

Catching Up: Adult Paths to a High School Education

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Despite recent recruitment of several high-profile international industries, Alabama continues its trend away from manufacturing jobs and toward the service and retail sectors, which now employ seven of every ten private sector workers in the South. This shift has grim implications for wage-earners in the state: Thirty-four percent of Alabama's jobs offer median annual incomes below the poverty threshold for a four-person family. The first fact sheet in this four-part series examined the plight of Alabamians trapped in low-paying jobs. This second installment looks at education opportunities for Alabama adults who lack a high school diploma, a basic requirement for moving up the wage scale.

Too often, low-wage jobs in Alabama become dead ends, rather than stepping-stones for advancement.

The highest unemployment rates in decades only compound the danger. The 20 percent of Alabamians age 25 and older who didn't finish high school often face a lifelong struggle to get by. And Alabama is stranding these workers (and their families) by failing to strengthen programs designed to close the basic education gap. That choice reflects an economic policy perspective that the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, in a 2009 report on Southern workforce development, calls "a focus on growth to the exclusion of questions of economic structure, distribution and equity."

Adult Basic Education (ABE)

Although ABE encompasses a variety of services promoting completion of high-school-level studies, the basic component of adult literacy is one of its biggest challenges. Learning disabilities present a further obstacle for many adults who have low literacy skills, and a small but growing number of Alabamians require instruction in English as a Second Language (ESL).

Federal efforts to promote adult education date back more than two centuries, but the link between adult illiteracy and poverty didn't become an explicit focus of legislation and funding until the 1960s. In 1964, the Economic Opportunity Act established the federal-state ABE partnership that would guide policy for the next 30 years. In 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) broadened the scope of ABE to include family literacy, emphasizing the links between child and parent learning.

Under Title II of WIA, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, eligible students are at least 16 years old, are not enrolled in secondary school and either lack basic educational skills, lack a high school diploma (or equivalent), or are unable to speak, read or write in English. A 2003 study by the U.S. Department of Education (released in 2009) found that 16 percent of Alabamians over age 16 – nearly 227,000 individuals – read below the 2nd-grade level. According to 2007 data from the Working Poor Families Project, Alabama has approximately 480,000 adults ages 18-64 who lack high school diplomas or the equivalent.

To receive federal funding for ABE, states must submit periodic plans to the U.S. Department of Education, outlining how they intend to deliver

services to those needing them.

The federal government gives money to the states using a formula that considers such variables as the number of students ages 16-19 without diplomas, overall population and poverty levels. States must

match at least 25 percent of the federal contribution and show regular maintenance of effort to keep funding level. There are no penalties for state failures to meet performance goals.

The Alabama State Board of Education supports ABE classes in reading, writing, computing and ESL. Providers of such classes range from public libraries to housing authorities and non-profit organizations. Participation in Alabama ABE classes falls dramatically short of the target population. Enrollment for 2006-07 ABE classes in Alabama was 18,742 – just 4 percent of the nearly half-million eligible. Of those enrolled, only 57 percent completed the coursework for their educational levels.

Our ABE efforts compare poorly with those of other states. We reach about 4 percent of our eligible population and rank 33rd among states in ABE funding per eligible person. In 2006, for example, we received \$9.2 million in federal funding and matched it with \$8.5 million in state dollars. That totals \$949 per-participant and \$17.84 per Alabama adult lacking a high school credential. Although states must match at least 25 percent of the federal grants, many do much more. For example, Arkansas spends about \$18 million annually

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on ABE, with the feds adding \$5.6 million, a total of \$752 per participant and \$66 per potential student. Florida sets the nationwide pace, spending \$1,443 per student (90 percent coming from state and local funds) and \$204 per adult without diploma or GED.

GED: a substitute diploma

Adults who achieve basic literacy and pass further ABE classes may be inspired to continue their education. While restarting high school isn't an option for adults, they can take steps to acquire an equivalent diploma. The General Educational Development (GED) test is perhaps the most effective way to match the earning potential of those with high school diplomas. Studies show that workers with a GED earn a premium over those without one, although often slightly less than those with high school diplomas. In 2007, nearly 730,000 people in the U.S. attempted the test and more than 450,000 – or 62 percent – passed it. Even so, those who pass each year make up only around one percent of all adults in the country who lack a high school diploma.

An Alabamian wanting to take the GED needs only to have \$50 and the ability to visit one of the 50 test centers around the state. But a person wanting to pass the test may want to consider taking a prep course, because Alabama's GED pass rate is 54 percent – the worst of any state, but an improvement over 2006, when we were the only state with more people failing the test than passing it. Mississippi's passing rate is 59 percent.

On closer inspection, Alabama turns in the nation's worst scores in all five sections of the GED: writing, reading, social studies, science and math. Further, the state fails to track how many GED takers go on to additional schooling in community or four-year colleges. Obviously, the absence of outcome data makes it difficult to improve success rates and training levels for Alabama's adult workers.

Improving adult learning outcomes in Alabama doesn't mean reinventing the wheel. Numerous other states offer models of sensible, well-integrated policies. In Iowa, for example, first-time test-takers have two years to complete the full battery of GED tests. Iowans wanting to re-test must wait 6 months and show evidence of remediation, such as instruction through ABE programs. As a result, Iowa's passing rate is 99 percent, the nation's highest. For those who resist comparing Alabama with states in other regions, there's a great example closer to home.

The Kentucky model

Too often Alabama shrugs off its poor standing in education rankings as a misfortune of history, geography and demography. Like Alabama, Kentucky is a largely rural Southern state of fewer than 5 million people, with relatively low numbers of non-English speakers and a high number of adults (786,000) lacking a high school credential. But when it comes to training those adults, the states' similarities end.

From 2000-03, Kentucky more than doubled – to 110,000 – the number of residents taking state adult education classes. The program has its gaps: Of Kentuckians at the lowest tier of literacy (reading at a second-grade level), only 11 percent enrolled. But some 20 percent of Kentucky GED passers enroll in post-secondary school within two years.

Kentucky policymakers have shown a willpower that their Alabama counterparts lack. The much-heralded success in the Bluegrass State stems from a 2003 Executive Order that created Kentucky Adult Education as a state entity. The state began to track results with a revolutionary accountability and improvement system. New data indicators measure improvements in literacy skill levels or workplace essential skills. For state recipients of federal welfare programs, the Ready to Work Program offers training toward the goal of certificates and diplomas. The program is an effective bridge to increase access to training for those not ready for college work. If a comparable state can make such gains in adult education, what is holding Alabama back?

Recommendations

- Expand and promote existing free online GED preparation courses;
- Increase legislative appropriations for ABE classes;
- Implement student retention policies and improve availability of data regarding program effectiveness;
- Following Iowa's example, integrate all components of adult education, identify clear pathways for advancement, track participants' progress through the system and implement strategies to maximize adult credential acquisition;
- Following Kentucky's model, develop and conduct an outreach campaign to make Alabamians aware of the availability and benefits of ABE, and provide services (and funding) necessary to meet the increased demand.

This fact sheet was prepared by ACPPE policy analyst Stephen Stetson. It may be reproduced with acknowledgment of Arise Citizens' Policy Project, Box 1188, Montgomery, AL 36101; (800) 832-9060; arisecitizens.org.