

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Good afternoon, and thank you for inviting me to present testimony at this hearing today. My name is Dr. Sandra L. Baxter, and I am the Director of the National Institute for Literacy (the Institute). The Institute serves as an important catalyst in the Federal government for improving opportunities for adults, youth, and children so that they may thrive in a progressively literate world.

The Institute was created by a bipartisan act of Congress in 1991 and reauthorized in the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998. It is tasked through WIA to provide national leadership for literacy, serve as a national resource for adult education and literacy programs, and promote closer coordination among federal agencies around issues of literacy. In keeping with its authorizing statute's definition of literacy, the Institute views literacy as more than just an individual's ability to read. Rather, literacy represents the sum of many skills—reading, writing, speaking in English, computing, and solving problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family and in society.

My remarks today will focus on the state of adult literacy, provide an overview of adult literacy services, describe some of the challenges facing the field, and review the critical role the Institute has played and can play in meeting those challenges.

In just one week, our nation will pause to celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, a day that marks our independence to govern ourselves, protect ourselves, and establish commerce. It will be a day of celebration for the gifts that freedom has brought all of us.

But for far too many adults living in the United States and the children who are dependent upon them there will be less to celebrate because they are not full partners in the American dream. Many adults lack the skills to obtain a good job to support themselves and their families as well as contribute to the nation's economy. They have not acquired the basic skills they need to understand how to maintain good health or follow their doctor's orders to get better when they are sick. And many of them lack the skill to read a book to their children at bedtime or help their children with homework.

### **A Profile of Adults' Literacy Skills**

We know about these adults' challenges from results of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), a survey conducted by the Institute of Education Sciences' National Center for Education Statistics. The NAAL measured the ability of the nation's adults ages 16 and older to find and use basic information and services they need to be healthy and to perform everyday literacy tasks. The NAAL uses a definition of literacy similar to the one found in WIA, describing literacy as "using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." The NAAL is the most current and comprehensive data available to the field.

Findings from the NAAL are compelling and complex. While some of its findings are encouraging, others are disturbing. Let me share a few highlights with you.

- Between 1992 and 2003, there was an increase in skill level for some racial groups. Most notably, average prose scores increased for Blacks and Asians/Pacific Islanders. Average document and quantitative literacy scores also increased for Black adults.
- Women's document and quantitative literacy increased between 1992 and 2003. Men still scored higher than women in quantitative literacy, but the increase in women's scores narrowed the gap.
- Nearly half the nation's adults—43 percent—had prose literacy skills at the Below Basic or Basic levels. Those performing at the Below Basic skill level were able to perform only the simplest and most straightforward literacy tasks, such as searching a short text to find out what a patient is allowed to drink before a medical test. Those at the Basic skill level were able to perform an everyday task, such as finding an explanation of how people are selected for a jury pool in a pamphlet developed for prospective jurors.
- Slightly more than half—55 percent—of the nation's adults had Below Basic or Basic quantitative literacy skills. Those adults performing at the Below Basic skill level were able to perform tasks such as adding the amounts on a bank deposit slip. Those with Basic level quantitative skills were able to perform tasks like comparing the ticket prices for two events.
- Between 1992 and 2003, there was a decrease in the percentage of the total population scoring Below Basic in quantitative literacy.
- While two-thirds of the nation's adults demonstrated document literacy skills at or above the Intermediate level, just 13 percent of those adults had Proficient—the highest skill level—document literacy skills. But 34 percent of the adults tested had Below Basic or Basic document literacy skills.
- In the adult prison population, 56 percent of inmates had prose literacy skills at the Below Basic or Basic level, 50 percent had document literacy skills at the Below Basic or Basic level, and 78 percent had quantitative literacy skills at the Basic or Below Basic level.
- Adults who spoke only English before starting school had higher average health literacy than adults who spoke other languages alone or other languages and English. In addition, some 49 percent of adults who had never attended or did not complete high school had Below Basic health literacy compared with 15 percent of adults who ended their education with a high school diploma and 3 percent with a bachelor's degree.

## **Adult Literacy and Implications for a Changing Workplace**

Low literacy levels among a large portion of the nation's adult population are particularly threatening to America's future because the majority of workers who will be in the workforce in 20 years are the same people who are in it now, according to *Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. Changes in the educational attainment of the U.S. workforce compared with other nations intensify the threat. The New Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce reports that, "Whereas, for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the United States could take pride in having the best educated workforce in the world, that is no longer true. Over the past 30 years, one country after another has surpassed us in the proportion of their entering workforce with the equivalent of a high school diploma and many more are on the verge of doing so. Thirty years ago the United States could lay claim to having 30 percent of the world's population of college graduates. Today that proportion has fallen to 14 percent and is continuing to fall."

Furthermore, too many youth in the nation's schools drop out before they have mastered the fundamental skills, especially reading, they need to meet the responsibilities of adult life. "The dropout rate for African-American, Hispanic, and Native American students approaches 50 percent..." said U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings in her May 9 speech to the National Summit on America's Silent Epidemic in Washington, D.C. She also noted that every year nearly a million students fail to graduate from high school.

The low literacy skills and low educational attainment of today's workforce hardly amount to adequate preparation for the challenges of a dramatically changing workplace. The Educational Testing Service (ETS), in *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*, observes there has been "...a profound restructuring of the U.S. workplace driven by technological innovation and globalization." Jobs associated with college level education are expected to generate about 46 percent of all job growth between 2004 and 2014, according to *America's Perfect Storm*. The number of jobs requiring either an associate's degree or a postsecondary vocational credential also will grow by a little more than 24 percent during this decade, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistic's *Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2002-2003*.

If the United States is to maintain a competitive place in the global economy, it must address the literacy needs of adults who are either already in the workforce or who should be, but do not have the basic literacy skills. Adults must have the literacy skills to succeed in either postsecondary education or training in preparation for an adequately-paid job or struggle to raise their families on the meager wages of a high school dropout.

Adult education is an important means of directly responding to this terrible need for a more literate, better educated workforce. In her action plan for higher education, Secretary Spellings emphasized addressing adult literacy as "a barrier to national competitiveness and individual opportunity." Fortunately, the adult education system is increasingly positioned to serve as a full partner in a national effort to prepare adults for postsecondary education and job training.

## **The Adult Education System: A Full Partner in Education and Training**

In fact, the federally-funded adult education system primarily serves learners who are currently employed and who are in the prime of their working lives. According to *Adult Education in America: A First Look at Results from the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys*, published by the Educational Testing Service in March 2007, 85 percent of students were most likely to have income from salaries or wages suggesting that they are employed rather than receiving public benefits. Forty-five percent of learners were between the ages of 25 and 44, and another 25 percent were between 19 and 24. Slightly more than half were women (55 percent), and slightly less than half (44 percent) were enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. Almost 40 percent were enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) level classes and the remainder (17 percent) in Adult Secondary Education.

The English Language Learners enrolled in federally-funded adult education come to programs with a wide range of educational backgrounds, including nearly a third with at least some education beyond the postsecondary level, according to the ETS report. Of the 34 percent of learners in the ETS survey who reported not having had any schooling in the United States, 4 percent had no education at all before they arrived here and 24 percent completed school up to the eighth grade. Almost 40 percent completed some secondary education, and 28 percent had continued past the secondary level, including 13 percent with bachelor's degrees. Overall, 29 percent of participants in adult education learned Spanish as their first language, 7 percent learned an Asian language, and 2 percent learned a European language.

In Program Year 2004-2005, total enrollment in federally-funded adult education programs was 2.58 million, according to the U.S. Department of Education. More current data from a survey conducted in 2006 by the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE) reports 917 programs in 40 states with waiting lists that total approximately 100,000 adults. The demand for additional services varies by state with waiting lists in some New York programs so long that lotteries for seats were established rather than keeping waiting lists. And according to the NCSDAE survey, 44 percent of local programs in Rhode Island have waiting lists. The highest need, 77 percent, is for adults at the lowest levels of adult basic education and English literacy. For 52 percent of adults in Rhode Island, the wait to access services was 12 months or more.

The Federally-funded programs that serve adult learners are typically not large or generously funded. Again, according to the ETS report, most programs are small or mid-sized with a median enrollment of 318 learners, a median budget of \$199,000, and a median per-student expenditure of \$626. Slightly more than half of all adult education programs (54 percent) are run by local education agencies. The majority of programs offered classes more than 40 weeks per year with 4-6 hours per week of instruction the most common category of class time. Only 17 percent of adult education program staff are full-time employees who work more than 35 hours per week. Part-time staff account

for 40 percent of the workforce. Volunteers account for the largest share, 43 percent, but this is due to exceptionally large numbers in only two states.

Despite the federally-funded adult literacy system's modest profile, it achieves results that suggest it is already making a substantial contribution to the overall education and workforce development system. In 2006, the Federally-funded Adult Education State Grants program run by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) received the highest possible rating – effective – from the Office of Management and Budget using its Program Assessment Rating Tool or PART. The PART report identified the percent of adult education students who obtained a GED or high school diploma increased by 55 percent from 2001 to 2006, and the Federal cost per GED or diploma was \$3,081 compared to a range of \$12,000 to \$90,000 for other Federal job training programs. In addition, according to the ETS report, "Overall, a little more than one-third of learners completed an educational functioning level by the end of the program year" with the largest percentage of completers coming from the ASE level. On average learners participated in adult education for under 100 hours during the year.

Through the U.S. Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services and the National Institute for Literacy, the Federal government has played and continues to play a significant role in supporting adults to achieve the literacy skills and abilities they need to find and hold jobs, prepare for postsecondary education and training, and function effectively within their families and communities. Within the broad guidance of WIA and the NCLB, the Institute's defining responsibility has been to provide the information, resources, and support that would lead to stronger and more effective literacy programs.

The Institute works in collaboration with other Federal agencies and non-governmental organizations in order to convene leaders and innovators to advance a comprehensive literacy agenda that will protect the United States and its citizens into the future. The Institute also customarily consults with nationally recognized experts and stakeholders to identify gaps in knowledge and capacity that other organizations have not addressed and worked to close. Integrating knowledge, research, and practice is at the heart of our work to deepen public awareness and understanding of literacy as a critical national asset.

### **The National Institute for Literacy: Leadership and Impact**

Since its inception, the Institute has chosen its projects and used its resources strategically to accomplish its goals. The Institute's annual appropriation under WIA has never exceeded \$6.6 million, so we strive to make only investments that leverage other agencies' work or develop an idea or approach that stands to advance the quality of adult literacy services. The Institute's Advisory Board—composed of 10 members appointed by the President—has provided advice that has helped keep the Institute focused on what's most important for its programmatic and operational activities.

I'd like to share with you just a few highlights of our recent and on-going work. In the past several years, the Institute, with funding from both its WIA and NCLB

appropriations, has provided leadership in developing and disseminating resources that support improved reading instruction for adults based on the most rigorous and recent research available. The Institute convened and worked closely with a panel of nationally recognized adult reading researchers to produce the first systematic review of the literature on adult reading research and instruction. The resulting report, *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* and an online reading diagnostic tool, *Match-a-Profile*, have become the basis of workshops, conference presentations, and a practitioner handbook that the Institute is making widely available in print. The Institute also plans to develop an online course using the handbook content to provide greater access to interested practitioners.

The Institute's work on adult reading also offers an excellent example of the way in which agencies can complement and advance each other's work without duplicating it. In this case, the Institute's *Research-Based Principles* report was adopted by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Adult and Vocational Education (OVAE) and used as the underpinnings of the Student Achievement in Reading (STAR) project. The STAR project, a multi-state effort to promote effective reading instruction at the state and local levels through site-based reform, extends the reach of the research findings through comprehensive technical assistance. In addition, the report's findings and the Institute's online reading diagnostic tool also inform a reading toolkit that OVAE has developed as part of STAR.

The Institute's collaborative efforts and support for research also have included joint efforts with the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). For the past five years, the Institute, OVAE, and NICHD have supported a joint national research program on adults' acquisition of reading skills. All three agencies have contributed funding to this effort, which is managed by NICHD to ensure the highest standards of research rigor. At the program's inception, the Institute worked with NICHD on a series of technical assistance workshops on research design and related issues to encourage the broadest possible participation in the program by educational researchers.

Building on the Institute's deep involvement in funding, translating, and disseminating reading research, the Institute is now leading an effort under the auspices of the Interagency Coordination Group for Adult Education to develop an adult literacy research agenda. This group is pursuing comprehensive and preventative approaches to addressing the findings of the NAAL and focusing resources across Federal agencies to ensure that all adults have the opportunity to gain literacy skills and to become successful in all areas of their lives. The Institute supported webcasts of the events and continues to offer the video on its website ([www.nifl.gov](http://www.nifl.gov)).

Using information from six Federal agencies with a stake in improving adult literacy, including the U.S. Department of Labor, the Institute is developing a research agenda. Our intent is to finalize a document that represents an interagency consensus on federal research priorities in adult literacy to inform future investment decisions. Agencies could

leverage each other's research and therefore receive the maximum benefit for adult learners from their investments.

As an initial step, the Departments of Labor and Education are considering jointly funding a secondary analysis of the NAAL data. This additional analysis could serve to further the understanding of correlations between literacy, education levels, employment in specific industries, language barriers and economic status. These important correlations are not addressed in the current report and would help inform how the public workforce system assists individuals with literacy challenges.

The Institute, its Federal partners, and adult literacy providers have learned the value of looking to the research to guide their activities. In fact, the Department of Education has an on-going rigorous evaluation to gauge the impact of an enhanced English as a Second Language (ESL) curriculum on the English reading, writing, and speaking skills for adult ESL students. This study will provide valuable information that strengthens the research base and will help improve program services. Experts advising the Institute on ESL literacy research and services note that more study of English Language Learners' acquisition of basic skills could deepen our understanding and lead to further improvements in practice.

Many questions remain unanswered concerning effective program models, curriculum, instructional approaches, and other service-delivery issues. For example, even today, research has yet to be conducted that compares the benefits of an instructional program for English language learners with reading and oral language components to instruction that concentrates on building reading skills alone. There is also great need for information about how best to integrate the teaching of vocational skills with basic literacy skills, including English language literacy, so learners can advance in their jobs more quickly. Research to inform English language learners' transitions from one level to the next – from English as a Second Language (ESL) classes to Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes, from ABE to GED; and from GED to post-secondary education and training – is lacking and yet essential.

Using the available research to inform practice has been a priority in the adult literacy field and continues to be. For example, the Institute has coordinated interagency efforts to review the literature on adolescent reading. The initiative has produced a guide for teachers on evidence-based instructional practices for improving adolescents' literacy skills as well as a publication for parents and another for school administrators. The Institute expects to publish all products by the end of this calendar year.

The Institute has made a sustained commitment to two projects that pioneered new approaches to adult literacy services when they were first introduced and now, though no longer new, improve the rigor of those services. In the late 1990s, the Institute began the Bridges to Practice project to train adult literacy practitioners to recognize adults with learning disabilities and teach them with appropriate methods. Bridges was one of the early efforts in adult literacy to translate the findings from rigorous research – funded by the Institute – for use in improving instructional practice. Now the Institute is funding a

comprehensive review of Bridges that is likely to result in strengthening the training aspect of the project and updating the content based on a new review of the literature.

Earlier in the 1990s, the Institute envisioned and developed a completely new use of technology to improve teaching and learning in adult education through a project called the Literacy Information and Communication System (*LINCS*). *LINCS* established the first online portal to instructional resources, websites, reports and other information useful to adult literacy administrators, teachers, and tutors. The Institute also offered assistance on using technology and introduced the use of discussion lists. Now, using new, more stringent selection criteria, the Institute is emphasizing the quality of materials it provides through *LINCS*, maximizing the capacity of its regional centers as the Institute's dissemination arms, and focusing the discussion lists on serving as professional development tools.

Technology continues to present important opportunities to extend and improve adult literacy instruction. Because of the demands of work and family, adult learners constantly struggle to find time to attend classes. And yet the amount of time dedicated to learning is extremely important, especially for beginning English language learners. For this reason, greater use of technology as a tool to extend classroom learning and to develop anywhere/anytime-learning modules could improve both access to services and opportunities to learn. A few initiatives already have begun making workplace-related curriculum for English language learners available to students with iPods or MP3 players. Building on these efforts to exploit technology to make it easier for more adults – not just those enrolled in programs – to spend time learning language, literacy, and workplace skills would represent a great step forward for the field.

And finally, I would like to share with you information about our dissemination activities. Beginning with the passage of the Reading Excellence Act in 1998 and continuing with No Child Left Behind, the Institute has led an interagency effort called the Partnership for Reading to develop and publish a variety of resources on reading for a wide audience concerned with literacy across the lifespan. To date, the Institute has funded on behalf of the Partnership the distribution of more than 13 million copies of its publications on reading research, instruction and adult literacy to teachers, principals, administrators and families. Under the auspices of the Partnership, the Institute is also leading and funding the National Early Literacy Panel to synthesize the literature on how young children from birth through age five learn the skills that will prepare them to be successful readers. The report's findings will then become the basis of new materials for families, early childhood centers, business, and policymakers.

What I've discussed today suggests reason for optimism. We live in a great Nation. Our economic, scientific, and social success is built on a promise that all adults and children will have the opportunity to develop the literacy skills they need to function effectively in society, achieve their goals, and develop their knowledge and potential. This has been America's promise since it's founding and it remains so today. It is the legacy we leave our children and the hope we offer immigrants who come to this country to build a better life for themselves and their families.



But, there is sobering news. More than 10 years have passed since the first national survey of adult literacy, and our most recent assessment of adult literacy in 2003 tells us little has changed during that time. Approximately 93 million adults still cannot read above a basic level and even more cannot perform simple, everyday quantitative literacy tasks required in this society. They as individuals and we as a nation are not well prepared to face the dramatic changes already underway in the workforce.

It's not too late to change this picture. Adult education is increasingly positioned to serve as a full partner in a national effort to prepare adults for postsecondary education and job training. And the National Institute for Literacy, in collaboration with its federal and non-government partners, stands ready to continue its work to improve opportunities for adults, youth, and children to acquire the literacy skills they need to thrive in our increasingly complex and literate society. Literacy skills *are* the building blocks for success in our families, in our schools, in our communities, and in our economy. Let's make sure every individual in our Nation has those skills.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving the Institute this opportunity to address the committee.