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Immigrants, Stimulus Programs and Future US Economic Competitiveness: An Eleventh-Inning Home Run on Adult Literacy and Workforce Training Reforms?

By Margie McHugh and Michael Fix

OVERVIEW

-Stimulus programs that do not specifically and adequately address the needs of immigrant workers and families will fail to address the needs of key states, industries and metropolitan areas that are the engines of our nation's economy.

- Only 12 percent of US residents are immigrants, yet over 20 percent of the country's low-wage workers and 45 percent of its low-skilled workers are immigrants.
- There are roughly 21.7 million adults in the US who are limited English proficient (LEP); just over 10 million of them do not have a high school diploma.
- Children from immigrant families are a large and growing share of the country's youth and rising workforce. They are now almost a quarter of all children in the nation, and over half of children in key parts of the country such as the state of California, and metropolitan areas such as New York, Miami, Los Angeles, San Jose, and Fort Lauderdale.
- Between 2010 and 2030, all growth in the US labor force will come from immigrants and their children.

-The adult literacy, community college and workforce training systems that are essential for creating pathways to increased productivity and good jobs for immigrant, Latino and limited-English adults are severely disjointed, small in scale and, taken as a whole, underperforming. Recent data show that only 36 percent of adult ESL students make adequate progress in their classes (advancing at least one level); less than four percent of those who receive training services through WIA Title I are LEP; and there is roughly 3.5 billion hours of pent-up need for adult English instruction among immigrants across the country.

-Pouring money into these systems without demanding more of them will not result in the needed growth in English and work-related outcomes for immigrants and their children: most available instruction is segmented, expecting students to spend years in ESL classes before moving (which very few do) to basic education and then workforce training or post-secondary education programs; and most English instruction is low-intensity, fails to take into account the educational background of students, and focuses on life skills rather than contextualized, challenging English instruction that is tailored to students' workforce or education goals.

-The demand for almost two billion additional hours of English instruction that could be touched off by creation of a legalization program during the stimulus-funding period should not be permitted to flow largely into low-performing, low-payoff ESL and civics instruction. A legalization program of significant scope could be enacted during the period that stimulus funding would be expanding the adult literacy and workforce skills training systems. Should the legalization program contain requirements for English acquisition in order to maintain or advance one's legal status (as most recent bills sought to do) an unprecedented demand for almost two billion hours of English instruction would be unleashed. The Administration should seek to realize long-term gains in immigrant English and workforce skills from the convergence of these two phenomena.

-To address these issues, a clear vision for the reorganization of adult literacy, ESL and workforce services must be articulated immediately by the new Administration, a vision which integrates the offerings of the current systems into clear pathways for student advancement in workforce, academic or family/civic literacy goals. New monies provided through a stimulus package, aid to close state budget gaps, the reauthorization of

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WIA, or other vehicles must break down the silos between literacy/ESL and workforce services and provide strong financial incentives and accountability measures to ensure proportionate expansion of effective programs for LEP adults, programs that integrate adult ESL instruction with occupational skills training.

-The inter-connected nature of our country's changed demographics, the urgency of re-starting the economy and rebuilding it with smart, long-term investments, and the long-neglected ills of our adult literacy, ESL and workforce systems, present a very compelling, "once-in-a-lifetime" investment and reform opportunity. The Administration can take advantage of this historic alignment of needs and opportunities by acting to—

In the near term:

- Significantly increase WIA Title I/II funds; however, rather than allocating them using a strict population formula, make a sizable portion available only for state systems and programs that have integrated their basic education, ESL and occupational training programs. Existing systems should be able to expand quickly with new monies given that management structures and experienced providers exist in key areas and more than half of ESL teachers currently work part-time;

- Significantly increase CSBG funding for education and training services, particularly services effective for LEP populations; however, NDA requirements should be loosened to allow a county-wide approach that targets particular populations or needs affected by the recession;

- Put immigrant youth on a path to success by significantly expanding summer youth jobs that are linked with programs that provide academic and occupational pathways with or between high schools and community colleges for immigrant and LEP youth. More generally, require states and counties to provide a plan for addressing at-risk youth needs and employment outcomes through stimulus support, including LEP youth, disconnected youth and youth in transition;

- Provide incentives to states to move in the direction of high quality, integrated instruction and other best practices in teacher certification, data systems, curricular support and appropriate use of technology. These can be created by reserving a portion of WIA Title I/II aid for transitional grants that will assist states with unintegrated programs in designing and implementing plans that will move them towards effective, integrated, literacy and occupational skills instruction;

- Address the unevenness in state investment, program quality and accountability through the state plan and peer review processes described below and also by enforcing strict maintenance of effort, state match and strong accountability provisions for actual student instruction hours. Regarding state and local match (which now ranges from roughly .25 to $8.00 for every federal dollar – with five states and Puerto Rico not meeting match requirements), the match for WIA Title I/II and other relevant funds could be gradually increased as the recession eases, or it could be reduced for funds awarded through the competitive grant process suggested above. Should direct grant programs be established for community-based organizations, the performance, teacher quality and other accountability standards that apply to education institutions should apply to these programs as well.

In the longer term:

- Speed the evolution of well-planned and integrated state systems through the use of expert panels to develop system standards along with peer review and evaluation of state plans and performance. Peer review and evaluation of plans will give ED officials the reinforcement they need to push states for genuine action to address persistent problems such as teacher quality, the pooling of instruction at the lowest levels of literacy, and the expansion and appropriate use of technology;

- Build the capacity of the federal government to understand and predict the literacy and related workforce training needs of LEP adults by charging an organization such as the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) to commission an ongoing study of changes in English language instruction needs in the United States, and issue an annual report to Congress.

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Additional Background Information
Adult Literacy and English Instruction Reforms to Benefit LEP Adults

Across the United States, large immigrant-receiving metropolises and small towns and cities in new destination states are intensely feeling the impact of LEP immigrants. Cities such as Los Angeles and New York, where roughly three-quarters and two-thirds of their respective immigrant adult populations are LEP,[1] confront major challenges in identifying funds to build their adult literacy service systems and provide access to their LEP residents. Similarly, current US Census Bureau figures show that dozens of new destination states and towns are faced with significant new demand for English language classes: between 1990 and 2005, the number of LEP adults grew by over 300 percent in states such as Georgia, North Carolina, and Nevada.

As the analysis in our 2007 report[2] makes plain, the need for English language and literacy instruction by the nation's LPRs and unauthorized immigrants dwarfs the scale and abilities of the current service system. The extent of the disconnect between current need and available services makes evident that tinkering with the current system — whether with nominal increases in funding or continued nudges for performance improvements — will not be nearly enough to meet the growing need for effective, high-quality instruction. Therefore, we have identified several options for expanding the pool of money available for adult English instruction programs; and, in order to gain public confidence that these new monies will achieve maximal results, we have proposed several ways in which new monies could be used to accelerate the adoption of best practices in instruction and accountability by service systems throughout the country.

With the retirement of the baby-boom generation underway, the United States cannot afford to have a substantial share of its workforce poorly educated and unable to meet the global economy's escalating demands for high worker productivity. Sustaining productivity and paying health and Social Security bills will require the country's largely younger first- and second-generation immigrant population to succeed in schools and the labor market and be deeply invested in the American community. Investing in an adult English instruction system that can meet the demand for high-quality instruction and allow the nation to meet these challenges is an obvious strategy whose adoption is long overdue.

Adult education reform efforts of recent years have attempted to raise the quality of teaching, curriculum, and assessment in ESL and basic literacy programs around the nation. These important efforts notwithstanding, the capacity and quality of programs in the 50 states is uneven,[3] and even where it is generally good, there is reason to worry that quality might not be maintained if programs are dramatically expanded.

Critics contend that the current system is not working well to meet immigrants' (and by extension, the nation's) needs for a variety of reasons. They point, for instance, to the unintegrated character of programs serving civics, workforce, and family literacy needs;[4] problems with teacher quality and professionalization;[5] the system's lack

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[1] Randolph Capps, Michael Fix and Leighton Ku, "How Are Immigrants Faring After Welfare Reform: Preliminary Evidence from Los Angeles and New York City." (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press, 2002), http://www.urban.org/uploadedPDF/410426_final_report.pdf.
[2] http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/NCIIP_English_Instruction073107.pdf
[3] US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Program Year 2003-2004," Report to Congress on State Performance, 2006.
[4] Heide Spruck Wrigley, Elise Richer, Karin Martinson, Hitomi Kubo, and Julie Strawn, "The Language of Opportunity" (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, August 2003).
[5] Jodi Crandall, "Professionalism and Professionalization of Adult ESL Literacy," *TESOL Quarterly* 27, No. 3 (Autumn 1993): 497-515.

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of emphasis on distance or "on-demand" learning;[6] and low retention and persistence rates (just 36 percent of students enrolled in ESL during the 2003-2004 program year succeeded in advancing one level).[7]

These and other concerns raise questions about how the political will can be found to provide the large and historic infusion of resources required to meet the need for adult English instruction. As the results of our analysis indicate, providing just half of the instructional hours needed by LPRs will require the system to move well beyond its current capacity and practices. And, should Congress enact a legalization program in the coming years, the scale and effectiveness of the current system would need to be transformed to meet the demand that such a program would likely unleash.

Fortunately, despite these challenges, much is known about how to deliver high-value, high-quality adult English instruction.[8] Demonstrating that measures are in place to ensure that new monies invested in the system will result in high-quality, cost-effective services will be essential in order to capitalize on any potential opportunity to considerably expand services. The following recommendations are provided to build public commitment to a significantly expanded system of adult literacy and ESL services.

Use Peer and Expert Panels to Develop the Guidelines for and Review State Plans. The US Department of Education should require state plans that address a full range of program design and accountability issues. A national panel of experts should be convened to design guidelines for the state plans, and other expert and peer review panels should be charged with examining and then recommending approval or rejection of individual plans.

The national expert panel that sets the guidelines for state plans should also designate acceptable ranges of students expected to advance one level of achievement per course of study. State plans should set annual benchmarks for student performance using these ranges. Financial incentives could reward states that exceed the upper limit of the standards in less than six years.

Expand the Use of Competitive Grants. Given the uneven record of states in creating programs that are successful in helping immigrants learn English[9] or in creating programs of significant scale,[10] the public policy rationale for simply allocating a large amount of potential new funding to states on a formula basis is not strong. Therefore, the use of competitive grants should be expanded, and state match requirements should be adjusted in order to reduce the current large disparities in state contributions.

Support States as They Scale Up Their Systems. Many states will need additional time and support to plan and develop expanded service delivery systems. A portion of federal monies invested in this area for up to three years should be reserved for transitional grants that will assist states in designing and implementing state plans that will pass the expert and peer review process.

Create Incentives for Using Well-trained, Highly Skilled Teachers. Federal funds should be used to leverage swift progress toward increasing the skills and quality of the adult ESL teaching force. Currently, states set the standards for ESL teacher qualifications and the result is a patchwork of differing rules where, predictably, some are quite rigorous in the training or experiene they require, and some are more lax.[11] Numerous researchers and teacher groups have pointed out that the part-time nature of most adult ESL teaching positions translates into low-pay, poor benefits, and few professional development or advancement opportunities for a large portion of

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[6] National Commission on Adult Literacy, "Dare to Dream" (New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, April 2007): 33-37, http://www.caalusa.org/daretodream.pdf.
[7] US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Program Year 2003-2004," Report to Congress on State Performance, 2006.
[8] See for example Forrest P. Chisman and JoAnn Crandall, "Passing the Torch" (New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, February 2007).
[9] "Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Program Year 2003-2004" (see n.32).
[10] The National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium (see n. **Error! Bookmark not defined.**).
[11] Texas Adult Education Credential Professional Development Planning Workshop Notebook (2005), The Education Institute. Texas State University-San Marcos. http://www.Credential/pdpw/credentialing in other states/2005 survey results.doc

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the adult ESL teaching force.[12] These employment conditions add to the inherent difficulties of setting and sustaining high standards for teacher quality in a field that has not yet broadly adopted teacher competency, credentialing, or certification standards.

Were there to be a major expansion of adult English and literacy instruction, substantial improvements in the quality of the teaching force could be realized. In order to obtain federal program service grants, states could be required to ensure that all ESL teachers in programs supported with federal funds have successfully demonstrated high levels of competency in teaching adult ESL learners, completed a recognized course of study in adult second-language learning, and/or obtained a recognized credential or certification in adult second-language learning. Appropriate training and skill standards should be set for teachers providing Basic Education in a Native Language and vocational ESL as well.

Rubrics for these professional standards could be developed by the national panel of experts and spelled out in the specifications for state plans. States should be permitted to obtain transitional grants to support teacher credentialing or certification efforts.

Provide Incentives for Expanding the Scale and Reach of Programs through the Use of Technology and an Emphasis on Self-study and Self-access Learning. It can be argued that it is unlikely that the United States can, or perhaps should even try, to meet the enormous need for adult ESL and BENL instruction through the current classroom instruction model. There simply may not be enough high-quality teachers or affordable classroom space available in the "right" places and at the "right" times to provide the hundreds of millions of hours of instruction necessary for either the LPR or potential legalization-program population. Further, the demands of many immigrants' work and family lives will likely make it difficult for them to regularly travel to an appointed time and place to be present for hundreds of hours of classroom instruction.

There appears to be little disagreement that a substantial expansion of programs that provide effective means for distance learning, anytime-anywhere,[13] and/or self-access learning,[14] is needed. However, ordinary classroom instruction remains the default instructional mode for a variety of reasons, including learners' difficulty accessing or using technology; the quality and availability of effective curriculum models; and the inherent difficulty of measuring learners' progress. A federal grant program should provide incentives to states to build the scale and reach of broadcast or information technologies to serve adult students; it should also encourage experimentation and sharing of successful practices in supporting anytime-anywhere and self-access learning.

Increase Public Confidence and Assure Quality by Requiring and Supporting Robust State Quality-control Systems. Currently, conventional practices such as random visits, audits, and scheduled program reviews by state monitors are not required. Effective quality-control systems should be a core component of state plans. Parameters for these systems and practices should be specified in the guidelines for state plans established by the national expert panel. The US Department of Education should play a lead role in this and related areas by providing opportunities for sharing of best practices among state agencies.[15]

Require an Annual Report to Congress. In order to allow policymakers at all levels of government to adequately plan to meet English language instruction needs, an organization such as the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) should commission an ongoing study of changes in English language instruction needs in the United States, and issue an annual report to Congress. The report should include national-, state-, and perhaps county-level analysis of adult English instruction needs; data on the composition of recent immigration flows and immigrant settlement patterns across US states; and estimated instructional needs based on the English ability and educational attainment of recent immigrants from top immigrant-sending countries.

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[12] "Passing the Torch" (see n.8 pp.vi-vii).
[13] Materials and strategies that support learners who are not part of a regular instruction program to learn on their own.
[14] A program in which students are provided access to instructional materials such as books, audio tapes, or videotapes, and then, often with guidance from a teacher, they pursue their studies.
[15] Best practices could including model practices identified through private initiatives such as the Dollar General/ProLiteracy Performance Accountability Initiative, see http://www.proliteracy.org/external/dg_pai.asp.

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The report should also use surveys and other methods to determine the level of demand for English instruction among LPRs. At this time, no reliable research exists on the share of LPRs who would be willing and able to attend English language classes if they were readily available. Our estimate that LPRs will only demand about half of the English instruction hours needed to bring them to English proficiency within a period of six years could be an overestimate or an underestimate. Planners will need this information to develop appropriate infrastructure and allocate the necessary resources to meet the true level of demand for English instruction.

Finally, the report should analyze best practices for prevailing instructional models, outcomes for key student subgroups, outcomes of students taught with alternative methods, and the relative costs of different instructional methods. These data would allow for more informed allocations of funds to different instructional models and greater understanding of the learning progress and instructional needs of various students.