentives in Federal law to use of technology;
- Supporting research, development, and dissemination and encouraging private-sector software development;
- Building on the Federal Star Schools program and other distance learning efforts to reach underserved populations of and to expand training and staff development for adult education teachers and volunteers; and
- Piloting use of technology to help manage complex recordkeeping and accountability requirements for multiple Federal programs.

## Coordination

Fragmentation at the Federal level undercuts Federal mandates for coordination at the State and local level. Federal leadership is urgently needed. A logical first step would be to develop a common framework to guide Federal accountability, reporting, and eligibility requirements; definitions; and funding cycles. The Federal Government could back up the requirements that already exist



in Federal law by providing some incentives, or “glue money,” for States and local providers to develop, extend, and improve good models of coordination and effective use of technology.

A stickier issue is whether agency responsibilities should be reorganized to cut down on fragmentation. To some extent the answer would depend on which literacy priorities Congress chooses to emphasize. A Federal role structured around upgrading the workforce, for example, would suggest a different configuration of agency responsibilities, with a stronger role for DOL, than one centered on educational capacity-building and teacher professionalization.

## CONCLUSION

**In assessing the overall** impact of the Federal Government on adult literacy, one must not become so caught up in the criticisms of the Federal role as to forget the positive contributions it has made to the field. The fact that States and local agencies continue to participate in Federal literacy programs year after year, with all the accompanying administrative challenges, suggests that the benefits of participation must outweigh the drawbacks.

The main benefit is not hard to find. Federal dollars continue to be critical to an underfunded field, and States and local service providers continue to do what they must to receive them.

The choice between turning people away and dealing with regulatory complexity is not a difficult one for most literacy providers. In fact, the lengths to which some programs will go to keep their doors open is often remarkable.

Still, it seems fair to ask whether the total Federal literacy effort—given its limited funding, its variable quality and intensity, its scant coverage of the eligible population, and its lack of a cohesive, overarching policy—is really making a dent in the problem of illiteracy. The answer seems to be it is making a real difference in the lives of millions of people, an accomplishment that should not be underestimated. With increased funding, better coordination, greater leadership in the areas of technology and instructional quality, and a richer base of research knowledge, Federal programs could make a difference for millions more.

A final observation: it is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyze the effects of other Federal legislation—such as housing, health, nutrition, tax, and elementary and secondary education policies—on the functional literacy of adult Americans. Suffice it to say, any policy choice **that** widens or reduces the gap between the haves and have-nots, in this generation or the next, ultimately influences the status of adult literacy in the United States.