



Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
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Letter to Advisory Board Members
National Institute for Literacy
May 20, 2003

Subject: Crucial Issues Regarding NIFL

Copied to: Selected Staff at NIFL & In the U.S. Senate

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Dear Colleagues,

This letter is being written to you in your capacity as members of NIFL's Advisory Board. CAAL would like to draw your attention to the NIFL-related provisions of HR 1261--The Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003--recently passed by the House of Representatives. These provisions, unless changed by the Senate, would radically alter the nature and mission of NIFL and effectively reverse many of the major adult education and literacy achievements of the past several years. Equally alarming, although floor amendments approved on the day that HR 1261 passed in the House restored the tri-agency governance of the Institute, these same amendments significantly downgraded the role of the NIFL Advisory Board.

Not only are we concerned about these crucial issues, we are equally concerned about the closed process by which these provisions in HR 1261 have come about. Some of us at CAAL were among the principal architects of the National Literacy Act of

1991, which created the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), so we have firsthand knowledge of the inclusive process by which the Act and the Institute originally came into being over a decade ago.

We sincerely hope that, as a member of the NIFL Board, you will give your firm support to ensuring the continued viability of both adult education and literacy at NIFL and NIFL itself. Specifically, we ask you to oppose these destructive provisions in HR 1261 and to support retaining the existing authorizing language for the adult education functions within NIFL. We also urge your close attention to the selection process for a permanent director for NIFL.

The Mission of NIFL

NIFL was originally created by the National Literacy Act of 1991. It was reauthorized in essentially the same form by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998. In both cases, authorization of the National Institute for Literacy was a thoroughly bipartisan (or nonpartisan) process, involving the collaboration and concurrence of both Republican and Democratic administrations and Congresses, people of both parties at the state and local level, and professional adult educators across the country who are members of both parties.

The clearly stated mission of NIFL, in both 1991 and 1998, was to provide leadership, technical assistance, research, and dissemination of information about practice and policy in the field of adult education and basic skills. That is, its focus was exclusively on literacy service to adults.

With growing workforce and immigration problems, the importance of this mission is even more vital now than it was in 1991 and 1998. Moreover, events have shown that adult education will not receive the visibility it requires at the national level, or even at the state level, without an independent national source of expertise and leadership such as NIFL.

Changes Embodied in HR 1261

Section 203 of HR 1261 defines instruction in adult education, literacy, and basic skills as an array of services – including instruction in reading, writing, mathematics, English as a Second Language and high school equivalency – for persons over the age of 16. The entirety of Chapter 1 of Title II of HR 1261 is devoted to federal support for these services to adults. Previous legislation established NIFL to support federal, state, local, and voluntary efforts to provide this array of services.

However, Sections 211-225 of Part B of HR 1261, reauthorizing NIFL, establish an Institute solely devoted to the advancement of “scientifically based” methods of teaching “reading” to both children and adults. “The National Institute for Literacy [or Basic Skills]” effectively becomes the “National Institute for Reading.” This change parallels the new restricted definition of literacy in HR 1261 that no longer addresses

mathematics, problem solving, and the three contexts of job, family, and society. Moreover, the word “adult” is used sparingly in the legislation.

Taken as a whole, Sections 211-225 appear to be primarily focused on reading instruction and services for children. For example, in Section 211(b), the purpose of NIFL is defined almost exclusively as supporting various provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. To take another example, Section 212(b) requires the Director to have a background in reading research, but not any special qualifications in any other aspect of adult education.

Why These Changes Are Destructive

CAAL believes that the House changes in NIFL’s mission are extremely flawed and destructive. As previous Congresses have recognized, reading is only one of the literacy/basic skills services urgently needed by under-educated adults and authorized by Title II. To withdraw authorization for NIFL to support these other essential services would seriously hamper the national adult education effort, including the implementation of other aspects of Title II.

Moreover, Sections 211-225 are, in a sense, *ultra vires*. A National Institute for Reading, which NIFL would effectively become, has no place in a bill devoted to advancing adult basic skills and employability. With that sole emphasis, it would be better placed in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

Finally, research has shown that the basic skills problems of adults are very severe and require instruction in reading and other skills different from that provided to children. NIFL was created precisely to support adult basic skills instruction. Shifting the Institute’s mission from service to adults to *exclusive or predominant* service to children would pervert its mission and, if retained by the Senate, this would be a serious blow to the Nation’s ability to meet the urgent national needs for improvement of adult basic skills.

Call for Action

For all of the reasons given, CAAL urges you and the other members of the NIFL Advisory Board to adopt and advocate a resolution urging the Senate, Congress, and the administration to reject the destructive provisions of HR 1261 related to NIFL and to support legislation that would: 1) reinstate the authorizing language for the adult education functions of the Institute used in the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, and 2) add a provision stating that, “adult education funds appropriated for the Institute shall be used solely for activities related to adult and family literacy and basic skills.”

Finally, in your consideration of candidates for the permanent directorship of NIFL, we urge that you carefully examine the credentials of all current and potential candidates to ensure that they are fully informed about adult education and literacy and clearly

committed to the mission and functions of the Institute as stated in the 1991 and 1998 legislation.

We hope you will work to preserve the authorities and nature of NIFL and of its board and to ensure that NIFL's programming for adults will be strongly retained even as new family programming is carried out.

With best wishes and thanks,

Cordially,

Gail Spangenberg
President