



Policy Brief

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About D.C. LEARNs

Our Mission:

To lead an active coalition of Washington, DC literacy programs, learners and supporters, and work with them to strengthen literacy services and present a strong unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community.

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Program Perspectives on the D.C. Adult Literacy System

I. Introduction

Purpose of this Report

D.C. LEARNs envisions an adult literacy system in the District of Columbia that is guided by the experience, expertise, and leadership of the community-based organizations that make up this system. Our work seeks to identify potential leaders and nurture an environment in which people in the field have a meaningful role in system-wide policy decision-making. From February 2006 through January 2007, we conducted a series of discussions with members of the adult literacy community in order to solicit their feedback on recommendations related to adult literacy currently under consideration by District policymakers. This paper summarizes our findings, analysis, and recommendations regarding that feedback.

About D.C. LEARNs

D.C. LEARNs is Washington's literacy coalition. Now in our 11th year, we work together with literacy programs in the District to raise public awareness of literacy issues, recruit volunteers, provide outreach to new learners, and provide the materials, research, training, and technical assistance needed to raise the quality of literacy services available to D.C. residents. Our coalition includes a majority of the organizations in the District that provide adult literacy services.

D.C. LEARNs is a partner in the District's Lifelong Learning Initiative and manages the Read Out Loud Literacy Hotline. Launched in 2005, the Read Out Loud (ROL) Hotline has the most comprehensive and up-to-date database of adult literacy program information that exists in the city. Our extensive knowledge of programs and our extensive outreach to the literacy community in the city over the course of eleven years uniquely positions us to gather the policy input from providers presented in this report.

Who Do Adult Literacy Programs Serve?

Adult literacy programs serve adult learners who are 16 years and older, and who have one or more of the following needs:

- ◆ They do not have basic education skills.
- ◆ They do not have a high school diploma or its equivalence.
- ◆ They need to improve their ability to speak, read, or write English.

Adult literacy programs (often referred to in the field as adult education programs) include: adult basic education (ABE) for adults who need to improve their reading, writing, or math skills, GED preparation, External Diploma Programs (EDP, an alternative high school diploma program), English as a Second Language (ESL), computer classes, workplace education and training, family literacy, learning disabilities, and services to seniors and institutionalized individuals.

How Are Programs Funded?

Public funds (both local and federal) for adult literacy programs in Washington are currently distributed through grants managed by the State Education Agency (SEA) at the University of the District of Columbia.

Approximately 25% of adult literacy programs are funded in part by public (federal and District government funding) sources. D.C. LEARNs estimates that programs that receive public support likely serve the majority of adult learners in the District. However, due to the mixture of public and private funding sources, D.C. LEARNs is unable to determine definitively how many learners are served exclusively via public dollars. Most of adult education programs receive no public funds; they receive only private funding.

Profile of Programs Contributing to this Report

This collection of input from the field regarding policy recommendations and decisions was undertaken on several fronts in the interest of reaching the broadest possible constituency of literacy programs, staff and learners. D.C. LEARNs electronically distributed a survey to eighty literacy providers on August 1, 2006 and received twenty-three completed surveys between then and October 1st. In addition to this survey, D.C. LEARNs solicited comments via e-mail and provided a forum for input online in February and March of 2007. We also hosted a day-long session for drop-in discussions on February 23, 2007, met with learners during the month of March, 2007, and held an open meeting to discuss policy recommendations on March 9th, 2007. The focus of this undertaking was to engage those in the field who do not normally have the opportunity or venue in which to give unfettered input.

Although input was solicited from literacy providers throughout the District, only thirty-one of the one hundred and fifteen organizations offering adult education services in D.C. participated. Because of this the results may not necessarily represent the consensus view of everyone in the D.C. literacy community. However, most of the major organizations providing such services were among those participating.

In light of this, we have put together a short profile of those who participated in this process:

- ◆ Of the programs whose input is included, twenty provide GED or high school equivalency services, sixteen provide Adult Basic Education training and seven provide English as a Second Language. Twelve of the respondents provide more than one type of service.
- ◆ Eighteen of the programs that participated in the process receive both public and private funding, eight receive only private funding. We are unsure of the funding status of three respondents.
- ◆ Eighteen of the thirty-one programs from which we received input are member programs of D.C. LEARNs. The thirteen non-member literacy providers participated only in the survey.

It is also important to recognize that even within programs, differences of opinion may exist between staff, students, and program directors. For the most part, the program views captured in this report represent the views of Executive Directors and Program Directors.

Organization of this Report

In this report, we thought it would be helpful to group comments and recommendations into categories corresponding to the purviews of the subcommittees of the Mayor's Adult Literacy Council (MALC)¹. In some cases, the arrangement of topics under these categories may not be entirely intuitive, but we thought it was important to mirror the MALC structure at this time. Under each section heading will be a brief profile of the programs detailing which ones provided comments and/or feedback in each subject area. There will then be a bullet-pointed list of comments from the field. These findings represent a summary of the comments we gathered from the field, and are not direct quotations. Following the findings, D.C. LEARNs has provided a succinct analysis of the comments, and finally a recommendation which identifies the policy action that the input from literacy providers suggests.

II. Standards and Assessment

Profile:

The ideas expressed in this section come from a heterogeneous group of literacy providers. There was no clear divergence of opinion between programs that do and do not receive public funding, ABE, GED or ESL programs or between member and non-members of D.C. LEARNs. All programs were concerned with the reliability of assessment instruments and the performance of the SEA. Though concerns with the GED testing center were voiced primarily by programs that provide GED services and receive referrals from the center, there were three specific cases where ABE programs mentioned students finding them only after having been erroneously sent to a GED program they were not prepared for.

Findings:

Programs expressed several concerns and views regarding the assessment tool and standards that the District will use to measure program success. Some of the concerns expressed included:

- ◆ Due to program variance in curriculum, population served, etc, a unified assessment of programs is neither accurate nor desirable.
- ◆ Performance indicators need to be applicable across the board in the capacity they are used. They should not target specific tests or materials, but results, because programs target different populations and use different methods and curricula to help students learn.
- ◆ Assessment tools and evaluation standards should take their learners' backgrounds and goals into account.
- ◆ It is important to ensure appropriate assessment of programs serving lowest literacy level learners.
- ◆ Standards should ensure that there is room for flexibility in the curriculum, so that teachers can design classes around their particular types of learners.
- ◆ Provider organizations should play an active role in the designing of monitoring and evaluation methods, and be involved in the process of administering such efforts.

Participants also felt strongly that the SEA and GED testing centers themselves would benefit from some study and independent assessment. In some comments, participants suggested:

- ◆ An independent evaluation of the SEA, more tailored than the one conducted on a federal level, could be useful in analyzing the quality of service provided.
- ◆ Literacy programs do not feel they have a way to express concerns with the policies of the SEA without risking upsetting the agency, a primary source of funding.
- ◆ The GED testing office needs to be evaluated for customer service and effective performance.

Analysis:

It is clear that there is a significant amount of anxiety when it comes to the subject of program assessment. The underlying concern is that any general standard will improperly reflect the actual performance of literacy programs. Clearly it would be difficult to properly assess ABE and ESL using the same benchmarks as GED programs. Additionally, an assessment tool that does not take into account the target populations of certain programs might result in a funding shift away from programs that serve the most needy populations due to an apparent low success rate. Programs feel that a closer collaboration with literacy providers in developing an assessment tool will go a long way in resolving these difficulties.

There was also a pervasive belief among programs that the SEA and GED testing center are not operating in an efficient and effective manner. Whether these perceptions are justified or not is outside the scope of this analysis. The suggestion regarding evaluation of the GED testing center is closely related to several accounts of improper and hasty referrals of adult learners into GED programs.

Recommendations:

1. Tailor assessments for GED, ESL, and ABE programs so that standards take into account target populations.
2. Commission an external assessment of the SEA.
3. Establish a mechanism for programs to express concerns or make comments regarding its policies without fear of retaliation.
4. Substantively engage literacy providers in the development of monitoring and evaluation methods and the process of monitoring and evaluating programs.

III. Governance

Profile:

The eight programs that provided input in this subject area are all members of D.C. LEARNs. Five receive both public and private funding. Five offer GED, two offer ABE and one offers ABE and ESL.

Findings:

The participants strongly felt that the Workforce Investment Council (WIC)² could benefit from a closer connection with the adult education community. The consensus was:

- ◆ If the policies of the Workforce Investment Council are to be effective, the most important change required is the creation of a strong link between the WIC and the adult education community. Even if the relationship is only an advisory one, it is important—the WIC cannot create programs without a full understanding of skills and needs of the population it is targeting.

One participant offered an additional suggestion regarding proposed changes to the WIC:

- ◆ Making the Workforce Investment Council a separate agency would drain the resources necessary to set it up. It is an expensive process, and the WIC could easily be empowered without separating it from the Department of Employment Services.

There was a very strong feeling among participants that collaboration and partnership between adult education providers and other city services needs to increase in order to better serve District residents. Among the comments, participants mentioned:

- ◆ Linkages between education programs and other service providers need to be stronger.
- ◆ Caseworkers need to be more informed. Learners cannot be sent to programs without proper regard for their level of education and other needs, such as childcare services, housing, and unemployment—the common GED recommendation is often inappropriate. A closer connection with the adult education community could assist in reducing misplacements and ensuring that the obstacles between a potential learner and their completion of a program are better understood.

In response to concerns that the adult education community is fragmented, the participants offered a couple of suggestions for encouraging programs to collaborate with each other:

- ◆ It is very easy to create collaborations on paper that never materialize. If collaboration among literacy providers is a serious goal, real accountability measures must be created to enforce it.
- ◆ If funding had an allowance, or a special allotment for sub-contracting, it would be far easier for programs to ef-

fectively collaborate—programs cannot afford to provide their services to other programs free of cost. By allowing some flexibility in spending, one program could sub-contract another adult education program with a different specialization to provide more comprehensive services to its learners. Such subcontracting might even be viable for collaboration with counseling and other related services.

Participating programs discussed the problems they had encountered with testing and accessing appropriate support services for learners. Some suggested that the city support some central resources for adult education providers to better serve D.C. residents:

- ◆ A testing and referral center might ensure proper placement of students and reduce stress on programs with learners who may not be an appropriate level for services
- ◆ A citywide clearinghouse of additional training and/or other support services would greatly assist programs refer students to these services when needed.

Analysis:

The strong feeling in regards to governance in adult education identified the need for a closer connection between the adult education community and related city services and agencies. Literacy providers have a very good understanding of the obstacles their learners face, and the sort of policies that they would be able to benefit from and take advantage of. The adult education community would be a great resource and partner for the city in terms of devising workforce development policy and improving city services.

Programs were also interested in having central, comprehensive resources for support and information to make directing learners to necessary training and support services a more navigable process. Many learners have close relationships with their programs, and come to them with questions and personal situations that are difficult for programs to address.

Recommendations:

1. The WIC should engage the adult literacy community in planning and decision-making that affects the population served by adult literacy providers.
2. Funders should require effective collaboration among providers of various education and support services needed by adult learners and ensure that all parties who collaborate are compensated for services they provide as part of the grant.
3. The District should investigate the efficacy and cost-benefit of supporting additional centralized resources, such as testing, information, and referral services.³

IV. Research for Accountability and System Improvement

Profile:

Of the nine programs that voiced concerns in this section about the funding and personnel required to effectively collect data, seven came from programs that receive some public funding. Additionally, all programs that commented in this area are members of D.C. LEARNs.

Findings:

The participants suggested that follow-up with learners to document progress and further understand trends in the population served would be a great tool in understanding problems faced by adult learners. Among the benefits programs cited were:

- ◆ Better understanding of program completion rate and reason for drop-outs.
- ◆ Success rate for referrals and an understanding of learner progression from program to program.
- ◆ Reasonable data about success in employment.

However, the participants also mentioned the following reservations:

- ◆ Tracking students after they have left the programs is very difficult and time-consuming for most programs.⁴
- ◆ A follow-up process is time-consuming, costly, and very difficult due to the lifestyle and situations of learners.

Programs understand and agree with the need for data collection in informing system improvement, and are willing cooperate in implementing established procedures in order to facilitate the process, so long as given the funding and personnel to do so.

Analysis:

Programs understand the importance of data collection and assessment, but they want to ensure that related procedures and requirements contribute, not detract, from the important services they provide to D.C. residents. Cooperation and support is easy to garner by ensuring that adequate resources will be provided to fulfill accountability requirements without siphoning off funding for service provision. Programs which do not receive public funding most likely expressed less concern because they do not feel as vulnerable to losing funding as a result of having to meet increasing accountability requirements.

Recommendations:

1. Funders should consider supporting a research study that follows up with learners who have left their literacy programs, including both those who apparently dropped out and those who may have gone on to further education, training, and/or employment.
2. Funders should work with literacy programs to understand the true costs associated with accountability requirements and ensure that grants adequately support these costs while not reducing funding for services to learners.

V. Finance or Funding Models

Profile:

All thirty-one programs that provided input in the data gathering process discussed funding in their responses. The majority of the twenty programs that receive public funding, however, argued beyond the need for increased funding and offered suggestions regarding funding decisions.

Findings:

Participants felt very strongly that a large and sustained increase in funding is necessary to better serve the demand for literacy programs in the District of Columbia. Some of the specific comments included:

- ◆ More funding is needed for staff, technology, and teaching materials.
- ◆ If the city is serious about improving K-12 education, it needs to dedicate resources to improving the education of parents so that children's education is supported and reinforced not only in school, but also at home.

Participants also took a keen interest in the formation of funding decisions:

- ◆ D.C. should create a fair system for allocating state funding based on program quality, outcomes, population and location of service.
- ◆ There should be participatory decision making regarding: formation of funding priorities for government grants, adult literacy program and professional development topics, program quality and indicators, and the workforce development plan of the District

Additionally there was agreement among participants that multi-year grants would contribute to infrastructure stability of adult education programs in the District.

Analysis:

The general and overwhelming consensus regarding funding reflected a need for greater dedication of city resources to adult education. There is a large demand for adult education services in the District, and in order to meet such demand, and ensure that learners are equipped with the skills and training they need to improve their lives, program funding must increase.

To ensure that money is being well-spent, the literacy community should be consulted during the funding process to help direct money to the areas of greatest need. Additionally, funding to specific programs should be based on factors contributing to their overall usefulness and effectiveness in educating city residents.

Though multi-year funding was not a pervasive topic when discussing funding, programs did agree that it would provide stability to the District's adult education system.

Recommendations:

1. The Mayor and the District Council should provide increased funds for adult literacy services based on both the needs of District residents and successful program performance.
2. Public policy-makers should work with the field to develop a realistic cost per student funding formula similar to the one produced by Maryland in 2005⁴ to ensure the adequacy of system resources to produce desired results.
3. Public policy-makers should substantively engage adult literacy providers in decision-making regarding funding priorities, performance measures and standards, and determining and addressing professional development needs.
4. Research regarding the implementation of multi-year funding for adult education should be conducted to explore the possible benefits and assess the viability of such a funding scheme in the District.

VI. Literacy Levels and Workforce Needs

Profile:

Although the ten programs which provided input in this section spanned the categories of public and private funding, type of service offered, and membership in D.C. LEARNs, there were noticeable groupings of comments and suggestions. ABE programs and programs targeting learners at lower levels of education voiced concerns about setting realistic goals in relation to workforce readiness, whereas programs offering GED or other advanced training expressed strong interest in developing relationships with local employers, and incorporating job training to bridge the gap between high school equivalency and job readiness.

Findings:

Participants expressed concerns regarding workforce transitions for lower level learners:

- ◆ Strategies for placing learners into skilled jobs in the District need to realistically address the situations and capabilities of the adult education population as a whole. Self-sufficiency is a worthy goal, and individual potential should not be curtailed or underestimated, but it is still important to understand that there may be portions of the population unable to work in more advanced industries, so a simultaneous effort to support low wage earners is necessary.
- ◆ It is possible to integrate work readiness with basic education, but it is important that the integration take place in partnership with providers of ABE, with teachers who know how to teach such students—otherwise both learners and programs are frustrated. With funding and materials, basic work readiness can be brought into adult education courses, while leaving more advanced job training to specialized programs.

Participants felt strongly that in order to increase matriculation into jobs, the D.C. government could play an important role in encouraging employers in the District to collaborate with adult education providers. Specifically mentioned were the following suggestions:

- ◆ Establishing connections with employers would be very useful. D.C. should work on getting a commitment from employers to hire graduates from adult education programs and create incentives for employers to encourage continued education and training for learners while they work.
- ◆ A stronger connection between employers and programs is desirable—it is a logical place to find a job upon completion, but programs are not equipped to be job referral agencies, and often do not have the resources to help students find jobs.

Programs also expressed a willingness to incorporate new, targeted training into their curriculum to assist in D.C.'s goal to get adult learners into self-sufficient jobs. One program specifically suggested that:

- ◆ Adult Ed centers could offer specialized training to prepare post-GED students for apprenticeship and union tests that are required for some jobs. Some funding for staff training and technical assistance would be necessary, but this would help eliminate barriers to jobs for many adult learners.

There was one dissenting voice, which felt that separate programs for job training would be more desirable, arguing:

- ◆ Offering incentives for literacy providers to incorporate job training into their current program is counterproductive; it encourages people to over-expand their mission for money and compromise the value of the program rather than to focus on what they do well—partnerships with other programs, or simply referrals, are a better solution to the need for both job training and education

Analysis:

Though programs tended to be concerned with issues relating to their own constituency, their concern that the setting of specific targets and goals might overlook important populations of adult learners is an important one—it is important not to focus only on moving higher level learners into high-skills jobs, but also in moving lower level learners further along in their progression.

Programs were enthusiastic about the opportunity to help learners translate their academic work into success in the workforce. Provided the necessary resources, they would provide a fitting location to help adult learners attain necessary workforce credentials and pass employer tests. And, with the help of a stronger connection to employers, such achievements by learners could more easily be converted into self-sufficient employment.

Workplace literacy, a practice in which employers or unions sponsor or at least facilitate adult basic education in the workplace—often in a job-specific context—was not mentioned in our various communications with literacy providers. While the ROL database shows that forty-two literacy providers provide job-related training too, there are few that do so as part of an employer-sponsored effort. We do not know the extent to which area employers may be providing adult basic education themselves independent of District literacy providers. Since the issue of an apparent gap between the skills needed by area employers and the skills possessed by potential employees living in the District has been raised by business leaders and policy-makers and reported on by the media, we were surprised that workplace literacy was absent from these conversations.

Recommendations:

1. The District's Adult Literacy Professional Development Center should explore the need and demand for curriculum development training related to functional context education among area service providers.
2. Funders should continue to support instruction to the lowest level learners, even though it may take these learners a significant amount of time before they possess the literacy skills necessary to earn a living wage.
3. The District's Adult Literacy Professional Development Center should explore the need and demand for training related to transitioning learners from GED programs to employment, vocational or job training, and post-secondary education.
4. Policy-makers should explore the possibility of providing employers with support and incentives to establish workplace literacy programs between employers, individual collaborators, and adult education programs, and expressly listing workplace literacy as an allowable activity, if not a priority to be supported through public funding.

VII. DC's Adult Literacy/Education Populations

Profile:

The programs that provided input in this subject area are all members of D.C. LEARNs. Five of the nine programs that provided input in this section receive both public and private funding. Five offer GED services, three offer ABE, and one offers ESL instruction.

Findings:

The participants believed strongly that the target population of adult education is underserved in the district. They expressed interest in a campaign to make services better known. Among the input they provided were the following comments:

- ◆ Aggressive, comprehensive recruiting and outreach are sorely lacking. One should be thinking about door-to-door campaigns and ways to talk one-on-one in neighborhoods and other public spaces to seek out program participants.
- ◆ Increased outreach is a good goal, but we should make sure that there is somewhere to send the people who are being targeted—a real look at the capacity of programs is necessary.
- ◆ It would be useful to identify successful programs that have involved large scale efforts at recruiting and enlisting large numbers of participants to explore their approaches and see what can be tried here.
- ◆ The Internet cannot be relied upon as a primary place to reach out to adult learners—many lack the skills and equipment to access this medium.

Participants were very vocal in their belief that adequate and accessible support services are integral to the success of adult learners. They expressed numerous concerns about the availability of necessary services, and the comprehension that case workers have of challenges faced by adult learners. Among those concerns were:

- ◆ Adult education people need to work with case workers for referrals, to help them identify the needs of adult learners and educate them about the available programs in the adult education community.
- ◆ Literacy and education are not number one on the hierarchy of needs. We must ensure other needs are met first before we can expect learners to really commit to a program.
- ◆ There needs to be a better support system to remove obstacles between a learner and program completion (e.g., childcare, transportation, unemployment, housing, domestic abuse, drug use).

- ◆ We can encourage more young parents in the District to participate in literacy programs by providing child care services.

Although a community college is not exclusively a function of adult education, it would be an important resource for high-level learners in the adult education population looking to further their education. Thus, the possibility of its establishment is of particular concern to literacy providers. Participants felt that a community college, if correctly designed and implemented, could be a very useful resource for many District residents, and should be strongly considered. They offered the following suggestions regarding the proposed community college:

- ◆ Before creating a community college, research needs to be done and a case needs to be made for why we need one and what we expect from it. We need specific goals and an understanding of what role the community college would have in D.C.
- ◆ As part of research, a study of other effective community colleges and how they operate should be done. Montgomery County is a good example of an effective community college which skillfully serves the population.
- ◆ Expanding UDC in order to serve this role instead of creating a separate institution should be considered cautiously—if UDC is not thought to be capably fulfilling its current role, it doesn't make sense to give it more responsibility.
- ◆ A two-year vocational program is needed in the district.
- ◆ A community college could also offer one-time workshops for college credit, so that students may access programs without longer commitment.

Analysis:

Increased recruitment and outreach has a lot of support in the adult education community, so long as it is followed by increased funding and resources to serve the influx of learners that would result. There are many adults who could benefit from literacy services, but many programs even now are short on capacity, staff and funding. If a massive recruitment effort is going to be undertaken, D.C. needs to ensure that there are places to put new learners, otherwise the entire effort may amount to discouragement.

Support services play an integral role in the ability of potential learners to begin and complete education programs. It is unrealistic to expect learners to be able to succeed in their studies and work to support themselves and their families when they are facing profound difficulties at home. An increase in the accessibility and sufficiency of support services is essential to assist learners as they work to further their education and attain self-sufficient jobs.

While a community college in D.C. would undoubtedly afford residents increased opportunity to further their education and employment, it is important in considering such a big step to make sure it is done right. A community college can offer a wide variety of services; it is a large undertaking that would require quality management to be effective. Before further consideration of a community college can begin, it is important to understand what types of services and course programs would be most beneficial to District residents. Research to create a comprehensive mission statement detailing such services, and target populations should be done as a first step in this process.

Recommendations:

1. A comprehensive mapping of resources versus demand should be undertaken before any new outreach is conducted.
2. Research regarding the demand for support services and the availability of such services should be conducted and the findings of this study should inform the allocation of funding.
3. Any decision regarding the development of a community college in the District should be given careful consideration. A case needs to be made for why we need one and what we expect from it. Expecting UDC to fulfill this role needs to be considered cautiously if there are concerns about its ability to fulfill its current role.

Data Collection Analysis

Methods of Data Collection:

In our effort to engage the largest possible quantity of members of the adult education community, D.C. LEARNs tried a number of methods of contact. Because of our involvement in the Read Out Loud hotline database of adult education programs in the District, we have access to fairly comprehensive information about these programs

In this attempt to be as inclusive as possible, we began by sending out a web-based system survey to identify the needs and concerns of literacy programs throughout the District. Next, we provided our members with a summary of the survey results, together with policy recommendations relating to adult education compiled from reports by the Brookings Institution Greater Washington Research Program, the Fenty Transition Team, and Wider Opportunities for Women. We set up a comment section on our website for discussion of policy recommendations or general challenges in adult education. In addition to these computer-based methods of response, we hosted a day at the MLK library for anyone interested to drop in as was convenient and discuss their ideas, comments, or problems in adult education. We also facilitated a round-table discussion of current policy recommendations related to adult education and went out to programs to meet with learners and talk with them about their experiences.

Results of Methods:

In sheer numbers, the survey we mailed out was the most widely responded-to method of outreach by D.C. LEARNs. Still, only twenty-three of the eighty contacted programs responded to the survey. There were very few responses directly made via e-mail, and only a few postings to the message board. The six programs which expressed a preference for e-mail were all responsive when contacted individually, however, indicating that personal contact may be component of successful response.

The round-table discussion generated the most in-depth input from the field, as it provided a dynamic environment to discuss ideas and challenges. Turnout was also fair, with eight representatives of various members of the adult education community, despite being scheduled in conflict with an SEA workshop. The drop-in discussions resulted in only seven participants, and while all were very appreciative of the flexibility it afforded them, the effort was inefficient and time-consuming.

Meeting with learners required making in-person visits to a program after classes. Only one program was able to afford us such an opportunity, and of the fifteen students who participated, only five were able to stay for a lengthy period of time. The participants were nonetheless enthusiastic in talking about their experiences and impressions of the programs. The weakness in this method of input was that it was limited to first-hand experiences and challenges, and without a system-

atic surveys of learners, it is difficult to draw conclusions about broader issues in the adult education system.

Recommendations for Future Feedback:

The quality of the responses collected here demonstrate the importance of gathering input from providers of literacy services in order to make effective policy-making choices for the field of adult education. Additionally, several of the recommendations, if implemented, would require close collaboration and communication with literacy providers and emphasize the importance of a strong connection between the adult education community and city services in order to be effective. In light of these factors, an effective method for soliciting input from the field is an important step in moving adult education forward.

Based on this experience with engaging the adult education community, one of the most effective ways to gather insightful feedback and discuss ideas is within the venue of a scheduled meeting. In order to access the broadest range of programs possible, however, several meetings would need to be held in several regional locations throughout D.C. to ensure that everyone enjoys a similar degree of convenient accessibility. However, this method may effectively preclude the participation of very small providers, in that it requires participants to take time away from running their programs, which may be all but impossible for small providers to do.

E-mail and web-based discussion mechanisms provide a convenient avenue for programs to thoughtfully respond to inquiries. They provide an effective way to disseminate information and ensure that no thoughts are drowned out by a particularly vocal or outgoing participant as in a live meeting. However, technology has the disadvantage of being impersonal, and as a result evoking little obligation or urgency in the recipients. It is possible that part of the problem with this method of gathering input is that it is still a relatively new method of communication and may not be widely used among programs, especially as a primary means of interaction.

However, because of the low cost, this is a method of communication that should be continued in the gathering of data. The input that was collected via the Web was thoughtful and worthwhile, and in time, we expect more programs to grow comfortable with this method of providing feedback.

Any method of gathering input will inevitably under represent programs which are not yet developed enough to be able to take time away from their day to day needs in order to engage in policy discussions. Tailored and targeted outreach is necessary to ensure that research is inclusive and representative of the adult literacy community as a whole.

Conclusion

This paper presents the unfettered views of District literacy programs regarding topics on which policy-makers are presently deliberating. These views should be considered a starting point for more in-depth engagement with the adult literacy community. Adult literacy programs in the District have experience and insight needed to develop sound literacy policy.

As a step towards ensuring consideration of input from the field on an ongoing basis, D.C. LEARNs hopes to institute an annual process to solicit policy-related input from adult literacy providers. This process will provide an opportunity for these providers to comment on existing policies and proposals, raise new issues, and offer their own suggestions.

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- ⁴ It should be noted that former students have no obligation to maintain communication with programs, and thus tracking their whereabouts alone would be a considerable task, especially for a large program.
- ⁵ Grasmick, Nancy S. "Stepping up to the Future: Adult Literacy Challenges at Work, at Home, and in the Maryland Community." Superintendents Panel on Excellence in Adult Education. Maryland Department of State Education, 2005

Endnotes

- ¹ Launched in 2006, the Mayor's Adult Literacy Council (MALC) has brought together leaders from the business and philanthropic communities, District policy-makers, and literacy experts to develop a series of recommendations that will enhance and sustain a system of adult literacy that is responsive to the needs of D.C. residents.
- ² The DC Workforce Investment Council (WIC) is a group of public and private organizations empowered to advise the Mayor and District government on developing, implementing, and continuously improving the District's Workforce Investment system, enhancing and developing accountability and performance systems, developing and encouraging private sector participation and encouraging public input and support.
- ³ Note that some centralized information services provided by D.C. LEARNs have been historically supported by the city, such as the Read Out Loud Hotline and D.C. LEARNs' Web-based Literacy Clearinghouse. See: <http://www.dclearns.org>