

# Facing the Future:

## Massachusetts Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education

2010-2015



Massachusetts Department of  
**ELEMENTARY & SECONDARY  
EDUCATION**

*“Let’s recognize a 21st century reality: Learning doesn’t end in our early 20s. Adults of all ages need opportunities to earn new degrees and new skills—especially in the current economic environment.”*

President Barak Obama, Remarks to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, March 10, 2009



Thank you to the members of the 2007–2009 Adult Basic Education Advisory Council for providing guidance and leadership in the development of *Facing the Future: Massachusetts Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education*.

## Executive Summary



**There is widespread acceptance that Adult Basic Education (ABE) is a valuable public investment. Individuals, families, communities, and the Commonwealth benefit from ABE. Studies show that when adults have more education, there are greater economic and social returns, including increased earnings, better health and nutrition, higher-level school performance among the children of educated adults, lower rates of incarceration, and greater community participation.**

**To maintain its competitive edge in the world economy, the Commonwealth needs a highly educated workforce. In 2000, *New Skills for a New Economy: Adult Education's Key Role in Sustaining Economic Growth and Expanding Opportunity* stated that one-third of the Massachusetts workforce—1.1 million workers—were not fully equipped to meet the skill demands of the state's rapidly changing economy.<sup>1</sup> Positioning the Commonwealth for economic success necessitates investing in the basic skills of all its residents.**

Massachusetts remains a destination for thousands of people from other countries who want to improve their lives and build a new future for their families. Yet, many immigrants do not have the language skills necessary to gain employment, help their children with homework, and participate fully in the communities in which they live. As a result, there is an ever-increasing demand for ABE services—far outweighing the ABE system's current capacity. Raising the basic

skills of newly arrived residents, incumbent workers, high school dropouts, the unemployed, and underemployed requires that there be high-quality education programs throughout Massachusetts with the capacity to meet the diverse needs of all adult learners.

In order to face the challenges of the future, this strategic framework was developed with input from thousands of ABE practitioners and stakeholders. The framework identifies three goals to enable ABE to continue developing innovative teaching and learning methods, to enhance and expand current program efforts, and to position the system to take advantage of new technology and promising opportunities.

► **Goal 1: Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services**

ABE will increase program intensity and student seats for adults wanting to improve their education, provide additional support for programs reaching diverse populations, and expand service delivery options.

► **Goal 2: Increase System Effectiveness and Quality**

ABE will continue to build a standards-based service system, increase regulatory flexibility to enable programs to meet local and regional needs, and seek opportunities to support innovative programming that better serves adult learners.

► **Goal 3: Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps: in College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community**

ABE will strengthen and contextualize student-centered curriculum, expand student access to support services, and ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to succeed in their next steps.

Achieving these goals requires the ABE system and its stakeholders to commit to the hard work ahead of increasing public awareness through state and local promotional campaigns; developing, sustaining, and utilizing both formal and informal partnerships; and leveraging a wide range of human, financial, and organizational resources.

## Introduction



*“The Massachusetts economy is becoming highly specialized with great rewards for those with the requisite levels of education and skills, and fewer options for everyone else.”<sup>2</sup>*

*Mass Jobs: Meeting the Challenges of a Shifting Economy, Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC), 2007*

Massachusetts is the birthplace of public education, home to well-regarded colleges and universities, and continues to lead the nation in student achievement. Yet, the Commonwealth faces unprecedented challenges: economic uncertainty, global competition, labor market restructuring, and demographic shifts, including a growing number of non-English speakers joining the traditional pool of skilled workers. The impact of these challenges has a far-reaching effect on communities, public institutions, and thousands of Massachusetts families. Massachusetts’ strengths provide fertile ground for responding to these challenges and facing the future with confidence.

The common theme raised by public and private sector leaders across the board is that many more adults must gain higher-level education and workplace skills if Massachusetts is to continue growing its economy and improving the quality of life for all its residents.

To achieve its policy goals, the Commonwealth needs an educated and skilled populace. Public schools need parents with the educational foundation and basic skills to provide economic stability for their families and raise the educational aspirations of their children. Businesses need workers with the skills today’s jobs require. If employers cannot find qualified workers here, they will find them elsewhere. And communities need residents who vote, volunteer, raise healthy families, work, and contribute to the tax base.

One thing is clear: modifying existing policy priorities and reallocating resources may make a difference in the short term, but over the long term, government alone cannot take on all of these challenges or make substantial and sustained progress. A shared urgency across sectors is essential “to make sure that all residents of the Commonwealth have the education and skill levels needed to benefit from the new job opportunities of the Massachusetts economy. Otherwise, they will suffer from even greater economic penalties as the economy continues to shift and the routes to economic success narrow.”<sup>2</sup> The Commonwealth must tap into the self-interest and social responsibility of community and private sector leaders, and effectively target and deploy the resources it will take to attain the crucial societal and economic outcomes that Massachusetts residents deserve.

As we face the future, the Massachusetts ABE system must increase its ability to deliver a full continuum of effective and comprehensive education services fully accessible to those needing basic skills to improve their lives as parents, workers, and engaged citizens. ABE must also work closely with community and private sector leaders in getting the word out so that more adults are aware of ABE services and will enroll in and complete the programs that prepare them to be successful in college and further training, at work, and in the community.

**“I want to learn English for many reasons. I want to understand my children when they talk to me in English. When I go to the hospital, I want to understand the doctor when he talks to me in English. When I go to work, I want to understand English. I want more English.”**

**Khadija A., a student at the Intergenerational Literacy Program in Chelsea, MA**

*“While there once was a time when a high school diploma was sufficient for obtaining a skilled job and earning a livable wage, increasingly that is no longer the case...In order to compete in today’s knowledge-based economy, all students must have the option to pursue postsecondary education.”<sup>3</sup>*

*High Expectation: A Key to Success for All, Pathways to College Network, 2006*

This strategic framework focuses on the needs of underemployed and unemployed adults seeking to improve their basic skills and/or English language skills—a prerequisite for achieving the Commonwealth’s long-range economic and workforce development objectives. Increasing system capacity now will lead to a higher return on investment to taxpayers by streamlining the path from the lowest level of literacy through advanced education and training and into family-sustaining jobs. When adult students have the opportunity to succeed through the ABE system, we all benefit. When individuals gain literacy and basic skills, the Commonwealth is closer to achieving its education, economic, workforce, and community goals.

To ensure more adult learners are successful, the ABE system is committed to working in concert with state agencies and the private sector to increase community access and build additional program capacity. With the help of determined partners, ABE has the power to reduce the achievement gap for the thousands of low-literate and limited English proficient adults, throughout the Commonwealth, who are looking to improve their basic skills and their livelihoods.

**Massachusetts has identified the following goals to guide our work as we face the future.**

- ▶ **Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services**
- ▶ **Increase System Effectiveness and Quality**
- ▶ **Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps: in College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community**

The strategy for realizing these three goals requires the ABE system to:

1. Increase public awareness through state and local promotional campaigns
2. Develop, sustain, and utilize formal and informal partnerships
3. Leverage a wide range of human, financial, and organizational resources

Every year thousands of adult students from across the Commonwealth—young and old, men and women, unemployed and the working poor, native speakers, and second language learners—enroll in local ABE programs looking to learn English, upgrade their academic skills, and earn a high school credential. To that end, this framework is intended to serve as a guide for the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and to inform its partners as policy and resource decisions are made 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.

## **DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK**

This strategic framework was developed by those who will be most affected by it: students, teachers, and staff of ABE programs. Agency partners in workforce development, K-12 education, and higher education provided additional insight, expertise, and input.

The planning process began with the commission of a student and staff satisfaction survey and visits to all regions of the state. A series of regional strategic planning meetings, meetings with the Adult Basic Education Advisory Committee to provide guidance and direction, and ongoing consultations with researchers, co-investors, practitioners, and consumers within the state’s workforce development and higher education systems engaged a diversity of perspectives on what is working and what needs to change in adult education.

Over 5,000 stakeholders were involved in helping to focus on the priorities identified in this document—priorities that will ensure a strong, effective, and accessible ABE system in the years to come.

## Why Adult Education Matters



*“Educational attainment correlates closely with economic status, here and across the country. Our public education system cannot get all students to a high standard if we pretend that they all have the same learning needs and that these needs can be met in the same way. Poverty[’s]...effects are seen in the stubborn achievement gap that exists between African American and Latino students and white and Asian students...We know now that much of what impacts a student’s ability to learn happens outside of school—in the years before kindergarten or in the hours after school, on weekends and during the summer...[T]he reality is that the capacity of the public education system to address these external influences is limited by time, resources and convention.”<sup>4</sup>*

Ready for 21st Century Success: The New Promise of Public Education, Executive Office of Education, June 2008

## A. THE COMMONWEALTH'S EDUCATIONAL GOALS

The Massachusetts ABE system's programs (including family literacy programs) support learners' individual educational goals and are aligned with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's major goals, which are:<sup>5</sup>

1. Prevent the achievement gap from starting
2. Close the achievement gap where it exists
3. Challenge all students to proficiency and beyond

### **Prevent the Achievement Gap from Starting**

The achievement gap refers to the observed differences in educational performance and academic progress among groups of students, especially students defined by gender, race/ethnicity, ability, and socioeconomic status. This gap can be assessed using various measures, including standardized test scores, grade point averages, dropout rates, and college enrollment and college completion rates.

Researchers point out that an achievement gap exists before the time low-income children enter kindergarten,<sup>6</sup> persists throughout school,<sup>7</sup> and is explainable by differences in factors such as family poverty and the number of books at home.<sup>8</sup> If, for example, children are not getting their basic needs met at home, doing well in school becomes a secondary consideration. In addition, low-income parents may have several jobs, which reduces the amount of time they have to support their children's academic needs. Moreover, some students have difficulty getting help with their homework because there is not an English speaker at home to offer assistance.

**Gilberto Mendes came to the United States 20 years ago from Angola and found that his limited English skills were a barrier to workplace success. Since he began taking English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) courses at the Brockton Public Schools Adult Learning Center (ALC) in 2004, he has completed English language classes and is preparing for the General Educational Diploma (GED) test. His employer promoted him to a managerial position, based on his improved communication skills.**

**"It has been great for me. Now I can speak better English, I can read and write in English, and that is what got me a promotion at my job," Mendes said. "This program helped me to communicate at work, and now I can help my children with their homework and take my father to his doctor's appointments and understand what is being said."**

**Mendes and his family speak Creole at home, and his young daughter was growing up without the ability to speak English. So Mendes enrolled her in the ALC's preschool program while he was taking ESOL classes, and his daughter learned to speak English fluently. By the time the little girl entered kindergarten, she was placed in a regular education English speaking classroom. "It is great to be a student here, because everybody wants to learn," Mendes said. "We value our education."**

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education funds over 200 ABE programs serving more than 23,000 students per year through academic skill-building and supportive services. ABE is an essential component in the Department's overall strategy for building a stronger Commonwealth by expanding opportunities for adult learners to improve their education skills and attain their life goals. When students, like Gilberto, take advantage of ABE program services in large numbers, the economy and quality of life in the state benefit.

Poverty is associated with employment status, which is itself related to literacy levels. The 2003 Massachusetts State Assessment of Adult Literacy (SAAL) showed a clear association between higher literacy and increased income. Across the income categories of adults in households who live below federal poverty levels,<sup>a</sup> 100 to 175 percent of the poverty level, and above 175 percent of the poverty level, the percentage of adults with proficient literacy<sup>b</sup> was higher for households with greater than 175 percent of the poverty level than the percentage of adults with proficient literacy in the remaining income categories combined.<sup>9</sup> Likewise, the *Commonwealth Corporation Research and Evaluation Brief* “Poverty and the Workforce” found families headed by a person without a high school diploma/GED were 9.4 percent more likely to be poor or low-income than their peers with a high school diploma/GED.<sup>10</sup>

*“In Massachusetts, educational attainment is a major determinant of economic status for families. In 2005, 6 out of 10 families fell into the ‘poor or near poor’ category if the head of household had not gone on to college after earning a high school diploma/GED or failed to graduate.”<sup>11</sup>*

*An Assessment of the Labor Market, Income, Health, Social, Civic and Fiscal Consequences of Dropping Out of High School: Findings for Massachusetts and Bristol County Adults in the 21st Century, Center for Labor Market Studies, April 2008*

ABE programs provide adults with the educational foundation to establish pragmatic goals to overcome poverty, access family-sustaining employment, and embark on career paths. At the same time, ABE programs help students with children become more effective in their roles as parents and family members—building a learning bond that links generations of children and adults to the benefits of learning and achievement. A 1999 national impact study reported “participation in adult literacy education has a positive impact on parents’ involvement in their children’s education.”<sup>12</sup>

a. The U.S. Census Bureau uses a set of money income thresholds that vary by family size and composition to determine who is in poverty. If a family’s total income is less than the family’s threshold, then that family and every individual in it is considered in poverty. The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically, but they are updated for inflation using the Consumer Price Index (CPI-U). The official poverty definition uses money income before taxes and does not include capital gains or noncash benefits (such as public housing, Medicaid, and food stamps). If their income is less than half their poverty threshold, they are below 50 percent of poverty; less than the threshold itself, they are in poverty (below 100 percent of poverty); less than 1.25 times the threshold, below 125 percent of poverty, and so on. The greater the ratio of income to poverty, the more people fall under the category, because higher ratios include more people with higher incomes. U.S. Census Bureau. Poverty. Retrieved from <http://census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/definitions.html#absolute>

b. Having English proficiency indicates that an individual has sufficient literacy skills to read, analyze, and synthesize information from complex and lengthy documents, such as comparing viewpoints in two editorials. Proficiency also means that the person can locate abstract quantitative information and use it to solve problems when the arithmetic operations are not easily inferred and the problems are more complex, such as interpreting a table about blood pressure, age, and physical activity or computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items. Hauser, R. M., Edley, C. F. Jr., Koenig, J. A., & Elliot, S. W. (Eds). (2005). *Measuring literacy: Performance levels for adults, interim report*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; White, S., & Dillow, S. (2005). *Key concepts and features of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NCES 2006-471)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; *Healthy People 2010*. Retrieved from <http://www.healthypeople.gov/document/pdf/uih/2010uih.pdf>

The importance of intergenerational learning support cannot be underestimated. Fully one-third of the ABE students served are parents of school-age children. Through family literacy programs, parents increase their knowledge of the social, emotional, and cognitive needs of young children, learn how to access preventive services for their children and set and achieve goals that support their children's general health and school readiness. As children grow and progress through the K-12 system, family literacy programs continue to provide families with information that strengthens parents' understanding and actions to support their children's behavior and achievement.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, family literacy helps parents learn to better navigate school systems, help their children with homework, understand the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS), access supplementary education services, and effectively participate in parent-teacher conferences. Ultimately, all ABE helps parents to demonstrate the value of education as they serve as role models for their children and build their families' future success.

### **Close the Achievement Gap Where It Exists**

Despite genuine improvements in the K-12 education system, The Commonwealth Readiness Project Report pointed out that there is a "stubborn achievement gap" between the scores on state math and English exams of Latino and African American students, and those of white and Asian students.<sup>4</sup> Between 40 and 70 percent of white students perform at or above the proficient level on MCAS across the grade levels, as compared to just 20 to 30 percent of African-American and Hispanic students.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, gaps in academic performance occur among all subgroups. Massachusetts test data show that girls tend to outperform boys in reading and English language arts, students without disabilities outperform students with disabilities, affluent students do better than low-income students, and limited English proficient students are behind their classmates in most subjects.<sup>5</sup> Of nearly 75,000 students in the class of 2006, only 64 percent of African Americans, 57 percent of Hispanics, and 70 percent of Native Americans in that same cohort graduated in four years compared to 84 percent of Asian students and 85 percent of whites.<sup>14</sup>

The impact of the achievement gap is felt beyond the public schools. According to a 2003 report from the Manhattan Institute, only 38 percent of the Commonwealth's Class of 2002 graduated college ready. Broken down by race, the picture looks worse. The study reported 43 percent of white students were college ready, as compared to 29 percent of African American and 14 percent of Hispanic students. This is all the more troubling since student enrollment data show that Latinos, Asians, and African Americans are the fastest-growing demographic groups in Massachusetts.<sup>5</sup>

While the ABE system itself cannot directly improve the academic performance of school-age children and youth, ABE plays an indirect role in improving school children's performance by providing literacy and education services to those parents enrolled in ABE with school-age youngsters—over 36 percent of the ABE population. Boosting the literacy rates among these parents through ABE programs is a tangible way to reduce family poverty and, by extension, the achievement gap.

Eleven thousand Massachusetts students drop out of high school each year.<sup>5</sup> Increasingly, many of these former students find their way into ABE programs offered by school districts, libraries, community-based organizations, and community colleges. About 40 percent of ABE and ESOL students are under the age of 22, and this proportion continues to rise.<sup>9</sup> Without having the academic foundation to rely on, these students cannot attend college, enroll in most job preparation programs, find a job with the potential for advancement, or participate in formal skills training.<sup>15</sup> The ABE system provides a second chance for these students.

**“I always struggled in school starting in the fourth grade. My grandson was the one who got me into the program and we worked together on homework. Then when the math got tough, I called in my granddaughter to help. She and I will share something very special this year. We both graduated with our high school diplomas!”**

**Betty M., 2007 GED graduate, Literacy Program of Greater Plymouth, Plymouth, MA**

### **Challenge All Students to Proficiency and Beyond**

*“As our economy continues to shift from manufacturing to knowledge-based industries, higher paying jobs in areas such as business services, education, and healthcare require postsecondary education and credentials.”<sup>16</sup>*

*Help Wanted...Credentials Required: Community Colleges in the Knowledge Economy, Carnevale and Desrochers, 2001*

Academic proficiency in the 21st century has a new meaning. No longer is a high school credential sufficient to guarantee a living wage or success in college. National surveys of adults age 16 and over show that the nation’s emerging and incumbent workers “do not demonstrate sufficient literacy and numeracy skills needed to fully participate in an increasingly competitive work environment.”<sup>15</sup> Nor do they have the skills “to function in our complex society, with its large bureaucratic institutions and its complex legal, healthcare, and retirement systems.”<sup>15</sup>

- ▶ The Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board has pointed out that “tens of thousands of Massachusetts adults” do not have the education and necessary skills to “participate in advanced job skill development or higher education.”<sup>17</sup>
- ▶ Four out of ten high school graduates “lack the literacy skills employers seek.”<sup>18</sup>
- ▶ Almost one in four high school graduates are not able to “succeed in an introductory-level college writing course.”<sup>19</sup>
- ▶ Nationally, 8 percent of entering college freshmen “take at least one remedial reading course,” and graduation data reveals that “only about one-third of such students graduate within eight years.”<sup>20, 21</sup> In 2004, 37 percent of incoming freshmen from Massachusetts public high schools were required to take a remedial course in reading, writing, or math.<sup>14, 22</sup>

*“For every 10 high school freshmen, 8 graduate from high school, 6 enroll in college, and only 3 to 4 earn a degree.”<sup>23</sup>*

*Facing the Challenge of Increasing College and Career Readiness.* Jeffrey Nellhaus and Patricia Plummer, Massachusetts College & Career Readiness Summit, 2008

Over one-half of the more than 30,000 “persistent” job vacancies require an associate’s degree or better.<sup>4, 24</sup> Yet:

- ▶ In a 2005 study, researchers reported that just 27 percent of GED recipients enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>25</sup>
- ▶ Nationally, “very few people who earn GEDs enroll in college and far fewer get a college credential: although 65 percent of people who take GED tests say they are doing so in order to go to college, 30 to 35 percent of GED recipients actually enter college, 10 to 15 percent finish one year of college, and only 4 percent earn an associate’s degree.”<sup>26</sup>
- ▶ Most GED recipients, along with many high school graduates who enter postsecondary education, are not prepared to succeed in credit-level degree programs.

That is why the ABE system includes ABE Transition to Community College programs in a growing number of community colleges around the state. This unique college readiness program bridges ABE and community colleges in order to increase college enrollment among ABE graduates. It provides access to associate’s degree programs and a wide variety of certificate programs by serving ABE students who have earned a high school credential and who want to enroll in college but need more preparation.

*“By providing academic, financial, and advising resources, the college is able to help students develop the skills necessary to be self-sufficient and successful in their college lives.”*

Kirsten Daigneault, ABE Transition to Community College Director, Quinsigamond Community College, Worcester, MA (personal communication)

Initial findings suggest that programs that provide transition to college services for adult students are increasing the rate at which adults enroll in postsecondary education. A 2005 study of the New England ABE-to-College Transition Project found that 69 percent of graduates from participating transition programs across the New England states—who included both GED recipients and high school graduates who had been out of school an average of 15 years—enrolled or were expected to enroll in postsecondary education.<sup>25</sup> Although there is much more we need to know, these are promising results.

By providing the support, knowledge, and skills that students need to matriculate and succeed academically, the potential return on investment in the ABE Transition to Community College program is high. If more former ABE students enter—and more importantly, graduate from—community college, Massachusetts’ workforce will be better prepared to meet the demands of today’s economy.

## B. THE COMMONWEALTH'S ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 heralded a new era in the relationship between ABE and workforce development. Shortly afterward, the 2000 Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) report *New Skills for a New Economy* heightened attention to the relationship between ABE and the Massachusetts workforce by reporting that fully one-third of the Massachusetts workforce—1.1 million workers—were not fully equipped to meet the skill demands of the state's rapidly changing economy.<sup>1</sup> For example, of the 92,640 job vacancies in the Commonwealth, 38 percent required an associate's degree or better in 2005 and 2006.<sup>14, 24</sup> In addition, 21.5 percent of immigrant workers with limited English are being held back from success in the labor market because they lack sufficient English-speaking skills.<sup>27</sup>

*“From the ability to communicate and collaborate effectively and the capacity to be self-motivated and directed, to understanding the culture and etiquette of a work place environment, employers report that those entering the workforce are not ready.”<sup>14</sup>*

*Leadership Council Interim Update, The Commonwealth Readiness Project, January 2008*

Despite rising unemployment, Massachusetts employers have more vacant positions than they can fill, particularly in high-skill occupations, because they cannot find enough qualified workers. At the same time, large numbers of unemployed adults are actively seeking employment. This mismatch between the skills of the unemployed and the needs of employers creates a skill gap which inhibits businesses from thriving and may deter new businesses from locating here.<sup>28</sup>

The Commonwealth cannot rely on new entrants to fill the labor gap. Annually, high school graduates add only 2 percent to the workforce. More college graduates are leaving the state and older workers are staying on the job longer. Over the next 10 years, the number of unfilled jobs in the state is expected to grow, more than doubling within two decades.<sup>14</sup> Massachusetts must do a better job educating the workforce we have today.

A native of Cape Verde, Nelida came to the United States in 2002 and began working at A. J. Wright's Distribution Center in 2003. After realizing that her son was rapidly learning to speak English in day care, Nelida began ESOL classes at A. J. Wright in 2004. “Now, I can speak with my three year old son,” says Nelida. The ESOL classes “help me to understand my supervisor at work and I can understand more at the doctor's.”

Nelida, A. J. Wright and UMass Dartmouth Workplace Education Program



*“In a competitive labor market, adults with low literacy may fall behind their peers and find their opportunities for career advancement limited. For states, a workforce with strong literacy is an essential component in creating a favorable business environment.”<sup>9</sup>*

*Adult Literacy in Massachusetts: Results from the 2003 SAAL, American Institutes for Research*

Closing the skills gap means that the Commonwealth must substantially boost the literacy levels of the state’s population as a whole by increasing the focus on ABE as a key component of the Massachusetts workforce development strategy. Otherwise, there are likely to be “tens of thousands of adults unable to meet the requirements of the new economy. Moreover, a substantial proportion of those adults will be members of disadvantaged minority groups who will likely consider themselves outside the economic mainstream.”<sup>15</sup>

Massachusetts employers will continue struggling to find employees with the knowledge and skills needed for high-growth jobs in the state until many more incumbent workers have the opportunity to enroll in ABE in their communities and worksites.<sup>14</sup>

*“In our state, there are no workers to waste. A workforce with insufficient skills is as big a threat as the persistent outmigration of workers to other states.”<sup>1</sup>*

*New Skills for a New Economy, MassINC, 2000*

### **The Role of the ABE System in Workforce Development**

*“Two of the primary returns on literacy are the greater opportunities for employment and earnings.”<sup>1, 9</sup>*

*Adult Literacy in Massachusetts: Results from the 2003 SAAL, American Institutes for Research, and New Skills for a New Economy, MassINC, 2000*

In 2005, 69 percent of 4,000 students responding to a satisfaction survey about their ABE classes said that they would like help either finding a job or getting a better job. Their responses accurately reflect the need for Massachusetts to better develop its workforce. While students and the ABE system have traditionally considered the end goal to be earning a GED, labor market analyses now show that a GED is 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 decent salary—which means the ABE system must adapt.

*“Adults with insufficient literacy levels are unable to access jobs that provide a wage and benefits that can support a family, and are unable to engage fully in the civic life of our great communities. As a society we need to provide more opportunities for those whose literacy levels create barriers. It is our shared responsibility to make the needed investments in basic skills education in order to improve the quality of life of all Massachusetts residents.”*

Robert Haynes, President, Massachusetts AFL-CIO (personal communication)

The ABE system is well positioned to prepare students to gain higher skills leading to solid career paths, but to do so it must continuously improve its local delivery system and deepen and expand its connections with the state’s workforce development system. To that end, the ABE system needs to work more closely with Local Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stop Career Centers to:

- ▶ Provide greater access to state and regional labor market information that will benefit students
- ▶ Promote ABE programs to industry sectors that are strong and/or have growth potential
- ▶ Create more opportunities for ABE students to participate in programs that integrate basic skills, workplace readiness, and job skills at times when more working adults can participate<sup>29</sup>
- ▶ Strengthen its alliance with the state’s higher education system, particularly community colleges, to ensure the successful transition of ABE students to higher education and family-sustaining career paths

Reaching these targets will require that the ABE system provide more intensive services for those adult learners who need and want them. ABE must further strengthen its connections with workforce stakeholders so that ABE educators better understand labor market information, are able to translate it into contextualized curriculum, and work with ABE students to help them improve their job search and future career prospects.

Partnerships between the ABE and workforce systems are further strengthened through workplace education programs.<sup>30</sup> These industry-based initiatives provide contextualized instructional services in basic literacy, numeracy, and ESOL for incumbent workers who lack the basic skills expected of a high school graduate. Providing these programs at the workplace makes it possible for many working adults to more easily enroll in ABE.

However, as the Massachusetts Workforce Investment Board noted in its August 2008 report on ABE, “Too few employers are involved in workplace education. Too few employers are aware of workplace education resources and there appears to be lower than average levels of

awareness in some regions and industries.”<sup>17</sup> To address the need for additional workplace education programs and to promote ease of access for employers, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development collaboratively created a dedicated workplace education fund. Even so, the demand and need for workplace education exceeds current resources, which indicates that additional consideration needs to be given to increasing workplace partnerships in critical and emerging industries and in more geographic locations.

Through workplace education programs, more Massachusetts residents, such as Xavier, can be supported to succeed as individuals, as family and community members, and as workers, to ensure that the new economy benefits all Massachusetts residents.

### C. THE COMMONWEALTH’S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNITY STRENGTH GOALS

*“Massachusetts is on the move today because individuals from all walks of life, from Pittsfield to Provincetown, have answered the call to take responsibility for the well-being of our communities. As I travel around the Commonwealth, it becomes increasingly clear to me that people are prepared to roll up their sleeves and work to achieve their dreams.”<sup>31</sup>*

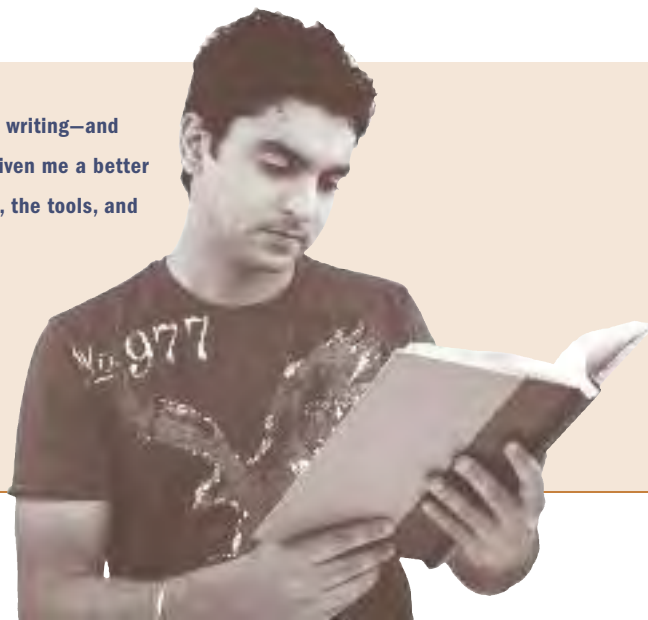
Governor Deval Patrick, *Civic Engagement Times*, May/June

Democratic societies rely on active and informed citizens. As a person’s educational level increases, so does his or her participation in the democratic process. Adults with more education vote and participate in community activities in greater numbers.

- ▶ High school dropouts are significantly less likely than better-educated Americans to vote, trust government, do volunteer work, or go to church, according to a 2006 report that reveals a widening gap in civic health between the nation’s upper and lower classes.<sup>32</sup>
- ▶ Better-educated and better-paid adults are more likely to have and volunteer time for civic, community, educational, health, environmental, and political organizations.<sup>33</sup> The National Conference on Citizenship reported that “College graduates dominate everyday American

**“I have two goals: to be more articulate—verbally and in writing—and to be more effective as a supervisor. This program has given me a better understanding of the language, and also the confidence, the tools, and the opportunity to achieve both goals.”**

**Xavier, Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health,  
Southern Berkshire Educational Collaborative  
Workplace Education Program**



community life” and “few high school dropouts participate in community projects,” which is “an especially serious problem” in communities that have a high percentage of early school leavers.<sup>32</sup>

- ▶ The connection between educational level and voter participation is also well documented. More than one-third—37 percent—of Massachusetts adults with low literacy levels did not vote in the 2000 presidential election; in 2004, 41.7 percent of adults with an educational attainment level below 12th grade voted, compared with 70.7 percent of adults with some college.<sup>9</sup>

ABE is building the skills and abilities of thousands of Massachusetts residents every day to enable them to fully participate as members of their communities from becoming citizens and registering to vote, to using local libraries, to participating in community activities at their children’s schools, neighborhood centers, and at their houses of worship.

Despite work, family, and educational commitments, some ABE students still find the time to get involved in volunteer activities. For example, John is a 20-year-old ABE student in Pittsfield, who attends the Adult Learning Center four days a week to improve his literacy skills. When not studying, he serves as a volunteer teaching aide helping other students—writing questions for them to discuss using the ABE curriculum—and assisting them in building their vocabulary skills.

John, student, Adult Learning Center, Pittsfield, MA

### **The Role of the ABE System in Civic Engagement and Community Strengthening**

While the primary reason that adults enroll in ABE programs is to learn English, earn a GED, and become better prepared for college or the workplace, that is not all they gain as adult learners. As ABE students work to achieve these primary goals, they are also exposed to a range of information and ideas about social, health, economic, and critical public issues that have a long-term influence on their civic participation and community involvement as family members, neighborhood residents, employees, and citizens.

Because community involvement and adult education naturally intersect at the individual and community level, ABE plays an important part in encouraging, supporting, and facilitating civic involvement and responsibility. In very practical ways, ABE helps students learn about and engage in community issues such as:

- ▶ Community health and health education
- ▶ Financial literacy
- ▶ Economic and community development
- ▶ Public safety



## ABE and Community Health and Health Education

*“People who have low levels of functional literacy are the same people we've found to be at higher-than-average risk for health problems.”<sup>34</sup>*

Rima Rudd, Harvard School of Public Health

There is a serious mismatch between the literacy demands of the health system and the literacy skills of the people using the system. Studies point out that “low literacy is associated with poor self-management of disease and increased hospitalization.”<sup>35</sup> Adults with low literacy have more difficulty navigating the health system, such as not being able to read the dosage instructions on a prescription label or speak enough English to communicate with a doctor or nurse. Patients may also have difficulty comprehending informed consent forms or health directives that are written for adults with higher literacy levels.<sup>36</sup>

Adults with advanced degrees and higher income levels, on average, are more health literate and have fewer health problems than less educated and poor adults. Increased income is also associated with higher health literacy.

- ▶ The 2003 State Assessment of Adult Literacy found that Massachusetts adults living in households with income below or within 100 to 175 percent of the federal poverty threshold had the lowest health literacy. Moreover, a higher percentage of Massachusetts adults living below the poverty threshold had below basic literacy, compared with adults living above 175 percent of the poverty threshold (41 percent and 4 percent respectively).<sup>9</sup>
- ▶ Additionally, parents with higher education levels have healthier children. They tend to use better pre- and postnatal care, which results in fewer premature births and low-weight babies. Educated parents also provide better medical care as their children get older, which contributes to “lower medical expenses and fewer learning problems in school.”<sup>37</sup>

Through contextualized curriculum, ABE incorporates health content into instructional activities for ABE students. Students are able to build their literacy skills while gaining practical knowledge they can use immediately.

**“In the early seventies, I went to vote for the first time. Since I could not read, I took my wife with me. I asked if she could go in the booth with me to help me read the ballot. I was told no. If I couldn't read it myself, I couldn't vote...it aggravated me from that day on.**

**I got along all these years by watching and listening to people. Most people didn't know I couldn't read. Sometimes, they asked me how to do things! The hardest thing I did was to go back to school to learn how to read. My teacher tells me I was reading at a kindergarten level when I started in 2006. She says I now read at a second grade level. This fall, the school helped my wife and me register to vote. And on November 4, 2008, at the age of 58, I voted for the first time.”**

**James, UMass Dartmouth, Workplace Education Program**

As more adults gain health information while building their skills in ABE programs in Massachusetts, they will be in a better position to improve their health literacy and health outcomes for their families by making better nutritional choices, reducing stress and drug/alcohol dependence, avoiding the incidence of HIV/AIDS, reducing domestic violence, and communicating more effectively with health professionals.

**“The wellness activities [at the ABE program] give good information. They changed my habits and my family’s habits, including my grandchildren. Now I give my grandchildren more fruits and vegetables and no more unhealthy snacks. Now I give them water instead of juice. Three times a week I walk for half an hour to an hour in the community with my grandchildren. I exercise more now both in school and out of school.”**

**Maria V., Lowell Adult Education Center student, Lowell, MA**

### **ABE and Financial Literacy**

*“Forty-three percent of adults in the United States at the lowest level of financial literacy live in poverty, compared to only four percent of those at the highest level of financial literacy.”<sup>38</sup>*

*Facts on Financial Literacy, Practitioner Resources*

ABE students increasingly recognize that how much an individual earns in a lifetime depends, to a great extent, on his or her education level and that learning English and gaining a GED puts them on a path to earning more and building a better life. While many adult students are quite skilled in developing and managing a family budget, using the banking system, navigating the credit system, and understanding employee benefits, some need help in these areas.

- ▶ Financial planning becomes increasingly relevant to ABE students as they consider further education, get better jobs, start businesses, and become homeowners. “The average household with debt carries approximately \$10,000 to \$12,000 in total revolving debt and has 9 credit cards.”<sup>39</sup>
- ▶ Homeownership rates are influenced by the educational level of the head of household. In 2006, less than 46 percent of households headed by an individual lacking a high school diploma/GED were owner-occupied, compared with 64 percent of households headed by high school graduates and 76 percent of those headed by an adult with a master’s or more advanced degree.<sup>11</sup>

Gaining financial literacy with the support of the ABE system provides the knowledge and skills that adult students need to establish their financial goals and build a better future.

## ABE and Community Economic Development

*“Adults with more schooling generate more favorable fiscal results for government at all levels—because of their higher rates of employment and annual earnings, higher marriage rates, higher home ownership rates, and lower rates of institutionalization.”<sup>33</sup>*

*Reach Higher America, National Commission on Adult Literacy, June 2008*

Massachusetts has one of the highest personal incomes per capita of any state in the United States. In 2005, the Commonwealth Corporation reported that the state’s overall economic performance is determined, in part, by the size and human capital characteristics of the state’s labor force.<sup>40</sup> When revenues are high, state and local governments are able to provide the services that residents need and want.

Yet, the labor and skills shortage threatens economic growth.

- ▶ If workers lack up-to-date skills, the probability is that their future wages will decline over their lifetimes, having a negative impact on the tax base of Massachusetts and its ability to provide services to its citizens.<sup>14</sup> In addition, low-skilled workers often are the first to lose their jobs and may require ongoing public support.
- ▶ Many of the three million Americans who lost their jobs in 2008 are individuals who need classes to learn the basic reading, math, or English skills required to apply for jobs and regain employment.<sup>41</sup>
- ▶ When higher proportions of residents earn education credentials and upgrade their literacy and job skills, they have more career options, which, in turn, provide direct financial benefits to communities by way of tax revenues. “In light of the stagnant labor force growth in recent years and lack of skilled workers in the Commonwealth, all Massachusetts residents must be viewed as potential assets to our economic future, including high school, college, and ABE graduates.”<sup>42</sup>

*“High school graduates with no postsecondary schooling paid \$1.64 in taxes for every dollar of transfers that they received. This ratio rose to 3.28 for those with 1–3 years of college, to 12.85 for those with a bachelor’s degree, and to 24.29 for those with an advanced degree.”<sup>14</sup>*

*Leadership Council Interim Update, The Commonwealth Readiness Project, January 2008*

ABE makes it possible for more adults to increase their education, thereby contributing to the state’s economic competitiveness and helping to attract industry and employers to establish and relocate their businesses in Massachusetts.

## **ABE and Public Safety**

*“The average cost to incarcerate one person for one year is... comparable to the tuition cost of obtaining a bachelor’s degree at many state postsecondary institutions.”<sup>33</sup>*

*Reach Higher America, National Commission on Adult Literacy, June 2008*

The relationship between the lack of formal education and crime is clear. Over 70 percent of offenders in Massachusetts correctional facilities do not have a high school diploma. The Center for Law and Social Policy estimates that about half of all inmates are “functionally illiterate.”<sup>43</sup> In addition, children of incarcerated parents are at greater risk of poor academic performance and dropping out of school, alcohol and drug abuse, and delinquency, leading to incarceration as a juvenile or adult, and living in poverty.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, “rates of recidivism in the United States are extraordinarily high, ranging from 41 percent to 71 percent.”<sup>45</sup> When most inmates leave prison, they reenter “the community unskilled, undereducated, and highly likely to become involved in crime again.”<sup>45</sup> A 2002 study by the Massachusetts Sentencing Commission showed that 49 percent of state offenders commit crimes within one year of leaving prison. Without adequate support for reentering society, former inmates struggle to adapt and to find work.

There is an “overwhelming consensus among public officials that postsecondary education is the most successful and cost-effective method of preventing crime.”<sup>45</sup> Additionally, for inmates earning a GED prior to release from Massachusetts medium security facilities, recidivism declined by 23 percent.<sup>46</sup> At an annual cost of \$43,000 per inmate,<sup>47</sup> the Commonwealth saves over one million dollars per year for every 25 people who do not return to the corrections system. There is a clear financial return, as well as societal benefits, when the Commonwealth invests in the education of incarcerated adults.

Jail may not seem like a positive learning environment, but without the peer pressure and the negative influences at home and in their neighborhood, inmates at the Suffolk County House of Correction “have a unique opportunity to take advantage of the education programs and concentrate on their school work,” according to ABE Coordinator Dottie Dunford.

At 54, Kaseem never learned to read. He dropped out in fifth grade and turned to dealing drugs. When in trouble as a teen, the court gave him the choice between jail and enlisting in the Marines. He chose to enlist, where he learned to box. When he returned, he continued boxing while using and selling drugs. This led him to prison, where he earned a reputation as being tough yet wise, while hiding his inability to read.

At the Suffolk County facility, his reading score placed him just above first grade. He looked to other students to do his work for him. As he began to gain more trust and motivation, he explained his struggle with dyslexia and his embarrassment about his inability to read to his grandchildren. It was then that Kaseem truly became a student.

He started to complete the assignments, ask questions, and even motivate others who were better readers than he. He was class leader and spoke to the younger students about the importance of education, while admitting to them his difficulty with reading.

Kaseem’s progress was slow, but he persevered and became the Student of the Month. When Kaseem was released, he read closer to a second grade level, and had a handful of children’s books that he could read to his grandchildren.

## Massachusetts Strategic Goals for Adult Basic Education



*“Our future and the future of our nation is at stake. Without change, doors will be closed to our students, and job options for many may be unnecessarily limited.”<sup>5</sup>*

*Framework for Leadership and Action, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006*

As the Commonwealth looks to build a better future for its residents, the ABE system must continue to develop innovative teaching and learning methods to meet the diverse needs of all the adult learners who need to upgrade their skills in the years to come. The three strategic goals—Ensure Access to Services, Increase System Effectiveness and Quality, and Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps—are meant to enhance and expand the good work that ABE programs are doing now and position them to be able to take advantage of promising new opportunities.

## ABE STRATEGIC GOALS AND OBJECTIVES AT A GLANCE

ABE Strategic Goals	Objectives
<b>Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services</b>	<p>Increase available services through service intensity and additional student seats</p> <p>Support programs that successfully address challenges in reaching diverse populations</p> <p>Expand multiple service delivery options</p>
<b>Increase System Effectiveness and Quality</b>	<p>Strengthen ABE's standards-based system so that it will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▶ Ensure that funding supports high-quality services</li><li>▶ Align content standards (Curriculum Frameworks), instruction, and assessment</li><li>▶ Use performance standards to identify where the system is doing well and where it needs improvement</li><li>▶ Ensure that the ABE professional standards, including the subject matter knowledge requirements, are aligned with the Curriculum Frameworks</li><li>▶ Align professional development with the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements</li><li>▶ Encourage the use of the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements to strengthen teaching and learning</li></ul> <p>Increase regulatory flexibility to enable programs to better meet local and regional needs</p> <p>Seek opportunities to support programmatic innovation in order to more effectively serve students</p>
<b>Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps: in College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community</b>	<p>Provide leadership and support to strengthen and contextualize student-centered curricula</p> <p>Expand student access to support services</p> <p>Ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps</p>

## **ABE Strategic Goal 1: Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services**

*“More than one half of adults (53 percent) who are not in the labor force lack basic skills across the prose, document, and quantitative literacy scales.”<sup>9</sup>*

Adult Literacy in Massachusetts: Results from the 2003 SAAL, American Institutes for Research

Adult learners seek literacy skills for countless purposes. Each year, more than 23,000 adult learners attend ABE programs and an additional 23,000 adults are on waiting lists to acquire the literacy skills they need to achieve their goals. Whether their objective is to get a job or a better job, help their children with homework, or become a citizen, the ABE system assists adult learners.

Just as the ABE system serves individual learners, it also serves the public interest. From bridging the gap between workers in need of good jobs and employers in need of skilled workers to reducing the academic achievement gap between poor and minority children and their middle-class counterparts, the ABE system enables adults and youth to better face the future and supports the state’s public policy priorities.

Despite the challenges of serving many purposes with limited systemic resources and a demand for services that far exceeds the supply, the ABE system and its stakeholders are unified in their determination to continue reaching out to prospective students and to keeping the door of opportunity open to all adult learners in need of literacy and language skills and to providing more intensive services for those students who need and want them.

To meet this goal, the system will:

- ▮ Increase available services through service intensity and/or additional student seats
- ▮ Support programs that successfully address challenges in reaching diverse populations
- ▮ Expand multiple service delivery options

## **ABE Strategic Goal 2: Increase System Effectiveness and Quality**

Access is a critical goal, but access without quality is an empty promise. Over 20 years ago, the ABE system made a difficult but necessary decision to embrace quality over quantity by paying for the real costs of providing effective educational services. That decision to fully fund the cost of a seat in ABE meant the creation of waiting lists, which continue to grow today. While the pressure of thousands of students on waiting lists weighs heavily on the ABE system, particularly on local programs, the system remains committed to providing high-quality and effective services, and to collaborating with local and state organizations with the capacity to support the ABE goals.

To sustain this commitment, it is imperative that ABE programs have adequate funding to support required program components that meet student needs, including counseling, a well-trained and stable workforce, and innovative program development. In return, ABE programs must be accountable for continually improving services that result in increased student outcomes.

To meet this goal, it is imperative to:

- ▶ Strengthen ABE's standards-based system so that it will:
  - ▶ Ensure that funding supports high-quality services
  - ▶ Align content standards,<sup>48</sup> instruction, and assessment
  - ▶ Use performance standards to identify where the system is doing well and where it needs improvement
  - ▶ Ensure that the ABE professional standards, including the subject matter knowledge requirements, are aligned with the Curriculum Frameworks
  - ▶ Align professional development with the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements
  - ▶ Encourage the use of the ABE professional standards and subject matter knowledge requirements to strengthen teaching and learning
- ▶ Increase regulatory flexibility to enable programs to better meet local and regional needs
- ▶ Seek opportunities to support programmatic innovation in order to more effectively serve students

**ABE Strategic Goal 3: Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps: In College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community**

*“The universal expectation must be that all Massachusetts residents achieve a postsecondary degree or equivalent credential coupled with a guarantee from the state of financial support to achieve that goal. This is not only critical to create opportunities for individual success, but for the success of our communities and the Commonwealth...Communities with high dropout rates, low college enrollment rates, and low college graduation rates represent our best opportunity for addressing labor and skill shortages, while lifting these communities economically.”<sup>14</sup>*

*Leadership Council Interim Update, The Commonwealth Readiness Project, January 2008*

Common sense and current research tell us that in order to improve the quality of the lives of adult learners and their families, it is necessary to support them in the successful transition to next steps including college, further training, advancement in the 21st century workplace, and civic engagement. It is no longer enough to earn a high school credential to make a family-sustaining wage. Armed with this information, the ABE system must shift its focus from the GED<sup>49</sup> as the end goal. It must also ensure that adult learners can acquire not only reading, writing, math, and English language skills, but also the communication, technological, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills needed for success.

Moving beyond preparing students for a high school credential to preparing students for success in postsecondary education and today's workplace will require the ABE system to renew partnerships with the workforce development and community college systems, leverage additional resources, and build its instructional and counseling capacities to improve student transition.

To meet this goal, the system will:

- ▶ Provide leadership and support to strengthen and contextualize student-centered curricula
- ▶ Expand student access to support services
- ▶ Ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps

### **Achieving the ABE Strategic Goals**

Achieving each of the ABE strategic goals will require tough decisions, hard work, and a concerted focus on public awareness, partnerships, and resources. Priorities include:

- ▶ Increasing **public awareness** through active marketing of ABE so that potential students (young adults, immigrants, incumbent workers), educators, employers, policymakers, and partners recognize that basic literacy is the gateway to the American Dream—the critical first step toward achieving long-term success as students, workers, parents, and contributing members of Massachusetts communities. ABE programs help students get the educational foundation they need to succeed in their next steps, overcome poverty, access family-sustaining employment, and embark on career paths.
- ▶ Developing, participating in, and sustaining formal and informal **partnerships** with state and local agencies, and the private sector, will make it possible for more adults from across the Commonwealth to access ABE services, build the core skills needed for success in today's economy, and actively participate within their community as involved parents and family members, savvy consumers, and informed citizens.
- ▶ Leveraging a wide range of human, financial, and organizational **resources** to fully support the implementation of action steps necessary to achieve ABE's strategic goals.

Public awareness, partnerships, and resources—all are needed at both the grassroots and state level to support the success of the ABE system and its learners as we face the future together.

Like many immigrants in ABE programs across the Commonwealth, Gifty, a native of Ghana, enrolled in an ESOL class. She attended classes for two years at the UMass Worcester Campus. She also worked full-time as a housekeeper at Mass Memorial Hospital. In June 2008, Gifty graduated and spoke about her experience at the program's year-end gathering.

"Because of this class I received the confidence I needed to take a CNA class and pass the exam...Things we couldn't do before we can do now. For example: we read better, we can have good communication with our co-workers and supervisors, and our computer skills have improved...Our families and co-workers notice that our skills are improving."

In 2009, she enrolled in a Medical Terminology program to further her communication skills. In the meantime, Gifty became a United States citizen.

## DEVELOPING THE ACTION PLAN

From December 2008 through May 2009, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS), convened an ABE Strategic Plan Task Force to study the *Massachusetts Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education* and make recommendations regarding how the Commonwealth's ABE system can best accomplish the goals outlined in this framework.

The task force included 30 individuals. A majority (64 percent) of the membership consisted of recent ABE/ESOL practitioners representing all regions of the state and a variety of community and service types and sizes. The remaining one-third included representatives from the workforce development system, community colleges, the ABE Directors' Council, the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE), the MCAE Working Conditions Committee, and the System for Adult Basic Education Support (SABES).

Early in the planning process, it became clear that the group's charge of making recommendations for implementation of the strategic framework needed to become more focused so that specific and useful recommendations could be made within the time frame of the task force's existence. As a result, the task force's scope of work was narrowed to provide recommendations specifically regarding how best to:

1. Increase service intensity for students who can participate more (an objective under Goal 1)
2. Strengthen ABE instruction and build teacher capacity, both to increase system effectiveness and quality (Goal 2) and to ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps (an objective under Goal 3)
3. Increase programmatic flexibility (an objective under Goal 2)
4. Expand access to counseling (an objective under Goal 3)

Throughout task force deliberations, several recurring themes arose:

- ▶ Focus the system more on outcomes and results and less on inputs
- ▶ Think—and track student progress—beyond the confines of a single fiscal year
- ▶ View programs holistically
- ▶ Simplify

The task force submitted a report in June 2009 that included specific policy recommendations, a context and rationale for each recommendation, and summaries of majority and minority positions on issues.<sup>50</sup> ACLS will be seeking comment from the ABE community and other stakeholders through a variety of existing venues such as, for example, the annual directors' meeting and Network conference and the website. ACLS will provide a written response to the report that will include an update on recommendations that are being implemented and, for any recommendations not accepted, an explanation of the reasons.

## Conclusion



*“Children go to school because they must be there by law, all their friends are there, and they don’t usually have other responsibilities. Children are not in school to meet their own goals; they are there to meet goals set for them by the school system. Adults must choose to go to class, and attending class always means taking time away from the important adult responsibilities of work, family, and community. Personal goals provide adults with the motivation to make that choice.”<sup>51</sup>*

John Comings, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) and Harvard Graduate School of Education

When faced with a variety of choices, none of them perfect, there will, by necessity, be tradeoffs. Adults make them and so does government. This is especially true in times of economic turmoil and competing priorities. The policy decisions and tradeoffs that the Commonwealth will make in the coming months about how much to invest in human capital may well determine Massachusetts’ competitive position in the global economy over the next decade.

Yes, there will be additional costs associated with investing in ABE. But the costs of helping more adults throughout the Commonwealth to become literate and earn education credentials will be far less the costs of not doing so, seeing industries and individual businesses looking elsewhere for qualified employees, having communities reduce or eliminate public services due to falling tax revenues, and watching families whose breadwinners do not have sufficient basic skills fall into poverty because they cannot find a job that pays enough to make ends meet.

The recommendations of the ABE Strategic Plan Task Force suggest that ABE can play an even greater role in supporting thousands of immigrants, early school leavers, and incumbent workers obtain higher education and skills training in the future. From a program standpoint, the recommendations will set in motion a series of practical action steps aimed at enhancing and expanding education, workforce, and community partnerships from Cape Cod and the Islands to Boston, the North and South Shore, to South Eastern, Central, and Western Massachusetts, so that many more adults can enrich and improve their lives, the lives of their children and families, and the hundreds of communities in the Commonwealth for years to come.

*“If we remain on our current path—given the continued rate of high school dropouts, the growing number of immigrants who are limited English proficient, and the low number of adults enrolled in adult education and moving along paths to postsecondary education and occupational training—our problems will only escalate. And by 2020, the nation will have to bear the burden of meeting the needs of an even larger pool of adults with low skills and language deficiencies. We cannot begin too soon.”<sup>33</sup>*

*Reach Higher America, National Commission on Adult Literacy, June 2008*

**“I came to America in 1976; I was seven years old. Today is very different for me; I am going to school to get my high school diploma.**

**When I came to this country at the age of seven, it was very scary. I started school not even being able to speak English...when I was 13 years old, my parents decided to go back to the Azores. So after only getting six years of schooling...my formal education ended...I always dreamed that I would be able to go back to school someday. At 15, I decided to return to the United States without my parents. I took odd jobs and worked at Dunkin Donuts for 11 years until I was laid off.**

**I visited the Greater New Bedford Career Center...I was very apprehensive about coming back to school after so many years. It was the best decision I have made in a long time. I started a new job just recently, and my employer, Eastern Fisheries, was able to give me the time off so I can get my diploma. I have learned many things since I have been in school; my confidence has risen. I have many more goals to strive for; my diploma is the first step of many that I will take.**

**My future educational goals are to enroll in college. Even though I am 39 years old...it is never too late to continue with your education. I would also like to enroll in classes that would help me with my computer skills...we all need technology skills.**

**Now, I feel that my life has changed; things are finally falling into place. If there is one thing I could tell everyone in the world, it would be never give up keep trying, because someday you will obtain all your goals.”**

**Vasco D., graduate of the New Bedford Public Schools, Division of Adult/Continuing Education's Adult Diploma Program**

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