

Testimony of
Beverly Smith, Assistant Commissioner-Adult Education Technical College System of Georgia
before the
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As a corporate manager for 18 years and a small business owner for 20, I never expected to work in the world of adult education...fate put me here. I have to admit, it is not what I expected and what I learned about the incredible numbers and the impact this group of citizens has on our economy is staggering.

It is an economic imperative that we focus on what I consider "low hanging fruit" to our economic recovery.

I'm here to address the importance of the Workforce Investment Act's reauthorization as it relates to adult education's role in creating a skilled workforce for a competitive economy. Why does the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act matter, as relates to adult education in the United States?

Let me first address the need: We have 31 million adults in this country who do not have a high school diploma or GED. These citizens, our citizens, also don't fit into any one ethnic or minority group as some, me included, may have assumed. They are equitably all of us.

Their chances of gaining jobs with family sustaining incomes are limited; and while some are learning disabled or have a handicap of some sort, a majority of them are people to whom "life happened".

- The breadwinner in their family lost his or her job during our recession and they left school to get a job;
- They come from a history of family members without an education and they don't value schooling ("we get along just fine, thank you!"). They see no need to stay in school past what they considered "the basics";
- They had children at an early age and dropped out;
- They worked in a factory, mill, plant or in agriculture where you didn't need to read or write well to do the job. But now these businesses have closed, gone overseas or retooled with technology that requires a different set of skills that they don't have and have been laid-off or fired with no place else to go.

In other words, many of these drop-outs are able-bodied Americans who could be more productive working folks, earning a paycheck, infusing dollars into our economy, taking care of their families, staying out of the criminal justice system... all that... if we had the resources to educate them and put them on the path to a career or college readiness.

As WIA ties the education of these citizens to basic workforce skills development, there is no doubt in my mind that a full partnership between those of us who are expert in the education of our adult citizens in the basics of "reading, writing and 'rithmetic" (the three "R's", as they called it in my day) and those who identify and place them in jobs is the most efficient and effective way of doing what

we describe in Georgia's adult education program of "Creating a Workforce for Georgia and a Future for Families". While the current Workforce Investment Act supports that partnership, the reauthorization effort you will undertake provides an opportunity to strengthen that partnership without diminishing the role of any of its key stakeholders: those being our state departments of labor, workforce investment boards and state adult education systems that focus on basic education and skills development with the three "R's" of the new normal: revive, refocus and retrain!

Let me share a picture of how a partnership of the state's key workforce stakeholders can work... and I'll use Georgia as an example. Georgia's Adult Education Division is a part of the Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) and, as our Commissioner Ron Jackson always says, we are an equal part of Georgia's workforce education three-legged stool: adult education, our 25 technical colleges and Quick Start, our world renowned division that customizes workforce training free-of-charge to qualified businesses. Commissioner Jackson also sits on the State Workforce Investment Board ensuring that adult education has a voice; and our adult education office is directly engaged with Georgia's Department of Labor to implement Accelerating Opportunity, which dually enrolls our adult education students in college courses allowing them to get their GED and technical certificates to be work ready at the same time.

The fact that we are positioned to work in partnership with an equal voice is the good news, but let me delve further into our situation. Even with that in place, we were only able to serve 70,000 of the 1.2 million adults in Georgia who do not have a high school diploma or GED® credential and in 36 of our 159 counties, 30% or more of their adult population lack a high schools education... counties that will never have new business or jobs without a change in these statistics. I think the same scenario is played out all across our country.

Recognizing the significant role that each stakeholder plays in ensuring greater economic strength through a well trained workforce, the opportunity is there for Adult Education, DOL and local WIBs to strike a better balance between basic education skills training, that leads to job-specific skills training, that leads to industry and job growth. As I've indicated by the numbers... the potential is there.

How can an improvement in WIA's reauthorization updates help from our vantage point?

- Adult Education needs to be at the table as an equal partner with the state and local workforce investment boards. Acknowledging that there are a significant number of adults who are unemployed or underemployed or who can't even participate in training due to basics skill needs must be addressed by adult education before these folks can even participate in job skills training offered by DOL through our local WIBs.
- There is a need to ensure that the key workforce players are all held accountable for the same performance measures and rewarded equitably for success on those measures. I am a firm believer in pay-for-performance accountability and it has paid off in Georgia. We reward our top performers who met our federal targets and work to support those who don't, with the understanding that consequences happen. However, unless my peers in workforce development are accountable for the same results and the incentive dollars authorized in WIA are equally distributed, that mutual accountability does not exist.

- Speaking of funding, I cannot tell you how important it is to continue states' maintenance of effort funding – a true partnership of state and federal funding.
- In addition, the percentage of dollars we get for “Administration” is truly funding that goes to teacher professional development and education. While we send a vast majority of our monies to local programs, without these federal dollars held at the state level and a part of our funding formula, we will not be able to maintain the training that our teachers need to reach our country's goal of building a strong career and/or college-ready workforce.

There's so much more I'd like to say but my 5 minutes is up. My excitement about the potential of this population is clear. Our country has to be ready for whatever is before us... preparation through education is the key. The price of ignorance is too high.