

ESTIMATING TOTAL NEED FOR ABE SERVICES IN MASSACHUSETTS

March 1995

There are no direct measures of the degree to which Massachusetts adults have mastered an adequate educational foundation. We do, however, have a wealth of state and national data that allow us to provide a reliable estimate of the total need for ABE services in Massachusetts. This estimate finds that 877,000 (19% of) Massachusetts adults have not yet attained functional literacy and that another 1,162,000 (25%) fall below the level of mastery education reform envisions for high school graduates. The following analysis reviews how these estimates were developed.

THE 1990 CENSUS

The 1990 Census provides a count of the number of adults who have not attained a high school diploma and an estimate of adults who are limited English proficient; the Census does not provide any data related to adults who have attained or exceeded a high school diploma but who still lack either functional literacy or mastery at the secondary level.

- 908,718 Massachusetts adults (21.6%) lack a high school credential
- 156,297* reported they speak English "Not Well" or "Not At All,"
67,656 of whom completed high school (non-duplicated count).
*[an acknowledged "under-count"]

This yields a *minimum* potential target population of **976,374**. With an average of at least 9,000 young adults per year dropping out of school, the potential *minimum* target population functioning with less than a high school diploma and/or limited English proficiency **exceeds 1 million**.

THE NATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY

In all the domains for which adult basic education is expected to provide an adequate educational foundation:

- *in our workforce -- as contributors in an increasingly competitive economy,*
- *in our communities -- as self-sufficient/contributing citizens, and*
- *in our families -- as contributors to intergenerational literacy,*

we are hearing (and research is confirming) that a high school diploma alone is not sufficient to ensure the adequacy of that foundation. Hence, we need to adopt a definition of ABE's potential target population based on *functioning level* rather than simply the last grade completed.

The 1991 "National Adult Literacy Survey" (NALS) identified the literacy proficiencies ("educational foundation") of U.S. adults in *prose*, *document* and *quantitative* literacy across a five level scale. Massachusetts DOE curriculum and assessment specialists examined sample items provided for each level of this scale and determined that level one covers early through mid-elementary level skills and abilities and level two falls below the level of skill/capabilities we should expect to find at the high

school level; they found level three covered from high school level content/expectations to the initial post-secondary level. Restricting our estimate to NALS levels one and two provides a conservative proxy for "adults functioning with less than mastery of the educational foundation expected of a high school graduate;" i.e., the target population for adult basic education (ABE) services.

Our most reliable estimate of need for ABE services is arrived at by combining Massachusetts' 1990 census educational attainment profile (the "best predictor" of NALS performance) with their corresponding functioning levels on the National Adult Literacy Survey. This approach more closely aligns NALS findings with the higher than average levels of educational attainment/"last grade completed" of Massachusetts residents.

Educational Attainment (Adults 18 and older)	1990 Census	NALS Level 1 (%)	MA Target Population @ Level 1	NALS Level 2 (%)	MA Target Population @ Level 2
Less Than 9th Grade	331,218 (7.1%)	77%	255,038	19%	62,931
Some High School Only	573,800 (12.3%)	44%	252,472	36%	206,568
High School Graduate only	1,390,182 (29.8%)	18%	250,233	36%	500,466
Some College / Associate's Degree Only	1,194,250 (25.6%)	7%	83,598	22%	262,735
Bachelor's Degree Or Higher	1,175,590 (25.2%)	3%	35,268	11%	129,315
TOTALS:	4,665,040	19%	876,609	25%	1,162,015

Hence, an estimated

- 877,000 Massachusetts adults are not yet *functionally literate*, and another
- 1,162,000 fall *below the level of mastery* education reform envisions for high school graduates.

Although these estimates are quite large, they are based on the conservative use of only NALS levels 1 and 2; nationally, another 31% of adults are functioning at level three, much of which still reflects high school level (rather than high school graduate) proficiency. Overall, therefore, there are at least an estimated 2 million Massachusetts adults potentially in need of adult basic education services.