

# POLICY NOTES

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## Adult Education in America

### Introduction

Today and in the future, in the United States and abroad, literacy is the coin of the realm and is becoming the most important form of human capital. The rewards for what one knows and can do are large and growing. Those with low-level skills are finding it increasingly difficult to earn a good living and to participate fully in a society where individuals are being required to navigate increasingly complex health care, financial, retirement, and social systems. A recent survey of the literacy of U.S. adults, however, showed that about half performed below the level considered necessary to fully participate in such a complex society.<sup>1</sup> And when ETS researchers projected what adult literacy levels might look like in the future, based on existing skill levels and changing demographics, the results were not encouraging. These projections showed that by 2030, the average levels of literacy and numeracy among the working-age population will have **decreased** by about 5 percent, with tens of millions more adults scoring at the two lowest literacy levels. This means that as today's workers retire, they will be replaced by those who, on average, have lower levels of education and skill. This will happen at a time when many job openings will be in occupations requiring higher skill and education levels.<sup>2</sup>

In this scenario, adult education has a more critical role to play in today's society and labor market than ever before. As technologies continue to evolve and individuals change jobs more frequently than in the past, adult education will become increasingly important — not only to gain access to and succeed in the workforce but also for full participation in society. For this reason, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored the Adult Education Program Survey (AEPS) to provide comprehensive information about federally funded adult education programs and the

### THIS ISSUE

This issue of *ETS Policy Notes* briefly summarizes the results of the Adult Education Program Survey (AEPS) sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education and conducted by ETS. The results provide a comprehensive picture of federally supported adult education activities in the United States. This picture includes a description of adult education programs, along with a profile of the learners who are being served by these programs and a description of their prose, document, and numeracy literacy skills. This survey can, in many ways, be considered a survey of firsts.

- It represents the first time comparable literacy measures have been used to assess the skills of a nationally representative sample of adult education participants.
- It is the first time such measurement allows comparisons with a household sample, by comparing the general adult population with adult learners from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL).
- It is the first time this kind of assessment has been conducted in both Spanish and English.

For more detail, see the full report: Claudia Tamassia, Marylou Lennon, Kentaro Yamamoto, and Irwin Kirsch, *Adult Education in America: A First Look at Results from the Adult Education Program and Learner Surveys*, Educational Testing Service, 2007. Download copies from [www.ets.org/AEPSreport](http://www.ets.org/AEPSreport). A limited quantity of reports is available for \$19.95 (prepaid by check payable to ETS) from Mail Stop 02-R, ETS, Rosedale Road, Princeton, NJ 08541.

<sup>1</sup> Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development and Statistics Canada, *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Paris, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Irwin Kirsch, Henry Braun, Kentaro Yamamoto, and Andrew Sum, *America's Perfect Storm: Three Forces Changing Our Nation's Future*, Policy Information Report, Policy Information Center, Educational Testing Service, 2007. This report features an overview of existing skill distributions, the changing economy, and demographic trends. Download at <http://www.ets.org/stormreport>.



skills of the participants enrolled in the programs. These programs are aimed at improving skills in the adult population with respect to literacy, English proficiency, and secondary education.

The AEPS consisted of two surveys: the Program Survey, which collected information about the characteristics of adult education programs and the services they offered; and the Learner Survey, which assessed the literacy skills of learners in a sample of adult literacy programs. All stakeholders in adult education can benefit from the results of the surveys, as they provide a unique look at the structure, organization, and substance of adult education programs across the country.

## A Profile of Adult Education Programs

More than 1,200 adult education programs participated in the Program Survey, representing more than 3,100 adult education programs in the United States funded under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). The programs accounted for a budget of more than \$1.6 billion and varied in important dimensions, including program size, types of providers, funding sources, and instructional and support services. This section describes selected aspects of adult education program structure and operation during the 2001-02 program year.

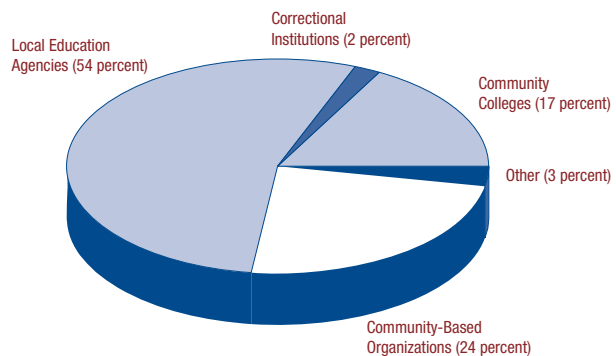
**Providers.** Funding under AEFLA flows to states which distribute the money to local programs. Administrative responsibilities for the programs vary across states. For example, state education departments may be responsible for programs in some states, while community college systems (or other agencies) may be responsible in others. Five types of providers were identified:

- **Local Education Agencies (LEAs)** — public schools or districts that provide adult education to all community members

- **Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)** — religious and social service groups, libraries, volunteer literacy organizations and coalitions, community action groups, and other public or private nonprofit groups
- **Community Colleges** — higher education institutions offering degrees below a bachelor's and technical degrees or certificates in mechanical or industrial arts and applied sciences
- **Correctional Institutions** — prisons and jails that are funded to provide adult education services to incarcerated adults
- **Other** — libraries, departments of human services, institutions for disabled individuals, and other coalitions and combinations of providers

Figure 1 shows the distribution of adult education programs among types of providers. LEAs represent the largest provider by far, offering more than half (54 percent) of the adult education programs. CBOs and community colleges also provide a fair share of programs, while correctional institutions were the smallest providers, offering just 2 percent of the programs.

**FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAMS AMONG TYPE OF PROVIDER**



**Instructional Services.** Adult education programs typically offer different types of instructional services categorized according to the learners’ skill level or language background. These include the following three types of instruction:

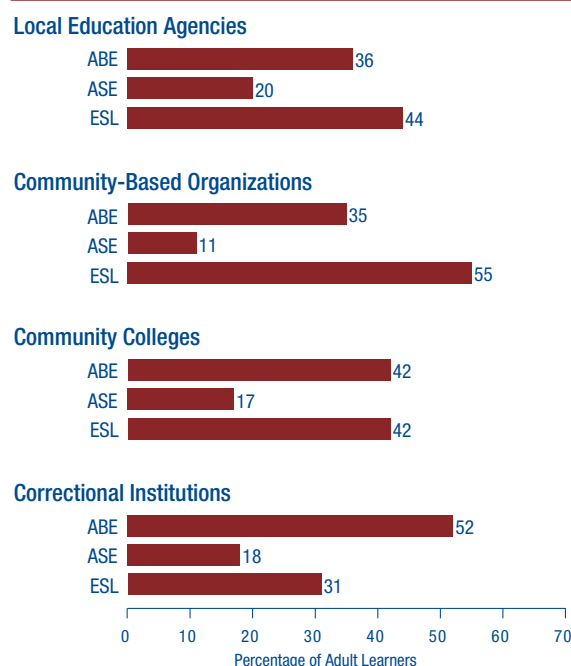
- *Adult Basic Education (ABE)* instruction is “designed for adults who lack competence in reading, writing, speaking, problem solving or computation at a level necessary to function in society, on a job or in the family.” ABE learners participate in programs to acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills.
- *Adult Secondary Education (ASE)* instruction is “designed to help adults who have some literacy skills and can function in everyday life, but are not proficient or do not have a certificate of graduation or its equivalent from a secondary school.”
- *English as a Second Language (ESL)* instruction is “designed to help adults who are limited English proficient achieve competence in the English language.”<sup>3</sup>

Overall, of the 2.7 million adult learners enrolled in adult education programs during the time of the survey, 43 percent were enrolled in ESL programs, 39 percent in ABE programs, and 19 percent in ASE programs. The survey data showed that the type of provider and the type of instruction were not related. That is, providers tended to offer more than one type of instruction in order to meet the varied needs of their learners. Figure 2 shows an overview of the distribution of adult learners in each type of instructional service offered by each type of provider. While there were not stark differences in the kinds of programs provided across types of providers, there appeared to be a few differences. Correctional institutions, for example, were more likely to provide ABE

services while CBOs were more likely to provide ESL services.

Adult education programs were asked to provide information about the intensity with which each type of instruction was offered. They reported the number of weeks per year that classes were held and the number of hours per week that instruction was offered. For the most part, programs reported holding classes for more than 40 weeks per year and this held across types of instruction. Seventy percent of programs reported offering ABE classes for more than 40 weeks per year, while 59 percent of ASE classes and 50 percent of ESL classes were held for more than 40 weeks per year.

**FIGURE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS, BY TYPE OF PROVIDER**



<sup>3</sup> Program descriptions shown in quotation marks are from: National Reporting System for Adult Education, *Measures and Methods for the National Reporting System for Adult Education – Implementation Guidelines*, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, U.S. Department of Education, Washington, DC, 2001.

The intensity of scheduled class times was reported across five categories, ranging from three or fewer hours to 20 or more hours during a typical week. Four to six hours per week was the most frequently reported category for all three types of instruction, which included 34 percent of ESL, 31 percent of ABE, and 26 percent of ASE classes. Interestingly, on average, about 20 percent of ABE and ASE providers indicated their classes were offered for 20 hours or more per week compared with only 9 percent of ESL providers. At the other extreme, an average of 11 to 15 percent of providers reported that they offered instructional services for three or fewer hours per week. The survey showed mean attendance for adult learners to be between 80 to 100 hours.

While the survey could not thoroughly investigate program effectiveness, some data are available on rates of student progress based on educational functioning levels. Learners who enroll in programs are classified into educational functioning levels based on an intake assessment. Literacy gains resulting from instruction are measured by comparing results from the intake assessment with results from assessments taken following instruction. One-third of all enrolled learners completed one educational functioning level, while one-fifth completed an educational level and advanced one or more levels. About one-third of learners remained at the same educational functioning level as when they first entered their programs. While noteworthy, the fact that 27 percent of learners left the program before the completion of an educational level should not detract from the positive retention rate of 73 percent of learners.

## Program Staff

This section provides an overview of the employment status of adult education program staff and a brief summary of their experience and credentials.

**Employment Status.** Adult education programs are generally staffed by a combination of full-time, part-time, and volunteer staff with various responsibilities in administration, support, counseling, and instruction. Across programs, administrative and clerical tasks were largely managed by full- and part-time paid staff. Instruction, on the other hand, was delivered mainly by part-time staff members, while volunteers comprised the main group for instructional aides.

Seventeen percent of staff members were full-time employees who worked 35 or more hours per week. Close to 60 percent of these staff worked in LEAs. In comparison, only 13 and 16 percent of full-time workers were employed by CBOs and community colleges, respectively, and less than 10 percent of full-time employees worked in correctional institutions.

Part-time employees made up 39 percent of the adult education workforce. These staff were also concentrated in LEAs, where about 60 percent of them were employed. The percentage of part-time staff working in community colleges was 26 percent, while the percentage in CBOs was just over 8 percent and only 1 percent in correctional institutions.

Volunteer workers accounted for 43 percent of staff working in adult education programs. Volunteers were concentrated in CBOs where 62 percent of them worked. Only 23 percent of volunteer staff members worked in LEAs, while 11 percent worked in community colleges.

Another way to view the distribution of adult education program staff is by their representation among types of providers. This distribution is shown in Table 1.

**TABLE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF STAFF MEMBERS WITHIN TYPES OF ADULT EDUCATION PROVIDERS**

	Full-Time Paid Staff	Part-Time Paid Staff	Volunteer Staff
LEAs	23%	55%	22%
CBOs	7	10	83
Community Colleges	16	57	27
Correctional Institutions	59	14	26

**Experience and Credentials.** Adult education program staff were quite experienced in the programs in which they worked. Thirty-one percent of the programs reported that they had full-time instructors who had been teaching in the program for four to 10 years, while 33 percent of the programs reported having instructors who had been teaching for 10 years or more. Part-time instructors had similar levels of experience. Volunteers, however, tended to have less experience — 31 percent of the programs reported having volunteer instructors with one year or less of experience in their program and only 12 percent reported having volunteers who had been teaching in the program for 10 years or more.

Most adult education programs have minimum educational requirements for staff — 76 percent of programs had requirements for full-time instructors and 89 percent had requirements for part-time instructors. The most common requirement was a bachelor’s degree followed by

K-12 certification. Minimum requirements were also reported for volunteer staff in 40 percent of the programs, most commonly a high school diploma or equivalent.

In addition to minimum educational requirements, many programs require specific credentials. The most common was K-12 certification, which was held by 28 percent of full-time instructors in ABE programs. Adult education certification was held by 13 and 10 percent of ABE and ASE full-time instructors, respectively. Special education and Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) certification was held by about 5 percent of full-time instructors. Among part-time instructors, 42 and 49 percent of ASE and ABE instructors, respectively, held K-12 certification, while 36 percent of TESOL instructors did so.

## Role and Uses of Assessment

The federal government requires that programs assess learners and report progress, although it does not specify the assessments to be used. The most commonly reported assessment for learners in ABE and ASE programs was the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE), with the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) a distant second. For learners in ESL programs, the Basic English Skills Test was the most commonly reported measure. Programs are required to pre- and post-test (the interval is not specified) to assess educational gain.

Assessments were widely used for many other purposes including placing learners, screening for learning and other disabilities, guiding instruction, and monitoring learners’ progress. Programs reported the most commonly used assessments were TABE (for both ABE and ASE learners),

Practice GED (for both ABE and ASE learners), CASAS (for ABE, ASE, and ESL learners), and informal inventories and teacher-made tests for all learners. These assessments were also used to provide learners with feedback about their performance and to identify special needs.

## Uses of Technology

The use of technology in adult education programs was commonplace and included the use of audiovisual equipment, computers for running educational software, and the Internet for both information retrieval and distance education. Overall, 80 percent of the programs reported that adult learners used computers for instructional activities.

Adult education programs also reported the use of other educational technologies, such as video series and instructional software targeted to specific adult learner populations as well as online learning. The following summarizes this technology use:

- About two-thirds of programs reported using a video series such as, “GED on TV,” “Workplace Essentials,” or “Crossroads Café.”
- At least three-quarters of programs reported using software designed for adult reading instruction, math instruction, or GED preparation.
- Slightly more than one-quarter of the programs reported that learners took advantage of online learning opportunities at the program site, versus off-site where learners would need their own Internet access.
- About one-tenth of the programs reported the use of broadcast/cable or satellite television at the program site.

More than 40 percent of adult education programs had a formal technology plan that addressed procurement and use. Financial resources, followed by the integration of technology into instruction, were specified as the most important factors in the expansion of computer technology for more than one-third of the programs.

## A Profile of Adult Education Program Participants

The Learner Survey was designed to profile a nationally representative sample of the more than 2.7 million adult learners enrolled in adult education programs in the United States during the period from March through June of 2003. Two instruments were used to gather this information. The first was a background questionnaire used to collect information about learner characteristics with respect to language background, educational background and experiences, labor market participation and other activities, and general demographic information. The second instrument was an assessment of literacy and numeracy skills derived from ALL, an international, large-scale assessment of adults conducted in 2003 with the United States as one of seven participants. This methodology allowed a comparison between the adult learner population and the general adult population in the United States. This section presents a comparative description of adult learners along with their literacy and numeracy skills.



## Defining and Measuring Literacy and Numeracy<sup>4</sup>

Literacy has been defined in a number of national and international surveys as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”<sup>5</sup> The AEPS shared this definition as well as the definitions of the three assessment domains.

- **Prose Literacy** is defined as the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts that include editorials, news stories, brochures, poems, fictional works, and instruction manuals. For example, tasks may require learners to find a piece of information in a newspaper article, interpret instructions from a warranty, infer a theme from a poem or contrast views expressed in an editorial.

- **Document Literacy** is defined as the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in non-continuous texts, or formats that include tables, charts, forms, and maps. For example, tasks may require learners to locate an intersection on a street map, use a bus schedule or enter information on an application form.

- **Numeracy** is defined as the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage and respond to the mathematical demands of diverse situations. These tasks cover a wide range of mathematical skills and include applying number sense, estimation skills, measurement, and statistical literacy to real-life tasks.

These three domains are represented through three proficiency scales ranging from 0 to 500

points. The scales are divided into five skill levels along the scale that represent the progression of skills and strategies required to successfully complete tasks at each level. Level 1 represents the least-demanding tasks and Level 5 the most-demanding tasks. So in addition to looking at average scale scores (290, for example), we can examine the percentage of adults who score at various levels on the scale (the percent who score at Level 5, for example), or combine levels to determine the proportions of a population who score above Level 3. Reporting results in terms of these levels adds to the interpretability of the data by not only showing the distribution of skills but also how they relate to various demographic and other characteristics.

## Profiling the Literacy Skills of Adult Learners

This section provides a broad overview of the prose literacy and numeracy skills of the nation’s adult learners and some perspective on how those skill levels compare with the skills of the overall adult population.<sup>6</sup> Readers are encouraged to see the full report for more detailed analyses (including the document scale) and interpretation of the data.

Figure 3 provides a summary picture of how adult learners compared with all adults on their prose literacy and numeracy scores. The figure also shows differences among different types of adult learners. The average scores of adult learners were substantially lower than the scores of the overall adult population — 50 points lower in prose and 58 points lower in numeracy. Among adult learners, those participating in ASE programs scored higher than other adult learners, while ESL participants scored the lowest.

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<sup>4</sup> Readers can refer to the full *Adult Education in America* report for more comprehensive information on the survey and its methodology.

<sup>5</sup> OECD and Statistics Canada, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> We have chosen to focus on the prose and numeracy scales in order to simplify the data presentation, while also representing the types of skills that will be most needed in today’s world.

**FIGURE 3: COMPARISON OF PROSE AND NUMERACY PROFICIENCY OF ALL ADULTS WITH AEPS PARTICIPANTS**

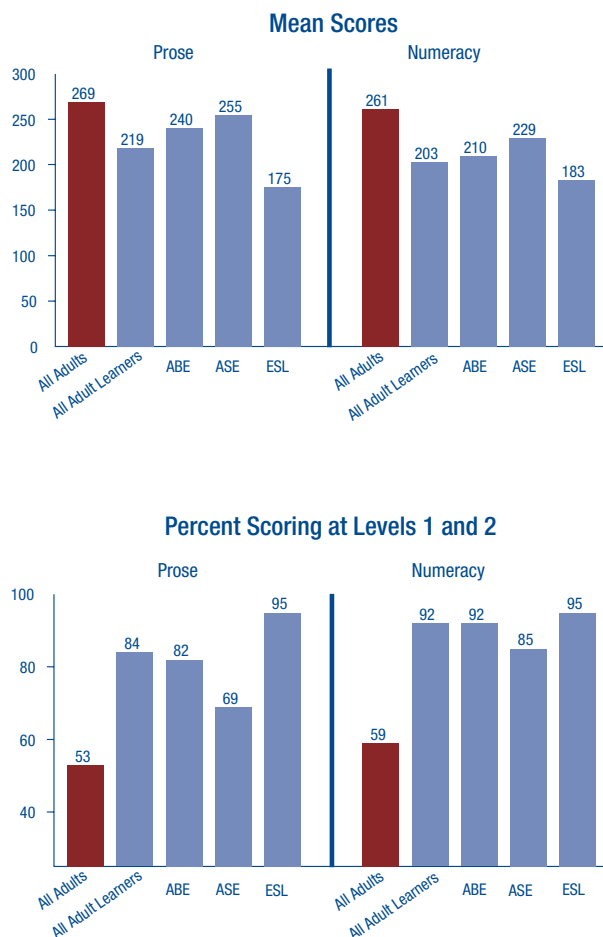
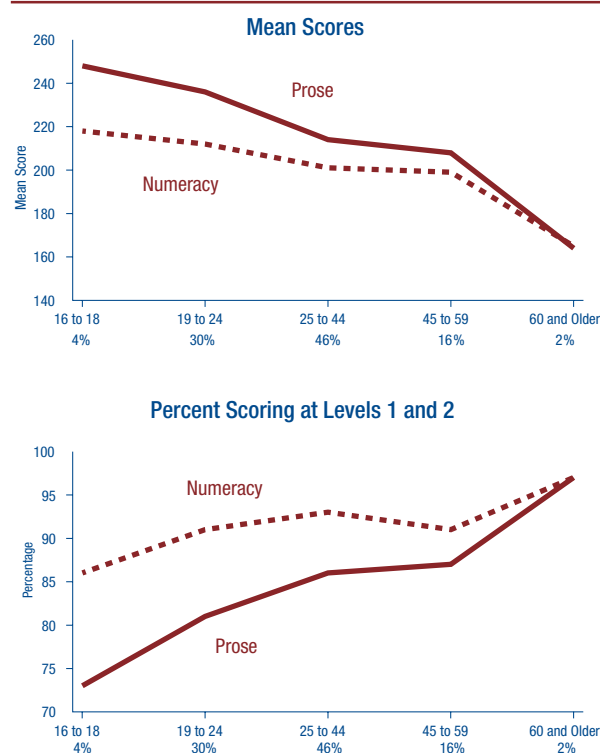


Figure 3 also shows the percentage of adults scoring at Levels 1 and 2. Experts have identified Level 3 as “a suitable minimum level for coping with the increasing demands of the emerging knowledge society and information economy” and “as a minimum standard for success in today’s labor market.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, adult learners who are performing at Levels 1 and 2 are likely to lack the full range of skills needed to compete and succeed in today’s society. In prose literacy, 84 percent of adult learners scored at Levels 1 and 2, compared with 53 percent of all adults. Again,

those in ASE programs were less likely to score at these low levels. In numeracy, the contrast is even more stark. While 59 percent of all adults scored at Levels 1 and 2 on this scale, 92 percent of adult learners did so. Ninety-five percent of ESL learners scored at Levels 1 and 2.

**Age.** Adult education programs target learners age 16 or older, resulting in wide variability in the age distribution. Overall, the adult education population was younger than the general adult population. More than one-third of adult learners were age 25 or younger, compared to about one-fifth of the overall adult population. In general, research has indicated a negative relationship between age and literacy skills. This is also the case with adult learners, as shown in Figure 4.

**FIGURE 4: AVERAGE PROSE AND NUMERACY SCORES AND PERCENT SCORING AT LEVELS 1 AND 2, ADULT LEARNERS, BY AGE**



<sup>7</sup> OECD and Statistics Canada, 2005, and Andrew Sum, Irwin Kirsch, and Robert Taggart, *The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality: Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective*, Policy Information Report, Policy Information Center, Educational Testing Service, 2002. Download from [www.ets.org/research/pic](http://www.ets.org/research/pic).



For both average scores, and for the percentage of learners scoring at Levels 1 and 2, younger learners outperformed older learners, on average. A large difference can be seen in prose literacy, where the youngest group of adult learners scored 40 points higher than the 45- to 59-year-old group. Younger adult learners were also less likely to score at Levels 1 and 2. In prose literacy, for example, 73 percent of 16- to 18-year-olds scored at Levels 1 and 2, compared with 87 percent of 45- to 59-year-olds and 97 percent of adult learners age 60 and older.

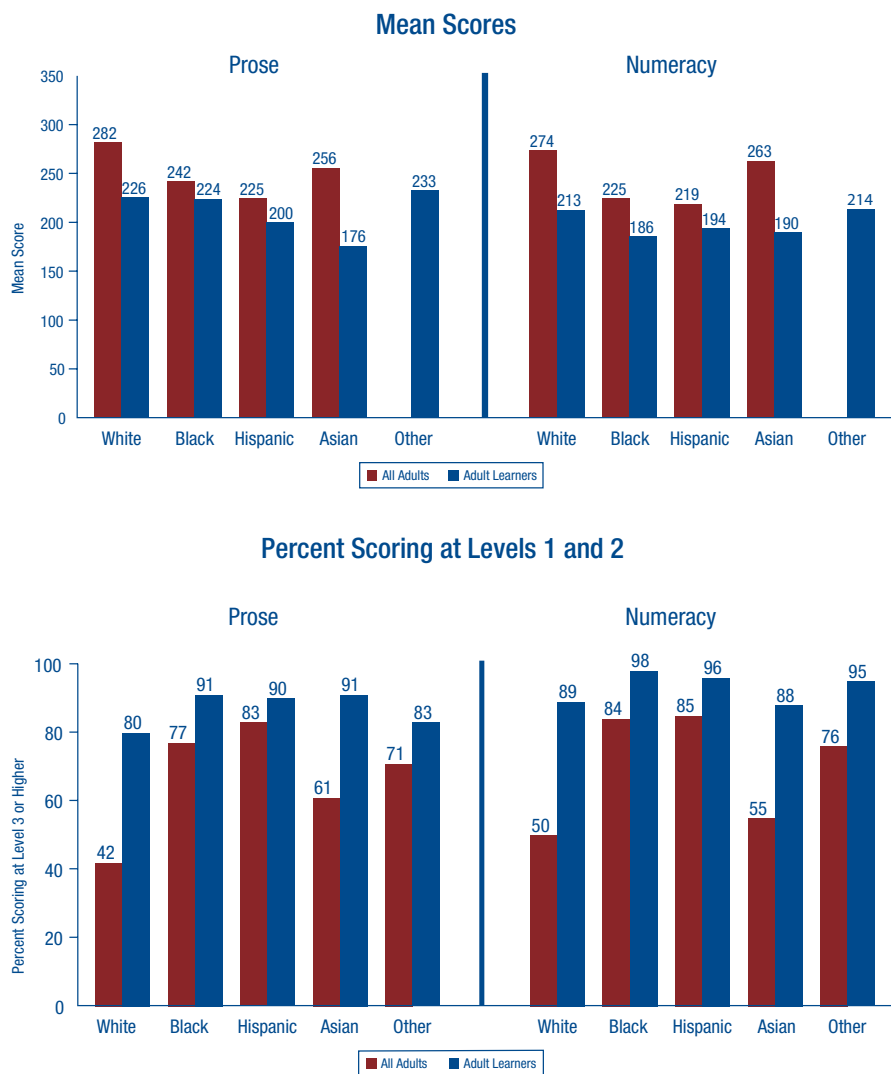
**Race/Ethnicity.** Adults in minority groups tend to be overrepresented in adult education programs. That is, the percentages of Black and Hispanic adults in the adult education population were larger

**TABLE 2: COMPARISON OF THE RACIAL/ETHNIC REPRESENTATION BETWEEN THE OVERALL ADULT POPULATION AND THE ADULT LEARNER POPULATION**

	All Adults	Adult Learners
White	70	53
Black	12	21
Hispanic	11	35
Asian	5	9
Other*	2	6

\*Other includes Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Alaskan Native.

**FIGURE 5: AVERAGE PROSE AND NUMERACY SCORES AND PERCENT SCORING AT LEVELS 1 AND 2, BY RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP**



than the percentage of those groups in the overall adult population — 24 percentage points more Hispanic and 9 percentage points more Black adult learners. Table 2 compares the adult learner population and the overall adult population by racial/ethnic group.

Figure 5 compares the literacy results of adult learners with all adults, breaking the data out by racial/ethnic group. As we might expect, adults in the adult education population from each racial/ethnic group scored, on average, lower than similar

groups in the overall adult population. For example, while 42 percent of the total adult White population scored at Levels 1 and 2, this was the case for 80 percent of the White adult education population.

The achievement gap among racial/ethnic groups that is seen in younger populations is also present among adults. In terms of both average scores and the scoring percentage at Levels 1 and 2, Black and Hispanic adults, on average, did less well than other adults.

Among adult learners, there was no significant difference in average prose and numeracy scores of Black and White participants. However, as shown in the bottom section of Figure 5, there were differences among adult learners in the percentage that scored at Levels 1 and 2. In prose literacy, for example, 80 percent of White adult learners scored at these levels compared to about 90 percent of Black, Hispanic, and Asian adult learners. On the numeracy scale, 98 and 96 percent of Black and Hispanic adult learners, respectively, scored at Levels 1 and 2, compared with 88 percent of White and Asian adult learners.

**Language.** The two major language groups within the population of adult learners were Spanish and English. Overall, 56 percent had learned English as their mother tongue, 29 percent learned Spanish, 7 percent learned an Asian language, and 2 percent learned a European language. Of the 44 percent that reported that English was not their mother tongue, English was still used by 13 percent of those adult learners at home and by 44 percent at work. Among this group, 59 percent reported that Spanish was the language most used at home and 28 percent reported that it was the language used most at work. When asked to evaluate their own English skills, 49 percent of

adult learners reported a limited understanding of English, 64 percent reported a limited capacity to speak English, and 62 percent reported a limited capacity to write English. Since the literacy assessment was in English, adult learners with English as their mother tongue performed better than adult learners who had other languages as their mother tongue.<sup>8</sup>

**Nativity.** Forty-three percent of adult learners were born outside of the United States, compared with 14 percent of adults in the general population. Most of these non-native adult learners appeared to participate in adult education programs to improve their language skills, as 85 percent of them attended ESL classes and only 3 percent reported English as their mother tongue. Native learners, on the other hand, were more likely to attend ABE and ASE classes (two-thirds and one-third, respectively).

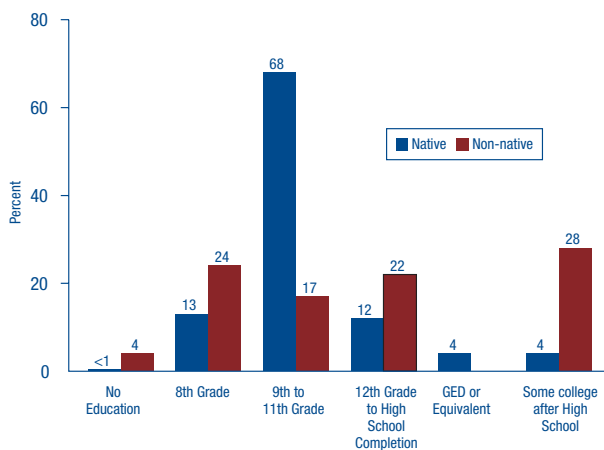
Non-native adults in both the adult education and general adult population had lower average scores than native adults, particularly in prose literacy. Ninety-one percent of non-native adult learners scored below Level 3 in prose literacy, compared with 78 percent of native adult learners. Among the total adult native population, 47 percent scored below Level 3, compared with 75 percent of the total non-native adult population.

**Education.** Adult learners were asked to specify the highest level of education they had completed in the United States. Overall, 9 percent of adult learners reported having completed only primary education (i.e., up to the 8th grade), while 53 percent reported completing their education up to the secondary level (i.e., between 9th grade and the completion of high school, either through traditional education or GED certification). Given the relatively large

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<sup>8</sup> To further explore the extent to which English-language fluency impacted the performance of Hispanic adults, the AEPS compared the performance of a representative sample of Hispanic learners who were randomly assigned to either English or Spanish versions of the literacy assessment. Results showed that while Spanish-speaking adult learners demonstrated somewhat higher average literacy skills in Spanish than in English, their skill levels were still well below those of the general population.

**FIGURE 6: EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE ADULT LEARNERS**



percentage of adult learners who are not native-born Americans, it is instructive to examine the educational attainment data by whether the adult learners were native or non-native to the United States as is shown in Figure 6.

Only a negligible number of native learners, who represented 57 percent of the adult learner population, reported no education. Thirteen percent completed primary education and 84 percent completed some secondary education (68 percent completed 9 to 11 years of school and another 16 percent completed high school or received a GED). Four percent completed some postsecondary education.

Non-native learners, who represented 43 percent of the adult learner population, showed a different pattern of educational attainment. Only 4 percent reported completing no education before immigrating to the United States, while 91 percent completed some education in their own country. Twenty-four percent completed up to 8th grade, while 39 percent completed some secondary education. An additional 28 percent of non-native learners indicated that they continued their

education beyond the secondary level, including 13 percent who completed a bachelor’s degree. It is likely that these degree holders are in adult education programs to help them master English.

## Summing Up

Adult education programs provide instruction in basic education, literacy, and English-language skills under a range of conditions and arrangements in LEAs, community colleges, community-based organizations, and correctional institutions. Along with adult basic education and adult secondary education programs, ESL programs serve immigrants or adults with limited English skills. Programs also serve populations with special needs (e.g., those with learning, sensory or mental disabilities) or adults in need of temporary assistance (i.e., displaced and migrant families, homemakers, homeless adults, and adults who are incarcerated).

Adult learners performed mostly in Levels 1 and 2 on the proficiency scales, indicating that large numbers of these individuals do not have the literacy skills needed to participate fully in society and the workforce. While such limited performance is to be expected given the nature of the adult education population, data demonstrating that many of these learners performed at the very bottom of the proficiency scales has important implications for the kinds of educational interventions needed to improve their skills.

Adult learners differed in many important aspects, ranging from demographic characteristics to their reasons for attending adult education programs. This variability also has implications for how programs are structured and clearly highlights the challenges that these programs face in addressing the diverse needs of adult learners.

One important finding of the survey was that 2.5 million adult learners are being served by America's adult education programs and those learners represent individuals most in need of improving their literacy skills. However, the data also highlight important issues within adult education that will require additional consideration and discussion. For example, on average, adult learners spent under 100 hours in programs over the course of a year. Of those learners, only one-third gained one or more educational levels during the year. Given the educational needs of these learners and

the consequences of not meeting those needs, one question is whether learners are attending programs for sufficient periods of time to improve their skills to a level that will impact their ability to succeed in today's society and labor market.

As national data show, the result of limited literacy skills is limited opportunities to succeed. The goal of the AEPS was to collect and present representative data about adult education programs and the learners they serve — with the hope that this data will both inform and contribute to the national dialogue about adult education and its increasingly critical role in today's society.

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