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Shaping practice from the top down: The impact of federal legislation on ABE practice

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Abstract: Through case descriptions of twenty-four programs in six states, this study documents the ways in which policy-oriented federal legislation, namely the Workforce Investment Act and Welfare Reform, influences the day to day practices of program administrators and instructors.

Two major pieces of federal legislation-the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (Welfare Reform) and the Workforce Investment Act-passed in 1996 and 1998, respectively, have the potential to widely influence Adult Basic Education (ABE) practice at the state agency, program, and classroom levels. This roundtable presentation discusses findings from a study currently underway designed to track the extent to which and in what ways these two reform initiatives are changing how practitioners do their jobs and how this influences the educational opportunities of adults who seek ABE services.

Welfare reform, with its time limits and work requirements has been shifted from a program that provides cash assistance to the needy as an entitlement to a temporary form of aid. The emphasis now is on getting recipients off the roles and into jobs. The "work first" philosophy of Welfare Reform places a high value on job attainment of any kind on the assumption that the best preparation for work is work itself. This operating principle, along with the fact that in most states participating in an educational program does not count toward fulfilling initial work requirements has the potential to influence ABE. For example, many programs may feel pushed to offer short-term job preparation classes rather than intensive, long-term classes designed to build basic skills. At the very least, we can assume that welfare reform has greatly decreased the number of adults who are seeking to participate in ABE classes.

Because federal money for welfare is now passed along to states in block grants which gives them considerable autonomy in the allocation of funds, the relationship between ABE and welfare varies greatly from state to state. For example, there is wide variation in the level of collaboration between these entities. In states where there is a stronger emphasis on human capital development there are rich examples of funds being pooled and partnerships formed which seek to integrate work experience, training and education. In other states where there is a much more literal approach to work first, if welfare money is used for education of any kind it may only fund job-readiness type learning experiences with little or no attention paid to clients with needs in the area of basic education. Where a state falls along this continuum influences the ways in which ABE programs interact with the welfare system and reshape their practice to respond to the needs of this constituency.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) was designed, in part, to reform a sometimes fragmented, redundant and inefficient workforce development system. As part of this process and for the first time, funding for ABE was subsumed within labor-related legislation. Although ABE (including ESL and Family Literacy) is funded under its own separate title within the bill, its very presence here signals an intent on the part of Congress to officially marry (job) training and education rather than continue to allow each to operate with little regard for the other. This integration has many implications. Key among them are the fact that WIA imposes extensive accountability requirements upon the state agencies that receive federal dollars for ABE (and, in turn, has pushed the state agencies to require much greater accountability from the programs they fund). This emphasis on a performance-based system has led to the development of the National Reporting System (NRS), and the adoption of management information systems in virtually every state. It also mandates partnerships among multiple job training, workforce development and education entities at the local level through "one-stop centers."

This legislation, like that in Welfare reform which enables states to use funds in a far more discretionary way than was possible previously, inherently shifts the purposes of ABE to a greater emphasis on literacy for the purposes of employment. As programs respond to demands for accountability, job placement becomes an important measure of their success. As a goal, job placement is often important to learners, but as a primary focus of funding it represents a narrowing of the purpose of literacy education from that of the previous legislation which funded ABE.

This brief, and greatly oversimplified, overview of Welfare Reform and WIA begins to suggest the ways in which federal legislation can influence how practitioners do their jobs. Several studies are underway which document system-level changes. However, this study asks at a more micro level what difference changes in procedures at system-level make when it comes to what actually goes on in classrooms. We are looking, for example, at testing and reporting procedures, sorting mechanisms for placing students, use of materials, and the content of classroom instruction. Such an effort can answer questions about the relationships between policy-oriented legislation and practice.

Based on interviews with state directors in six states that are diverse along a number of dimensions, "thumb nail" sketches are being developed of the mandates, requirements and incentives that programs can/must respond to in relationship to Welfare Reform and WIA. These thumbnail sketches are the basis for the development of fieldwork protocols. Practitioners from six programs in each state will be interviewed. These interviews will help us understand the ways in which reforms initiated and then implemented from the "top down" actually create change, are resisted and/or get reinterpreted to meet local need. Our findings may also suggest ways in which "bottom-up" practice actually re