

New and Effective Approaches to Adult Basic Skills Advocacy

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U.S. public adult basic skills education, as adult education researcher Thomas Sticht has often pointed out, is on the margins of public education. By many measures, in the past decade it has experienced significant further decline. In the last decade and a half, according to Sticht's (2015) analysis, "enrollments in the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) have dropped from some 4.3 million in 1999 to under 1.6 million in program year 2013-14, the last year with data available." Federal funding for adult basic skills education, which includes English language learning, has at best stagnated; in constant dollars, it has declined. In constant 2015 dollars, according to Sticht (2015), "the federal funding purchasing power was \$577 million in 2000, some \$79 million more than a decade and a half later in 2015." Because of increased costs needed to meet rising content standards and greater accountability requirements as well as other increasing program expenses, effectively this has meant fewer federal resources. State public funding, with a few modest exceptions, at best is also level; in many states, such as California, adult basic skills funding has been severely cut (Sticht, 2015). As a result of increased demand, higher costs, and fewer resources, according to the National Council of

State Directors of Adult Education (NCSDAE), there are waiting lists now for adult basic skills services in virtually every state.¹

What can we do to change that? What is the role of public policy advocacy at state and national levels? What are the most effective public policy advocacy strategies? Do we need to make adjustments to our approach to public policy advocacy, or do we need to overhaul it?

Adult basic education public policy advocates need to continue and expand their local, legislator-by-legislator community, state, and national organizing efforts. This is essential, the *sine qua non*, of adult literacy advocacy. However, times have changed, and we also have to do some things differently:

- **We need a new major media campaign.** It has been almost three decades since the last major media campaign for adult literacy, Project Literacy U.S. (PLUS), that was sponsored by major television and radio broadcasters with the help of the Ad Council. During and right after this campaign, our field gained ground, not entirely due to the campaign, but it helped. Many more Americans knew we had an adult literacy challenge in our country, and we had adult literacy champions

¹Waiting list information available from NCSDAE website, <http://www.ncsdae.org/2010%20Adult%20Education%20Waiting%20List%20Report.pdf>

in Congress. Since then, however, we have lost ground in both public awareness and legislators' interest and commitment to address the issue. In a new media campaign we now need both traditional media—radio, television and newspapers—but we also need Internet social media.

- **We need strong public policy advocacy for basic skills from our adult literacy stakeholding partners.** We need to emphasize organizing at community and state levels of our adult basic skills partner stakeholders such as: community colleges; employers; labor unions; poverty and income inequality reduction advocacy groups; community health centers and other health promotion and health care organizations; immigration rights advocacy organizations; advocates for reduction of prison and jail recidivism and for successful transition of former inmates into the community; advocates for affordable housing for low-income and homeless people; campaigns to raise the minimum wage; libraries, newspapers and book publishers; public schools' intergenerational efforts to improve children's reading readiness for school by helping their parents to learn to read, and others who depend for the success of their initiatives and efforts on their clients having good basic skills.

However, we need to change the nature of these community and state advocacy partnerships; adult literacy practitioners are too used to being supplicants with not only policymakers but also with their community and state partners. We need to be equal partners in our coalitions in which all partners benefit directly *as organizations* from what their adult basic skills partners offer, in addition to having their clients benefit from increased basic skills. For example, in

Cleveland Ohio the Literacy Cooperative, a coalition of literacy organizations including those providing adult literacy services, has launched a very successful social media campaign through which they offer opportunities to their partner organizations to also get attention for their organization's issues .

- **We need to make clear that adult basic skills programs are effective** to share effectiveness with our basic skills stakeholder partners, as well as with the general public and policymakers.
- **We need to make clear why adult literacy and basic skills are essential to our partner organizations' success**, for example in reducing prison recidivism or family poverty, or in parents' preparing children for school.
- **We need new blood in basic skills advocacy work.** The strongest advocates in our field, social change advocates and labor and community organizers from the 1960s, have been retiring, and although there may now be a new generation of social change advocates, they are not yet showing up in our field, and especially not in adult basic skills advocacy work. We need to reach out to them, perhaps through our work with partner social change organizations, and recruit them to be part of our advocacy efforts.

I want to emphasize how important it is to continue to educate public policy makers about the importance of increasing public support for adult basic skills. Legislators have the power to strengthen adult literacy. I want to conclude by describing or reminding readers of some of the most important strategies to reach legislators:

- **The most important overall strategy is to create and maintain a statewide adult literacy/basic skills advocacy organizing committee.** This committee works year round to organize program practitioners and

students. In the fall each year, it determines what to ask legislators to do. This may change from year to year depending on the needs, the resources available, and on political ctors. This group then mobilizes the field to contact legislators and support the agreed-upon advocacy goal for the year. In turn, field advocates at the programs communicate back to the organizing committee what the legislators' responses are so that the advocacy campaign can be adjusted as needed.

- **Program activities.** These include: meet and greet events with legislators invited to the program to meet and talk with the students; inviting legislators to be speakers at graduations, where they're also often presented with awards from the program for their support for adult literacy/basic skills, and sending postcards to legislators about student successes and the length of program waiting lists.
- **Students' Visits to State and Congressional Legislators.** Legislators want to speak with constituents. It is important for students to visit their state and national legislators in their offices and to talk about what attending an adult literacy program has meant for them, to tell their story. Students understand and can convey how important these services are. Legislators also appreciate data, particularly if it's focused on their state legislative or Congressional district or, in the case of U.S. Senators, on the whole state. They want to know what percentage or number of their constituents are enrolled in adult basic skills programs, how many adults are on waiting lists, and how long a wait there is for the

services. They may also want to know what the outcomes are for adult learners: how many get a high school equivalency diploma, how many improve their English language skills and to what levels, how many get jobs, how many advance in their jobs or are on career paths leading to family-sustaining salaries, how many learn how to read so that they can read to their children, help their children with homework or read the labels on medicine bottles.

These national public policy advocacy resources may be helpful to all adult basic skills advocates, and especially to new advocates. Also, many states have adult basic skills public policy advocacy organizations.

Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) website Legislative Center and Media Toolkit
<http://www.coabe.org/legislative-center/>

National Coalition for Literacy Research and Factsheets
<http://national-coalition-literacy.org/research/>

ProLiteracy Advocacy webpage
<http://proliteracy.org/get-involved/advocate>

TESOL Advocacy Resources
<http://www.tesol.org/advance-the-field/advocacy-resources>

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References

Sticht, T. (2015, August 17). Message posted to <http://lists.literacytent.org/pipermail/aaace-nla/2015/008254.html>