

Adult Education in Nebraska:
*The Need to Invest
in Our Workforce*



Introduction

The jobs of the future will require Nebraska's workforce to have training and education beyond the high school level. *By 2018, 64% of the available jobs in Nebraska will require a post-secondary education.ⁱ Yet, nearly 10% of all Nebraskans ages 18 to 64 lack a high school degree or an equivalent. Moreover, 36% of adults in Nebraska are at or below basic literacy levels.ⁱⁱ With skill deficiencies such as these, many individuals are unable to access quality jobs and fully participate in our communities and economy.*

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In order to acquire education and skills, many Nebraskans need Adult Basic Education (ABE), which can provide individuals with the tools and support necessary to move on to additional levels of training and skill acquisition or employment.

With so many Nebraskans lacking basic skills, it is vital that we invest in ABE programs that allow more individuals to get the training needed to support their family and fill needed jobs. This report is intended to provide an overview of ABE, as well as ABE programs and strategies currently in place in Nebraska, and recommendations to ensure more individuals can get the skills needed to move ahead.

Overview of Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Is there a skills gap in Nebraska?

Many Nebraskans lack the education and skills needed to acquire a quality job. Nearly 10% of all Nebraskans lack a high school degree or an equivalent.ⁱⁱⁱ This is approximately 105,505 individuals in Nebraska.^{iv} The majority of these individuals are in their prime working years; 63.2%, or approximately 66,765 individuals between the ages of 25 and 54, do not have a high school degree or equivalent.^v The statistics are also alarming for younger Nebraskans and for minorities.

Indeed, 12.5% of individuals ages 18-24 do not have a high school diploma or equivalent in our state. More than 30% of minorities ages 18-64, or approximately 60,385 individuals, are in the same position.^{vi} In fact, Nebraska ranks last in the nation for the percentage of minority adults without a high school degree or equivalent.^{vii} This is particularly striking for those that are not English proficient, with approximately 6.1% of individuals having difficulty speaking English very well,^{viii} which includes about 69,160 people in our state.^{ix}

These facts are alarming when considering that nearly six out of ten jobs will require a post-secondary education in the near future.^x In order for our workforce to meet the skill demands of these jobs they must be able to obtain industry recognized credentials or degrees, and ABE and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs may be the starting points for many adults to acquire education and skills.

What is ABE?

ABE refers to education programs aimed at developing basic literacy and mathematical skills, as well as instruction on everyday life skills. While the Nebraska Department of Education offers preparatory classes that enable adults to obtain high school equivalencies, these classes require a ninth grade education level. ABE specifically targets students who have at least basic English proficiency, but who are not yet ready for high school equivalency classes. Unfortunately, students who are not performing at a ninth grade level can be left behind, stuck in low-wage jobs with little opportunities for advancement.

ABE programs in Nebraska are aimed at bridging this gap and placing adult learners on track to achieve their goals. ABE programs cover a variety of education areas and can be individualized for one-on-one instruction depending on the needs of the student. This flexibility is critically important, as literacy and education levels vary widely among students.

Many students also lack basic English skills, making it difficult to take advantage of ABE programs. To address this need, federal funding for ABE programs requires that each state receiving funding establish ESL instruction. At the most basic level, ESL programming includes reading, writing, and conversing in English. However, students enter ESL programs at different levels of English proficiency, and ESL education in Nebraska is structured as a multi-tiered system that allows potential students to enter and progress at their own ability level. Advanced ESL classes combine low-level ABE materials with English instruction in order to transition students to ABE education.

How does ABE work?

Prior to entering an ABE program, students must first take the Test of Adult Basic Education or TABE. This placement test gauges a student's level of attainment in literacy, writing, and mathematics. Students scoring below the ninth grade level in any area will be placed in ABE.^{xi} The length of time that a student is enrolled in ABE classes varies, and depends upon the same range of factors that cause students to drop out before completing their education (see below). As a result, some students could see a transition to adult secondary education as early as a few months but students with minimal educational attainment may be in ABE classes for over one year.

How is ABE funded?

In 1998, the federal government passed Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), which was recently modified and is now known as the Workforce Opportunity and Investment Act (WIOA).^{xii} This act funds adult education programs in every state, with a state matching requirement included as a condition of funding. To meet the minimum requirements for AEFLA funding a state must match through either state or local sources at least 25% of the amount dispersed to the state.

Federal funding to the state accounts for 65% of the entire budget for adult education in Nebraska, with 25% of funding coming from local sources, such as funding from individual school districts and local taxes.^{xiii} But, *only 10% of funding for adult education in Nebraska comes directly from the state.*

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The adult education grant awarded to the state for the current 2014-15 school year totaled \$2,026,518,^{xiv} and the state of Nebraska contributed only \$214,664 to adult education for the 2014-15 fiscal year.^{xv} Although Nebraska recently invested in innovative ABE programming by allocating \$200,000 per year to pilot bridge programs (see below), continued funding beyond 2015 would require legislative reauthorization.^{xvi}

Of the approximately 105,505 individuals in need of these educational services, only 6.6% are actually enrolled. And only 4.35% of those who have difficulty speaking English are enrolled in ESL courses.

Even with the small amount of support from state general funds, adult education dollars go far in their use by the Nebraska Department of Education and ABE providers. In fact, *ABE instruction is provided to 7,007 students on a state budget of \$1,504,692, which is less than \$214.74 per student* (compare this to the state average expenditure of \$11,582 per student in K-12 education).^{xvii} Indeed, Nebraska allocates only \$8.81 for adult education and literacy per adult without a high school degree or GED, compared to \$47.96 per student in Iowa, and \$178.60 in Minnesota.^{xviii} Nebraska ranks 44th in the nation for state resources allocated to adult education and literacy.^{xix}

While Nebraska invests modestly in ABE, the need for services has never been more important. In total, 7,007 students were enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), or English as a Second Language (ESL) classes during 2013-2014.^{xx} *This means that of the approximately 105,505 individuals in need of these educational services, only 6.6% are actually enrolled.*^{xxi} *And only 4.35%*

of those who have difficulty speaking English are enrolled in ESL courses.

Increasing our state's investment in ABE is merited when considering the modesty of our current investment as compared to the volume of individuals that lack a high school diploma or equivalent.

SPOTLIGHT: Central Community College – From Adult Education Director Ann Chambers

“The majority of funding for the adult education programs at our institution come from adult education grants written to the state department of education and from the college itself. Unfortunately, even with the funding from the state, the program must seek funding from other sources. Central Community College’s adult education program is a United Way agency in Columbus, Gothenburg, Grand Island, Hastings, Kearney and Lexington, which provides additional funding, and the adult education administration often applies for Worker Training Grants and Dollar General Education grants. *We cobble together the funding that lets us work, but even with all of our funding sources, we usually get by on less than \$1000 per student, far below the state [K-12] average of \$10,000 per student.*”

Is ABE accessible?

The Department of Education (NDE) seeks to ensure that every Nebraskan has access to ABE. Across the state, there are adult education programs at 150 locations, including multiple locations in several communities such as Omaha, Grand Island, Lincoln, and Scottsbluff, in addition to distance education classes. The six community colleges located throughout the state all offer adult education courses that include ABE. In addition, nine public schools systems throughout the state offer adult education courses. ABE is provided to any student free of charge, and classes are offered on an as needed basis, usually on nights and weekend days, as most adult learners work full time to support themselves and their families. While adult education centers are conveniently located in close physical proximity to many Nebraskans, many adult learners have trouble accessing these education programs when needed.

In fact, the demand for adult education in Nebraska far outpaces the resources in place. *Over 50% of the adult education programs in the state, including ABE programs, have a waiting list for placement.*^{xxii} The average waiting time for a student to enroll is anywhere from two to four months, depending on the class. However, in some instances these waiting lists can last more than eight months.^{xxiii}

These access issues are not due to a lack of effort by NDE or ABE programs. Many ABE instructors devote additional, unpaid time outside of class for lesson planning and to meet with their students. But even with their extra efforts, there are simply not enough resources or instructors available for every student.

Do ABE students complete their programs?

While resources exist throughout the state that provide free basic education, many adult learners do not continue their education long enough to complete ABE.^{xxiv} Nationally, half of all ABE students drop out of ABE programs before 10 weeks.^{xxv} In Nebraska, during the 2013-14 school year, one-third of all adult education students dropped out of their program before completing their current educational level.^{xxvi}

More specifically, during the 2013-14 school year, 39% of students in an ABE program dropped out before advancing to the next educational level, 30.3% completed their current educational level, and 30.6% remained at their current level.^{xxvii} Within the four intermediate levels of ABE the percent of students who move forward to the next level declines at each intermediate educational step. Thus, *less than one in two students who enroll in the ABE beginning literacy actually complete the program, and completion rates steadily decline at successively higher ABE levels.* Of the 1,368 students at the highest level of adult basic education, only 350 or 26% went on to adult secondary education.^{xxviii} ESL students fared slightly better, and

overall, 35.8% of students improved in beginning literacy skills.^{xxix} However, 36.4% of ESL students dropped out of their program before completing their current educational level.^{xxx}

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The problems with dropping out and lack of advancement are not unique to Nebraska. Indeed, neighboring states like Iowa and Minnesota have similar drop out rates before completion. While 39.1% of Nebraskan students dropped out before completing their current educational level, this is only slightly higher than the drop out rates of 31.9% in Iowa, 32.5% in Minnesota, and the national average of 33.8%.

There are a variety of reasons for these less than ideal outcomes, including, but not limited to, unreliable transportation to and from ABE programs, lack of child care access while in school, insufficient support networks, and the sometimes slow nature of advancing in ABE. In addition, some students face barriers, such as learning disabilities, to staying in or advancing in ABE and there are few resources or training for instructors to screen for these issues or provide accommodations. Moreover, without training and screening resources, instructors are often unable to spend sufficient time with students at the outset to gauge whether they can commit to ABE to the extent necessary to succeed. Finally, with limited resources, class hours and times can prevent working students from staying in or completing ABE.^{xxxi}

In order to address some of these issues, strategies to help more students access and complete their course work should be continued and expanded.

SPOTLIGHT: Bridge Programs

Bridge Programs are a relatively new model in the field of adult education that combine contextualized learning and instruction to allow students to get basic skills and learn information applicable to their employment needs or interests. These programs typically involve a curriculum designed to fast track a student with the traditional educational background as well as the job skills needed for a specific career. Bridge programs allow students to quickly acquire the skills and college credits necessary for additional education or employment. Importantly, effective bridge programs provide supportive services, such as childcare or transportation, which can help students get the support needed to succeed. Many programs also utilize a cohort structure, which allows a group of learners to support each other and be held accountable to a group standard. In short, bridge programs can help address many barriers students face in completing ABE and finding employment.

In 2012, the Nebraska Legislature appropriated funding to pilot bridge programs in Nebraska. Through this grant program, facilitated by NDE, grants were awarded to four programs. The programs used the first 3-6 months to develop programming and curriculum and to recruit students. The programs have focused on customer service, information and office technology, and Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) certification.

In the first 15 months of the pilot, 133 students participated in four bridge programs. Of those students, 92 received a credential for completing their program of study. In addition, 54 percent of students were employed in the third quarter of 2014, and 22 percent of students were engaged in postsecondary education. Additional data will be available regarding the last quarter of 2014 and first quarter of 2015, but these early indications for bridge programs are promising.

SPOTLIGHT: Service Coordination

An additional way to help more students access and complete ABE programming is to ensure service coordination. Partnerships between adult education providers and other support networks can allow students to access services to help them overcome barriers to their education, such as career counseling or work support programs. In Nebraska, some ABE providers have started this coordination by co-locating services. For example, Southeast Community College's downtown campus is located in close proximity to the One-Stop Career Center, the Department of Labor, and the Department of Health and Human Services. This co-location of services allows students to attend classes, apply for work supports (e.g., child care), or look for a new job, all in a single location.

Recommendations

While Nebraska has created a strong foundation for students to succeed in ABE, there is more that can be done to ensure it is accessible and that students can complete ABE.

1) Increase State Investment in ABE to Allow Greater Access

The state of Nebraska puts a modest amount of funding towards ABE; only 10% of funding for adult education in Nebraska comes directly from the state. This is an especially small investment compared to our per student investment in K-12 education (\$1,214.74 per student for ABE compared to \$11,582 per student for K-12). Due to this humble outlay, fewer students can access ABE. Indeed, more than 50% of adult education programs have significant waiting periods for placement.

To address these issues, Nebraska should, at a minimum, double its per student investment in ABE to provide \$3 million per year.

This funding would allow more students to access ABE in Nebraska, reducing the number of individuals that are waiting to access services presently. The funding could also help provide additional instructors, which could allow more flexibility in how students can access ABE services, including flex-time or on call scheduling.^{xxxii} Additional resources could also allow instructors to access additional training to allow them to screen students for disabilities and preview the commitment level needed to complete ABE. Additional funding could also help decrease wait times, allowing more students to more quickly access ABE.

Recommendations

2) Continue and Expand Bridge Programs

Throughout the nation, bridge programs have been shown to help students get the support they need to quickly acquire skills and find employment or move on to additional education. Nebraska has wisely invested in bridge program pilots, and the early results from that investment are promising, with more than half of program participants receiving college credits. State support of the pilots is set to expire in the fall of 2015, and the ability of these programs to continue without state investment is in doubt.

The Legislature should, at a minimum, maintain current funding or expand funding for the bridge program in 2015.

Continued or expanded funding could also help minorities acquire a high school equivalency. For example, increased funding could allow for bridge programming with a greater focus on ESL learners, which has been expressed to be a need in the Omaha community.

In addition, the Legislature should ensure low-income students participating in bridge programs can better afford the costs of these services through the creation of a tuition assistance program. Such a proposal is currently before the Nebraska Legislature in Legislative Bill 36 (2015).

3) Increase Coordination of Services

Some ABE providers have done well in partnering with other important service providers to help students acquire supportive services. However, additional cooperation and coordination among ABE providers and state service providers, particularly the Department of Health and Human Services, would help more students succeed.

For example, many students are not aware of work supports, such as SNAP (food stamps) or childcare assistance, that could help them meet their educational goals. Better connections between ABE programs and work support programs can give students assistance to allow them to overcome barriers to complete ABE.

The Legislature should stress an increase in coordination through a Legislative Resolution in 2015 to study current coordination and make recommendations for improvements.

Conclusion

Many adults in our state lack the skills necessary to get a quality job and support their families. ABE can help them obtain the education they need to move ahead. But Nebraska must invest in ABE to allow this to happen. Without a serious investment in ABE, Nebraska's citizens, communities, and economy will face problems in the near future because our workforce will not have the skills needed to fill jobs.

Acknowledgements

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Nebraska Appleseed is a nonprofit organization that fights for justice and opportunity for all Nebraskans. We take a systemic approach to complex issues - such as child welfare, immigration policy, affordable health care, and poverty -

and we take our work wherever we believe we can do the most good, whether that's at the courthouse, in the statehouse, or in the community. We would like to thank the Working Poor Families Project for its support, which allowed this project to happen.

Reference

- i) Georgetown University Center for Education, “Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements through 2018 – State Level Analysis,” available at <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/9pvw2eqcu0x8jz665nxxg>
- ii) Working Poor Families Project, generated by the Population Reference Bureau, American Community Survey (or US Census depending on indicator), 2013.
- iii) *Id.*
- iv) *Id.*
- v) *Id.*
- vi) *Id.*
- vii) *Id.*
- viii) This is a measure of the extent to which working low-income and poor families have at least one parent with limited English. See *Id.*
- ix) *Id.*
- x) See *Supra*, Note i.
- xi) While the ideal of ABE instruction is individualized education, many adult education centers in Nebraska group adult secondary education and ABE students into one classroom as a matter of logistical necessity. Even though each student has a specific education plan, students receive some exposure to material that is above or below their grade level.
- xii) WIOA reauthorized federal funding through 2020, and makes changes in emphasis including a focus on career pathways.
- xiii) CLASP, “Sinking or Swimming: Findings from a Survey of State Adult Education Tuition and Financing Policies,” available at <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED538039.pdf>, June 2012.
- xiv) Around 17.5% of this funding is reserved for administration and state leadership, with the remainder available for local grants to educational providers.
- xv) State of Nebraska, FY2014-2015 Biennial Budget – available at <http://nebraskalegislature.gov/pdf/reports/fiscal/2013budget.pdf>.
- xvi) In 2013, the Nebraska legislature allocated a one-time technology grant of \$750,000 to upgrade GED testing facilities, which will enable students to take the computerized GED.
- xvii) Nebraska Department of Education, “Cost per pupil by average daily attendance and by average daily membership, available at <http://www.education.ne.gov/FOS/SchoolFinance/AFR/Downloads/1213/ppc1213.pdf> 2012-2013
- xviii) This indicator reveals the level of state funding allocated for adult education and literacy as measured by state funds reported to the U.S. Department of Education divided by the number of adults in the state without a high school or general equivalency degree. Source: Computed by staff based on FY 2010-11 expenditure data submitted to U.S. Department of Education (numerator) and 2010 Census data on number of adults 18-64 without HS/GED (denominator). Educational attainment of adults 18-64 is from the Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2010 American Community Survey.
- xix) *Id.* The figure of \$8.81 in state resources ranks Nebraska as 44th in the nation for amount allocated for Adult Education and Literacy.
- xx) This figure only includes students who have enrolled in at least 12 hours of adult education courses. Students who have completed less than 12 hours are not included in the annual reporting to the Department of Education.
- xxi) Data generated by the Population Reference Bureau, analysis of 2012 American Community Survey. Computed by taking the number of students enrolled in adult education in Nebraska (numerator) and the number of adults aged 18-64 in Nebraska without a high school diploma.
- xxii) Bauer, V., Nebraska Department of Education, Personal interview, (2014, June).
- xxiii) *Id.*
- xxiv) Roughly half of the adult education programs charge a nominal registration fee for classes, however, in order to serve every student, this fee is waived for any student who is unable to pay.
- xxv) The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, “Persistence among Adult Basic Education Students in Pre-GED Classes,” available at <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report12.pdf>.
- xxvi) This measure reports on the demonstrated improvement in literacy skills in reading, writing, numeracy, problem solving and speaking the English language. Source: Enrollment data from State Annual Performance Reports to the U.S. Department of Education, July 1, 2012 – June 30, 2013 Dept. of Ed, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, National Reporting System (Table 4), available upon request. Percentages calculated based on number completed ABE beginning literacy level/ total number enrolled in ABE beginning literacy.
- xxvii) *Id.*
- xxviii) *Id.*
- xxvix) *Id.*
- xxx) *Id.*
- xxxi) Bauer, V., Nebraska Department of Education, Personal interview (2015, January).
- xxxii) For example, instructors could allow ‘flex’ scheduling for those students who would be able to meet with students outside of the classroom, or instructors could be “on-call,” allows students access to assistance for various hours of the week.