



Rethinking Basic Skills Education in California


PRINCIPLES for policymakers



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California's future prosperity and competitiveness depends to an important degree on our ability to increase the share of basic skills students who attain a community college degree or certificate and/or transfer to and graduate from a four-year institution. The danger, as we make framing decisions about basic skills education, is that we beggar our future both by underfunding the system and by failing to learn the lessons of recent practice and research about what works and what doesn't.



Our Principles

resource adequacy

Despite the tough economic times, California must maintain funding for basic skills education and improve the efficiency of the delivery system. Many of the strategies described below should improve efficiency and ultimately reduce costs, including integration of the Adult Education and CCC programs and approaches that accelerate student progress.

transparency

Not all of California's basic skills students will enter postsecondary education or training, but each should understand his or her full range of options. There are some basic skills students for whom entering postsecondary education may not make economic or personal sense, but all students must understand at the outset the options available to them so they can make informed choices. California's goal must be to increase the number of students who learn the skills they need to be successful in the labor market.

acceleration

Basic skills education should be designed to enable students to advance as quickly as possible to career technical and academic courses that provide certificates, degrees, or transfer to a four-year college or university. Most basic skills students fail to make meaningful progress and few enter postsecondary academic or career technical programs. Research suggests that a key reason is the length of time traditional approaches to remediation take. One recent study suggested that CCC basic skills students required about one more year to earn a degree or credential and one and a half more years to transfer to a four year college than other students.

California should redesign its system of basic skills education to dramatically reduce the time students spend in remediation. There are excellent models of programs that do so both in California and in other states, which often entail serious curricular reform. Approaches to accelerating student progress include shortening remedial sequences, integrating basic skills instruction with career technical and academic courses, contextualizing basic skills to career-relevant content, enrolling students concurrently in basic skills and community college career technical courses, and substituting targeted workshops or tutoring for lengthy remedial courses.

Over the coming months, policymakers will be faced with major decisions about how to organize the delivery of basic skills education in California for at least two reasons.

1)

A significant decline in resources for the Adult Education program and cutbacks in the community colleges have seriously under-funded the state's basic skills programs.

2)

Apart from the cutbacks, there is substantial evidence from both practice and research that California's overall approach to basic skills education is in need of serious reexamination.

IN FACT, that reexamination has been underway for some time. Both the California Department of Education (CDE) and the California community colleges (CCCs)– the two principal delivery systems for basic skills education – have implemented new initiatives: the Basic Skills Initiative in the CCC and, in CDE, the development of a new strategic plan, *Linking Adults to Opportunity: Transformation of the California Department of Education Adult Education Program*. In addition, legislation has been introduced to reform basic skills education; think tanks have produced major reports; and both the Legislative Analyst's Office and the Little Hoover Commission are examining the problem.

In 2010, the Community College League of California's Commission on the Future issued a set of recommendations to close both the "participation" and "achievement" gaps that included a focus on basic skills education; in 2011, in response to a legislative mandate, the Chancellor's Student Success Task Force released recommendations aimed at improving outcomes for CCC students that acknowledged the importance of rethinking California's basic skills "system".

Dwindling resources also are raising questions within both CDE and the CCCs about the extent to which they can continue to serve basic skills students. The 2009 budget agreement permitted local school districts to use Adult Education monies for their K-12 programs. Since then, approximately half the Adult Education funds (\$400 million) have been diverted to K-12 and it is likely more will be diverted in the future. To date, CDE estimates a drop of about 460,000 students served as a result. The Chancellor's Student Success Task Force also seriously debated recommending that the CCCs stop offering credit courses to students who enter the community colleges more than two levels below "college ready."

The need to make hard choices is real, but the timing of this crisis couldn't be more unfortunate. The Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) predicts that between now and 2025 California will face a shortage of college-educated labor. Other research points to shortages of "middle skilled" labor, as well. As the PPIC study notes, a key explanation for the skills shortfall is

a demographic shift toward population groups with historically lower levels of access to and participation in higher education, particularly Latinos. According to another study, by 2020, Latinos and African-Americans will comprise almost half the prime age workforce (ages 25-64) and 57 percent of young adults (ages 20-24).

These are the same populations basic skills programs largely serve. In the Adult Education program, more than two-thirds of students (68.5 percent) are Latino and another 5.9 percent are African-American. Similarly, in the community colleges, approximately 57 percent of basic skills students are Latino or African-American. Overall, about 80 percent of entering community college students who are assessed need remediation in math; approximately 70 percent need remediation in English.

California's future prosperity and competitiveness, then, depend to an important degree on our ability to increase the share of basic skills students who attain a community college degree or certificate and/or who transfer to and graduate from a four-year institution. The danger, as we make framing decisions about basic skills education, is that we beggar our future both by underfunding the basic skills system and by failing to learn the lessons of recent practice and research about what works and what doesn't.

This brief suggests key principles and strategies policymakers should keep in mind when examining competing policy recommendations. The principles are *resource adequacy* (maintaining funding and improving efficiency); *transparency* (ensuring that students understand the full range of their options); and *acceleration* (organizing institutions, programs, and courses to facilitate timely student completion). The strategies are integration of the Adult Education and CCC basic skills programs; linking basic skills programs to career pathways; allowing students to pursue a variety of strategies for addressing their basic skills needs, rather than rigidly defining them by "levels"; and providing students adequate counseling, peer group support, and financial aid.



What Works

System Design
Instructional Strategies
Support Services

Integration

The Adult Education program, community college noncredit basic skills, and community college credit basic skills programs must be tightly integrated. Currently, there is little alignment of course content or expected competencies between the Adult Education program and the CCCs. As a result, students who “graduate” from the Adult Education or CCC noncredit programs may be sent to additional remedial classes when they try to enter credit classes in the CCCs. Integrating the institutional course offerings would significantly speed the remedial process and lower the cost to both taxpayers and students.

Promising Practices

COMMON STATEWIDE GOALS AND ACCOUNTABILITY SYSTEMS

Increasing numbers of states have focused their Adult Education systems on helping students transition into and succeed in postsecondary education. Developing a common reporting system concretely supports this goal.

COMMON GATEWAYS OR “FRONT DOORS”

Students should be directed to the same set of opportunities regardless of which institution or program they initially enter. One approach could be the creation of “gateway centers” – partnerships between the Adult Education and community colleges that offer a range of blended services and direct students toward the pathway that makes best sense for them.

UNITED STATE LEADERSHIP

Some states have moved the Adult Education program into their community college system; others have placed both under a common state leadership body. It appears that transition rates of basic skills students into postsecondary education are generally higher in states where responsibility for Adult Education rests with the community colleges.

INTEGRATED APPROACHES TO PROGRAMS AND COURSES OFFERINGS

Programs and course offerings across both community colleges and the Adult Education program must be well coordinated and linked, so that they build on rather than duplicate one another and foster rather than impede student progress.

Barriers

TRADITIONAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN “ADULT EDUCATION” AND “COLLEGE” STUDENTS

The traditional assumption that most Adult Education students are not college material has been profoundly challenged by accelerated approaches that allow students with low entering basic skill levels to access and succeed in credit coursework.

RIGID DELINEATION OF MISSION

In practice, the missions of the Adult Education and CCC systems have blurred. Some policy proposals would revisit and more sharply delineate the mission of each in regard to basic skills students. Doing so would likely preclude implementation of many of the most promising practices described in this brief.

Opportunity

Basic skills courses should link students to career technical and academic pathways that provide them the opportunity to continue their education. In general, basic skills courses should not be seen as an end in itself. Most should be the first step on a pathway that leads to a degree or credential.

Promising Practices

IDENTIFY POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION/TRAINING AS A PRINCIPAL GOAL OF BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION

Historically helping students achieve a GED was a key goal of the Adult Education system. Today there is ample evidence that a GED alone has little value in the job market and so, as described earlier, states are committing themselves to increasing the share of basic skills students who attain a postsecondary degree or credential.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COHERENT CAREER PATHWAYS

Basic skills programs linked to career technical courses are sometimes called “bridge” models. To ensure that these are not bridges to nowhere, colleges

must make entry level courses part of an entire course sequence that leads to successively higher level certificates and/or degrees.

DUAL ENROLLMENT IN BASIC SKILLS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE CREDIT COURSES

Dual enrollment approaches (including simultaneous enrollment in Adult Education and community college programs) enable students to begin earning postsecondary credits while they address their basic skills weaknesses. Contextualized basic skills – that is, basic skills content that is tailored to or integrated directly into an occupational certificate course – is one dual enrollment strategy.

Barriers

INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS BETWEEN THE ADULT EDUCATION AND CCC SYSTEMS (AND BETWEEN THE CCC CREDIT AND NONCREDIT DIVISIONS)

Historic differences in mission, assessment tools, pedagogical practices, faculty qualifications, and governance structures have kept the Adult Education and CCC

basic skills programs apart – and in fact, have also separated the CCC credit and noncredit programs. Proposals which would have the effect of reinforcing the silos, rather than dissolving them, would erect continuing barriers to students’ timely progress toward completion.

Flexibility

Rigidly defining students by “levels” slows progress and wastes time and money. By the time they reach the postsecondary level, students’ usually have “spot”, rather than “blanket” deficiencies in math or language. They need targeted intervention rather than an entire course; yet most basic skills programs organize students by general levels and force students to waste considerable time “learning” content they already know. Basic skills strategies should also be tailored in other ways (for example, taking into account the kind of math a student needs for a particular course of study) and should engage students in challenging tasks relevant to their academic and career goals.

Promising Practices

DIAGNOSTIC ASSESSMENTS

Assessment instruments, particularly those now used by the CCCs, generally are not designed to provide students or teachers information about a student’s specific strengths or weaknesses. Introducing more diagnostic instruments might allow students to focus on their specific math or language problems and provide counselors and teachers the information to effectively work with students. However, given the well-documented weaknesses in assessment instruments, diagnostic assessments should be carefully developed and tested before being put into widespread use

and should be used only in the context of structural and curricular redesign to basic skills instruction.

MAINSTREAMING COMBINED WITH TARGETED REMEDIATION

For some students with limited and specific basic skills needs, “mainstreaming” is the best strategy (that is, placing students directly in credit courses while at the same time providing targeted remediation). This instruction can be provided by a tutor, a tutoring center, or by including the basic skills instruction in a career technical class.

Barriers

MANDATORY PLACEMENT INTO LENGTHY REMEDIAL SEQUENCES

There is evidence that students do better when their basic skills needs are addressed early, but mandatory placement into lengthy remedial sequences appears to significantly reduce the chances that an individual will achieve a degree, certificate, or transfer to a four-year

institution. This is because the time investment required to complete those sequences is so great that a significant share of students drop out of school. As a result, some studies suggest, students who are assessed as needing remediation but go directly into credit courses are more likely to achieve a meaningful educational outcome.

Student Support

Basic skills students are more likely to be successful if they receive adequate counseling, peer group support, and financial aid. Students need from the beginning to have a clear understanding of their options and how to navigate the many institutions and programs. They also do better when class offerings provide peer support and when they have sufficient financial resources to spend significant time in the classroom.

Promising Practices

OUTREACH AND COUNSELING

Basic skills students tend to have little information about the programs available to them or know how the education and training system works. States committed to improving graduation rates of basic skills students recognize the key role outreach and counseling play. Counseling and mentoring services also must be much more tightly integrated with what is going on inside the classroom.

ENROLLING STUDENTS IN COHORTS

Adult Education programs have typically been open entry/open exit, but new

evidence suggests that enrolling students in groups or cohorts improves outcomes. Some community college programs have taken the cohort model further by developing learning communities that provide crucial peer support to basic skills students.

NEEDS-BASED FINANCIAL AID

Studies suggest that student success is strongly correlated with the amount of time students are able to spend on their studies. Financial aid programs that help low-income students meet living expenses support this goal.

Barriers

LIMITED RECOGNITION OF THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDENT SUPPORTS

Student supports of all kinds have traditionally taken a back seat to other educational functions because they are viewed as desirable rather than necessary. Much new research underlines the critical role these supports play.



Summary of Recommendations

general principles

RESOURCE ADEQUACY Despite the tough economic times, California must maintain funding for basic skills education and improve the efficiency of the delivery system.

TRANSPARENCY Not all of California's basic skills students will enter postsecondary education or training, but each should understand his or her full range of options.

ACCELERATION Basic skills courses should move students as quickly as possible toward career technical or academic courses that provide a certificate, degree, or transfer to a four-year college or university. Approaches to accelerating student progress include shortening remedial sequences, integrating basic skills instruction with vocational and academic courses, contextualizing basic skills to career-relevant content, enrolling students concurrently in basic skills and community college career technical courses, and substituting targeted workshops or tutoring for lengthy remedial courses.

what works

INTEGRATION The Adult Education program, community college noncredit basic skills, and community college credit basic skills programs must be tightly integrated.

OPPORTUNITY Basic skills courses should link students to career technical and academic pathways that provide them the opportunity to continue their education.

FLEXIBILITY Rigidly defining students by "levels" slows progress and wastes time and money; instead interventions should be flexibly tailored to the needs of each student.

STUDENT SUPPORT Basic skills students are much more likely to be successful if they receive adequate counseling, peer group support, and financial aid.



Barbara Baran, a senior partner at Workforce Learning Strategies and member of the Executive Committee of the California EDGE Campaign, prepared this brief on behalf of LearningWorks. LearningWorks works to facilitate, disseminate and fund practitioner-informed recommendations for changes at the system and classroom levels, infusing these strategies with statewide and national insights. LearningWorks seeks to strengthen the relationships that offer the greatest potential for accelerating action, including those between policy makers and practitioners, among overlapping initiatives, and across the 112 colleges. LearningWorks founding partners include the Career Ladders Project for the California Community Colleges, the Research and Planning Group for the California Community Colleges, and the California Community Colleges Student Success Network.

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