



MASSACHUSETTS COALITION FOR ADULT EDUCATION

**WHITE PAPER**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION  
SYSTEM TO WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT**

**Prepared by:**

**The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education  
Public Policy Committee**

**At the request of the Patrick/Murray Transition Team  
Workforce Development Work Group**

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## OVERVIEW OF THE MASSACHUSETTS ADULT BASIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

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### *ABE Services – The Cornerstone of Public Policy Priorities:*

The Massachusetts Adult Basic Education (ABE) system provides instructional services to adults in basic literacy, adult basic education (reading, writing and math), pre-GED, GED, Adult Diploma Program/External Diploma Program (high school credentialing), and English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

In addition to the core instructional offerings noted above, programs also provide a range of educational services such as employment/career readiness, citizenship, transitions to college, computer-assisted instruction, distance learning, family literacy, financial literacy, health literacy, services to the homeless, student leadership and community participation, and workplace education.

In 1993, the Commonwealth, through the Education Reform Act, recognized ABE as an essential component of the state's public education system and charged the MA Department of Education with the lead responsibility for developing and managing an effective ABE service delivery system. After the inclusion of ABE in the landmark Education Reform Act, the Massachusetts Board of Education embraced universal access to adult basic education for adults in the Commonwealth by adopting the following mission<sup>1</sup>:

*To provide each and every adult with opportunities to develop literacy skills needed to qualify for further education, job training, and better employment, and to reach his/her full potential as a family member, productive worker, and citizen.*

In acknowledging its responsibility to provide opportunities for basic skills instruction to every adult who needed it, the Massachusetts Board of Education underscored the importance of adult basic education to individuals, families, the quality of life in the community, the development of an educated workforce, and the state's economic prosperity. Clearly, adult basic education is at the cornerstone of many of today's pressing public policy priorities:

- **Poverty:** Families headed by adults without a high school diploma suffer severe economic consequences.<sup>2</sup>
- **Workforce development:** Good-paying jobs for those without college degrees or advanced skills have become considerably harder to find, and more so in our state than in other parts of the nation.<sup>3</sup> More than 1.1 million (1/3) of the state's 3.2 million workers do not have the skills required to perform in the state's rapidly changing economy and need ABE services.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> MA Dept. of Education website: <http://doe.mass.edu/acls>.

<sup>2</sup> *The State of the American Dream in Massachusetts*, MassINC, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> *Mass Economy: The Labor Supply and Our Economic Future*, MassINC, 2006.

<sup>4</sup> *New Skills for a New Economy*, MassINC, 2000

- ***School success for children and the success of education reform:*** The best indicator of a child’s future success in school is the educational level of the mother.<sup>5</sup>
- ***Civic engagement:*** Civic and community participation suffer when adults do not have sufficient literacy skills.<sup>6</sup>
- ***Health care:*** Adults suffer adverse health outcomes as a result of low literacy skills.<sup>7</sup>
- ***Crime:*** Incarceration and recidivism rates are high among adults who do not have sufficient literacy skills.<sup>8</sup>

***An Integral Component of the Workforce Development System:***

The ABE system is an essential and integral component of the workforce development system. ABE provides adults with the basic skills they need to enroll in job training programs, successfully complete them and take advantage of career advancement opportunities. There is no question that the proficiency gained by undereducated adults through the ABE system is a pre-requisite to their qualifying for even the most basic training, further education and better jobs.

***One of the Nation’s Most Diverse Provider Networks:***

One of the great strengths of the Massachusetts ABE system is its diverse provider network. ABE services are provided by community-based organizations, local educational authorities, community colleges, higher education, correctional facilities, businesses and labor unions. This diversity provides the best possible access for adults, allowing them multiple points of entry in the community so they can enroll at a program that is geographically accessible, meets their educational needs and may already be a resource with which they are comfortable thereby encouraging enrollment and persistence.

For purposes of this White Paper, the ABE system in Massachusetts is defined as the agencies that receive federal Workforce Investment Act Funds (WIA) – Title II, and state funding under budget line item #7035-0002 in the MA Department of Education. Although there are hundreds of other smaller ABE programs that do not receive funding from the MA Department of Education, they are not included in this discussion since they are not subject to the same program requirements and performance standards.

***ABE Funding – A Leveraged Investment:***

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<sup>5</sup> *Teach the Mother and Reach the Child: Literacy Across Generations. Literacy Lessons*, Sticht, T. G., & McDonald, B.A. (1990).

<sup>6</sup> The National Adult Literacy Survey, Educational Testing Service, 1993.

<sup>7</sup> Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, *Literacy and Health Outcomes*, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> The National Adult Literacy Survey, Educational Testing Service, 1993; and The Policy Information Center of Educational Testing Service.

For Fiscal Year 2007, WIA funds to Massachusetts total \$10.46 million; the state ABE line item funding totals \$32.5 million, which includes \$3 million made available under the Economic Stimulus Bill. Approximately \$1.3 million of the state funding is for workplace education programs. Both the state and federal sources of funding are administered under a competitive grant process by the Massachusetts Department of Education – Adult and Community Learning Services (ACLS). There are no presumptive providers and there is no entitlement funding. In accordance with federal and state statute, all ABE instructional services funded by WIA and the state budget line item are provided at no charge to the student.

In order to leverage additional funds into the system and require a tangible demonstration of a state's financial commitment to providing ABE services, WIA mandates that the state provides a non-federal contribution (i.e., "the match") and that the match must maintain a required level of investment from year to year (i.e., "the maintenance of effort"). States that do not comply with either or both of these provisions risk a proportionate loss of federal ABE funding. However, states can apply for and receive a one-time waiver under exceptional or uncontrollable circumstances.

In order to meet the federal maintenance of effort requirement and leverage additional resources in Massachusetts for ABE services, ACLS mandates that programs must also provide a match of public or private local dollars as well as an annual maintenance of effort. ACLS can also exercise discretion in granting occasional waivers for programs due to unusual circumstances.

WIA mandates that in states that have a statutory designation of a lead agency for adult basic education, federal adult education funds must be awarded to that same agency, in this case, the MA Department of Education – the only state agency with the mandate to educate all students, including adults, to the skill level of a high school credential, and the only state agency mandated under the Education Reform Act to develop and manage a system for delivering ABE services.

### ***The Wait List -- A Demonstrated Demand for Services:***

In Fiscal Year 2006 (7/1/05 – 6/30/06), the ABE system in Massachusetts served 22,249 adults, each of whom received at least 12 hours of instruction, the federal minimum standard in order to include an individual in the total student count at year-end. As of December 13, 2006, there are more adults on the wait list than were enrolled during all of Fiscal Year 2006: a total of 22,236 are waiting to enter a program (unduplicated count)<sup>9</sup>. Of those on the waiting list, 5,678 need ABE services and 16,558 need ESOL services.

This demonstrated demand for services has occurred without advertising or a concerted outreach effort to recruit students. The time on a wait list can vary from 2 to 8 months for ABE services and 6 months to 3 years for ESOL. Some programs maintain a practice of "closing" the wait list when it becomes too long because it is unrealistic to ask an individual to wait years for service. ACLS removes duplicate names from the list and programs are asked to update their list annually in the fall. An ad hoc working group of ABE practitioners is currently drafting recommendations for standardizing the wait list process across programs.

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<sup>9</sup> Source: <http://acls.doemass.org/pAbeDirectoryHome>

Utilizing data from the 2000 U.S. Census provides a picture of the need and potential demand. According to a data analysis by ACLS of the need for ABE services in the state, which was prepared for the most recent competitive grant cycle in 2005<sup>10</sup>, nearly 1 million adults (14.28% of the population) lack a high school diploma and have limited proficiency in conversational English. There are obvious limitations to using U.S. Census data to determine need:

- Information is self-reported and there could be multiple reasons for inaccurate reporting (e.g., adults are too afraid or embarrassed to admit their limited skills, they may overestimate their skills, or they may have difficulty understanding the questions and providing the information).
- The Census typically undercounts individuals.
- The Census determines literacy proficiency solely by the last grade of school completed, which is not an accurate or absolute indicator of skill level.

As a result, over the years, there have been other attempts to measure the skill level of adults and the need for ABE services via a demonstration of competency by a study sample: the Adult Performance Level Study conducted by the U.S. Office of Education in 1971, the National Adult Literacy Survey conducted by the Educational Testing Service in 1992, and most recently, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) conducted by the American Institutes for Research in 2003. Under the NAAL auspices, Massachusetts was one of six states in the country, including Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, New York and Oklahoma, who commissioned a more in-depth study of the ABE needs in their respective states.

Preliminary information from the Massachusetts State Assessment of Adult Literacy<sup>11</sup> defines a much greater need in the Commonwealth for ABE services than is suggested by either the wait list or the U.S. Census figures alone. According to information from this study, 32% of Massachusetts adults were at the Below Basic and Basic levels in Prose Literacy, the lowest literacy skill level (i.e., the ability to search, comprehend and use information from continuous texts such as newspaper articles or instructional materials).

Further, the majority (53%) of Massachusetts adults with Below Basic literacy levels across the three literacy scales (e.g., Prose, Document and Quantitative Literacy) were not in the labor force, an additional 5% were unemployed, 22% were employed part-time and only 20% were employed full-time. More data is expected from this study when the Massachusetts SAAL is completed.

The wait list is the focus of policymakers and legislators who are justifiably horrified that adults – their constituents – must languish on a long list and wait for desperately needed services. In fact, ABE funding under the Economic Stimulus Bill specified that the additional monies were to be used to move individuals from the wait list into programs with a goal toward eliminating the wait lists. In reality, the wait list has grown as the funding for ABE has increased. As adults in the community learn about more money being made available to add classes or increase services, the news spreads rapidly by word-of-mouth, bringing forward even more people who cannot

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<sup>10</sup> Source: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/rfp/>

<sup>11</sup> *Massachusetts State Assessment of Adult Literacy*, American Institutes for Research, 2003.

enroll in programs. It is unlikely the wait list can be totally eliminated. However, additional funding would make it possible to move individuals off the wait list and into programs more quickly so more adults can ultimately be served.

If additional funding is used to increase the intensity of service at a program, it can allow currently enrolled students to advance more quickly, opening up seats as students move up to the next instructional level, achieve their goals and transition out of the program. If additional funding is used to increase the number of classes or programs, more people from the wait list can move off the wait list and enroll. Given the extent of the need, it is unrealistic to assume that even modest to significant increases in funding will totally eliminate the wait list.

The ABE system serves the most educationally disadvantaged adults and accepts students regardless of skill level, income, the amount of instructional time that would be needed to meet stated goals, or age (provided the individual is over age 16 and out-of-school as required by WIA). Despite the wait list, the ABE system still provides the most universal access of any public education or training program for adults.

## INFRASTRUCTURE AND QUALITY STANDARDS

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### *The ABE System Infrastructure – Enabling System Strength and Effectiveness:*

The Massachusetts ABE System infrastructure is designed to provide the necessary foundation on which to build a strong, sustainable and responsive system that provides quality services and can continuously improve. Components of the system<sup>12</sup> include:

- ***Adult Curriculum Frameworks:*** Adapted from the K-12 curriculum frameworks used to guide teachers in lesson plan development and content, there are frameworks in English Language Arts, Math and Numeracy, ESOL, history and social sciences, and health. The frameworks document the skills and content that adult learners need to know and be able to perform to function successfully in their roles as a parent, family member, worker, citizen, and life-long learner.
- ***SABES (System for Adult Basic Education Support):*** With a national reputation for excellence in program and staff development, SABES consists of five regional support centers located at community colleges and the University of Massachusetts/Boston, and a central resource center at World Education in Boston. SABES provides comprehensive training, technical assistance, the dissemination of research and focused publications for practitioners with a goal to help them equip students to succeed in the economy, contribute more fully to their families and communities, develop leadership skills, and reach personal learning goals.

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<sup>12</sup> More detail about the components of the infrastructure and the performance standards can be found at the ACLS website: <http://doe.mass.edu/acls>.

- ***Teacher Licensure:*** With standards equivalent to the K-12 teacher certification, the ABE teacher license is a voluntary credential. ABE practitioners seeking a license are required to pass the Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure (MTEL), which consist of the Communication and Literacy Skills Test and the ABE Subject Matter Test, the first of its kind in the nation.
- ***Community Planning:*** A statewide initiative involving all programs funded by ACLS, community planning was first intended to coordinate services among ABE service providers and has since evolved into community-wide initiatives involving public and private stakeholders with a common goal of coordinating and integrating ABE services with other services utilized by students in the community (e.g., employment and training, health and human services). Community planning strives to foster collaboration, investment, and responsive innovation across the system by working together with entities whose missions intersect with ABE.
- ***SMARTT Data Management System:*** A proprietary, state-of-the-art, encrypted, online database, SMARTT is the most comprehensive ABE data management system in the country. Used by every program to submit student level data to ACLS on a monthly basis, SMARTT includes all demographics, assessment, attendance and goal attainment information required by the National Reporting System under WIA in addition to supplemental information required by ACLS. To allow practitioners to utilize data to continuously improve their programs, ACLS incorporated COGNOS, a commercial software reporting package.
- ***Standardized Assessments:*** All programs funded by ACLS must utilize standardized assessments approved by the U.S. Department of Education. ESOL programs in Massachusetts use the BEST Plus and REEP to assess English language conversation and writing skills respectively. ABE students are assessed utilizing the TABE and the MAPT (the Massachusetts Adult Proficiency Test), an assessment developed by the University of Massachusetts at Amherst for the MA Department of Education. The MAPT is a web-based, adaptive, computerized assessment aligned with the content of the curriculum frameworks.
- ***Workplace Education Programs:*** The workplace education program, funded through ACLS, provides basic skills instruction at the workplace and union halls where access is especially important for low income workers with more than one job. These programs serve the needs of the employers, unions and employees, and represent a private sector investment where some programs continue to operate after the end of the grant period.

***Performance Standards – A Drive Toward Excellence:***

The ABE system stands out in the Commonwealth as a system with a commitment to rigorous program performance standards driven by an equally strong commitment to providing the high quality services that ABE students deserve. The performance standards, as one part of a larger system of accountability, encourage continuous improvement, effective program administration, and positive student outcomes.

In Fiscal Year 2006, the state average for attendance was 72.59% and has increased every year since Fiscal Year 2001. In theory, an attendance rate of 72.59% seems to be unacceptably at odds with the long wait list where students are waiting to enroll while classes are not at capacity. However, because ABE students must often artfully juggle the realities of difficult schedules, the responsibilities of a family, child care, multiple jobs, transportation, and the challenges of every day life often with limited resources, it is unrealistic to expect average attendance to be much higher than 75-80%.

The state average for attendance per student for Fiscal Year 2006 was 127.34 hours, above the national average of approximately 100 hours per student. Of the students who were pre- and post-tested during Fiscal Year 2006 (68.5%), 51% demonstrated significant gain on the standardized assessment.

Other components of the performance accountability system include a strong program monitoring tool and Indicators of Program Quality.

## COLLABORATION WITH THE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

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The ABE System collaborates extensively with the Workforce Development System in the belief that the adults in need of education and training will best be served when interlocking services are linked by a common purpose – an easily accessible, easy to understand, easy to navigate system that is student-centered. Neither ABE nor Workforce Development can excel in fully meeting the educational and training needs of the individual student/client or employer alone. The following examples demonstrate how ABE has worked to implement a vision of integrated services, policy implementation and accountability.

### *Joint Direct Service Initiatives:*

- ***One-Stop Career Centers:*** ACLS contributes \$500,000 each year to the Career Centers to assist with general operating expenses, materials purchases and administration. Since 2001, ACLS has funded the out-stationing of ABE program personnel at Career Centers in 11 SDA regions for an average of 1 day/week to conduct student intakes, assessments and referrals. Local collaborations also exist between ABE programs and local Career Centers with more in the planning stages.
- ***The BEST Initiative:*** The BEST Initiative followed and built upon the earlier MA Workplace Education Initiative (MWEI), a multi-agency collaboration between 1985 and 1990. One of the first such initiatives in the country, it broke new ground as a public-private partnership, combined a single policy, reporting and RFP, and received a Presidential Award from President Reagan. After the state's financial crisis eliminated funding, ACLS continued the workplace education initiative. Using MWEI as a model, ACLS helped write the initial RFP for the BEST Initiative, an industry sector initiative, and contributed a significant amount of funding.



- ***BEST Older Youth:*** This project was as a result of the ACLS recommendation to spend \$2.9 million in WIA incentive funding to further integrate ABE and employment/training.
- ***Program Development:*** ACLS has helped craft and implement industry sector initiatives, the Workforce Training Fund, Bay State Works and the Workforce Competitive Trust Fund. The ECCLI initiative in the health care sector has had impact on workers at 25% of the nursing homes in the state.
- ***Workforce Development as ABE Priority:*** The 2005 RFP for ABE funding included a workforce development priority, encouraging programs to propose joint ABE/ESOL and occupational training, coordinate with workforce development organizations, and integrate job readiness skills into ABE/ESOL curriculum. Since 2003, ACLS has supported a workforce development priority within SABES to help programs address their students' workforce development goals, and workforce development staff participates in SABES professional development activities.
- ***Transitions to College:*** ACLS funds 10 college transition programs to prepare ABE program graduates for post-secondary education and training, the potential next step in their career advancement. The MA Office for Community Colleges contributed to the review and development of the project RFP and to the review process for grants.

***Joint Policy Development and Accountability:***

- ***Policy Task Forces:*** SDAs/WIA administrative entities and REBs/LWIBS served on task forces to restructure ABE policy for RFPs in 1990, 1995 and 2000.
- ***ABE Performance Accountability Work Group (PAWG):*** A Vice President from Commonwealth Corporation and an LWIB director served on the PAWG in 2001 and 2002, the group being charged with formulating ABE program performance standards.
- ***Vision Subcommittee of the WIA Steering Committee:*** The ACLS Director served as chair of the Vision Subcommittee of the WIA Steering Committee to implement WIA.
- ***LWIBs:*** Each of the 16 workforce investment boards has a designated ABE program representative.
- ***RFP Reading and Review Teams:*** ACLS has invited staff from the workforce development system to review ABE grant proposals, resulting in 50% of the reading team being ABE staff and 50% being workforce development staff. ACLS staff also serves as readers/reviewers of workforce development proposals under the Workforce Training Fund. This collaboration is coordinated with DTA as well as other agencies.
- ***Program Monitoring:*** ACLS includes workforce development representatives on all ABE program monitoring visits during a 5 year funding cycle.

- ***ACLS Staffing:*** ACLS has a program specialist dedicated solely to workforce development programming and collaborations.
- ***National Governor’s Association Industry Sector Forum:*** ACLS and its workforce development colleagues are invited participants in this ongoing forum focused on industry sector partnerships.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### **1. Recognize the ABE System as a valuable partner that should always be included as an indispensable stakeholder and co-investor in education/training policy initiatives and program development.**

The Massachusetts ABE system is a vitally important educational system included in the Education Reform Act and charged by the MA Board of Education with providing “each and every adult with opportunities to develop literacy skills needed to qualify for further education, job training, and better employment, and to reach his/her full potential as a family member, productive worker, and citizen.”<sup>13</sup>

As such, the system is diverse and works with a multitude of students with varied educational needs and goals, which often intersect with other parts of the educational continuum: early childhood education, children in the K-12 system, post-secondary and higher education as well as workforce training and development. The ABE System is vital to the success of the entire educational continuum and is an important entity that must connect, collaborate and integrate well with these other systems without being subsumed by any one of them.

Further, the ABE System is at the cornerstone of the debate and search for solutions to the emerging public policy issues that overlap both education and training: immigration and undocumented workers, excessive high school drop-out rates, the state’s shrinking workforce, a decline in young adult and teen employment, at-risk youth teetering on a decision to drop out of school but with no marketable work skills, the re-training of older workers, students needing much remediation at the post-secondary level in order to be successful, and the comparative rigor and acceptance of the GED and the MCAS and the implications for high school credentialing programs.

Clearly, because of the extensive reach of the ABE System, ABE is a valuable partner and should always be included as an indispensable stakeholder and co-investor.

### **2. Recognize that a long-term investment is required to ensure universal access and the right to ABE services for all adults across the Commonwealth who need to improve their basic skills.**

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<sup>13</sup> MA Dept. of Education website: <http://doe.mass.edu/acls>.

Adults with low level basic skills are consigned to a bleak future in Massachusetts and are unable to reach their full potential, depriving them, their families and the Commonwealth of their promise, creativity and talents. As stated by MIT Economist, Lester Thurow in 1982:

*Social-welfare programs are essentially a matter of ethics and generosity, but education and training are not. I am willing to pay for the education of my neighbor's children not because I am generous, but because I cannot afford to live with them uneducated.*

Similarly, the Commonwealth cannot afford to ignore adults who are undereducated, and need ABE services and further education/training. Universal access cannot be achieved or sustained without a long-term commitment and investment.

**3. Commit to the long-term investment required to provide universal access and strengthen the ABE infrastructure to ensure continuing high quality services and standards as services expand.**

The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) is supporting the ABE line item #7035-0002 state appropriation of \$40 million under consideration by the MA Board of Education for Fiscal Year 2008. MCAE's five year plan is to invest an additional total of \$35 million into the ABE line item to:

- Expand programming to unserved and underserved communities.
- Increase instructional intensity whenever possible given the students' ability to attend varied schedules.
- Invest in the ABE infrastructure (e.g., space, equipment and teachers) to be able to increase educational offerings, move adults more quickly off the wait list, and decrease the effects of turbulence in the ABE workforce.

**4. Invest in pilot projects to experiment with promising practices and inform policy decisions, and invest in the replication of successful pilot initiatives.**

Funding should be provided to encourage innovation in response to emerging student and system needs and the replication of successful pilots with promising practices. Some possible areas of study would emanate from the list of emerging issues noted above under Recommendation #1.

Alignments of the ABE System with the Workforce Development System and other educational systems (e.g., K-12, early childhood education, post-secondary and higher education) regarding roles, responsibilities, performance standards, curriculum, assessment, integrated programming and access should be incrementally tested via pilot projects to avoid wide-spread disruption, confusion or wasted resources. Significant system changes need to be predicated on whether or not real benefits will accrue to the students.

*We trained hard but it seemed that every time we were beginning to form up into teams we would be re-organized . . . . I was to*

*learn later in life that we tend to meet any new situation by reorganizing; and a wonderful method it can be for creating the illusion of progress while producing confusion, inefficiency and demoralization. – Petronius Arbiter, 210 B.C.*

## QUESTIONS

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For questions regarding this White Paper, please contact Roberta Soolman, the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) Public Policy Co-Chair at 617.367.1313 or [litvolma@aol.com](mailto:litvolma@aol.com).

The Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education is the professional development and public information organization for adult education in the state with more than 1,000 members. Major activities include sponsoring the annual two-day Network Conference, one of the largest adult education conferences in the country, and providing information on adult education to policymakers and funders.

MCAE would be pleased to continue this dialogue with the Patrick/Murray Administration and continue to serve as a resource for the Administration on adult basic education and workforce development.