



Adult Education Pays... For Fully Integrated Communities

On November 13, 2013, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released *Time for US to Reskill? What the [PIAAC] Survey of Adult Skills Says*.ⁱ The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) was a survey of 5,000 adults aged 16-65 in the U.S. and 24 participating countries. The survey assessed literacy, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments.ⁱⁱ

Commenting on the initial release of the PIAAC findings, OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría said, *“Proficiency in basic skills affects more than earnings and employment. In all countries, adults with lower literacy proficiency are far more likely than those with better literacy skills to report poor health, to perceive themselves as objects rather than actors in political processes, and to have less trust in others.”*ⁱⁱⁱ

The 2013 OECD PIAAC report found that “evidence on gaps in adult basic skills and the link with economic and social outcomes has been growing”, both nationally and internationally.^{iv}

OECD recommends that the US “take concerted action to improve basic skills and tackle inequities affecting sub-populations with weak skills”^v. More than half of adults with low skills are black or Hispanic. Low literacy is more than three times more likely among blacks and Hispanics than whites. Therefore, to help adults with low skills learn and to promote equity among groups, concerted action is necessary.^{vi}

Adults from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly likely to have low skills. In the US, for adults who have not completed secondary education, the odds of having low skills are ten times higher for those born to parents with less than a secondary education than for adults with a secondary education born to parents with a secondary education or higher. These odds of having low skills are much greater than the international average.^{vii}

Coming from a disadvantaged background “appears to have a larger impact on skills [in the US] than in other countries,” the OECD report concludes, in that having low skill levels in the previous generation is “readily reproduced in the current generation”.^{viii}

Other studies have also shown strong correlations between poverty and low literacy. “Compared with children whose families had incomes of at least twice the poverty line in their early childhood,” wrote researchers from the ETS Center for Research on Human Capital and Education, “poor children completed two fewer years of school, earned less than half as much money, worked 451 fewer hours per year, received \$826 per year more in food stamps, and were nearly three times as likely to have poor health”.^{ix}

Data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study “revealed significant differences in the cognitive skills measured” for toddlers and pre-schoolers; 67% of toddlers at or above the poverty level were proficient in expressive vocabulary, compared to 55% of toddlers below the poverty level, and the gap in numbers and shapes between pre-schooler income groups was even wider. Similar patterns were found in academic performance in school, SAT scores, and attending and graduating from college.^x

The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems has reported, “about 2 million immigrants come to the U.S. each year. About 50 percent of them have low literacy skills and lack high school education and English language skills, severely limiting their access to jobs and job training, college, and citizenship.”^{xi}

According to the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE, formerly OVAE), “Successful integration of immigrants is vital to the social and economic strength of the United States. Full integration for New Americans is multifaceted and includes linguistic, civic and economic integration. However, immigrants often face challenges on one or all of these areas which may hinder their participation in school, community and work. Challenges include limited English proficiency, lack of access to job training and retraining, inadequate information about credentialing and licensing, and limited understanding of U.S. civic engagement.”^{xii}

The odds of having low literacy skills are about ten times higher for foreign-born adults who are socio-economically disadvantaged than for native-born adults from advantaged backgrounds, according to the OECD report.^{xiii}

OCTAE describes English language learners as “the largest subgroup enrolled in adult education programs, with over 40% of students served enrolled in adult English as a Second Language classes in program year 2011-2012. Many more non-native speakers enroll in adult basic and secondary education programs. The ELL population is extremely diverse in terms of languages spoken, educational attainment levels, literacy skills in their first languages, and English proficiency. The population represents immigrants highly skilled in their home country but lacking English proficiency as well as immigrants with little formal schooling.”^{xiv}

The Educational Testing Service^{xv} also highlighted the impact of immigration on the U.S. workforce and economy: “In 2004, nearly 57 percent of the 16- to 64-year old Hispanic population in the United States was foreign-born, up from 46 percent in 1990. More than half of these immigrant Hispanics lacked a high school diploma. The lack of a high school diploma by such a large proportion of Hispanic immigrants is of concern, given the fact that almost 80 percent of immigrants who have not earned a high school diploma report not speaking English well or at all.”

“The causes and effects of weak basic skills are many-layered,” observed the OECD report, “They may emerge from a culturally impoverished background, from a learning disability, from poor schooling, or simply from life experiences and jobs which have not supported skills development. Given the diversity of groups and multiple causes involved, differentiated interventions are required.”^{xvi}

In *US: Time To Reskill?* OECD concluded that the US needs an approach that “goes beyond simply responding to expressed demand [for instruction], but emphasizes the need to reach out to those who may have weak skills, to raise awareness of the issues, and the scope for individuals to improve their skills through learning initiatives.”^{xvii}

ⁱ http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/education/time-for-the-u-s-to-reskill_9789264204904-en

ⁱⁱ <http://www.oecd.org/site/piaac/publications.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD Secretary General Angel Gurría, October 8, 2013, <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/launch-of-oecd-survey-of-adult-skills.htm>

^{iv} OECD, *Time for the US To Reskill?* p. 16.

^v Ibid p. 12.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid, p. 32 and 75.

^{viii} Ibid, p. 33.

^{ix} ETS, *Poverty and Education: Finding the Way Forward* https://www.ets.org/s/research/pdf/poverty_and_education_report.pdf p. 8

^x Ibid, p. 9-10.

^{xi} National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2007

^{xii} US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Adult Education and Immigrant Integration,

<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/sectech/factsheet/adult-education-immigrant-integration.html>

^{xiii} OECD, *Time for the US To Reskill?*, p. 33.

^{xiv} US Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Adult Education and Immigrant Integration,

<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/sectech/factsheet/adult-ell-pd.html>

^{xv} *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*, Educational Testing Service, 2007

^{xvi} OECD, *US: Time to Reskill?* p. 13.

^{xvii} Ibid, p. 52.