



**Literacy Funders Webinar Remarks
by Gail Spangenberg
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I've been asked many times to give ideas on how PIAAC's findings can be used, and I'm glad to share my thoughts with you. It's pretty obvious that there are broad policy implications--in Congress and across programs of the federal government, in state legislatures, and on other fronts. And I know that the Departments of Education and Labor both intend to be ambitious in their use of PIAAC. There are profound implications for state-level planning, public and philanthropic giving, and our national research and evaluation agenda.

I was asked specifically to consider what the Literacy Funders Network can do with the PIAAC findings, and I have a wish list for you. You can actually do quite a lot -- in your multiple roles as grant givers and coalition builders, and in your efforts to improve communications in philanthropy generally. But ideas about action should occur in a clear context. So I'll make a few points about that first.

WHAT'S THE PIAAC STORY REALLY ABOUT?

1. I can't stress enough that PIAAC is a story about ADULTS. For groups that are interested in literacy and the needs of low-skilled Americans, and for those who care about the employability of our working-age adults, that means out-of-school adults aged 16 to 65, people served primarily by the Adult Education and Workforce Skills system, the very people PIAAC assessed, and that we'll be able to keep on assessing through the really exciting Online Resource Tool that'll soon be available from OECD to states and other entities.

2. Discussions about our low-skilled adults and what we can do to help lift them up, tend to revert mistakenly to what we can do to improve K-12. That's *why* I'm stressing this point about adults: historically and in most current media coverage, we fail over and over again to grasp that this, and we need to coalesce around the real and very urgent need to **upgrade the basic foundational skills of our adults**: our current and future workforce, the parents of our children, and to put it altruistically, the keepers of our freedom.

3. We can't meet the low-skills challenge that PIAAC makes evident by focusing on school reform, K-12, or community colleges. The adults we need to reach, *as a top national priority*, are beyond the reach of the school system as such. And millions aren't ready for college or jobs for lack of the basics. An adult educator from Pittsburgh told me this just last week: *"It has been one of my great frustrations that any talk about the need for adult and English language literacy always leads back to "fixing" K12—which, even if it were possible, is irrelevant for the adults who need to build skills now.*

4. We need to "get it" that those who currently make up our workforce will be the bulk of our workforce for decades to come. I'm speaking of adults who are not college- or job-ready--because they lack fundamental basic skills of reading, writing, math, ESL, and problem-solving. They're predominantly minorities (especially Hispanics and Blacks). They're the low-skilled incarcerated who return daily to our communities without job skills. They're our burgeoning ESL population that has come to the U.S. with both language and literacy problems. They're incumbent workers, high school dropouts, even high school graduates who leave school with low basic skills, and they're often the working

poor. All of these groups stand out in the PIAAC findings, and they stand out in prior assessment studies too.

5. The PIAAC message isn't new. Although the PIAAC's findings should shake us all into action, we've had this same news several times before over the past few decades, and should have had our eyes open long ago. Mostly we've looked the other way. So we keep slipping at home and in international comparisons. So to stress my point again, our basic message should be about the needs of *adults*, and about adults in our society who are disproportionately affected, giving us one of the highest rates of "inequality" among all OECD members. In a broad sense, it's about the importance of a lifelong learning vision, but that depends on a strong foundation of basic skills! PIAAC makes it clear that we haven't any more time to lose. By the way, a recent report by the Lifelong Learning Institute of UNESCO conveyed a message similar to PIAAC's, and with equal urgency. And the report of our National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Reach Higher, America*, though issued five years ago, is still timely today. The Commission considered the adult education challenge and the stakes so great that it called for a national response on the order of a Marshall Plan. That report is available at the Commission website (www.caalusa.org), and is still one of our most popular titles.

6. It's not a question of either/or! We shouldn't pit K-12, the colleges, and adult education against each other. All are a vital part of our overall education system, and we need to support and develop them on parallel tracks. We should be working harder to reduce our high school drop-out rate—to be sure our kids and teens graduate high school with basic literacy skills and qualify for jobs and/or college. And we should strengthen the community college role—community colleges provide some adult education services now; they need to do more.

But we also need to strengthen adult education by focusing on that system for ADULTS, in all its parts. And we should understand what that system is. Our adult basic skills system is a mix of provider types: community-based organizations of all kinds, libraries, parents in family literacy programs. It's GED and alternate diploma venues. There are ESL venues, workforce development programs, correctional education programs, and voluntary groups. Unions, colleges, and workplace programs are service providers, too. And more and more, adult education services include partnerships between adult education venues and enlightened business and other stakeholders. Also, most analysts concluded long ago that we need to put a big effort into developing adult distance learning on a large scale if we're to really increase adult education access.

7. But here's the biggest problem of all: Right now, we're only reaching 1.8 million adults in the federally-funded adult education part of our system, and federal funding is the core support. That funding hasn't been increased since the last budget of the Clinton administration, 13 years ago. *We are literally starving adult education to death*, even though we keep asking programs to do more and more. As the PIAAC data shows, we need to be reaching many millions more than we are, but right now we're headed in the opposite direction. By the way, I should note that if we manage to get Immigration Reform passed in this Congress, our adult education and workforce skills programs can expect a *huge* influx of *new* immigrants in need of ESL and basic literacy services, on top of the community needs that programs are unable to meet now.

SO GIVEN THIS CONTEXT, WHAT CAN THE LITERACY FUNDERS NETWORK DO TO BUILD ON PIAAC? HERE'S MY WISH LIST IN THREE AREAS:

1. Communications and Messaging: Be clear about your message – maybe craft one for the LFN as a group, and also for each of your individual organizations. That message is important to the way your colleagues, your own organizations, talk about the issue, and how you frame your organization's grant-making programs. If you're Literacy Powerline, you can help your local coalitions craft messages suited to their varied purposes. If you want to help educate the media and legislative leaders, you can encourage your community coalitions to engage them and to think and talk usefully about the topic and the challenge the nation faces. And of course these coalitions will need to review their own planning and service goals. By the way, in everything we all do, it should be unacceptable to say that adults with low basic and soft skills are “dumb or illiterate,” as some in the media have been doing. They are neither, and these negative descriptors should be discouraged.

You can also work to improve understanding among philanthropy beyond your own membership. The points to stress, as I've said, are that this is primarily an ADULT story...that we will do better if we target our services on those groups most in need of skills upgrading...and we'll accomplish more if we understand collectively what we're trying to achieve. It's about making our nation more internationally competitive, about improving dramatically the employability of our workforce. It's also about the ability of our adults to function well in other kinds of community roles, and to experience equality of opportunity. It's about preserving the very foundations of our democracy.

Of course as a nation we can't "make it" unless several things happen: a substantial investment of public funds, major new philanthropic investments generally, and a much higher adult education profile (something some of our allies in Congress are trying to achieve). We need much greater public awareness and understanding, including a well-crafted national public awareness campaign (as called for by the National Commission on Adult Literacy and others).

2. Your Role as Grantmakers. Many of you are community or national grant-makers. Family literacy's an important area of giving--we all know about the intergenerational effects of literacy--and I know some of you like to give to family literacy. That's okay. But parents are workers, too. Many do not earn family-sustaining wages and they also need to be enrolled job- or college-related skills upgrading programs, activities that increase their employability and qualify them for better jobs and success in college. It's a time to give grants to other kinds of ADULT education and workforce skills programs in your communities, too--collectively, they are the backbone of our system, and they're starving now. It's also time to help the planning groups that work on their behalf at the state and national levels, and it's clearly essential to develop the role and use of technology for service delivery and management.

Maybe you can even POOL some of your resources to help advance a national public awareness campaign. And it's important to highlight one other area of need: Most strategically important national research and technical assistance groups are not considered sexy enough to fund, or they are dismissed from consideration because they aren't local service providers. But know that groups like COABE, or Proliteracy, or the National Skills Coalition, or CLASP, or the

National Coalition for Literacy, need funding help to do their jobs well. Their local constituents need their services and technical assistance help.

3. Encouraging wider involvement of philanthropy generally. I come from a philanthropic background, and one thing I've learned is how important a single caring and knowledgeable individual within a foundation is. Just because adult education and workforce skills development isn't on the agenda of a corporate or private or community foundation now, doesn't mean that it couldn't be or shouldn't be.

During my professional life, very few foundations of any size have made more than modest short-term investments in adult education, partly because they haven't really appreciated that adult education cuts across nearly everything they do – whether it's in economic development, community development, workforce development, social welfare, educational achievement and equity, or civil rights. *Often that's because there has been no one within to make the case.*

I should recognize some who *have* given generously already. Three that come immediately to mind are Dollar General (the primary funder of the National Commission on Adult Literacy), Verizon (technology), and McGraw Hill (which has supported literacy, the role of libraries, the voluntary organizations, and CAAL in one form or another for many years). Other foundations have done a smattering of work in the past decade or so – e.g., Ford, Carnegie, Joyce, Annie Casey, Lumina, and Mott. And about a half century ago—here's a good idea that needs reviving--the Ford Foundation established and supported for a time a Fund for the Advancement of Adult Education. We need one of those today! It's something the National Commission on Adult Literacy also recommended.

My point is, the foundation presence in this field is very small, and it lacks potency! I hope PIAAC will motivate them to better action.

But here are a couple of things Literacy Funders can do. This has been on my back burner for some time: there needs to be a meeting of foundation thinkers to turn this situation around, to provide leadership that will plan for a really significant breakthrough. But LFN members could do something as simple as to knock on the door of colleagues you know in non-member philanthropies, give them the facts, try to do some persuading. In fact, maybe you could find a way to get the Council on Foundations to put the subject of PIAAC and adult education on an upcoming conference agenda for all its members. Not just an hour session, but some real time with an array of presentations from the experts. That could turn a lot of heads.

Concluding Thoughts. Finally, I want to recognize that PIAAC challenges all of us to do something extraordinarily difficult, and to do something that too many of our leaders have chosen to pay lip service to for too long. But the longer we put it off the harder it gets. I've stressed the need to get the right messages out, and to keep our focus on adults, but we've got to keep the messages alive through a long-term well-focused commitment to the cause. We've need to get started, stay at it, and remember that we're all in this together.

In closing, I want to thank the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). I've been involved in national/international assessments before this one. The PIAAC story may not be news, but the comprehensiveness of its data is. I've never seen anything like the quality and extensive nature of PIAAC's roll-out. It's just remarkable. I hope they'll stay at it. #