

Theory to Practice

A Study of Pennsylvania Adult Literacy and Basic Education Service Providers

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Abstract

This article describes a survey of programs that are providing adult literacy or basic education services in the state of Pennsylvania. The survey gathered information from programs concerning the following areas: general information on the responding organization, services provided, staffing, sites, outreach methods, technology used for instruction and available for staff training and information sharing, and funding. The results indicate that the profile of responding providers is one of great diversity; however, there are general trends in the areas of services provided, use of volunteer tutors, types of technology used, and sources of funding.

Introduction

Individuals working in the field of adult literacy and basic education are well aware that various organizations provide a wide variety of services falling under that rubric. However, to what extent have the types of organizations working in Pennsylvania and the services they provide been documented? The project discussed in this article was intended to identify all programs in the state that are providing adult literacy or basic education services, to gather basic information on those programs and develop a comprehensive database containing that information, and to analyze the data to report summaries and trends. One primary goal was to identify and gather information on programs that operate outside the mainstream of government funding (at the time this study was completed, these were likely to be Act 143 state adult literacy funds or Section 322

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federal adult education funds distributed through the Pennsylvania Department of Education). The Institute for the Study of Adult Literacy worked collaboratively with the Pennsylvania 2000 Adult Literacy Task Force and the Pennsylvania State Coalition on Adult Literacy to develop a survey instrument, locate providing organizations, and summarize the results of the survey. The resulting information is being used by the Pennsylvania 2000 Adult Literacy Task Force in collaboration with educators, government, media, and business to plan future steps toward achieving National Education Goal 6 (described below). The database and information may also be useful to the planning efforts of local communities and individual programs.

The Pennsylvania 2000 Adult Literacy Task Force is presently working to achieve, in the state of Pennsylvania, National Education Goal 6: By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and will possess the knowledge and skills necessary to exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. In 1993 the Task Force members believed that two crucial steps needed to be taken in planning to attain this goal: 1) to identify the literacy needs of adult Pennsylvanians and 2) to identify existing programs that are meeting those needs. The identification of literacy needs of adult Pennsylvanians has been accomplished by Pennsylvania's participation in the State Adult Literacy Survey (Jenkins & Kirsch, 1994), which was conducted as part of the National Adult Literacy Survey administered by the Educational Testing Service (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). The study described in this article addressed step two outlined by the 1993 Task Force.

Methods

The study described here was intended for all organizations in Pennsylvania that provide literacy or basic education services to adults regardless of funding source. The survey defined adults as individuals over 16 and not enrolled in secondary school or college. Literacy and basic education services, as defined by the survey, included basic literacy, Adult Basic Education (ABE), high school equivalency (General Educational Development [GED]) and Alternative Secondary Education (ASE), English as a Second Language (ESL), customized basic skills instruction for work, customized basic skills instruction for family literacy, welfare-to-work literacy, and any other type of basic skills instruction that develops the English language, reading, writing, communication, computation, and problem solving skills of adults. These skills are all identified as literacy

skills by the National Literacy Act.

The project team designed an eight-page survey instrument to elicit information from organizations providing adult literacy services. Questions covered the following areas: general information on the responding organization (name, address, telephone number, and administrative organization), services, staffing, sites, outreach methods, technology used for instruction and available for staff training and information sharing, and funding. A ninth page provided space for respondents to list other providing organizations in their regions, especially business or volunteer efforts. The survey questionnaire was pilot tested with eight organizations that were members of the Pennsylvania State Coalition on Adult Literacy and that represented a variety of typical Pennsylvania providers, including community literacy programs, intermediate units, and community colleges.

The Institute mailed the survey to 2,911 organizations across the state that were known to provide adult literacy or basic education services (such as Pennsylvania Department of Education-funded programs and literacy councils) or that might be likely to provide those services (such as colleges, school districts, libraries, intermediate units, and businesses with over 500 employees). Efforts to increase response to the survey included a second mailing followed by telephone calls to non-responding organizations.

A total of 948 surveys were returned. The overall return rate was 33%. The return rates for subgroups varied; for example, the return rate for Pennsylvania Department of Education-funded programs was 73%, while that of businesses with over 500 employees was 12%. It is important to note that most of the organizations to which surveys were mailed (including colleges, school districts, libraries, intermediate units, and businesses with over 500 employees) were selected without prior knowledge of whether or not they actually provided adult literacy or basic education services. Three hundred and twenty-four of the 948 organizations returning surveys indicated that they were services providers.

Findings

Findings for the 324 organizations indicating that they provide services are presented below. Findings are organized by topic: organization type, services, staffing, sites, methods of outreach, technology, and funding.

Types of Organizations Providing Services

As would be expected, responses indicated that a variety of types of

organizations provide adult basic or literacy education services throughout the state. Organizations indicated their administrative organization on the basis of a list providing 21 possible types including "Other." There were 320 rather than 324 organizations because four organizations did not identify their type; no respondents indicated that they were federal agencies. The types most frequently indicated by responding organizations were community-based organization (CBO), school district, and literacy council. Organizations indicating that they are libraries, intermediate units, area vocational-technical schools (AVTS), and religious-affiliated organizations also responded. Thus, responding providers can best be characterized as community and education-related organizations.

Services

Most responding organizations offer, and most students enrolled in those organizations receive, more traditional service offerings (e.g., basic literacy, ABE, GED/ESL) than non-traditional services developed around job, job-skills development, or family issues. However, the types of services offered and the number of students enrolled in those services vary according to type of organization. The survey asked organizations to indicate the numbers of students they serve in each of the eight categories listed previously (basic literacy, ABE, etc.). The types of services most likely to be provided by responding organizations overall are ABE (60% of the responding organizations), followed by GED/ASE (58%), basic literacy (53%), ESL (45%), and customized work (18%). Only 14% of responding organizations report providing customized basic skills instruction for family literacy, and just 19% report providing customized basic skills instruction for work. Different types of organizations are likely to provide different types of services, however. Table 1 shows percentages of types of services provided by responding organizations including CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units. For example, the types of services likely to be provided by literacy councils are basic literacy (82% of responding councils) and ESL (77%).

Responding organizations reported servicing a total of 69,687 students across all categories of services. Responding CBOs reported serving the largest number of students (n=18,830 or 27% of the total) followed by intermediate units (n=14,093 or 20% of the total), school districts (n=10,489 or 15% of the total), and community colleges (n=5,880 or 8% of the total). ABE services are provided to the largest number of students in responding organizations (n=18,006 or 25.8% of the total) followed by ESL services (n=16,590 or 23.8%), GED/ASE programs (n=13,785 or 19.8%), basic

Table 1

Percentages of responding organizations providing each type of service, by organization type

Type of Service	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Basic Literacy	66	40	82	75	53
ABE	67	63	68	94	60
GED/ASE	54	75	50	88	58
ESL	43	46	77	50	46
Custom Family	24	5	23	19	14
Custom Work	29	11	14	31	19
Other Custom	11	14	18	19	13
Welfare-to-Work	15	2	9	19	8

literacy programs (n=12,428 or 17.9%), customized work programs (n=3,162 or 4.5%), other customized services (n=2,560 or 3.7%), customized family literacy programs (n=1,974 or 2.8%) and welfare-to-work programs (n=1,182 or 1.7%).

Examining the types of services provided by different types of organizations provides a different picture, however. For example, for CBOs alone the largest percentage of students (31%) receives ESL services, while for literacy councils the greatest number of students (45%) receives basic literacy services. Table 2 shows percentages of students served through each service category by CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units. Readers should interpret these numbers with caution. The design of the survey did not allow project staff to determine the extent to which individual students may have been counted in more than one category. In addition, some organizations indicated that they provide particular types of services but did not report numbers of students served. Similar cautions apply to data reported for other topics described below.

Table 2

Percentages of students served by each service category, by organization type

Type of Service	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Basic Literacy	19	14	45	12	18
ABE	19	35	19	35	26
GED/ASE	11	26	3	26	20
ESL	31	14	26	21	24
Custom Family	5	1	2	2	3
Custom Work	7	3	1	1	5
Other Custom	3	7	3	2	4
Welfare-to-Work	4	0	2	2	2

Staffing

Organizations generally rely heavily on part-time paid staff and, especially, volunteers, but again the pattern varies by type of organization. The survey asked organizations to list numbers of five categories of staff: volunteer tutors, other volunteers, full-time teachers/coordinators, part-time teachers/coordinators, and other paid staff. Table 3 shows percentages of responding organizations overall and specific percentages of CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units using each type of staff. As Table 3 shows, more than half of all responding organizations use volunteer tutors, and more than half use part-time teachers/coordinators. However, the staffing pattern varies with organization type; for example, 70% of responding CBOs use volunteer tutors, and 70% use part-time teachers/coordinators. Ninety-six percent of responding literacy councils use volunteer tutors, and 68% use part-time teachers/coordinators.

Responding organizations reported a total of 14,329 staff. Responding CBOs reported the greatest number of staff (4,158 or 29% of the total) followed by literacy councils (n=3,681 or 26% of the total) and libraries (n=1,615 or 11% of the total). Total numbers and percentages for each staff type reported by responding organizations are as follows: Volunteer

Table 3

Percentages of responding organizations using each staff type, by organization type

Type of Staff	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Vol. Tutors	70	23	96	50	52
Other Vols.	45	12	68	19	29
F-T Teacher/Coord.	50	33	32	63	42
P-T Teacher/Coord.	70	79	68	100	64
Other Paid Staff	68	47	68	81	55

tutors (n=10,029 or 70.0%), other volunteers (n=1,534 or 10.7%), part-time teachers/coordinators (n=1,270 or 8.9%), other paid staff (n=905 or 6.3%), and part-time teachers/coordinators (n=591 or 4.1%). Most striking is that volunteer tutors are the largest number of staff reported followed by other volunteers and part-time teachers/coordinators. It is also important to note that staffing patterns vary for different types of organizations. Table 4 shows percentages of the different staff types reported by responding CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units. For example, 80% of the staff reported by literacy councils are volunteer tutors, 16% are other volunteers, and 1% are part-time teachers/coordinators. In contrast, 30% of the staff reported by school districts are volunteer tutors, 30% are part-time teachers/coordinators, and 16% are full-time teachers/coordinators.

Sites

Organizations provide services at a wide variety of sites, and the sites that are used vary with the type of organization providing the services. The survey asked organizations to indicate at which of 16 types of sites they provide services. The types of sites most likely to be used by responding organizations are schools (28% of responding organizations), organizational headquarters (25%), and churches or synagogues (24%), followed by libraries and correctional institutions (20% each), community centers (17%), and private businesses (14%). As might be expected, different

Table 4

Percentages of total staff represented by each type of staff, by organization type

Type of Staff	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Vol. Tutors	72	30	80	60	70
Other Vols.	11	6	16	7	11
F-T Teacher/Coord.	4	16	2	6	4
P-T Teacher/Coord.	5	30	1	22	9
Other Paid Staff	8	19	1	5	6

types of organizations rely on different types of sites. Table 5 shows the percentages of responding CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units that use each type of site. For example, responding school districts are likely to provide services in schools (79%) while responding CBOs tend to provide services in their own headquarters (49%).

Outreach

Many organizations rely on informal personal interactions for recruitment of students and staff and for public relations, in addition to more formal methods such as brochures and newsletters. Again, there is variety in the specific methods used depending on the type of organization examined. The survey asked organizations to indicate which of 11 methods they use to recruit students, to recruit volunteers, and for public relations. Overall, the outreach methods most likely to be used by responding organizations to recruit students are word of mouth (75% of organizations reported using this method for this purpose); brochures, fliers, and posters (69%); and agency interaction (61%). The outreach methods used to recruit volunteers are word of mouth (48% of organizations), local newspapers and magazines (40%), and agency interaction (39%). The outreach methods used for public relations include local newspapers and magazines (57%); word of mouth (52%); and brochures, fliers, and posters (50%).

Table 5

Percentages of responding organizations using each type of site, by organization type

Type of Site	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Org. Headquarters	49	9	46	31	25
School	13	79	27	56	28
Library	17	11	68	25	20
Community Center	29	12	36	31	17
Adult Learning Center	13	7	18	38	11
Private Business	16	5	36	25	14
College/University	7	4	36	38	13
Church/Synagogue	25	7	55	50	24
Home	15	7	59	19	13
Correctional Inst.	13	11	41	88	20
Special Needs Inst.	8	9	23	38	11
Agency	25	5	27	25	13
Public Housing	12	2	9	31	8
Homeless Shelter	11	9	9	19	8
Government Facility	4	4	9	13	4
Other	8	5	0	6	5

Methods used for the three types of outreach vary somewhat for the different types of organizations. For example, while 75% of responding organizations overall use word of mouth to recruit students, 100% of literacy councils and 81% of school districts reported using word of mouth for this purpose. While 40% of responding organizations overall use local newspapers or magazines to recruit volunteers, 55% of CBOs and 100% of literacy councils use this method for this purpose. While 24% of responding organizations overall use their own newsletter for public relations, 59% of literacy councils do so, but only 18% of school districts do so.

Technology

Respondents tended to indicate use of low-end technologies for instruction, and they have access to those same technologies for staff training/information sharing. However, as with the other topic areas explored so far, technologies used depend on the type of organization examined. In general, responding school districts tended to report more use of and access to higher-end technologies than did CBOs, literacy councils, and intermediate units. Especially small percentages of responding literacy councils and CBOs (compared to responding school districts and intermediate units) indicated use of or access to such technologies as computer modems, integrated learning systems, compact disks, and interactive videodisks.

The survey asked organizations to indicate which of 16 types of technology they use for instruction and have access to for staff training/information sharing. The 16 choices ranged from very “low-tech” (chalkboard and newspapers) to “high-tech” (integrated learning systems or interactive videodisks) materials and equipment. The four technologies noted most frequently by respondents as being used for instruction were chalkboard (79% of respondents), newspaper (67%), videocassette recorder/player (VCR; 59%), and stand-alone computers (53%). The three technologies noted least frequently by respondents as being used for instruction were closed-captioning (less than 1%), satellite downlink/uplink (3%), and interactive videodisk (4%; see Table 6). The four technologies most frequently noted by respondents as accessible for staff training and information sharing were chalkboard (74% of respondents), VCR (72%), newspaper (63%), and television (63%); those least frequently noted were closed-captioning (1%), integrated learning system (7%), and interactive videodisk (9%; see Table 7).

Specific types of technology used for these two purposes vary slightly depending on the type of organization examined. For example, although 43% of responding organizations overall and 54% of responding school districts use television for instruction, only 27% of responding literacy councils use television for this purpose. By contrast, 72% of responding organizations overall have access to a VCR for staff training/information sharing; 72% of responding CBOs and 86% of responding school districts have access to a VCR for this purpose.

Funding

While most responding organizations, regardless of type, rely on government funding to provide adult literacy or basic education services,

Table 6

Percentages of responding organizations using each type of technology for instruction, by organization type

Type of Technology	Organization Type				
	CBO District	School	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org
Overhead Projector	33	72	18	75	42
Television	57	54	27	56	43
Video Recorder/Player	70	72	46	69	59
Audio Recorder/Player	55	60	77	63	52
Radio	11	11	0	13	8
Chalkboard	91	90	59	100	79
Newspaper	84	65	82	88	67
Hand-Held Learning Dev.	17	25	14	6	18
Stand-Alone Computer	51	68	59	63	53
Computer Modem	5	25	5	0	10
Networked Computer/FS	7	42	0	0	14
Integ. Learning System	4	12	0	0	7
Compact Disk	3	16	5	13	8
Interactive Videodisk	1	9	0	6	4
Satellite Down/Uplink	0	7	0	0	3
Closed-Captioning	3	0	0	0	1
Other	4	2	5	0	5

not all do. The mix of government and private funding reported depended on the type of organization examined. The survey listed numerous sources of government funding (22 sources including "other") and private (13 sources including "other") funding and asked organizations to indicate categories and amounts of public and private funding they receive. A total of 215 organizations reported dollar amounts for at least one funding category listed on the survey. Assuming organizations received no funding in categories for which they did not report amounts, it is possible to estimate the percentage of each organization's funding that comes from government sources. One hundred and sixty-one responding organiza-

Table 7

Percentages of responding organizations with access to each type of technology for staff training, by organization type

Type of Technology	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
Overhead Projector	50	83	50	81	58
Television	70	77	55	63	63
Video Recorder/Player	72	86	77	81	72
Audio Recorder/Player	59	74	68	50	60
Radio	34	42	18	44	34
Chalkboard	80	84	82	94	74
Newspaper	66	75	64	63	63
Hand-Held Learning Dev.	13	26	9	6	14
Stand-Alone Computer	54	72	55	56	57
Computer Modem	14	46	9	44	23
Networked Computer/FS	9	49	0	25	21
Integ. Learning System	4	16	0	13	7
Compact Disk	1	26	0	6	10
Interactive Videodisk	3	21	0	19	9
Satellite Down/Uplink	3	25	5	44	14
Closed-Captioning	3	2	0	0	1
Other	3	2	5	0	5

tions receive 75% to 100% of their funding from government sources, 24 receive 50% to 75% from government sources, 9 receive 25% to 50% from government sources, and 21 receive 0% to 25% from government sources. Table 8, which gives breakdowns for CBOs, school districts, literacy councils, and intermediate units, shows that these types of organizations which responded to the survey tend to receive the majority of their funding from government sources. The 107 organizations which report receiving 100% of their funding from government sources includes 38 school districts, 27 CBOs, 1 literacy council, and 7 intermediate units.

Table 8

Numbers of responding organizations receiving percentage categories of government funding, by organization type

Percentage Funding	Organization Type				
	CBO	School District	Literacy Council	Interm. Unit	All Org.
75%-100%	45	42	5	15	161
50%-75%	5	3	11	0	24
25%-50%	6	1	0	0	9
0%-25%	5	1	2	0	21

The most frequently reported categories of government funding were Section 322 federal adult education funds (40% of respondents) and Act 143 state adult literacy funds (39% of respondents). The most frequently reported categories of private funding were gifts from individuals (16% of respondents) and corporate contributions (12% of respondents).

The dollar amounts reported by responding organizations summed to \$25,864,410 in government funding and \$6,661,143 in private funding, roughly \$4 in government funding for every \$1 in private funding. For different types of organizations, however, summed figures for government and private funding vary, as do ratios of government to private funding. For example, CBOs together reported receiving \$7,231,405 in government funding and \$2,337,020 in private funding (roughly \$3 in government funding for every \$1 in private funding), school districts together reported receiving \$5,028,726 in government funding and \$40,705 in private funding (roughly \$124 in government funding for every \$1 in private funding), literacy councils together reported receiving \$1,081,742 in government funding and \$635,998 in private funding (roughly \$1.70 in government funding for every \$1 in private funding), and intermediate units together reported receiving \$6,036,573 in government funding and \$59,355 in private funding (roughly \$102 in government funding for every \$1 in private funding). Because not all responding organizations reported both government and private funding, averages present a somewhat different picture. The 199 organizations that reported government funding received an average of \$129,972 from government sources, and the 101

organizations that reported private funding received an average of \$65,952 from private sources. The pattern of average funding reported by different types of organizations also varies. For example, CBOs report on average \$124,679 from government sources and \$83,465 from private sources, school districts report on average \$109,320 from government sources and \$4,523 from private sources, literacy councils report on average \$67,609 from government sources and \$37,412 from private sources, and intermediate units report on average \$402,438 from government sources and \$7,419 from private sources.

Discussion

The picture of adult literacy service provision in the state of Pennsylvania presented by this survey is one of great diversity. Although one can look at results for organizations overall, it is important to keep in mind that each type of organization providing services has its own unique profile. In general, four trends emerged: 1) an emphasis on providing “traditional” adult literacy and basic education services (ABE, GED/ASE, and basic literacy), 2) heavy reliance on volunteer tutors, 3) use of and access to primarily traditional technologies for instruction and staff training/information sharing (despite the increasing importance of technology in society, only a handful of programs reported use of or access to such advanced interactive technologies as interactive videodisks or satellite links); and 4) use of government funds to provide services.

The reliance on volunteer tutors by Pennsylvania service providers is noteworthy because it appears to be much greater than that of service providers nationally. Volunteers (87% of them serving as tutors) make up 81% of all staff reported by organizations responding to the survey. This compares with approximately 48% volunteers among programs nationwide surveyed by Development Associates (1992). Volunteers bring much energy and creativity to programs, but those serving in an instructional role are faced with the challenge of assisting adults for whom education has failed in the past. Volunteers may face this challenge with little or no training to help them meet the needs of these adults. Despite good intentions and efforts, and positive results in some areas, volunteers may be unable to give these adults many specific kinds of help they need. For example, they may provide valuable interpersonal support but may not have the skills or knowledge needed to support the development of cognitive processes required for literacy.

Based on the results of the State Adult Literacy Survey conducted by

the Educational Testing Service (Weinberger, 1994), the Pennsylvania 2000 Adult Literacy Task Force estimates that 4 million adult Pennsylvanians over the age of 16 are in need of adult literacy services. Organizations responding to the present survey reported that approximately 70,000 adults in the state currently receive these services. It is possible that many adults receive literacy services from organizations not responding to this survey, but any reasonable extrapolation from this figure leaves a large gap between the need for and the provision of services. As National Education Goal 6 calls for nationwide adult literacy by the year 2000, service provision must be expanded to accommodate more of those in need. This likely requires both expansion of resources and more effective use of existing resources.

One way to more effectively use existing resources might be to shift the current focus on traditional adult literacy and basic education services to providing customized services, that is, literacy skills related to contexts that are meaningful and relevant to adults (for example, family or job-related contexts). Research has shown that literacy instruction in such meaningful and relevant contexts is more effective than instruction in traditional, general contexts (Sticht, 1988). A recent study indicates that technology has the potential to help adult learners and programs accomplish more, but this outcome won't happen without funding, policy changes, and cooperative efforts to improve access to and availability of appropriate hardware, software, and other media, as well as staff training and support for use of technology (US Congress, Office of Technology Assessment, 1993).

The results of the survey indicate that there are organizations in the state of Pennsylvania providing services with little or no government funding and some that are operating without the major streams of funding available to providers of adult literacy and basic education services in the state at the time of the survey (Act 143 and Section 322 funds). While information on service providers that operate inside of the mainstream of these government funds is readily available, there is little information beyond that collected by this survey about those providers operating outside these areas of funding. Learning more about what these organizations are doing and how they are going about doing it may be illustrative for other providers.

The goal of this project was to create a comprehensive database of information on all adult literacy and basic education service providers in Pennsylvania. Not all service providers responded to the survey, and some responses were incomplete, particularly regarding amounts of funding

received from different sources. The detailed results, therefore, must be interpreted with caution. The clear trends that did emerge, however, point toward important issues for those concerned with adult literacy.

[Note: This research was conducted as part of a Section 353 Special Experimental Demonstration Project funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education with matching funds provided by the Pennsylvania 2000 Adult Literacy Task Force. Detailed findings of the study are available in the final project report which may be obtained from AdvanceE or from the Western Pennsylvania Adult Literacy Resource Center.]

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