



# A GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

*Strategies to Focus Adult Education  
on College and Career*

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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*this is an  
executive summary  
of a longer report*

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A list of people who were interviewed for this report is presented in the Acknowledgments section at the end of the report. The authors worked with Linda Collins from LearningWorks and the Career Ladders Project in the development of this report.

This report is second in a series addressing the basic skills system in California. The first report, *Rethinking Basic Skills Education in California: Principles for Policymakers*, was authored by Barbara Baran and published in January 2012 by LearningWorks.

LearningWorks was founded by the Career Ladders Project (CLP) for California Community Colleges, the Research and Planning (RP) Group for California Community Colleges, and the California Community Colleges Success Network (3CSN) 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 is supported by the Walter S. Johnson Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.



# Introduction

DESPITE STILL HIGH UNEMPLOYMENT, over the long run California may face a skills gap that could threaten our future prosperity and competitiveness. By 2020, much of California's prime age workforce will be from population groups that are underrepresented in higher education. Yet many Californians are not eligible to enter high quality postsecondary programs because they lack the basic English or math skills to do so, and California's education and training system is ill-prepared to meet their needs.

Adult Education programs, which provide basic skills education, were severely cut back during the state's long fiscal crisis. Many of those that remain were created for an era in which a high school diploma or GED was sufficient for obtaining a good job. As a result, these programs are not adequately focused on preparing students to enter and succeed in postsecondary education and training, and, in fact, very few students in basic skills programs in California make the transition. Lack of integration across institutions and programs – particularly between Adult Education and the community colleges – and outdated program design and pedagogy mean that remedial and English-as-a-Second Language courses are often duplicative and disconnected from career-technical and academic programs, erect-

ing serious barriers to student success. Students in basic skills programs waste time and money as a result of these problems, and many simply drop out. California institutions and policymakers have taken some steps to address these concerns; however, outcomes for students in basic skills programs continue to be poor.

There has been considerable documentation of the failures of California's basic skills "system" over the past several years and varying recommendations about how to address the problem. Governor Brown's 2013-14 budget proposal gave new urgency to the policy discussions by recommending creation of a new dedicated funding stream for Adult Education to be administered by the California Community Colleges, rather than the California Department of Education. The recommendation brings much-needed attention to the issue of basic skills education; however, the Governor's proposal does not address broader concerns about the effective design and delivery of services. Mounting evidence suggests that effective systems build on a few key principles:

- *Integration.* Adult Education, community college noncredit basic skills programs, and community college credit basic skills programs must be tightly integrated so that

students are not forced to take duplicative, disconnected courses.

- *Opportunity.* Basic skills programs 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 students.
- *Student support.* Students in basic skills programs are much more likely to be successful if they receive adequate counseling, peer group support, and financial aid.

Other states have confronted the same challenges with which California is now wrestling. Some have made major strides in redesigning their education and workforce systems to accelerate students’ acquisition of basic math and English skills and improve students’ success in accessing and completing postsecondary programs connected to labor market opportunities. The purpose of this brief is to help inform the current debate by examining what California might learn from these experiences, using four policy levers utilized successfully by other states to facilitate the change: governance structures, state strategic plans and funding guidelines, innovation initiatives, and accountability systems. The seven states interviewed for this study were Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin. We begin with governance since that issue was raised by the Governor’s proposal.

## ***Basic Skills Education Roadmap***

Nationally, two principal kinds of basic skills services are offered to adult learners: Adult Education and developmental education.

### **ADULT EDUCATION**

*Includes adult basic education (ABE), for those at the lowest skill levels of math and/or English; adult secondary education (ASE) and GED preparation, for those at higher levels; and English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) instruction. Adult Education is funded by Title II of the federal Workforce Investment Act and usually by state monies as well.*

### **DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION**

*Offered by community colleges, largely serves high school graduates who are not college-ready (including ESL students). Developmental education is often offered for credit, although frequently that credit is not applicable toward a degree or transfer.*

In California, the Adult Education program is administered by the California Department of Education, and primarily delivered by a network of adult schools. In some communities, the community college is the designated Adult Education program provider, although some community-based and other organizations also offer Adult Education. In addition to developmental education, some California community colleges offer non-credit basic skills programs very similar in their services to the Adult Education program. Overall, there is poor coordination across California’s basic skills programs, including different approaches to assessment and outcomes measurement.





# Lessons From Other States

## INTEGRATING ADULT BASIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE GOVERNANCE

Currently twelve states house adult basic education in their community/technical college systems, an increase over the last decade. Alternatively, one state has created an overarching policy coordination structure. States have moved to integrated governance to:

- Increase the focus of Adult Education programs on access to, and success in, postsecondary education and training;
- Facilitate adoption of curricular, instructional, and delivery models that accelerate progress through remediation and attainment of postsecondary credentials; and,
- Make possible the articulation or integration of adult and developmental education.

Consolidating governance can support but does not ensure progress toward these goals. Regardless of the governance structure, what appears most critical is a new vision for basic skills education clearly focused on helping students access and succeed in postsecondary education and training, tight integration of the Adult Education program and community college noncredit and credit basic skills programs, and inclusion of basic skills in career technical and academic pathways programs.

## USING STRATEGIC PLANS AND ADULT EDUCATION FUNDING GUIDELINES TO SIGNAL A NEW FOCUS ON COLLEGE AND CAREERS

Without concrete direction and incentives, local delivery systems are unlikely to make major changes in the way they do business. States are using strategic plans and Adult Education funding guidelines to:

- Send a clear signal about a new direction for Adult Education, positioning it as central to a state's economic future;
- Operationalize the new focus on postsecondary education/training and career opportunity, while maintaining a commitment to learners at all levels; and
- Broaden ownership of the goals of Adult Education to other systems, such as community colleges and workforce development, to create shared accountability and incentives for joint programming.

A clear implication for California's policy debate is that to move the Adult Education system in a new direction, guidelines and incentives for new partnerships, new program designs, and more effective pedagogical approaches need to be implemented.

## INNOVATION INITIATIVES TO ALIGN INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULA BEHIND COLLEGE AND CAREER SUCCESS

States also are using innovation initiatives to give local programs the resources and knowledge to adopt new curricular, instructional, and delivery models. Innovation initiatives do not necessarily require new funding; for example, states can use monies already received for innovation purposes from the legislature, from federal sources, and from philanthropy in a more coordinated and strategic way. Innovation initiatives can:

- Spur adoption of new strategies that span Adult Education, community colleges, and workforce development; and
- Institutionalize innovation through state policy changes that allow existing funding streams to support the new service models.

California has implemented important innovation initiatives in the area of basic skills. These include the California Community Colleges' Basic Skills Initiative (BSI) and the Career Advancement Academies (CAAs). More recently, California's Adult Education program launched a Policy to Performance Initiative, as part of a federal effort to focus Adult Education on college and career. To be transformative, these kinds of initiatives must be linked and extended.

## USING GOALS, METRICS, AND DATA TO REFOCUS PROGRAMS: STATE ACCOUNTABILITY POLICIES

Programs are driven by the metrics used to judge their performance. Therefore, states are using data to drive systemic change in Adult Education by:

- Using data to make the case for refocusing Adult Education on approaches that improve student success;
- Connecting data across agencies to track student progress over time through basic skills and postsecondary education and into the labor market; and,
- Experimenting with performance-based funding.

States face serious challenges in designing and implementing effective accountability systems. These include technical and legal obstacles to matching data from different agencies, and the difficulty of constructing performance-based funding that does not deter programs from serving students with lower skills. For data to make a difference, states and local programs must actually use data regularly to improve policy and practice. Efforts to develop a comprehensive integrated data system in California have long been stymied; however, informal attempts to more effectively track community college and workforce program participants have gained ground and are producing useful results.



# Conclusion

THERE IS NO STATE in which basic skills education looms larger in importance than California. California's ability to expand the share of students from low-income or under-represented communities who successfully complete post-secondary education and/or who are able to secure jobs with real career opportunity may well hold the key to our future. For many students, weak English and math skills are among the principal barriers to success and so the current spotlight on Adult Education is long overdue. Hopefully, the renewed attention will lead to serious policy discussion on the goals California should establish for its basic skills programs and the changes we need to make, both to Adult Education and within the community colleges, to achieve that vision. The stakes could not be higher.





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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