



**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy
(for the National Commission on Adult Literacy)
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To: Parag Mehta for January 7, 2009
The Obama Transition Team

From: Gail Spangenberg

Subject: Reach Higher, America
National Commission on Adult Literacy

Parag,

As I advised you following our meeting on December 18th, a few prominent educators and human resource development people feel so strongly about the importance of *Reach Higher America*, the final report of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, that they want to offer comments about it to those on the transition team concerned about education and economic development. Per your instructions, here is my compilation of their remarks to supplement the material we have already provided. I hope your transition people will find the document useful, and thank you for the opportunity to offer this additional information.

**Samuel Halperin, Founder/Director, American Youth Policy Forum and
Institute for Educational Leadership (12-23-08)**

One of the curses of current federal and state educational policy and practice is the ultra-territorial division of our many important reform efforts resulting in disconnected and insular silos that work against creative communication and positive change.

Recognizing this reality, the National Commission on Adult Literacy took a different tack in its deliberations and policy recommendations: It consciously set forth broad and bold policy options that are respectful both of our federal system and of community diversity, allowing states and localities to mobilize public and private resources for addressing a full gamut of their *own choices*, e.g., early literacy, family strengthening, dropout prevention and recovery, the needs of non-English language minorities, preparation for success in college, and excellence in the 21st century workforce. This non-age-segregated policy perspective enables over a million high school-age youths, technologically displaced older workers, new immigrants and many others to obtain the essential training and education they need to be able to contribute fully to our economy and society. It enables us



to hold elected officials accountable for effective results without having to follow cookie-cutter mandates designed by distant others. It is the kind of responsible change we need in the Obama Administration.

Ed Morris, Assistant Superintendent, Division of Adult and Career Education, Los Angeles Unified School District (12-23-08)

The existing *Crisis in the American Workforce* originally reported by the National Commission on Adult Literacy in June of this year is rapidly escalating into a national emergency the scope and magnitude of which threatens to produce an economic disaster on a national scale. The immediacy and accuracy with which the incoming administration engages and deploys its resources to divert the looming workforce disaster may well become its defining act.

In its report, published just prior to the current economic meltdown, the Commission found that between 88 and 90 million adults are unprepared to secure a job that pays a family-sustaining wage, and that they all have at least one educational barrier to economic success. It is absolutely critical that when we consider the economic situations in which these adults find themselves, we do not lose sight of the families and children who depend on them.

In Los Angeles for example, seventy-six percent of the children attending District schools qualify for “free” or “reduced price” lunch. These children are living at or below poverty level, and will remain economically disadvantaged for every day of every month, of every school year until they graduate, unless we are able to provide their parents with short term, high quality job training and support services that lead to the attainment of skills sets that are immediately marketable in the local economy.

Exacerbated by the mounting job losses occurring in the six months since the report was published, the nation’s unemployment problem has steadily worsened. Since June, unemployment figures have grown to include skilled workers whose only barrier to earning a decent income is . . . a job! Skilled workers with proven work ethic are finding themselves facing financial catastrophes as businesses close and industries downsize. Clearly, any solution to the crisis in the American workforce must include short term programs that retrain the newly unemployed for jobs in growth industries such as health care, in addition to the much needed basic education skills for the populations identified in the Commission’s report.

The Commission is to be lauded for its unprecedented work, and the incoming administration would be well advised to use the report as a critical resource as it develops its economic recovery package.



Sharon Darling, President/Founder, National Center for Family Literacy (12-23-08)

Like many Americans, I am concerned about the future of our nation and the current economy that erodes progress and security for families. The adult education report, *Reach Higher, America*, proposes a critical pathway to equipping adults to contribute to the economy and society in positive ways. As a Commissioner of the National Commission on Adult Literacy and forty-years of implementing adult literacy programs to help adults join the workforce, I impress upon you that the proposed action items in the report contain the most valuable steps in adult education to date. Our nation's future depends on the results outlined in the report.

I also impress upon you that the adults struggling with poor skills are parents of children likely to follow the same path. Addressing the educational needs of adults builds solutions for today and generations of tomorrow. Please consider this document in the context of adults serving as their child's first and most influential teacher. The days of working with low-literate and under-skilled workers with no consideration of their influence over their children's success should be over.

The National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL) has forged new territory over the last 20 years. The recommendations outlined in the *Reach Higher, America* report present timely and actionable opportunities sure to benefit our nation.

Garrett Murphy, National ABE Policy Analyst (12-23-08)

I have had the opportunity to observe workforce policy in the United States for almost 50 years. As a director of a local adult education center I helped prepare adults to enter state operated skills centers under the Manpower Development and Training Act (MDTA) of 1962. Our center was the sole recipient of classroom training and public service employment for the City and County of Albany, New York under the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) of 1963. When CETA was replaced by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) in 1973, as New York State's director of adult education I helped begin a national trend to devote the Act's education set-a-side to basic skills and English language instruction. Finally, as policy analyst for the 50 state directors of adult education, I was involved in the One-Stop planning for the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998.

Having had this opportunity to observe workforce policy and practice from a number of perspectives I enthusiastically endorse the policy recommendations contained in the impressive new report entitled *Reach Higher, America* as offering the best hope of producing an internationally competitive workforce, an educated citizenry, and a faster route to citizenship for speakers of languages other than English. In addition the report proposes an opportunity for genuine



rehabilitation of individuals emerging from correctional facilities and a highly productive connection between parents and schools.

Along with pursuing these long term goals, one particular recommendation of the report could be very beneficial to the upcoming stimulus package. The simultaneous provision of basic education or English language instruction, along with specific occupational skills, could prepare unemployed adults to work in new occupations far more quickly than the traditional sequence of education followed by occupational training. The perceived closeness to employment would motivate trainees to remain in their programs, greatly reducing dropout rates, and income maintenance costs during training could be cut in half.

For all of these reasons I strongly urge that you read this important document and consider adopting its recommendations.

Kevin Smith, Executive Director, Literacy New York (12-29-08)

United States policy makers, economists, employers and labor leaders can no longer ignore or merely lament the skills shortage in the American workforce. It is past time for our leadership to address strategies for developing the human infrastructure required for any successful economic recovery plan. Like our highways and bridges, we have failed to adequately invest in literacy and language development of our parents and workers. Now, as evidenced in Reach Higher America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce, success will require an unprecedented government response.

Tom Sawyer, State Senator (28th District, OH) (12-29-08)
(and former U.S. Congressman)

The demographic shifts that are taking place today are profound. This is deeply unsettling for the future of our economy. This is why I believe that it is vitally important to maintain a strong and accurate Census program, both statewide and throughout the nation. If we fail to implement such programs successfully, we will never have a clear knowledge of data such as dropout rates, limited proficiency numbers, and patterns of aging, all of which directly affect adult literacy. Having this information is fundamental to the operation of workforce development programs, and in driving the overall policy decisions that shape them.

Mark Musick, Chair, State Workforce Investment Board, Georgia (12-30-08)

As the chair of Georgia's Workforce Investment Board, *Reach Higher, America* is my compass and GPS for 2009, 2010, and beyond. In February, the chairs of two state workforce investment boards and a state board of education chair will come together with a large regional workforce board calling a meeting around the *Reach Higher, America* recommendations with the chair of the National Commission on Adult Literacy. This is but one example of the kind of focus,



energy, and action that *Reach Higher, America* can bring to states and communities across our nation. This report from the National Commission on Adult Literacy can help policymakers and adults who consider themselves "everyday citizens" understand that our nation's economic future for the next decade or two is "us". America's adults, today, are overwhelmingly the workforce of 2020, but We Can change the future by changing the skills and education we have. *Reach Higher, America* shows us why and how we must and can do this.

Marshall Goldberg, Past Executive Director, Association of Joint Labor/Management Educational Programs (1-5-09)

As past Executive Director of the Association of Joint Labor/Management Educational (representing some 16 unions, over 400 employers, and serving the educational interests and needs of over 500,000 active workers), I have seen the critical need for providing Adult Basic Education (ABE) as a platform for job specific training, and as an opportunity for the adult learner to enter a continuum of lifelong learning. ABE is relevant not only for preparing new entrants into the workplace, but also for many front-line workers already employed. Continuous change in the workplace due to market changes, technology, and new products and services highlights the need for workers to have continuous access to enhanced basic skills.

Association members had the opportunity to testify before the National Commission on Adult Literacy on Aug. 20, 2007. I led a panel of Labor/Management Educational Programs representing the private and public sector interests in the steel industry, healthcare, telecommunications, and state public employees. The Commission's panel "Employer-Union Models that Work—Taking it to Scale," highlighted the documented decades-long success of this workforce development model with a practical focus on the transferable elements of design, implementation, and operation for the larger workforce community.

I strongly support the Commission's comprehensive report *Reach Higher, America* and recommendations for dramatic change in our ABE system. To accomplish this, sustained funding and programmatic partnerships must be developed by employers, unions, state, and federal government, economic development organizations, public & private education providers, and most importantly, the adult learner.

An educational investment in workers has a major positive impact on the individual, the employer, union, and community.

Gary A. Eyre, Commission Director on Adult Basic Education and Literacy, American Association for Adult and Continuing Education (1-5-09)

The time for arguing whether adult education and adult literacy is needed in our society, whether it is a major component of our nation's total educational



enterprise, and whether states and the federal government should increase their involvement in adult literacy is past. Today, an analysis of social and economic trends clearly and incontrovertibly underlines the need for adult education and adult literacy.

The work of the National Commission on Adult Literacy (2006-2008) resulted in the very comprehensive report *Reach Higher, America: Overcoming Crisis in the U.S. Workforce*. The Commission's report builds on the work and reports of many individuals, organizations, and agencies since the passage of the federal adult basic education legislation in 1964. It examines the causes and dimensions of adult literacy in America, and offers various action plans to address them.

AAACE commends the Commission's outstanding leadership in promoting effective policy and solutions. Its report and its concrete recommendations must be considered as part of the White House and Congressional initiatives in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Plan.

David Hosley, Manufacturing Association of Florida Workforce and Education Committee Member (1-6-09)

This nation is in deep trouble as documented in the *Reach Higher, America* report. America is in economic and cultural battles to maintain our way of life, and we need a wake-up call. The bow-wave is crashing down on us, and we need an emergency route out of this potential drowning.

The forces riding this crest of this wave are: wide disparity in literacy and numeracy skills among our school-age and adult populations, seismic changes in our economy, and sweeping demographic changes. Our culture and way of life are seriously threatened, and we must implement change to avoid the disaster facing us.

Reach Higher, America is unique in that NO prior reports have been produced like it. The documentation with detailed statistics of the forces mentioned above along with the broad array of actions suggested in the report provide action-oriented solutions that the incoming administration needs to immediately review and implement as a NATIONAL PRIORITY.

Donald Block, Executive Director, Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, and the nation's 2007 Administrator of the Year as named by the Commission on Adult Basic Education (1-6-09)

The incoming administration may look to improve the nation's economic prospects by bolstering public schools (K-12) and colleges and universities. It would be a costly mistake to leave adult literacy education out of the equation. Adults who cannot read, write, or fill out job applications represent about 14 percent of the U.S. population and cost the economy \$225 billion a year. A



landmark study by the National Commission on Adult Literacy entitled *Reach Higher, America* concludes that this adult education crisis “saps the energy and capability of our people, our economy and our institutions. It feeds our national unemployment, the welfare rolls and our correctional institutions. It literally robs America of its future.”

At Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council, Pennsylvania’s largest adult literacy organization, we see the link between adult education and economic development firsthand in the efforts and successes of the 7,000 students we serve each year. We support the recommendations of the National Commission on Adult Literacy. Adult education has a low cost compared with other types of education, but it has an immediate impact on the economic prospects of the adult students and their children.

Laura Chenven, H-CAP National Coordinator (1-6-09)

The work of the National Commission on Adult Literacy has documented the need for a greater investment in adult education and workforce skills. The Healthcare Career Advancement Program (H-CAP) as a national labor/management organization, is deeply committed to and invested in training low wage healthcare workers to advance through career ladders into demand healthcare occupations. Our joint labor/management training partnerships could do much more to educate nurses and allied health professionals, so desperately needed by employers and the community, if more resources were committed to providing workers with the language and literacy skills they need to succeed in post secondary training. We are currently looking to support an even greater effort to train workers from within the healthcare industry to meet the increasing need for healthcare professionals. A new and major commitment from the government to support adult education will make our efforts all the more effective and make the industry better able to serve the healthcare needs of the public.

Karen Narasaki, President, American Asian Justice Center (1-7-09)

In the past year, the Asian American Justice Center conducted a nationwide survey and focus groups to find out what the general public thinks about Adult English Language Acquisition and found that, not surprisingly, Americans overwhelmingly support immigrants learning English. While we are not surprised that Americans very much support English Language Learning, it is important that they also see these programs as another avenue to maintaining a skilled and educated workforce capable of competing in today’s 21st century economy.

In *Reach Higher, America*, the National Commission on Adult Literacy emphasizes that improving access to adult education for everyone—whether they are low-wage workers, high school drop-outs, formerly incarcerated adults or Limited English Proficient Americans—is an investment with significant returns that can pay for that investment. This and other proposals laid out in the report



are the kind of proactive policies that are necessary in order to ensure our competitiveness in an increasingly global economy.

George Boggs, President, American Association of Community Colleges (1-7-09)

As the data presented in the *Reach Higher, America* report of the National Commission on Adult Literacy makes clear, the nation requires a more highly skilled and educated workforce, but in many respects we are moving in the opposite direction. America's community colleges are on the front lines of the effort to provide adults with basic skills and move them into postsecondary education. This task is extremely daunting, often hampered by insufficient resources and fractured efforts at the federal and state levels. As the Commission's report indicates, this country is in dire need of a coordinated and sufficiently funded effort at the federal, state, regional, and local levels to equip our workforce with the skills they need for the modern economy. Community colleges look forward to continuing and expanding their role in this critical national initiative and we urge your serious attention to *Reach Higher, America*.

Maria Flynn, Vice President, Jobs for the Future (1-7-09)

At a time when our country faces unparalleled economic uncertainty and unprecedented competition, it is imperative that we invest in education and skill development. A focus on adult literacy, basic education, and workforce skills is a critical part of this investment. Eighty to 90 million adults — about half the U.S. adult workforce — do not have the skills required to succeed in jobs that pay a family-sustaining wage. Current federal workforce development programs are fragmented, underfunded, and are in need of reform. The National Commission on Adult Literacy's "Reach Higher, America" report provides new ideas that would fundamentally transform the current approach into a comprehensive system that would create educational pathways to meet the needs of both individuals and employers.

Ronald P. Sexton, Chancellor, Montana State University Billings (1-7-09)

During our November 2008 "Reach Higher Montana Conference," [which drew on the *Reach Higher, America* report] it became very clear that the nearly 100 representatives of agencies, educational programs, and adult learner service providers from across the region agree and recognize the seriousness of a problem that was and is already a crisis, and quickly becoming a national emergency/disaster. The underlying issues/causes are known to most. However, the rules and regulations governing the respective organizations make it difficult, if not impossible, to change in any substantial way how they address the adult learning issues and the underlying causes. Each group recites numerous "reasons" as to why there has been so little real progress and the



crisis worsens. A lack of money is primary, but the fact that it is so difficult to work outside and across agency and practice guidelines was clearly evident in our conference.

The current paradigm for adult literacy is no longer relevant. Clearly, what happens now to break the cycles of increasing higher high school dropout rates, the increase of illiteracy among young people, largely males and minorities, and the continuing changes in basic family structures and values requires a different, a new paradigm.

Given the exceptional work of the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy over the years in bringing the issue to new levels of attention and understanding, especially the most recent report of the National Commission on Adult Literacy which documents crisis in the American Workforce, the question must be asked why, in almost every case, at every level, in local, state, and national elections, this crisis has continued to be ignored.

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