The Massachusetts ABE Teacher Quality and Effectiveness Initiative: Standards, Professional Development, and Incremental Credentials

Standards-based education has become the organizing principle and driving force behind most federal, state, and local education policy in the United States, and Massachusetts is no exception. The Massachusetts Adult Basic Education (ABE) System has standards for program quality, program performance, opportunity to learn criteria, data quality, curricular content, professional practice, and professional development.

Massachusetts’ goal for ABE is to ensure adult learner access to an ABE system that is effective in preparing all students to be successful in their next steps, with a particular focus on college and careers. In order to meet this goal, Massachusetts has engaged in a multi-year strategy to gradually increase academic rigor in order to strengthen English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) instruction throughout its ABE system.

To understand the direction of the ABE system and how it is informed by standards, it is necessary to focus on standards for three audiences: standards for students (i.e., content standards), standards for teachers (i.e., professional standards), and standards for professional development providers (i.e., professional development standards).

Standards for Students: Content Standards

Content standards define what adult learners need to know and be able to do, to function successfully in their roles as parents/family members, workers, citizens, and life-long learners. In this way, they give teachers a structure from which to develop lesson plans and curricula. In 2013, the US Department of Education’s Office for Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) released the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Standards for Adult Education report. The result of a nine-month process that examined the Common Core State Standards from the perspective of adult education, this report provides a set of manageable yet significant CCR standards that reflect broad agreement among subject matter experts in adult education about what is desirable for adult students to know to be prepared for the rigors of postsecondary education and training.

The Department formally adopted the CCR standards to inform ABE curriculum development, instruction, and assessment in October 2013 and for the foreseeable future. ESOL instruction must be in alignment with the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Framework Standards and Benchmarks for ESOL and incorporate the CCR standards where applicable and where supportive of English language learners’ next steps for college and careers.

1 For more information about these and other standards of the Massachusetts ABE system, see the FY 2013 Massachusetts Guidelines for Effective Adult Basic Education, http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/abeprogram/GuidelinesCI.pdf
3 In February 2014, the name of the Office of Vocational and Adult Education was changed to the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE).

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Standards for Teachers: ABE Professional Standards

Just as the content standards referenced above describe what learners need to know and be able to do, ABE professional standards describe what teachers of adults need to know and be able to do or teach.

Massachusetts has two categories of ABE Professional Standards: (a) the Subject Matter Knowledge Requirements for ABE Teachers (or professional content standards), and (b) the Professional Standards for ABE Teachers.

a) The Subject Matter Knowledge Requirements for ABE Teachers\(^5\) outline in brief terms the subjects in which ABE teachers need to be able to teach: English/reading and writing, English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), mathematics, history and social studies, and science, although not every teacher needs to master every subject.

b) The Professional Standards for ABE Teachers\(^6\) cover more generic areas of teaching including understanding the adult learner, diversity and equity, instructional design and teaching approaches, learner assessment and evaluation, facilitating the adult learning environment, and professionalism/continuing education. These standards reflect the expectation that ABE teachers need to be knowledgeable about such topics as adult learning theory and learning disabilities, diagnostic assessment, contextualized curriculum, adult learner diversity, technology integration, effective learning environments, learner persistence strategies, learner employment readiness skills, learner critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Together, these two categories of ABE professional standards define the content, pedagogical, and other professional knowledge and skills that ABE teachers need. These standards may be used by ABE programs and practitioners to identify areas of strengths, areas for improvement, and professional development strategies for enhancing both teaching and learning in the ABE program. The Department uses the professional standards to inform investments in professional development and ensure that all students have teachers who have mastery of the subject(s) they teach.

Standards for Professional Development Providers: High Quality Professional Development Standards

The Department has developed standards for professional development\(^7\) that describe criteria for High Quality Professional Development (HQPD). The Department defines HQPD as a set of coherent learning experiences that is systematic, purposeful, and structured over a sustained period of time with the goal of improving teacher practice and student outcomes. HQPD enables educators to facilitate the learning of students by acquiring and applying knowledge, skills, and abilities that address student needs and improvement goals

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\(^5\) Subject Matter Knowledge Requirements (to be replaced by FY 2016 with professional content standards aligned with the College and Career Standards for Adult Education) [http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr47.html?section=07&flag=](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr47.html?section=07&flag=).

\(^6\) Professional Standards: [http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr47.html?section=08&flag=](http://www.doe.mass.edu/lawsregs/603cmr47.html?section=08&flag=)

\(^7\) For Professional Development Standards, see [http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/standards.html](http://www.doe.mass.edu/pd/standards.html).

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of (a) the district, school, and/or ABE Program, as applicable, and (b) the individual. HQPD conforms to best practices in research, relates to educators' assignments and professional responsibilities, and conforms to the ten Massachusetts Standards for Professional Development. All ESE vendors employed through Department ABE professional development initiatives will be required to work with ACLS to create and promote professional development programs that are responsive to the HQPD criteria to the greatest extent possible, within the parameters of ABE.

In FY 2013, the Department initiated a multi-year academic rigor strategy in order to strengthen English Language Arts (ELA), Mathematics, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) throughout the ABE system.

The major projects in process to implement this strategy include:

- Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ELA and Math with the CCR standards.
- Align curriculum, instruction, and assessment in ESOL with the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Frameworks, making clear connections to the CCR Standards.
- Ensure that the ABE professional standards, including the subject matter knowledge requirements, are aligned with the CCR standards (ELA and Math) and the Massachusetts ABE Curriculum Frameworks (other subjects). This is the development of professional content standards for ELA and Math.
- Align professional development with the ABE professional standards including the subject matter knowledge requirements. This is the continued development of the new Math and ESOL professional development programs, and the planned development of the ELA professional development program.
- Encourage the use of the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements to strengthen teaching and learning. This is the planned development of a teacher credentialing and assessment system. ESE-funded ABE professional development grantees and contractors will be expected to work closely with Department staff and designees in the development and implementation of the professional development and assessment components of this new credentialing system.
- Use standards to understand where the ABE system is doing well and where it needs improvement.

The third, fourth, and fifth bullets above outline a plan to ensure that all ABE teachers, over multiple years, meet proficiency standards in the content areas they teach.

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8 Facing the Future: Massachusetts Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education 2010–2015