



“In a global economy where the most valuable skill you can sell is your knowledge, a good education is no longer just a pathway to opportunity – it is a pre-requisite.”

- President Barack Obama, Address to Joint Session of Congress, Tuesday, February 24th, 2009

Need for Change / Background:

Adult educators today face an unprecedented challenge: they must prepare all adult learners, both native and non-native speakers to participate in a world with increasing educational and skill demands. What for decades has been an effort to establish and improve literacy skills toward helping students gain the skills and knowledge needed to pass the GED must be greatly expanded to help them prepare to enter and succeed in postsecondary education.

While earning a GED has long been considered to be the end goal of adult basic education, labor market analyses now show that having a GED is simply not enough to get a good job and earn a family-sustaining wage in Massachusetts. Postsecondary education and training are required, in most instances, for individuals to be qualified to obtain a job that pays a family-sustaining salary — which means the ABE system must adapt.

Last year, Adult and Community Learning Services released *Facing the Future: Massachusetts Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education*. The *Framework* identifies the priorities that will guide ACLS in making policy and resource decisions in order to ensure that all of the Commonwealth’s residents have access to public education as a route to college, family-sustaining jobs and an active civic life. The three strategic goals identified are:

- 1) Ensure that adults needing basic education have access to services;
- 2) Increase system effectiveness and quality; and,
- 3) Prepare students for success in their next steps: in college and further training, at work, and in the community.

Together, these goals and their related objectives outline a commitment to a system that provides access to instructional services that are *effective* at helping students continue their education *beyond the GED*, in order to qualify for work that provides a *family-sustaining wage* and an improved quality of life.

Simultaneously with ACLS’ strategic planning process, the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board (MWIB) issued a report that called for the state to develop an effective *pipeline of education and skills development from K-12 to jobs skills development, post-secondary education, and beyond*, for the “tens of thousands of Massachusetts adults who simply cannot move up in this pipeline . . . without adequate basic skills”. Specifically, the report challenged the state to “promote and fund ASE programs to offer *higher-level academic content* to ensure that lower-skilled adults *master academic content needed to succeed in post-secondary education and training*” and, “promote and fund ABE/ESOL services to include models *with more intensive levels of instruction* (15-20+ hours/week) to enable students to *reach their goals in a more timely fashion.*”

Massachusetts has work to do. While about two-thirds of our adult students with the goal of entering college do enroll, too few understand the need for college in today’s economy. Only 4% of all Massachusetts ABE students for whom college would be a realistic goal (GLE 10 or above) actually identify this goal. ABE Transition to Community College Transition programs can and do help, but these programs serve only 300 students annually — less than 2% of all Massachusetts ABE students.

Massachusetts has developed content standards, program performance standards, and professional standards, and continues to make a substantial annual investment in professional and program development. Despite this work and the hard work of dedicated ABE practitioners, the ABE system’s learning gains have remained relatively flat over the past five years.

Where do we go from here? How should we address these challenges? ACLS is evaluating several possible policy responses to these issues.



Policy Area 1: Increase access to adequate preparation for college

An objective identified in the Strategic Framework under Goal 3, *prepare students for success in their next steps: in college and further training, at work, and in the community*, is to **ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps**.

Adults with no post-secondary education or training can face an uphill battle supporting families or climbing out of poverty. This past May, the Massachusetts Department of Workforce Development released its annual Labor Market Information Profile for Massachusetts. It confirmed, as it has for the past several years, that education and training will continue to play an increasingly prominent role for both current and future job seekers. Twenty-three of the 30 fastest growing occupations (77%), and more than half (60%) of *all* new jobs related to growth will require an Associate's Degree or higher. The report summarizes, "While a Bachelor's Degree may be preferable, it is important to recognize that some form of postsecondary education will be essential for those seeking a rewarding career path with good pay and upward mobility." This is confirmed by a 2006 University of Washington study reported that a single parent with two children in Boston would need to earn \$27.53/hour to support the family; and that generally, some post-secondary education is required for jobs paying at that level.

Both national and Massachusetts data show, however, that too few GED graduates: a) enroll in college, b) score well enough on the college placement test to qualify for credit-bearing courses, or c) earn a post-secondary degree or certificate. While the GED Testing Service reports that 66% of GED Examinees say they are taking the tests to get into college, only 27% of GED graduates ever enroll in college. Of those 27% who enroll, less than 20% ever complete two years of college, and only about 4% ever complete four years.

We know that success on the GED tests is not a reliable predictor of college success. In fact, the clearly defined curriculum gap between where the GED leaves off and college level work begins suggests that adult secondary education (ASE) classes must adjust their curriculum to better prepare students for college level work. The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), reports that 85% of GED graduates who enter community colleges require remediation. Because the cost of developmental courses drain a student's PELL grant, a student who requires many developmental courses may find they have insufficient funds remaining in their grant to cover the cost of courses that provide credit toward a degree. A recent study of longitudinal data from nine Massachusetts ABE-Transition-to-Community College programs looked at the relationship between a student's need for developmental courses and her/his likelihood of earning a certificate, earning a degree, or transferring to another postsecondary institution. We found that only 15% of students who took two or more developmental courses ever achieved any one of such outcomes -- 85% never did.

If we intend to help students fortify their economic stability and support their families, we need to do more to **ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps**: we need to develop and support a GED preparation program that also prepares students to succeed in a college classroom. Fortunately, a review of the literature provides good models for an effective pre-GED and GED curriculum. Components would include: intensity of instruction, establishment of a "college-bound" culture, managed enrollment and a cohort model, focused instruction in math and reading/writing, and ongoing counseling/advising.

ACLS is considering a policy approach that would:

- Set aside a certain amount of funding (for example, \$75,000-\$90,000) in each LWIB region to fund ABE-to-College services.
- Require each program that includes an ASE level to have a Memorandum of Agreement with a community (or other) college. Require any program without an ASE level to have a Memorandum of Agreement with another program that connects its students to ASE and college.

For Discussion: If ACLS were to take this policy approach,

1. What do you see as the benefits to students?
2. What concerns do you have?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving on this policy approach, and why?



Policy Area 2: Increase access to intensive instructional services

The Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board report referenced on page 2 challenged the state to “promote and fund ABE/ESOL services to include models with more intensive levels of instruction (15-20+ hours/week) to enable students to reach their goals in a more timely fashion.” This challenge echoed TESOL’s 2000 recommendation that programs provide “courses of sufficient intensity and duration with flexible schedules to meet varied student and community needs in convenient locations within the constraints of program resources”.

It seems reasonable to assume that more intensive instruction yields better results, and there is some research to support it. In 2006, NCSALL researchers John P. Comings and colleagues, outlining an “evidence-based adult education program model”, cited a 2001 British review of research on adult education that noted that, “among the groups comprising the study population, those who *attended most regularly*, and thus had *more hours of instruction*, *experienced the largest improvement in skills*.” The researchers also cited analyses of statewide evaluation data of Pennsylvania’s family literacy programs, in which the researchers found that “programs must be designed and funded with consideration for factors that influence *intensity* of participation, *not merely persistence* of participation”. Another report, a paper presented by Eunice Askov and colleagues at the 2003 Rutgers Invitational Symposium of Education cited the same Pennsylvania study, “Results from these analyses indicate that. . . *Intensity of instruction was consistently more important than total number of hours accumulated* in adult education. Also, in their work on adult education policies in Canada, White & Hoddinott recommend that all programs provide access to “a minimum of 6 hours of instruction per week, though *a minimum of 15 hours of instruction per week is preferable*.”

The research is not definitive; some studies suggest that duration (the total number of weeks a student is enrolled in a program) may have a greater impact than intensity (the number of hours a student attends a program each week). Surely, intensive instruction is not for everyone. Working people, parents of pre-school children, and others may find it difficult to attend more than five or six hours a week. But for those who can benefit for more intensive instruction, we need to find ways to make it available. With the state’s struggling economy resulting in record levels of unemployment, there is a responsibility to help adults who have lost their jobs. A temporarily out-of-work adult may be able to attend many class hours weekly – for a limited number of weeks – and thereby build her or his skills and achieve her or his goals faster. Making significantly more intensive instructional opportunities available to such students increases the likelihood that, when their unemployment insurance runs out, they are on stronger ground as they seek new employment. Another population that may benefit from intensive programming is the young adult population; agencies that serve this group tell us that young adults recently out of high school tend to do better with programs that run twenty hours or more per week.

One of the objectives under Strategic Goal 1, “ensure that adults needing basic education have access to services”, is to ***increase services through service intensity***, as well as through additional seats. However, it is difficult to ask programs to increase intensity of instruction without additional funds. Constrained by level funding, a strategy that ACLS has employed over the past couple of years is to set the “intensity” bar lower, and seek to increase intensity slightly, by offering some regulatory flexibility to programs that could offer at least 9 hours of instruction weekly. For example, to allow programs to offer one or more classes of nine hours or more of instruction per week, ACLS allowed: waiving the 32-week requirement (while maintaining

minimum 150 hours/year), waiving the 20% cap on non-rates classes, consolidating or eliminating summer classes, waiving all but the first sequence of three levels, and developing new Memoranda of Agreement for part of the one required sequence of three levels. Still, less than a quarter of Community Adult Learning Center programs have found a way to increase intensity even to this low threshold of nine hours.

The data suggests that it may be worthwhile to continue to find ways to increase intensity. A comparison of the 2010 performance of Massachusetts programs, specifically in the area of student learning gains, and the number of instructional hours they offer per week indicated that, with one exception resulting from the small number of programs in the group with 4 points, in each higher tier of learning gains points, the proportion of intensive programs increases:

Performance Points for Learning Gains	Percent of Programs Offering 9 or More Instructional Hours Per Week
9	41%
8	26%
7	15%
6	6%
5	0%
4	33% (one out of 3 programs)
3	0%
2	0%
1	0%

Moreover, intensity increases with performance. The 45 programs in the “advanced” range (8 or 9 performance points for learning gains) provided an average of 8 instructional hours per week; while the 36 programs in the “meets” range (5 to 7 points for learning gains) provided 6.6 hours. There were too few programs in the “needs improvement” and “remedial action” range to yield meaningful averages, but the 28 programs with 6 or fewer points for learning gains provided an average of 6.5 instructional hours per week.

ACLS is considering a policy approach that would:

- Set aside a certain amount of funding (for example, \$200,000-\$250,000) in each LWIB region to fund intensive instructional services.

For Discussion: If ACLS were to take this policy approach,

1. What do you see as the benefits to students?
2. What concerns do you have?
3. What suggestions do you have for improving on this policy approach, and why?



Policy Area 3: Increase the effectiveness of classroom instruction

Teaching a more academically rigorous curriculum at a more intensive pace, that prepares students to be college- and career-ready, puts new demands on ABE teachers who are already stretched to their limits, trying to meet their students' needs with part-time jobs, low pay, often no benefits, and no career ladders for themselves. *Facing the Future* acknowledged the imperative to support the required program components that meet student needs — including a well-trained and stable workforce. ACLS understands the need to balance increased support for local flexibility and program innovation with a persistent focus on improving the working conditions of the ABE workforce. In return, ABE programs and practitioners must be accountable for continually improving services that result in increased student outcomes.

Teachers and teaching are at the heart of system quality and effectiveness. No one would question the dedication and commitment of the teachers in the MA ABE system. Nevertheless, an objective review of student learning gains and completion of educational functioning levels over the past several years does not show growth. Learning gains are flat; too few students go on to post-secondary education, and too few of those who do go on subsequently complete the program and earn an associates degree. We know that too few programs have a program-wide curriculum that is aligned with the frameworks, too few teachers have explicit training in how to teach reading or math, and too few teachers are comfortable with math and writing themselves.

System improvement depends on the capacity of teachers throughout the system to effectively teach what students need to learn in today's world. This requires knowledge of the subject matter, knowledge of subject-specific instructional strategies, and general knowledge of how to teach adults. All ABE teachers need to be able to teach a challenging curriculum that's aligned with the ABE content standards and contextualized. They need to have some knowledge of both the content and the content-specific pedagogy in the subject or subjects their students need — reading, second language acquisition, math. ABE teachers need to be able to teach at the level of challenge required to help students develop the skills they need to be successful in college and to secure a good job. They need some knowledge of adult development and adult learning theory, and they need to have an understanding of and skill in working with people from diverse backgrounds. Few people bring all of this depth to their work; great teachers develop it over the course of several years.

A key objective identified under Strategic Goal 2, increase system effectiveness and quality, is to strengthen Massachusetts' standards-based ABE system. Specific strategies for doing so include:

- *Ensure that professional content standards for teachers are aligned with the ABE Curriculum Frameworks' content standards.*

The Adult Basic Education Curriculum Frameworks articulate the standards and benchmarks that describe what adult learners need to know and be able to do — we need to consider what their teachers need to know and be able to do as well, if we are to reach the challenging goals outlined in the Strategic Framework. The new ABE Professional Content Standards will outline what teachers of adult learners need to know, be able to do, and be able to teach, in the specific areas they teach: reading, writing, mathematics, ESOL, and so forth.

- *Align professional development with these content standards.*

Massachusetts invests over \$3 million in professional development annually. As rising costs and level funding cause resources to become ever more precious, we must be strategic in how we allocate these resources. Professional development must support teachers in meeting the professional content standards, with increased focus on subject matter and subject-specific instructional methodologies.

- *Encourage the use of the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements to strengthen teaching and learning.*

We need to go beyond merely identifying the content knowledge teachers need, and also use the professional content standards to develop new self-assessment tools for teachers, classroom observation and evaluation tools for program directors, and other resources.

We also need to develop tools to evaluate the extent to which teachers are meeting these standards.

- *Ensure that funding supports high-quality services.*

We should consider salary differentials for teachers who demonstrate increased levels of proficiency in the content areas they teach. We should also seek strategies for increasing their paid hours to mentor other teachers.

ACLS is considering a policy approach that would:

- Identify content-knowledge standards for teachers, in reading, math, ESOL, and other academic areas, that are aligned with the content standards of the ABE Curriculum Frameworks and national College- and Career-Readiness Standards.
- Require that all teachers, over multiple years, meet proficiency standards in the content areas they teach, and increase salaries accordingly: raise minimum salary rates as teachers move through a process of meeting these standards.

For Discussion: If ACLS were to take this policy approach,

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