

# Massachusetts' Strategic Framework for Adult Basic Education

## INTRODUCTION

If Massachusetts is to continue growing its economy and improving the quality of life for all Bay Staters, many more adults must gain additional education and workplace skills – more so than at any other time in the Commonwealth's history. No longer is a high school diploma sufficient to access in-demand jobs and career success in today's knowledge economy.

*When adult students have the opportunity to succeed through the Adult Basic Education System, we all benefit; when individuals gain literacy and basic skills, the Commonwealth achieves its goals.*

The Commonwealth is facing serious challenges — economic competitiveness and labor market restructuring, demographic shifts which are impacting the pool of skilled workers, and immigration that shows no sign of slowing. Furthermore, no single government agency can do this alone and government alone can't accomplish this effort.

The Commonwealth must tap into the self-interest and social responsibility of community and private sector leaders – perhaps even more than before – to deploy the resources it will take attain the crucial societal and economic outcomes that Massachusetts' residents deserves.

*"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."*  
*(Mass Jobs: Meeting the Challenges of a Shifting Economy, MassINC, 2007).*

The macro-economic and societal trends are clear and a shared urgency across sectors is needed "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>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sum, Andrew et al. *Mass Jobs: Meeting the Challenges of a Shifting Economy*. Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC), 2007

To achieve its public policy goals, the Commonwealth needs an educated and skilled populace. In order to help children reach their full potential, the 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. Massachusetts businesses need workers with the entry-level skills today's jobs require; if they cannot find those workers in this state, they will find them elsewhere. And Massachusetts communities need residents who vote, volunteer, raise healthy families, work, and contribute to the tax base.

Therefore, the Massachusetts Adult Basic Education System (ABE) must scale-up its ability to provide a full continuum of cohesive and comprehensive education services. Services that take an adult from the lowest level of literacy or English language proficiency through high school completion leading to advanced education and training – a strategic investment that will also help prevent the achievement gap and close the skills gap among low-income and minority youth – and will provide a greater return on investment over generations than it will cost in time, talent, and resources in today's dollars. Increasing the capacity of the ABE system to scale-up services to meet the challenges ahead will require concentrating resources on three strategic goals:

#### MASSACHUSETTS' STRATEGIC GOALS FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION:

1. Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services.
2. Increase System Effectiveness and Quality.
3. Prepare Students for Success in their Next Steps: College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community.

The strategy for achieving each of these goals will require:

- Increasing public awareness through active marketing of ABE;
- Developing, sustaining and utilizing formal and informal partnerships; and,
- Leveraging a wide range of human, financial and organizational resources.

The strategic framework that follows presents a roadmap to guide ABE policymakers, providers, leaders and other stakeholders in ensuring 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. It focuses specifically on the needs of the state's adults seeking basic skills and/or English language skills and will guide investments of limited state and federal funds for ABE by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) and its partners who co-invest in ABE as a key component of the Commonwealth's long-range economic and workforce development strategy.

## DEVELOPING THE STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

This strategic framework is designed to create a unified vision for the future of the ABE system that enables all stakeholders in the Commonwealth to speak with one voice, to assist state policymakers in strategically directing ABE resources where they will have the greatest impact and help the Department create new policy options and, where necessary, modify existing policies and procedures to deliver more effective ABE services throughout the Commonwealth.

It was developed by those who will be most affected by it: the 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 review preliminary findings, 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's working and what needs to change in adult education.

In all, the planning process engaged over 5,000 stakeholders in helping to identify the most effective strategies for ensuring a strong, high-quality and accessible adult basic education system in the years to come.

## WHY ADULT EDUCATION MATTERS

"No single actor can generate the scale of [education] reform required, and no single action included here will yield the scope of advancement needed. Working together, however, we can press ahead, implementing actions and strategies that will help get us all ready for success in the 21 century."

*-Ready for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Success: The New Promise of Public Education (June 2008)*

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education funds over 150 ABE programs. Adult Basic Education is a key component in the overall strategy for building a stronger Commonwealth. It opens the doors to expand the individual's opportunities. When this happens in large numbers, the economy and quality of life in the state benefits.

As we've come to understand after listening to stakeholders across the state, there is a shared recognition that today the bar is set much higher. ABE services must prepare students both academically and motivationally to embark on a path of life-long learning, providing both academic skills and links to career paths. This preparation will enable students to meet employers' expectations for trained workers, attend and complete college, and attain the goals they set for themselves.

Adult Basic Education supports the Commonwealth's education, workforce development, civic engagement and healthy communities goals.

## MASSACHUSETTS' STRATEGIC GOALS FOR ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

As the Commonwealth looks to building 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 and new opportunities.

### GOALS AND OBJECTIVES AT A GLANCE

Strategic Goals	Objectives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Ensure That Adults Needing Basic Education Have Access to Services</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase available services through service intensity and/or additional student seats.</li> <li>• Support programs that successfully address challenges in reaching diverse populations.</li> <li>• Expand multiple service delivery options.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Increase System Effectiveness and Quality</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to build a standards-based ABE system.               <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> </li> <li>• Increase regulatory flexibility to enable programs to better meet local and regional needs.</li> <li>• Seek opportunities to support programmatic innovation in order to more effectively serve students.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Prepare Students for Success in Their Next Steps: College and Further Training, at Work, and in the Community</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide leadership and support to strengthen and contextualize student-centered curricula.</li> <li>• Expand student access to support services.</li> <li>• Ensure that students gain the academic skills needed to be successful in their next steps.</li> </ul>

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

Adult learners seek literacy skills for countless purposes. Each year, over 24,000 adult learners attend adult basic education programs and an additional 23,000 adults wait for services so that they can acquire the literacy skills needed to achieve their goals. Whether their goal 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 closing the academic achievement gap between poor and minority children and their middle class counterparts, the ABE system supports 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 keep the door of opportunity open to all adult learners in need of literacy and language skills.

*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.

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

Access is a critical goal, but access without quality is an empty promise. Over twenty 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 waitlists weighs heavily on the ABE system, particularly on local programs, the system remains committed to providing high quality and effective services.

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

*To meet this goal, the system will:*

- Continue to build a standards-based ABE system.
  - Ensure that funding supports high quality services.
  - Align content standards (Curriculum Frameworks), 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.

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

Common sense and current research tell us that in order to improve the quality of the lives of adult learners, it is necessary to support them in the successful transition to next steps including college, further training and advancement in the 21st century workplace. 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 as the end goal to ensuring that adult learners can acquire not only the reading, writing, math skills 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 post-secondary 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 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 Goals**

Achieving each of the goals will require tough decisions, hard work and attention to public awareness, partnerships and resources:

- Increased 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 their community – and that ABE programs help students get the

educational foundation they need to overcome poverty,<sup>2</sup> 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 implement the action steps necessary to achieve these goals.

Like the proverbial three-legged stool, the entire strategy is inter-connected and cannot stand on just one or two of these operational components – all are needed at both the grassroots and state level to maintain forward progress and ensure an opportunity for success for adult learners.

In 1993, The Massachusetts Board of Education adopted the following mission for Adult Basic Education:

*“To provide each and every adult with opportunities to develop literacy skills needed to qualify for further education, job training, and better employment, and to reach his/her full potential as a family member, productive worker, and citizen.”*

As we move forward from this framework to develop an action plan for achieving these goals and objectives, we will provide an opportunity to thousands of residents from the Cape and the Islands, to Boston, the North Shore, and to Central and Western Massachusetts to enrich their lives, and the lives of their children and families for years to come.

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<sup>2</sup> According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), poverty and deprivation have profound effects on child development and children's prospects for the future. Low family income can impede children's cognitive development and their ability to learn. It can contribute to behavioral, social, and emotional problems. It can cause and exacerbate poor child health. Poor nutrition, lack of preventive health care, substance abuse, maternal depression, and family violence put young children at risk, with children who experience economic hardship when they are young and children who experience severe and chronic hardship at the greatest risk. NCCP asserts that the best way to promote children's healthy development and reduce risks is to help parents and other caregivers and recommends several ways to promote healthy, effective parenting: providing interventions that explicitly address parental risk factors, connecting young children with necessary health and related services, and addressing the concrete needs of the family.