



United Way of Rhode Island

Findings of the Adult Education Research & Convening Project

Community Recommendations for Advancing Foundational Skills Development in Rhode Island

October 2015

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the over 300 adult learners, adult basic and secondary education professionals, library staff, higher education professionals, occupational training providers, state agency staff, volunteers and other community members whose input defines this report.

Thank you in particular to consultants Jill Holloway and Brady Dunklee and to the members of the working groups, whose energy and vision made this possible.

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Executive Summary

2015 is a transformative year for Rhode Island’s education and workforce development systems.

“Our collective future is tied to rebuilding our economy in a way that expands opportunity for all families and leaves no one behind.”

- Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo,
Inaugural Address (2015)

Governor Gina Raimondo’s commitment to economic growth that “expands opportunities for all families and leaves no one behind” sets high expectations for how the state develops its greatest economic asset – its workforce.

New federal legislation – the **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)** – was signed into law in 2014 and will go into full effect in July 2016. WIOA reauthorizes federal funding for workforce development in the states and sets new standards for system-wide collaboration and the service of low-income individuals and individuals with barriers to employment.

The Rhode Island Governor’s Workforce Board has undertaken a massive review of the state’s workforce development system, with the goal of mapping connections, strengths, and areas of weakness. The resulting **Comprehensive System Improvement Plan (CSIP)** will inform the state’s implementation of WIOA and will set the stage for the ongoing evaluation and redesign of Rhode Island’s workforce development system.

It is time for the state to address its growing foundational skills gap.

Over 80,000 Rhode Islanders lack a high school diploma or equivalency¹ and nationally, data have shown that a high school diploma or equivalency is no guarantee of basic math and reading skills.² Both 12th grade-level skills and credentials continue to be an important stepping-stone to active community engagement, personal self-sufficiency, and employment³.

Rhode Island adult education professionals came together in 2003 to address foundational skills development as part of Governor Carcieri’s Adult Literacy Taskforce. Many of the Taskforce’s recommendations have since been successfully implemented, but there is a need at the state level to continue adapting to changing circumstances and learner needs.

“...Foundation skills – the combination of literacy, numeracy, and English language as well as employability skills required for participation in modern workplaces and contemporary life – are a shared responsibility of, and value and benefit to the entire community.”

- *Making Skills Everyone’s Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States (2014)*

Take action to improve foundational skills in our state.

From April through August 2015, United Way of Rhode Island gathered input from over 300 Rhode Islanders – with a focus on adult learners, adult education and occupational training providers, and state agency staff – about foundational skills development in Rhode Island. From this process, four core recommendations emerged:

“The voices of the undereducated and underemployed need to be heard. Our task is to provide instruction and training that encourages individuals to participate more fully, as citizens and workers, as they feel more invested in the future of their communities and their state.”

- Rhode Island Adult
Education Professional
(2015)

(1) Update the structures of leadership and governance for adult education in Rhode Island to reflect the importance of this work to the economic development of the state and to continue advancing improvements to the state’s foundational skills development system as a whole.

(2) Fully integrate a set of priorities designed to advance the development of foundational skills among Rhode Island adults into all future state plans for education, workforce development, and economic development.

(3) Revisit and redesign data collection, data use, program quality indicators, and performance targets for foundational skills development to ensure that education and workforce development systems support service of adults with the greatest barriers to employment and that they are able to remain responsive to both learner goals and workforce needs.

(4) Expand the capacity of the state’s education and workforce development systems to help more Rhode Islanders improve their foundational skills and to reduce barriers for adult learners at all skill levels.

Together we can make change happen.

For more information about the convening process or a copy of the full report, please visit the project website at adulthoodri2015.weebly.com or contact United Way of Rhode Island directly at (401) 444-0600.

“I hope the state find[s] out how successful this program is for adult[s] like me.”

- Learner at a Rhode Island Adult Education Program (2015)

Introduction

In 2003, Rhode Island Governor Carcieri commissioned an Adult Literacy Taskforce composed of leaders and practitioners in Rhode Island’s adult basic education community to discuss the most critical issues facing the field and to produce a common vision and plan for “an integrated, quality system of adult education” in the state.⁴ The recommendations of this group were summarized in “Building the Critical Links”, a report produced by the Governor’s Policy Office with the support of the Economic Policy Council in 2004. This report went on to guide the development of a high-performing adult education system in Rhode Island and represent the voice of foundational skills learners and providers in state-level conversations about education and workforce development.

Key successes over the past ten years include:

- Consolidation of state-level adult basic education administration and funding at the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE)
- Creation of statewide accountability and program improvement measures, including the state’s first electronic Management Information System (MIS) for adult basic education
- Establishment of the Rhode Island Adult Education Professional Development Center (RIAEPDC), which delivers professional learning opportunities and technical assistance to foundational skill-building programs around the state
- Implementation of a standardized assessment policy for learners at adult basic education programs
- Documented gains in the performance of publicly funded adult basic education programs, such that these programs have consistently exceeded annual state targets and secured two federal incentive grants under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA); the state’s adult basic education system as a whole has moved from the bottom performance quartile to the top quartile in national performance measures
- Service, on average more than 6,000 learners per year

Many of the above successes were a response to the recommendations outlined by the 2003 Governor’s Taskforce, and the Taskforce’s recommendations continue to be a critical source of vision and guidance for the field. However, adults lacking foundational skills in Rhode Island, as in many other states across the country, remain underserved by public education and workforce development systems. As of April 2015, over 1200 adults were on RIDE’s waiting list for adult basic education services, and most of those waiting were English language learners seeking openings in ESOL classes. Research shows that participation in educational programs teaching basic literacy and numeracy is strongly correlated with positive long-term economic outcomes.⁵

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From April through August 2015, United Way of Rhode Island brought together a group of over 300 learners, training providers, education professionals, state agency staff, and others to revisit the recommendations presented by the 2003 Governor’s Taskforce and to discuss the challenges and opportunities in Rhode Island’s foundational skill-building system today. United Way of Rhode Island has identified several key themes from the group’s discussions, which are reflected across participants’ recommendations and proposed strategies for policy makers and state agencies:

1. As a state, it is important to ***elevate and prioritize improved access*** to adult education services, technology, internet, coordinated case management, career pathways and other resources for adults with the highest barriers to education and employment, as the state’s future economic success depends on its ability to support all Rhode Island adults in achieving their potential as parents, workers, and community members.
2. Policy makers, state administrators, and others have the potential to significantly ***improve outcomes for all adult learners by facilitating increased alignment, collaboration, and resource sharing*** among service providers, state agencies, employers, and funding streams.
3. The state’s workforce development and education ***systems must remain versatile and responsive*** in their efforts to serve adults who lack foundational skills. A culture of continuous improvement will give these systems their best chance at success, but that approach requires room to innovate, evaluate, and adjust systems and practices over time.
4. ***Adult learners, service providers, and other community members bring important perspectives to the table***, and the state will benefit from more intentional inclusion of these voices in future policy and planning decisions at all levels. Although a disconnect has often existed between policy makers and those who work directly with adult learners, United Way of Rhode Island has heard evidence of eagerness and commitment on both sides to improve communication and transparency of decision-making.

While compiled by United Way of Rhode Island staff, this report is intended to be a summary of the opinions, recommendations and potential strategies developed by the individuals who shared their input during this process and not those of United Way of Rhode Island. It is also important to note that the recommendations and strategies described here are by no means comprehensive, nor are they the only possible interpretation of this group’s collective input. Six months was not enough time to allow this group to delve fully into all of the issues that were raised. The present document is therefore not intended as a final or static summary of this group’s work. Instead, we hope it will be a springboard for future action, collaboration, and engagement between members of the adult education community and state leaders and policy makers.

Process

In December 2014, United Way of Rhode Island began conversations with adult education professionals about opportunities for community voices to influence the future of the state's adult education field. It had been ten years since Governor Carcieri's Adult Literacy Taskforce released its recommendations in 2004. While not all of that Taskforce's recommendations were implemented and others were reversed following initial implementation, those recommendations continue to represent the foundation of adult education in Rhode Island.

However, significant changes are on the horizon for adult education at both the federal level – with the passage of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) – and the state level in Rhode Island – with Governor Gina Raimondo's energetic focus on economic and workforce development. This year has been an important and opportune moment for the state to reconsider how it educates and upskills its workforce, particularly the vast number of adults with foundational skills or credentials below a 12th grade level. And there is no one better to evaluate existing systems than the learners, educators, training providers, library staff, postsecondary administrators, volunteers and others who have helped to develop and implement those systems and are most intimately familiar with their day-to-day effects.

In January 2015, United Way of Rhode Island committed \$25,000 to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Raise awareness and share information about adult education and foundational skills in Rhode Island.
2. Bring together and give voice to adult education students, professionals, partners and community members.
3. Produce tools that support advocacy and inform policy in order to improve the state's foundational skill-building system.
4. Identify issues that require ongoing exploration and action moving forward.

The present report is designed to advance all four of these objectives – to advance awareness, elevate community voices, provide a tool for future advocacy and decision-making, and lay the basis for ongoing conversation and collaborative action to address the key issues affecting foundational skills development in Rhode Island.

Timeline

As the third-party convener and facilitator for this project, United Way of Rhode Island staff and consultants gathered input as follows:

April - May: Two online surveys gathered information from over 300 respondents about their familiarity with adult education in Rhode Island and what they see as the strengths and weaknesses of the current system. Respondents were also asked to identify what they believed to be the primary purpose of adult education and important topics to address. A related set of questions was also shared with adult basic education programs across the state, five of which responded with written feedback from a combination of program staff and adult learners.

May: 70 people attended a meeting convened by United Way of Rhode Island to discuss the results of the surveys and provide additional input and framing for the priority issues identified by survey respondents.

June – July: Over 25 people volunteered to participate in a total of eight meetings as part of three working groups. Each group worked to identify policy, regulatory, and community based strategies on one of the following topics:

1. Promoting equitable access to education services for all adults;
2. Increasing and leveraging resources to meet current demand for adult education services; and
3. Improving collaboration and coordination across state systems serving adult learners.

August: 40 people attended a meeting convened by United Way of Rhode Island to discuss the findings of the working groups, to set priorities, and to strategize about the release of the group's recommendations.

United Way of Rhode Island staff developed this report with the goal of presenting the vision, principles, recommendations, and strategies developed by this group of over 300 individuals across the state. At each stage of this process, United Way of Rhode Island staff compiled all of the input and organized it to draw out themes and priorities identified by the group. United Way of Rhode Island encourages the readers of this report to view summaries of the original data gathered as part of this project on the publicly accessible project website at adulthoodri2015.weebly.com.

Vision for Adult Education in Rhode Island

The Governor's Adult Literacy Taskforce that convened in 2003 produced the following vision⁴:

The adult basic education system in Rhode Island will enable adults to participate fully in society in their various roles as parents, workers and citizens. The system will allow adults to acquire the skills they need to access the larger workforce development system, seek higher education, and cultivate lifelong learning. The education offered will be high quality and available in a convenient, inexpensive and timely manner. An efficient and coherent system of services and providers will allow clients to enter at the appropriate level and progress until they are able to meet their self-identified goals.

Participants in the three working groups convened by United Way of Rhode Island in 2015 began their work by producing a common vision, which forms the basis for the recommendations and strategies presented here. Below is a combination of what the three working groups developed:

All Rhode Island adults will have access to high-quality, student-centered learning opportunities and support to enable them to articulate and achieve their goals. Rhode Island will actively facilitate the ongoing effort to develop strong, effective connections and collaborations among adult education community providers and partners that empower all adults to participate meaningfully in the economy and society. With the input of learners, education and training professionals, and partners, Rhode Island will maximize and leverage resources for a highly effective infrastructure and system of services that meets the diverse needs of adult learners equitably across the state.

Recommendations and Strategies

‡ See Appendix C for additional information and participant comments regarding strategies marked with this symbol.

I. *Update the structures of leadership and governance for adult education in Rhode Island* to reflect the importance of this work to the economic development of the state and to continue advancing improvements to the state’s foundational skills development system as a whole.

Participants propose the following strategies:

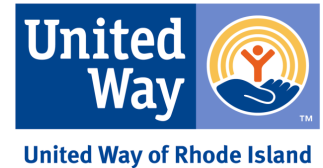
- A. That the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE) restore the role of the state Director of Adult Education to a high-level management position that has the authority to advocate for, negotiate for, and support the development of foundational skills for Rhode Island adults within RIDE and at the state level.‡
- B. That the Governor’s Office include representation from adult education service providers and adult learners in future appointments to the Rhode Island Board of Education and Council on Elementary and Secondary Education.‡
- C. That the Governor’s Office include additional representation from community-based adult basic education service providers in future appointments to the Rhode Island Governor’s Workforce Board (GWB).‡

II. *Fully integrate a set of priorities designed to advance the development of foundational skills* among Rhode Island adults into all future state plans for education, workforce development, and economic development.

Participants propose the following strategies:

- A. That RIDE work with adult education providers and other partners, as outlined in the RIDE strategic plan, to identify a cohesive set of priorities, strategies, and agenda items for foundational skills development across the state. Participants encourage RIDE, the Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training (DLT), the Rhode Island Department of Human

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Services (DHS), and the Governor’s Office to work toward ensuring that all state plans for education, workforce development, and economic development fully integrate and align with these elements.[‡]

- B. That the Governor’s office submit a Combined State Plan under WIOA that outlines mechanisms for improved collaboration between all education and workforce development systems, including RIDE, DLT, GWB, the Office of Post-Secondary Education, the One Stop Career Centers, the Rhode Island Office of Rehabilitative Services (ORS), the Rhode Island Department of Corrections (RIDOC), and RI Works. Participants encourage the Governor’s office, in compliance with WIOA, to ensure that collaborating agencies develop a system of shared outcomes and performance targets that incentivizes and rewards service of adult learners with the lowest levels of literacy and the highest barriers to employment.[‡]
- C. That RIDE update its mechanisms for soliciting, receiving and adopting community feedback, including the agency’s Advisory Committee for Adult Education and its quarterly Leadership Institutes, currently open to representatives from some or all of the state’s RIDE-funded adult education programs. Participants propose that these mechanisms be redesigned to ensure that RIDE-funded adult education providers, as well as non-RIDE-funded providers and especially adult learners, have the opportunity to inform and influence policy, priorities, and funding decisions affecting adult basic education within RIDE and in cross-agency conversations where RIDE represents the state’s foundational skills development system.[‡]

III. *Revisit and redesign data collection, data use, program quality indicators, and performance targets* for foundational skills development to ensure that education and workforce development systems support service of adults with the greatest barriers to employment and that they are able to remain responsive to both learner goals and workforce needs.

Participants propose the following strategies:

- A. That the Governor’s office design the Combined State Plan for WIOA implementation to intentionally incentivize service of adult learners with the highest barriers to education and employment by implementing a system of outcomes and performance targets that learns from the state’s experiences with existing systems and does not penalize programs for serving high-barrier populations.

- B. That RIDE engage a committee of adult basic education providers, learners, and others in the foundational skills building community to revisit the indicators of program quality and their current applications. Participants encourage RIDE and the Rhode Island Board of Education to maintain and enhance requisite supports to facilitate ongoing quality improvement by education and training providers serving adults with the highest needs and barriers, whether by adjusting RIDE’s monitoring practices for adult basic education providers or exploring a system of program credentialing.[‡]

- C. That RIDE lead an evaluation of its practices for data gathering, analysis, sharing and use to improve system and program quality for adult learners at all levels of literacy. In light of what RIDE and the adult basic education community have learned since the adoption of the current reporting system for adult education (CALIS), participants strongly suggest that RIDE wait to renew the contract for CALIS at the end of the current contract period. Instead, participants encourage RIDE to engage a group of adult basic education providers and others to reevaluate current practices and ensure that future data collection efforts and systems are designed to prioritize a collaborative, collective impact approach.[‡]

IV. *Expand the capacity of the state’s education and workforce development systems* to help more Rhode Islanders improve their foundational skills by reducing barriers for adult learners at all levels of literacy.

Participants propose the following strategies:

- A. That the new high school equivalency Request for Proposals (RFP) / Request for Information (RFI) that RIDE develops requires that a paper version of the test be available for those who can master the content but are not proficient in the academic computer literacy requirements of the timed essay writing. In addition, participants urge that the new RFP/RFI be written to require acceptance of ‘past partials’ from previous tests for two years. During the 2014 transition, and if there is a future transition of allowable test(s), test takers who have passed previous versions of subject sub-tests will then not have to re-take that same test in the new version at added cost to the student or the state.[‡]

- B. That RIDE, in partnership with other state and federal funders and resources, enhance digital literacy and distance learning opportunities for adult learners by investing in internet

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access and technology resources and by facilitating partnerships that will increase the impact of available resources.[‡]

- C. That RIDE, DHS, GWB, DLT take joint action to improve access to information about education and training resources for adults in the state, by promoting and enhancing existing databases of resources and investing in a shared strategy to build awareness of the services that are available.[‡]
- D. That RIDE design future RFPs for adult education with the geographic and programmatic distribution of foundational skills development services in mind, to ensure equitable and transparent access for adult learners across Rhode Island.
- E. That the Governor's Office ensure that the Combined State Plan under WIOA includes mechanisms for strong communication and coordination between state agencies and partners including RIDE, DLT, GWB, RI Works, the One Stops, ORS, employers and vendors providing education and training to adults, particularly those seeking to build their foundational skills.
- F. That the General Assembly increases general revenue appropriations to RIDE for adult education to accommodate the 1,200+ adult learners currently waiting for foundational skill-building services.
- G. That RIDE and other state agencies partner to identify funds and approaches that will provide services to all adults, regardless of learner goals, barriers to work, or employment status. As part of this effort, funding should follow 16- and 17-year-olds from local school districts to adult education programs when they are placed there under alternative learning plans (ALPs).
- H. That RIDE build on what the state has learned since its adoption of the current performance-based funding formula for adult education to develop a new formula that more strongly supports innovation, equity, and efficiency through collaboration. This formula should be based on a system of outcomes and performance targets that rewards service of adult learners with low levels of literacy and high barriers to employment. Participants are also eager to see RIDE, as proposed in its strategic plan, develop an innovation fund to incentivize the provision of personalized learning opportunities for all adults, regardless of literacy level or work/employment status.[‡]

Conclusion

At this moment, changing conditions in the state – driven by the passage of WIOA, the mapping of the workforce development system under the CSIP, and the leadership of a new Governor – offer a unique opportunity to learn from our past experiences and reform the way that we serve adults with the highest barriers to personal, educational, and economic success.

While the committed learners, practitioners, and leaders of Rhode Island’s foundational skill-building system have helped the state to make great strides in recent years, this community is eager to see the system continue to innovate and evolve. Those who participated in this project have expressed a commitment to continuing this work in the coming months and years, and they have already begun discussions about how this group, and the broader Rhode Island community, can take action moving forward (see Appendix D). United Way of Rhode Island is confident that the state as a whole will benefit from hearing the voices of this community, and we look forward to supporting ongoing conversations and collaboration with participants and policy makers to advance our common goals.

Appendices

Appendix A: Glossary

Acronyms

ABE:	Adult Basic Education
ALP:	Alternative Learning Plan
ASE:	Adult Secondary Education
CALIS:	Comprehensive Adult Literacy Information System
CASAS:	Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System
CSIP:	Comprehensive System Improvement Plan for Workforce Development
DHS:	Rhode Island Department of Human Services
DLT:	Rhode Island Department of Labor and Training
EOHHS:	Rhode Island Executive Office of Health and Human Services
ESL:	English as a Second Language
ESOL:	English for Speakers of Other Languages
GWB:	Rhode Island Governor's Workforce Board
JDF:	Job Development Fund
OCTAE:	United States Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education
OLIS:	Rhode Island Office of Library and Information Services
ORS:	Rhode Island Office of Rehabilitative Services
RIDE:	Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education
RIDOC:	Rhode Island Department of Corrections
SNAP:	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
TANF:	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
UEP:	Unified Workforce Development Expenditure and Program Report
WIA:	Workforce Investment Act
WIB:	Workforce Investment Board
WIOA:	Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

Key Terms

Adult Basic Education (ABE): The 2003-2004 Rhode Island Governor’s Adult Literacy Taskforce defined adult basic education as “beginning through advanced English for speakers of other languages (ESOL), beginning literacy, beginning through intermediate adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and transition to college programs.” In Rhode Island, the term “adult basic education” is at times used interchangeably with the term “adult education”. However, this report primarily uses the term to refer to foundational skills education for adults 16 years and older who are not enrolled in high school and either have no high school diploma or whose literacy, numeracy, English language, and/or digital literacy skills are below a 9th grade level.

Adult Education: Under WIOA, adult education is defined as “academic instruction and education services below the postsecondary level that increase an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak English and perform mathematics or other activities necessary for the attainment of a secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent; transition to postsecondary education and training; and obtain employment.” For the purposes of this report, adult education specifically refers to the collection of these educational services available to adults 16 years and older who are not enrolled in high school and either have no high school diploma or whose literacy, numeracy, English language, and/or digital literacy skills are below a 12th grade level. Types of adult education services include adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), developmental education, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) / English as a second language (ESL).

Alternative Learning Plan (ALP): In 2011, the Rhode Island General Assembly passed legislation (§ RIGL 16-19-1) requiring that Rhode Island high school students under age 18 remain in school and that in cases where local superintendents waive this attendance requirement for 16- and 17-year-olds, those students are provided with an alternative learning plan (ALP). In many cases, alternative learning plans include the expectation that a student will enroll in a local adult education program in order to complete his or her Rhode Island secondary education diploma or its equivalent (for example, the GED).

Adult Secondary Education (ASE): For the purposes of this report, adult secondary education refers to foundational skills education for adults 16 years and older who are not enrolled in high school and either have no high school diploma or whose literacy, numeracy, English language, and/or digital literacy skills are from a 9th to 12th grade level.

Career Pathways: As of October 2015, the Rhode Island Governor’s Workforce Board defines career pathways as “a series of connected progressive education and training programs and support services that enable individuals to secure employment within a specific industry or occupational sector, and to advance over time to successively higher levels of education and employment in that sector.”

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Digital Literacy: WIOA uses the definition of digital literacy provided under the Museum and Library Services Act (2010), “the skills associated with using technology to enable users to find, evaluate, organize, create and communicate information.”

English as a Second Language (ESL) / English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL): This report refers to educational services that help adults to learn English speaking and literacy skills interchangeably as English as a Second Language (ESL) or English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). However, it is worth notice that WIOA uses the term “English Language Acquisition” (ELA) to refer to the same set of services.

Foundation(al) Skills: While the terms “foundation skills” and “foundational skills” have been defined in multiple ways in recent years, this report primarily uses the definition developed by the Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), which includes basic reading, writing, arithmetic and mathematics, listening and speaking, creative thinking, decision making, problem solving, reasoning skills, and personal qualities related to employability. This report also uses “foundation/al skills” to refer to the English language and digital literacy skills that learners are expected to demonstrate at completion of many secondary education credentials.

Appendix B: List of Working Group Members

The following individuals registered to participate in one or more of the three working groups that were convened in June and July 2015. Working group members met 2 – 3 times and also shared feedback via email and online comments.

Resources

David Banno
Pat Bellart
Jill Holloway
Kristen McKenna
Ruth Tureckova
Linda Katz
Mary Parella
Thomas Larrabee
Bubacar Fofana
Melanie LaMountain

Access

Ed Ferszt
Tyla Pimentel
Jamie Scurry
Heather Gaydos
Karisa Tashjian
Michelle Novello
Bernice Morris
Gayle Dzekevich
Susan Korte
Kristen McKenna

Connections

Dr. Albert Alba
Jennifer Bryant
Adriana Dawson
Jason Colonies
Jane May
Joan Ayotte
Kristen McKenna
April Brown
Melanie LaMountain
Sharon Miles

Appendix C: Supporting Information, Background and Context for the Proposed Strategies

Recommendation I – Strategy A

In 2005, on the recommendation of the 2004 Rhode Island Governor’s Adult Literacy Taskforce, the state “adult education director’s position” was elevated within RIDE to “a high level administrator reporting directly to the Commissioner [of Elementary and Secondary Education].” However, in 2010 this action was reversed, and the role recognized by the federal government as Rhode Island’s State Director of Adult Education was changed to a non-management, labor union position two management levels removed from the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education within the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (RIDE). This role, currently held by the Administrator of Adult Basic Education and GED Programs, is charged with leading the administration of all state and federal funding for adult education in Rhode Island and with developing and implementing policies that affect adult education programs and learners across the state. However, the current level of this position within RIDE’s organizational structure inhibits the Administrator’s ability to communicate, advocate and negotiate on behalf of adult learners, both within RIDE and with other state agencies and policy makers. While current management staff above this position have the authority to take on these tasks, their primary area of expertise is in serving students in the traditional K-12 system, whose needs and experiences are distinct from those of adult learners educated in community-based settings.

Recommendation I – Strategy B

Governance of the public adult basic and secondary education system in Rhode Island falls to the Rhode Island Board of Education and its Council on Elementary and Secondary Education. However, neither the Board nor the Council includes representation from the adult education community, such as those with experience as adult education practitioners, administrators, advocates, or students. In the course of this project, some members of the community also strongly recommended that the Rhode Island General Assembly consider creating a governing board specific to adult basic education that could liaise with the Rhode Island Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and bring the community’s voice to inform agency decisions affecting adult learners and adult education providers.

Recommendation I – Strategy C

While the Rhode Island Governor’s Workforce Board (GWB) and the state’s local Workforce Investment Boards do not hold governing authority over the state’s adult basic education system, these Boards have long recognized the importance of adult basic education services to improving the state’s workforce. The GWB is the largest public funder of adult basic education in the state (\$3.5M annually). The GWB’s Adult Education and Literacy Committee, which works closely with the state Administrator of Adult Basic Education and GED, has significant influence over funding and policy decisions affecting RIDE-funded adult basic education providers.

Recommendation II – Strategy A

All of Rhode Island’s major state workforce and economic development plans reference adult basic education, including the Biennial Employment and Training Plan (2016-2017), the Strategic Plan for PK-12 & Adult Education (2015-2020), the Rhode Island Integrated Workforce Plan under WIA (2012-2016), and the RhodeMapRI Economic Development Plan (2014). However, these plans were each developed independently and in response to a focus or mandate that overlaps with, but does not specifically address, the issue of foundational skills in the state. Since the conclusion of the 2004 Governor’s Taskforce on Adult Literacy, there has been no government-sponsored, public input process dedicated to updating a collaborative, cross-agency plan for foundational skills development in Rhode Island that maximizes collective impact. By creating such a plan, opening it to public review and comment, and sharing the final version publicly online, RIDE will ensure that future administrative and policy decisions affecting adult basic education providers and learners continue to be fully aligned and driven by core principles, innovative thinking, and learner demand.

Recommendation II – Strategy B

Participants expressed the hope that all adult education providers could one day have the opportunity and support to share resources with each other, with K-12 school districts, and with training providers. Resources proposed for sharing include space, curricular materials, administrative staff, hardware, internet access, and software.

Recommendation II – Strategy C

As an alternative, participants also discussed the concept of a state-convened and recognized leadership group, composed of adult education professionals and learners, that RIDE’s Office of Adult Education would be required to consult on policy and regulatory decisions regarding adult education.

Recommendation III – Strategy B

Several participants noted that the program quality indicators developed by the 2004 Governor’s Adult Literacy Taskforce, which have been adopted by RIDE for monitoring purposes, are not being used as originally intended. One participant in this year’s process who was also involved in the 2004 Taskforce explained it this way: “The indicators...emerged as guidance and not as prescriptive items...The indicators were never intended to be used...to dictate or prescribe or...monitor compliance.”

Recommendation III – Strategy C

The majority of adult education providers participating in this project strongly recommend that RIDE’s current adult education reporting system (CALIS) be retired and replaced once new reporting standards and requirements are established under WIOA.

Recommendation IV – Strategy A

In January 2014, the Rhode Island’s Department of Elementary and Secondary Education adopted the new GED® as its high school equivalency exam. This computer-based test, developed by Pearson VUE and the American Council on Education, was phased in as the old 2002 GED was phased out. McGraw Hill and ETS also released competing exams the same year, available in computer and paper/pencil versions.⁶ States across the country adopted from one to three of the available tests, and supported them with a wide variety of financial models.⁷ The RI Legislature passed RIGL § 16-63-18 in June of 2014, requiring that the RI Department of Education develop criteria to identify individuals with limited income and cover the cost of high school equivalency tests for those individuals. The law also requires RIDE to investigate alternative providers of a high school equivalency test, especially in regards to pricing and portability. This meant the removal of all references to the GED® or other proprietary tests from regulation⁸. The regulations to enable this went into effect June 5, 2015, and RIDE is now poised to draft an RFP or RFI to reconsider which tests will be accepted as the state’s high school equivalency test. A process for issuing waivers was put in place on June 5th, but the funding to cover the costs with Pearson is coming from a one-time situation this year only.

Recommendation IV – Strategy B

The second Adult Education Technology Advisory Committee convened by RIDE recently released a report titled, “Essential Conditions Necessary for the Effective Use of Technology in Adult Education in Rhode Island.” This report outlines a set of preliminary recommendations for how the state can “meet the standards of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA)”, beginning with the suggestion that all “Adult Education programs receiving RIDE funds...develop a multi-year technology plan” and receive professional development and technical assistance to support implementation.

Recommendation IV – Strategy C

Ideas discussed by participants include the development of a shared marketing plan to raise awareness about public education, training and career opportunities available to adults in the state; creation of opportunities for education and training providers to share information about available programs with staff and clients at the state’s One Stop Career Centers; and increasing the accuracy, use of, and linkages between existing lists and databases where adults can find information about education and training programs.

Recommendation IV – Strategy D

Participants commented that the current performance-based funding structure has had the effect of creating a competitive rather than collaborative atmosphere among GED Testing Centers as well as adult education providers.

Appendix D: Action Steps for the Community

In addition to developing recommendations and strategies for policy makers, participants in this project also spent time proposing and discussing actions that we as a broader community can take to continue advancing the equity and efficacy of Rhode Island’s foundational skills development system. The following steps are directly informed by those discussions:

1. Create an inclusive stakeholder-driven leadership and advocacy group for adult education in Rhode Island. This group can build on and enhance existing forums for discussion of and communication about policies and regulations affecting the development of foundational skills in Rhode Island.
2. Explore a plan for a dedicated, staffed division, department or center that will coordinate, develop and share in-kind resources and services between adult education programs, possibly via an extension of the Rhode Island Adult Education Professional Development Center (RIAEPDC).
3. Document the distribution of existing adult basic education services in detail to inform future policy and regulatory decisions affecting adult learners.
4. Advocate for and take advantage of opportunities to influence the CSIP, WIOA and other future planning processes affecting foundational skills development in the state.
5. Share information by attending open meetings of the Governor’s Workforce Board (GWB), its Adult Education & Literacy Committee, and its Career Pathways Advisory; of the RI Board of Education, RI Council of Elementary and Secondary Education, and RI Council of Postsecondary Education.
6. Release and respond to calls to action about proposed legislation and regulations. Provide written or oral testimony at hearings held by the Board of Education, the Council of Elementary and Secondary Education, and relevant State House and Senate committees. Raise and document issues and concerns through input mechanisms at RIDE, including the Adult Education Advisory Committee and direct communications with RIDE staff. Write or sign onto letters addressed to state agency staff and government officials about issues of concern.
7. Contribute to ongoing discussions by participating in meetings of the Workforce Alliance to hear updates and contribute to conversations about policy/regulatory challenges or changes. Reach out to local city council, RI House, RI Senate, or US Congressional representatives to offer tours of a local program and a discussion of their interests and learner needs. Join or create a local or regional network of adult basic education service providers to share resources, facilitate referrals, and distribute different levels and types of services to meet local learner needs.

Endnotes

¹ The Economic Progress Institute (June 2014). *Educational Attainment of Rhode Island's Workforce*. Retrieved from <http://www.economicprogressri.org/FactsStats/EducationalAttainmentofRhodeIslanders1213/tabid/293/Default.aspx>

² American Institutes for Research (November 2014). *An Education and Workforce Challenge*. Retrieved from <http://educationpolicy.air.org/education-and-workforce-challenge>

³ RI DataHUB (2015). *RI's College to Career Landscape*. Retrieved from <http://ridatahub.org/datastories/ris-college-to-career-landscape/>

⁴ Rhode Island Economic Policy Council (2004). *Building the Critical Links: Recommendations of the Governor's Adult Literacy Taskforce*. Retrieved from http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Sweaver_Center/Literacy_Resources/CriticalLinks.pdf

⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (December 2014). *The Impact of ABS Program Participation on Long-Term Economic Outcomes*. Retrieved from http://lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/ABS_EconomicOutcomes.pdf

⁶ Inside Higher Ed (May 2013). *Testy Battle Over Tests*. Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/05/16/ged-faces-competition-states-weigh-two-new-entrants>

⁷ National Adult Education Professional Development Center (January 2015). *High School Equivalency Options by State*. Retrieved from <http://www.naepdc.org/>

⁸ Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2015). *Public Notice of Proposed Rule-Making: Regulations of the Board of Education Governing the Rhode Island High School Equivalency Program*. Retrieved from http://sos.ri.gov/documents/archives/regdocs/holding/DESE/Proposed_Revisions_High_School_Equivalency_Regulations.pdf



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