



Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy

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Senator Tom Harkin
Chairman, HELP Committee
731 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C.

February 6, 2012

Dear Senator Harkin:

I write to you as President of the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy (CAAL) and on behalf of the members of the National Commission on Adult Literacy to express CAAL's interest in and support for the "Rebuild America Act," which you compellingly outlined in your Center for American Progress (CAP) speech on February 1.

All of the themes outlined in your CAP talk are highly important to America's future, but I'm especially pleased by your emphasis on investing in education and job training, reinforcing the President's message in the SOTU. In this area, however, I want to urge that explicit attention be given to the role that Adult Education must play in preparing our workforce for the realities of the 21st century global economy. The fact is that our community college system alone cannot meet the instructional challenge, which you clearly recognized at CAP. Our national employability goals cannot be met without the help of the Adult Education system, which must be a key partner in providing the services that under-skilled adults need to be job- and college-ready.

As you pointed out, the U.S. has both a long-term and a short-term employment problem. After we have recovered from the effects of the recession, we will still face structural impediments to engaging adults in the workforce of the 21st Century. For example, half the immigrants who arrive in America each year (approximately one million people) have low literacy levels, lack a high school education and English language skills, and thus face a challenging employment situation even under the best of circumstances. Also, while the demand for skills is increasing, as retiring "baby boomers" leave the workforce, they are being replaced by younger workers who are, on average, less well educated. Among the 30 OECD free-market countries, the U.S. is the only nation where young adults are less educated than the previous generation. And we are losing ground to other countries in educational attainment.

CAAL is a nonpartisan "policy and action think tank" dedicated to promoting a new, more workplace-oriented vision of Adult Education. It initiated the work of the National Commission on Adult Literacy and its still-influential "Reach, Higher America" report (copy attached), and continues to work for the adoption of the Commission's recommendations, with the full and active support of members of the Commission (listing attached).

Most simply put, Adult Education is a system in which investments today can produce change for this generation of workers, while simultaneously preparing the next generation.

Furthermore, Adult Education is the only system available to those low-skill incumbent workers for whom community college is not a viable option. Moreover, today two-thirds of the American workforce is beyond the reach of the schools. This staggering number includes some 50 million English-speaking adults who have a high school diploma but have never attended college (many of whom have limited skills proficiency), about 18 million adults who speak English but don't have a high school diploma, and another 18 million who have limited English skills.

The Census Bureau expects that between 2000-2015, net international immigration will account for more than half of our nation's population growth, increasing the demand for adult English-language programs. Yet, at present, one-third of foreign-born adults living in the U.S. do not have a high school diploma, and almost 80 percent of them do not speak English well or at all.

The relationship between adults' education level and the economic situation of individuals and the nation is clear: 47.7 percent of adults with less than a high school education are not gainfully employed and about 47 percent of welfare recipients have not graduated from high school. Yet, only about 25 percent of adults with less than a high school education participate in any kind of education or training.

Unfortunately, as we all know, the current Adult Education system reaches only about 2 million adults annually. It was not designed for today's global economic challenges, and is not well enough funded to meet even current demand. In fact, considering the nation's demographic trends, we have been moving backward. Over the last decade, largely due to funding constraints, enrollment in Adult Education programs has declined by an astounding 30 percent, even as the need has expanded rapidly. In short, we are already starving our essential Adult Education system, and we urgently need to reverse course.

The National Commission on Adult Literacy found that:

- (1) Our Adult Education system doesn't adequately prepare adult students to meet workforce and educational needs. We need to place greater emphasis on adult workplace skills, improve coordination of goals and outcomes among federal programs, and encourage collaboration between education, labor, and business to provide education and training for low-skilled workers (both potential and incumbent).
- (2) We need to create incentives for business to improve employee skills and encourage states to increase the participation of future and incumbent workers in their workforce training and Adult Education programs. In so doing, we should ensure that federal funding formulas accurately take into account the adult education and workforce skills needs of individual states and revise those formulas to make sure that states receive funding according to their needs, including the needs of their LEP populations.
- (3) We need to increase access to adult education, literacy, and workplace skills through the use of technology. We need to create incentives for states and adult education programs to use technology to better integrate their workforce skills training and adult education programs, and to reach substantially more learners in a cost effective way.

If the United States is to remain globally competitive, there is no avoiding it. We must invest in our Adult Education system. The cost of not doing so will be far greater than the cost of taking needed action. We have no choice but to provide the adult population with the tools necessary to obtain basic literacy and workplace skills, to gain admission to job training programs or postsecondary education, to have the means to be employed, self-sufficient, or advance in the workplace.

The National Commission called for fundamentally transforming the Adult Education system and increasing its capacity to effectively serve 20 million adults annually by the year 2020. The Commission called for a per student annual expenditure of \$1000 per enrollee, a mere fraction of what we spend on K-12 students. While we realize that in the present economy, the Commission's goals are very ambitious, this is not a time to reduce funding for our already underfunded Adult Education system. We believe that redirecting existing resources could pay for program outcomes and for more services more geared to the needs you identify, but of course

modest new investments are needed, too. Numerous studies show that enormous savings would accrue to our nation through higher earnings and reduced spending on social safety net programs.

One finding in *Reach Higher, America* is that with adequate investments in Adult Education, we would see an \$848 billion increase in earnings over a lifetime of work if all adults earned at least an associate degree. We would see a personal income increase of about \$200 billion if all adults without a high school diploma acquired one.

Senator Harkin, your entire career is a testament to your belief in the value of education. We share that belief. CAAL is committed to the proposition that if we are to address the short- and long-term needs of American workers, we must restructure the Adult Education system to meet the demands of the 21st century.

We strongly support the Adult Education and Economic Growth Act (AEEGA), introduced in the House by Rep. Ruben Hinojosa and in the Senate by Sen. Webb. And we appreciate that many of our recommendations are included in the Harkin-Enzi draft WIA reauthorization bill. Indeed, we continue to provide analysis and to advocate actively for enactment of solid reformed WIA legislation by the Senate and House.

We would be pleased to assist in any way we can to ensure that the “Rebuild America Act” meets the education and training needs of our future workforce, including incumbent workers.

Thank you very much for your vision in the “Rebuild the Middle Class” speech, and for your efforts to elevate the national conversation and the agenda for action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Gail Jorgensen". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

cc: Heather Boushey, Michael Ettlinger, Neera Tanden, CAP
Isabel Sawhill, Brookings Institution
John Schmitt, Center for Economic and Policy Research

MEMBERS OF NATIONAL COMMISSION ON ADULT LITERACY

David Perdue, International Businessman; former Chairman & CEO, Dollar General Corporation; former chair, National Commission on Adult Literacy

Morton Bahr, President Emeritus, Communications Workers of America

Hon. Gerald Baliles, Director, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia; former Governor of Virginia

David Beré, President & CEO, Nonni's Foods LLC; former President and Chief Operating Officer, Dollar General Corporation.

Robert Bickerton, Sr. Associate Commissioner of Education for the Commonwealth of MA

Marion Crain, Director, Center on Poverty, Work, and Opportunity, University of North Carolina

John Comings, Former Director, National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Graduate School of Education, Harvard University; International Consultant

Sharon Darling, President and Founder, National Center for Family Literacy

Samuel Halperin, Senior Fellow and Founder, American Youth Policy Forum

George Kessinger, President and CEO, Goodwill Industries International, Inc.

Cheryl D. King (Study Director), former Dep. Secretary and Commissioner of Adult Education and Workforce Development in Kentucky; past President of Kentucky Wesleyan College

Bridget Lamont, Vice Chair, U.S. National Commission on Libraries and Information Science; past Chair and current member, Illinois Educational Labor Relations Board

Hon. Ray Marshall, Rapoport Centennial Chair in Economics and Public Affairs, University of Texas; former U.S. Secretary of Labor

Gail Mellow, President, LaGuardia Community College

Owen Modeland, President, Correctional Education Association; Supt of Schools, Oklahoma Department of Corrections

Mark Musick, Chair, Georgia Workforce Investment Board; President Emeritus, Southern Regional Education Board (SREB); chaired Board of National Assessment of Educational Progress under three presidents

Karen Narasaki, President, Asian American Justice Center; Vice Chair, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights; Vice President of Coalition for Comprehensive Immigration Reform

Juan Olivarez, President, Grand Rapids Community College; member, Board of National Institute for Literacy

Camille Preus, Commissioner, Oregon Department of Community Colleges and Workforce Development; recent President, National Council on State Directors of Community Colleges; Chair-elect of Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education

Hon. Tom Sawyer, Ohio State Senator; former member U.S. House of Representatives. Author, National Literacy Act of 1991

Hon. George Staples, Director General of U.S. Foreign Service and Assistant Secretary for Human Resources, U.S. Department of State (retired July 2007); former U.S. Ambassador to many countries

Gail Spangenberg (Commission Manager), President, Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy; former operating head, Business Council for Effective Literacy

Andrew Sum, Professor of Labor Economics, Director of Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University

Robert Wedgeworth, Past President & CEO, Proliteracy Worldwide (retired June 2007); former President, American Library Association

William White, President and Chairman, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation