



Restoring the Promise of Adult Education

Strategies to Make Michigan a Leader in Preparing All Adults to
Succeed in a Knowledge-Driven Economy

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Author Recognition

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Public Policy Associates is a public policy research, development, and evaluation firm headquartered in Lansing, Michigan. We serve clients in the public, private, and nonprofit sectors at the national, state, and local levels by conducting research, analysis, and evaluation that supports informed strategic decision-making.



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Table of Contents

Author Recognition	2
Acknowledgments	3
Table of Contents	4
Letter from the President	5
Executive Summary.....	6
Overview.....	7
The Promise of Adult Education	7
MICHIGAN’S ADULT EDUCATION LANDSCAPE.....	8
Research Results	11
WHAT WORKS FOR ADULT LEARNERS.....	12
LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES	16
MICHIGAN OPPORTUNITIES	20
Strategies Roadmap.....	28
Appendix A: Methods	33
LITERATURE REVIEW	33
STATE COMPARISONS	34
EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS	34
MICHIGAN-FOCUSED INTERVIEWS	35
PROVIDER SURVEY	35
MAERS DATA	36
FOCUS GROUPS	36
Appendix B: Supplemental Research Reports	38

Letter from the President

Achieving long-term, sustainable, economic prosperity for Michigan has become increasingly dependent on the education and skills attained by its residents. Across the United States, metro areas with concentrated pools of educated and skilled talent are seeing economic rewards. Reports make clear these challenges will increase as artificial intelligence and automation transform the workplace, creating upward pressure on the knowledge and skills required by employers for their workforce. Regions and states need their populations to be well-educated and skilled if they hope to remain competitive in a knowledge driven economy.

Michigan faces two significant challenges: first, the state has an aging population and declining birth rate. Second, its residents have lower levels of education and skills compared to neighboring states and the nation overall. As a result, upskilling Michigan's adult population, while simultaneously improving the quality of our P-20 education system, is a priority.

In the face of this economic imperative, TalentFirst set out to understand what was happening with adult education in Michigan. While the state has devoted considerable resources toward programs aimed at fostering postsecondary education and training, adult education has been a neglected aspect of talent development. Michigan's adult education programs yield the results we should expect with diminished funding, insufficient outcome measures, and inadequate support for providers and learners. We must take this opportunity to address one of the biggest challenges holding us back: the unacceptable number of Michiganders who require basic education, English language acquisition, remediation, and high school completion/equivalency. Overlooking this population is detrimental to Michigan's long-term competitiveness, has a negative societal impact, and incurs long-term costs to taxpayers. In addition, focusing on adult education influences the next generation of learners and workers. It benefits children when parents value education, earn more, read regularly at home, help with homework, and act as partners with their schools. Parental success contributes to children's success.

Within this report, we share the current state of adult education in Michigan, what can be learned from other states, national experts, and the voices of service providers and adult learners. This research effort, designed and conducted by Public Policy Associates, has led us to a set of strategic recommendations. These strategies tie in directly with TalentFirst's recommendations for making West Michigan a top talent region. However, the aim is not to benefit one region of Michigan. The strategies detailed in this report would put Michigan on a path to being a leader in adult education in the nation. We look forward to working with partners to build a stronger, more effective, more cohesive adult education system for all.



Kevin Stotts
President, TalentFirst

Executive Summary

Adults in Michigan who lack basic skills, a high school diploma or GED, or who do not speak English are an untapped resource in Michigan. More than 716,000 adults in Michigan lacked a high school diploma in 2019. Of those, 267,000 aged 18-64 were not in the labor force.¹ And yet, in the 2020-21 school year, adult basic or secondary education programs reached only 17,182.²

This service gap is due, in part, to funding declines and adult education's subordinate status in the overall educational and workforce systems. State funding for adult education dropped by 78% between 1997 and 2019,³ resulting in a system that can serve only a fraction of the potential learners and that employs mostly part-time and underpaid adult education instructors. Today, the state invests \$0.01 on adult basic education for every \$1.00 spent on higher education.⁴ Getting fewer resources results in a diminished adult education landscape.

This report contains 21 strategies based on research conducted by Public Policy Associates. The activities included a literature review, promising practices from other states, interviews with national and state experts, analysis of Michigan Adult Education Reporting System data, focus groups with diverse adult learners, and a survey of the 118 providers who receive State School Aid Act, Section 107 and Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, Title II funding. The strategies fall into four categories:

- **System Integration:** Positioning adult education as part of a coordinated talent development system by raising its profile, aligning goals, working closely with employers and partners, delivering services in a human-centered manner, and connecting adult education and career pathways, and more.
- **Funding:** Injecting more resources to support adult education performance through increased state funding, redesigning the funding distribution strategy, greater flexibility through policy waivers, and investing in resources for systems change.
- **Educator Supports:** Demonstrating respect for the field through increased compensation and full-time positions, professional development to serve this population's unique needs, and adult educator certification, among other strategies.
- **Learner Services:** Addressing the whole learner to foster strong outcomes through expanded service access, flexible delivery methods, peer support, digital literacy, technology and learning environments, and learning plans that include assessment for disabilities and career connectivity.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. *2019 American Community Survey 1-Year Survey*.

² National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), Reporting Tables: States and Outlying Areas List, accessed October 29, 2022, <https://nrs.ed.gov/rt>

³ "2022 Budget Priority: Increase Adult Education Funding to Prepare More Workers for Training and Skilled Work," (Lansing, MI: Michigan League for Public Policy, 2022). Dollars adjusted for inflation.

⁴ Calculated by TalentFirst staff based on the Section 107 funding divided by the higher education budget appropriation as reported by the Senate Fiscal Agency, https://www.senate.michigan.gov/sfa/Departments/HighlightSheet/HIhed_web.pdf.

The strategies form a roadmap of what needs to happen to strengthen the outcomes of adult education in Michigan, prioritized into three phases of action. With concerted effort, Michigan can help a greater share of its adult population fulfill its potential as individuals, workers, and contributors to the economy.

Overview

THE PROMISE OF ADULT EDUCATION

A high school diploma or its equivalent and adequate English-language skills are oftentimes the entry ticket to more employment opportunity, more stable workforce participation, postsecondary education and training, and better wages.⁵ For instance, those with a high school diploma participated in the workforce in 2020 by 13.7 percentage points more than those with less than a high school education, and the rate of participation increases with additional education.⁶

For these reasons, adult education⁷ is a foundational component of every state’s development of talent. Adult basic education resulting in a high school diploma is important in itself to most employment and as a predicate to higher levels of education. As Table 1 shows, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has estimated that 39% of all entry-level occupations in 2021 required a high school diploma or equivalent. The BLS estimates that by 2031 the largest increases in employment will require high school completion as a foundational education.

Table 1. United States Employment by Typical Entry-Level Education Required

Typical Entry-Level Education	Employment Distribution, % 2021 ⁸	Employment % Change, 2021-31 ⁹
Total, all occupations	100	5
Doctoral or professional degree	3	9
Master’s degree	2	14
Bachelor’s degree	24	8
Associate degree	2	9
Postsecondary nondegree award	6	7
Some college, no degree	3	1
High school diploma or equivalent	39	3
No formal educational credential	22	5

⁵ Elka Torpey, “Data on Display: Measuring the Value of an Education,” Career Outlook, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (April 2018), accessed October 28, 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2018/data-on-display/education-pays.ht>. See also Jill H. Wilson, “Investing in English Skills: The Limited English Proficient Workforce in U.S. Metropolitan Areas,” Brookings Institution, Metropolitan Policy Program (September 2014), accessed October 29, 2022, [metro_20140924_investing_in_english_skills_report.pdf \(brookings.edu\)](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/metro_20140924_investing_in_english_skills_report.pdf) with respect to English language skills and proficiency. See also “Labor Force Participation Rate Report: Michigan’s Shrinking Workforce – Examining a 20-Year Problem,” TalentFirst (November 2022).

⁶ TalentFirst, 24.

⁷ *A note about terminology:* In the field, multiple terms are used to describe the type of education that is offered to adults. In this report, “adult education” refers to all types, inclusive of literacy, numeracy, and other foundational knowledge and skills.

⁸ “Employment Trends by Typical Entry-Level Education Requirement,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2017, <https://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2017/article/employment-trends-by-typical-entry-level-education-requirement.htm>.

⁹ “Occupations that Need More Education for Entry are Projected to Grow Faster Than Average,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, September 2022, <https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/education-summary.htm>.

Adult education is part of a continuum of education and training that positions individuals to maximize their potential and progress in careers. For those who lack basic skills, literacy in English, a high school diploma or GED, adult education is the critical bridge to further education and training. This is a priority for Michigan, with its goal for 60% of working-age adults to have a skill certificate or college degree by 2030. Adult education has a role to play in this objective, by preparing learners for postsecondary opportunities such as Michigan Reconnect, Futures for Frontliners and the Michigan Achievement Scholarship.

Like other states, Michigan also is contending with demographic shifts that limit the availability of talent for employers. These include an aging population, declining birth rate, and low net migration – factors that mean we cannot afford to neglect any portion of the talent pool.

When both the demand and supply sides of the labor market are served by coherent, effective, and sustainable adult education policies and programs, individual workers and businesses will benefit, as will the overall state economy.



Types of Adult Education

1. ABE: Adult basic education (math, reading, writing)
2. ELL: English language acquisition
3. HSE: High school completion (diploma or GED)

MICHIGAN'S ADULT EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

For the most part, adult education in Michigan is treated as an ancillary branch of the much larger K-12 system, although the Office of Adult Education (OAE) is housed within the state's Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) Workforce Development division. The effectiveness of this dichotomous arrangement is mixed. While the OAE receives strong support from Workforce Development leadership, systems issues, such as those used for awarding and administering grants, cause delays and create frustrations for OAE staff as well as for adult education providers.

That adult education shares certain elements with K-12 education should not obscure the significant differences between the two systems. These differences matter in several key areas — areas including classroom setting, materials, curricula, instruction, and assessment – largely because adults have life experiences and learning needs that differ from children. They also have other types of motivations and challenges. The alignment that exists between adult education and workforce development should also not be ignored. Connecting these two systems offers important value for both learners and employers.

Funding Streams

The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA),¹⁰ Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) is the mechanism through which the federal government funds and provides guidelines for adult education programs in states. In 2021, WIOA Title II provided \$11 million in federal funds for adult education in Michigan, a decline of \$4 million since 2011. Michigan's State School Aid Act, Section 107 provided \$26 million toward adult education in 2021, a dramatic decrease from 1997-2001 budgets, when \$80 million per year in state funding went to adult education services.¹¹

The amount of funding through Section 107 for providers is currently calculated based on the Prosperity Regions' Census data¹² and distributed to providers by the intermediate school district that serves as the fiscal agent for that region. Allowable uses of Section 107 funds are items such as "participant assessment and instruction, classroom supplies and materials, data entry, support services, and building operations and maintenance" and administrative activities.¹³

Other funding comes from philanthropic organizations, charitable donations, and other program funding that ties in with adult education services, such as from immigrant and refugee assistance or workforce development. Not all of this funding is reported, due to the federal government's 90% maintenance of effort requirement and a lack of confidence that the existing funding levels will be maintained.

Adult Education Providers

Michigan has 118 adult education providers funded by WIOA, Title II and/or Section 107. These deliver a combination of high school equivalency (99), adult basic education (95) and/or English for foreign language learners (61). Providers include K-12 districts, literacy centers, community colleges, and other nonprofits. Some providers operate outside of the two state-issued funding streams, making the total number of providers uncertain.

Michigan's decentralized adult education system affords more flexibility to individually provide the services that each community needs most. Additionally, this means that each service provider is responsible for maintaining their own staffing requirements (beyond requiring a K-12 teacher certificate for instructors). Each service provider is required to partner with the local workforce agency, but beyond that it is up to them to find relevant partners.

Providers employ administrative staff, instructors, guidance counselors, paraprofessionals, and supervisors who work part time, full time, or as volunteers. According to a survey conducted for this report, on average, providers have five full-time staff, seven part-time staff, and three volunteers.

¹⁰ Code of Federal Regulations, Title 34, Subtitle B, Chapter IV, Part 463, as amended November 17, 2022, U.S. Department of Education, last accessed January 4, 2023, <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-IV/part-463>.

¹¹ "2022 Budget Priority: Increase Adult Education Funding to Prepare More Workers for Training and Skilled Work," (Lansing, MI: Michigan League for Public Policy, 2022).

¹² "2022-23 Section 107 Final Allocations," Office of Adult Education, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity, <https://www.michigan.gov/leo/bureaus-agencies/wd/education-training/adult-education/adult-education-program-administration>.

¹³ "State School Aid Act, Section 107, Allowable Use of Funds and Allowable Costs," Policy Issuance: 16-10, Change 1, (former) Michigan Department of Talent and Economic Development, September 6, 2017, 2.

Approximately 72% of instructors are employed part time, with each provider averaging about seven instructors.

Michigan Adult Education Providers		
118 Providers to serve all ABE, ELL, and HSE students	7 Instructors per provider on average	72% Of instructors work part time

Need for Services

According to Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) skills map, less than 50% of all Michigan adults are proficient at working with information and ideas from written text, while only 39% are proficient with mathematical information and ideas.¹⁴ One contributing factor to these concerning figures may be that, in 2019, over 267,000 of Michigan adults aged 18-64 lacked a high school diploma or equivalent and were not employed, or 11.6% of the state’s adult population.¹⁵ Nearly 78,000 individuals in this age range lacked proficiency in English as well as a high school credential.¹⁶ These adult years encompass the time of life when most employment, child rearing, and financial asset building occurs. Yet, in the past five years, Michigan program enrollment in adult education declined by 8%.¹⁷ By the 2020-21 school year, enrollment had dwindled to 17,182.

In the past five years, adult education program enrollment declined by 8% to just 17,182. This is 2.4% of Michigan adults with less than a high school diploma.

Performance

As of 2020, Michigan was underperforming on most targets for most of the standard metrics set by the federal government, including whether students have gained academic skills, achieved a credential, gained employment, and increased their wages in the year after receiving services. In some cases, such as credential gain, Michigan is close to the target (39.9% vs the target of 40%) but in other cases was farther off the mark, such as with skill gain (50% target, 37% actual).¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Adult Education Program Fact Sheet, July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019, Michigan,” (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Michigan WIOA State Plan, PYs 2020-2023,” (Lansing, MI: Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity), WIOA State Plan Portal, 61.

¹⁸ NRS Statewide Performance Report for Michigan, department of Education <https://nrs.ed.gov/rt/mi/2020>.

Table 2. Michigan 2021 Target and Actual NRS Performance Data

NRS Performance Measure (2021)	Target	Actual
Total Participants Served	N/A	17,182
Total Participants Exited	N/A	9,167
Employment Rate (Q2)	42%	36.9%
Employment Rate (Q4)	42%	38.1%
Quarterly Median Earnings, 2 nd Quarter After Exit	\$4,320	\$4,550
Credential Rate	40%	39.9%
Measurable Skill Gains	50%	37.1%

As Table 2 shows, Michigan is close to the target in some cases, and is essentially on target for credential rate. However, the state was substantially farther off the mark on others, such as skill gain (50% target, 37% actual).¹⁹ In employment gain, the metrics were also not fully met, as Michigan fell 4%-6% under expectations (depending on the quarter when measured).²⁰ Wage increase was the only measure where Michigan exceeded the target, with the median earnings of the 2020 cohort about \$200 higher than the target.²¹ In addition, not all adult education service outcomes data are reported in Michigan Adult Education Reporting System (MAERS) if not state or federally funded.

Research Results

In determining the needs and opportunities of Michigan’s adult education system, the researchers set out with these core research questions:

- How is Michigan serving adult learners? How does this compare with what the literature says works?
- What are other states doing to deliver effective adult education?
- Where are the opportunities for greater access and effectiveness?

The research plan included a literature review, scan of targeted states for comparison with Michigan, interviews with national and state experts, focus groups with adult learners, a survey of adult education providers, and examination of MAERS data.

The results of the research, summarized below, include insights on what contributes to adult learners’ success, what lessons Michigan can learn from other states, and the opportunities for improving the state’s outcomes. The strategies outlined in this report flow from the research results, including the voices of system participants.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

WHAT WORKS FOR ADULT LEARNERS

Many adult learners have not had positive educational experiences and come to their programs with a history of challenges. This history can be accompanied by other barriers, connected to past challenges or new. Finding what works for the adult learner is essential to helping them succeed.

Barrier Reduction

Barriers to adult education and learning fall into two categories.²²

Barriers to Access	Barriers to Participation
Accountability policies that inadvertently discourage enrollment	Low English proficiency or literacy
Lack of awareness of programs	Learning or other disabilities ²³
Absence of available, high-quality programs	Economic vulnerability
Inadequacy of services and supports suiting adult learner needs	Justice system involvement
	Family responsibilities
	Travel distance to reach adult learning providers
	Low self-image and the social stigma of needing adult education
	Racial/ethnic or class marginalization

²² The literature includes various barrier typologies several of which inform the discussion that follows. See Erik Jacobson, “There Are No ‘Hard to Serve’ Learners, Only ‘Ill-Served’ Ones,” *Adult Literacy Education: The International Journal of Literacy, Language, and Numeracy*, Vol 3 (1), Winter 2021; Flynn, J. Brown, A. Johnson, and S. Rodger, “Barriers to Education for the Marginalized Adult Learner,” *Alberta Journal of Education Research*, Vol. 57 (1), Spring 2011, <https://tinyurl.com/ycmy5884>; David Deggs and Ellen Boeren, “Access, Participation, and Support of Adult Learners,” Chapter 10 (100-106) in Tonette S. Rocco, M. Cecil Smith, Robert C. Mizzi, Lisa R. Merriweather, and Joshua D. Hawley (Eds.), *The Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC for the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education, 2020); Trenia Miles, “Adult Education: A State Director’s Perspective: Where Are We Now? Where Are We Headed?” *Adult Literacy Education*, Vol 3, no. 2, Summer 2021, 44-49; Marcie Foster and Lennox McLendon, “Sinking or Swimming: Findings from a Survey of State Adult Education Tuition and Financing Policies,” Report of Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (June 2012), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Sinking-or-Swimming-State-Adult-Education-Tuition-and-Financing-Policies.pdf>; Amy Pickard, “Barriers to access in Public Adult Literacy Education,” *Educational Policy*, Vol. 35(5), 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0895904819843602>.

²³ Learning disabilities can be a different sort of barrier. Disabilities is a broad term that encompasses both physical and mental impairments, which includes emotional and learning disabilities as well. For adults, having an undiagnosed learning disability can affect career choice and job advancement. It also can lead to personal issues including depression and feelings of low self-worth. It is not apparent in federal or state policies or regulations if sufficient attention is given to learning disabilities or the funding to diagnose and address them. “What is the Definition of Disability under the ADA?,” ADA National Network, <https://adata.org/faq/what-definition-disability-under-ada>; M. Cicerchia, *When Learning Disabilities in Adults go Undiagnosed* (Touch-type, Read & Spell), <https://www.readandspell.com/us/learning-disabilities-in-adults>; M. Orenstein, “Picking Up the Clues: Understanding Undiagnosed Learning Disabilities, Shame, and Imprisoned Intelligence,” *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, Vol

To reduce and surmount barriers, support services for adult learners are a necessity, not an “extra,” and supports should be tailored to each learner’s circumstances in the context of safe learning environments.²⁴

A majority of the providers responding to the survey indicated that they assist learners with school supplies (76%), computers (67%), tutoring (62%), testing fees (57%), and transportation (57%). Only 12% charge anything to attend their programs, with the highest cost being \$50.

Instructional Approaches

The research has established other adult education program characteristics that increase the likelihood of adult learner success. With respect to instructional delivery, for example, Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act’s (WIOA’s) emphasis on contextualized learning such as integrated education and training (IET) programs and career pathways find consistent support in the literature. Indeed, even before WIOA, a substantial body of research had identified promising programs — most prominently, Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program²⁵ with its many variations — and converged on the components of effective integrated pathways models.²⁶ The question has always been the degree to which such programs are implemented with fidelity and provided with sufficient, sustainable resources.

The literature further identifies numerous adult-learner-oriented approaches, methods, and models as potentially useful, including work-based learning, computer-based instruction, coaching, independent study, group classes, discussion groups, and team-based activities, to name a few.²⁷ These are effective for young adults and older learners alike. One review of evidence-based instructional strategies for adult learners also found strong agreement that the teaching of critical-thinking skills is key to encouraging lifelong learning.²⁸

²⁴ M. Falasca, “Barriers to Adult Learning: Bridging the Gap,” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, Vol. 51 (3), 2011, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ954482.pdf>; Cynthia Hess, Yana Mayayeva, Lindsey Reichlin, and Mala Thakur, *Supportive Services in Job Training and Education* (Institute for Women’s Policy Research, 2016), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep34565.2?seq=1>.

²⁵ Initiated more than 15 years ago, and consistently funded at an elevated level, Washington State’s I-BEST model integrates and contextualizes adult basic education and sector-focused occupational skills training, while also providing an array of coordinated transition and support services along a well-articulated pathway. Integrated curriculum and instruction are conducted by both ABE and CTE faculty at the community college level, who together teach each cohort of students for the program’s duration.

²⁶ For example: Richalene Kozumplik et al, “Career Pathway Toolkit: Six Key Elements for Success,” (Social Policy Research Associates for the Career Pathways Technical Assistance Initiative, September 2011), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://iincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-556>; Theresa Anderson et al, *New Evidence on Integrated Career Pathways: Final Impact Report for Accelerating Opportunity* (Urban Institute, June 2017), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/new-evidence-integrated-career-pathways>; “Integrated Education and Training (IET),” California Department of Education, Research Brief No. 14 (September 2017), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://www.calpro-online.org/documents/CALPRO2017Brief-IET-508.pdf>; Mary Freeman, Larry Good, and Vickie Choitz “Detroit Adult Foundational Skill Development: Challenges and Solutions” (Ann Arbor: Corporation for a Skilled Workforce, June 2018), <https://skilledwork.org/publications/detroit-foundational-skills/>.

²⁷ R. D. Robinson, *An introduction to Helping Adults Learn and Change* (revised edition) (West Bend, Wisconsin: Omnibook Company, 1994); see also National Center for Education Evaluation, “Adult Education Strategies: Identifying and Building Evidence of Effectiveness” (NCEE 2021-007). Institute of Education Sciences Study Snapshot (April 2021), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/2021007/pdf/2021007.pdf>; Rheagan D. Coffey and Tara Smith, *Challenges, Promising Programs, and Effective Practices in Adult and Developmental Education* (Ray Marshall Center for the Study of Human Resources, University of Texas at Austin, February 2011), accessed April 27, 2022, <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/28364>; and Hong Shi, “Planning Effective Educational Programs for Adult Learners.” *World Journal of Education*, 7(3), 2017, 79-83, accessed April 27, 2022, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1157810.pdf>.

To keep learners engaged, instructors should also have knowledge of adult learning dynamics. Professional development and approaches that assist in success include how adult learners with varying characteristics learn,²⁹ the differing types of challenges to adult learning,³⁰ strategies and techniques for teaching adults,³¹ and how a broader framework for adult education might increase overall effectiveness.³²

In a promising development, recent conversations between the Michigan Department of Education and OAE staff resulted in an agreement to broaden requirements for teacher certification candidates and allow student teaching placements in adult education classrooms. This has the potential to increase the number of teachers who have a greater understanding of the needs of adult learners as well as increase the utilization of strategies and techniques known to be effective for teaching adults. Although details are being worked out, this development bodes well for adult education programs and learners as only K-12 student teaching placements previously counted toward certification.

Further strategies to enhance persistence include:

- Examining positive and negative forces that hinder or support student persistence
- Building students' self-efficacy throughout their experience
- Setting clear, meaningful, and achievable goals
- Helping students recognize and keep track of progress in meeting those goals

“If I put too much pressure on myself, I start getting discouraged. I have to let myself focus on what I am doing right now. Eventually it will turn into something else.” – ADULT LEARNER, BENTON HARBOR

Learners also benefit from comprehensive, learner-centered intake, assessment, and orientation procedures, as well as ongoing assessment and consistent feedback. Remote and hybrid learning also supports learner persistence for some,³³ though providers have noted concerns that remote students are not making as much progress as they might expect from participation in on-site programs. Moreover, provider staff find it more challenging to manage enrollment as well as support consistent learner participation with students who utilize remote options extensively. Many adult students, especially those with barriers to participation or access, appreciate the flexibility and opportunity that learning remotely provides, yet additional options and supports are needed to sustain persistence.

In response to the survey, 93% of providers said they had no problems developing curriculum. A majority have staff train in adult education theory and believe that it is crucial. Nearly all the providers (91%) indicated that they offer in-person classes, but a majority also offer remote

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ S.B. Merriam and R.S. Caffarella, *Learning in Adulthood: A Comprehensive Guide* (2nd ed.) (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1999) in M. Falasca, “Barriers to Adult Learning: Bridging the Gap,” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 51, no. 3 (November 2011).

³¹ R. D. Robinson, *An introduction to Helping Adults Learn and Change* (revised edition) (West Bend, Wisconsin: Omnibook Company, 1994).

³² Reder, “A Life-Long and Life-Wide Framework for Adult Literacy Education.”

³³ “Persistence: Helping Adult Students Reach Their Goals,” LINCIS: Community, Courses, and Resources for Adult Education, 2007, <https://lincs.ed.gov/professional-development/resource-collections/profile-265>.

instruction (72%), hybrid learning (72%), one-to-one tutoring (66%), small group instruction (62%), and self-directed learning (55%). This variety in instructional mode is good for learners. Most programs also offer classes throughout the day on weekdays: 84% offer morning times, 76% offer afternoon times, and 74% offer evenings slots. A majority of providers offer a variety of instructional types and times (see figures below). With the various options that providers give, learners have more flexibility to include coursework and study alongside their work schedule, family needs, and other obligations.

Figure 1. Instructional Types Offered

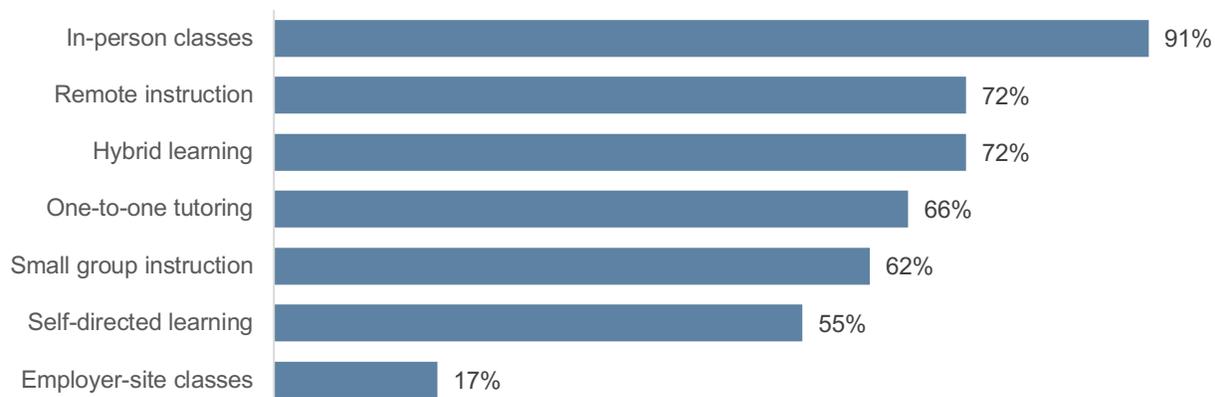
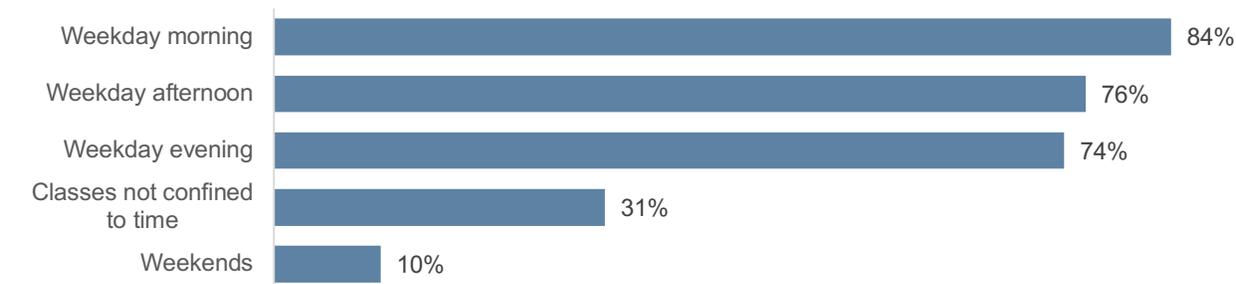


Figure 2. Instructional Times Offered



The Adult Learner Perspective

When asked about what is useful for their learning, focus group participants mentioned flexible options for engaging with coursework, including having access to modules online so they could also meet work and home responsibilities. High school/GED students were eager to progress as quickly as possible. Having a means of seeing interim milestones achieved, like on a personalized dashboard, gave them a clear reference for measuring their progress. A realistic, consistent schedule, whether set by oneself or staff, also helped learners keep moving toward their goals.

“I have been at [program] for about 3 years. ... I procrastinated, but in the last year, as my life progressed in other ways, it is time to hold myself accountable. Three out of the four tests are now done [for the GED]. ... At [program], they ... keep me moving at a most consistent pace.” – ADULT LEARNER, BENTON HARBOR

English language learners (ELLs) valued conversational opportunities within class and with outsiders, listening practice, correction from the teacher, and games. They judged their progress based heavily on their personal comfort with speaking English, as opposed to tests, although those provided some validation.

“I am afraid maybe my pronunciation, that no one understands me. ... I am so embarrassed the first time to speak, to talk. But now I feel a little better.” – ADULT LEARNER, DETROIT

Few learners — of any type — had a formal plan that they created with a program staff person. Those who mentioned having experienced a more detailed planning process viewed it positively.

LESSONS FROM OTHER STATES

All states seem to find establishing and sustaining an efficient, equitable, and effective adult education system highly challenging. Interviewees who offered a state or national perspective pointed to a range of factors that constrained success. Those most often mentioned included:

- Lack of attention to adult education within the state
- Disconnected systems and funding streams
- Insufficient funding
- Narrow outcome measures
- Limited access to services
- Unaddressed learning disabilities
- Inadequate teaching force
- Lack of professional development about educating an adult with barriers

The need for adult education exists just about everywhere, as Table 3 shows.

Table 3. Comparison of State Demographic Characteristics, 2019³⁴

	MI	AZ	CA	FL	MA	MN	TX
Total adult population ages 18-64	6,121,044	4,208,207	24,775,310	12,513,746	4,372,204	3,408,832	17,459,884
Adults 18-64 without high school diploma and not in the labor force (percentage of total adult population ages 18-64)	267,160 (4.4%)	238,830 (5.7%)	1,424,390 (5.8%)	597,610 (4.8%)	152,840 (3.5%)	86,010 (2.5%)	1,028,290 (5.9%)
Adults 18-64 without high school diploma and on public assistance	91,183	100,510	574,056	243,810	70,040	43,460	317,790
Youth 16-24 without high school diploma, not enrolled in school, and unemployed	11,230	8,000	27,530	18,290	3,790	2,830	22,340
Percentage of children living in household headed by adult without high school diploma	9%	17%	21%	12%	9%	8%	20%

Although these absolute numbers show a pattern similar of need and therefore potential benefits from improved adult education, state-to-state comparisons based on such statistics can be misleading due to the very different contexts of each state.

Systems Change

Adult education has long been treated as the poor relative of state education and workforce programming. The experiences of Texas, Florida, and California suggest the importance of political prominence and visibility for adult education. In each of these states, political leadership and perceived system dysfunction prompted a prioritization of adult education and workforce development, resulting in state and regional reorganizations, funding changes, and other reforms. These were designed to improve the alignment of state policies, the coordination of program funding and delivery, and the effectiveness of system governance, in recognition that system structure and governance matter for effective integration, coordination, and alignment. The larger lesson is that, to achieve meaningful and sustainable reform, adult education must be a priority.

States included in the scan for this report:

- Arizona
- California
- Florida
- Massachusetts
- Minnesota
- Texas

Partnerships

Minnesota’s decentralized structure, with its emphasis on public-private partnerships, presents a counterpoint to states such as Texas, Florida, and Arizona, where responsibilities are more centralized in state agencies. In Minnesota, state agencies partner with literacy organizations and other nonprofits to provide adult education services. These agencies also fulfill support functions involving, for example, administration, research, professional development, parent engagement, volunteer recruitment, and website and other resource collection and

³⁴ National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, “Michigan Adult Education Program Fact Sheet, July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019.” Note that figures are rounded to the nearest 10.

dissemination.³⁵ In Michigan, another decentralized state, a state office for adult education is housed within its labor department. The office oversees the state and federal funding distribution, offers some professional development for providers, and monitors data reports and general compliance. Partnerships in Michigan most often are formed at the regional or community level, with wide variation in scale and partner type.

Even in some of the more centralized states, promising partnerships have developed among regional and local education and workforce agencies, employers, and service providers. California, for example, boasts a number of regional and local partnership-driven integrated education and training programs. The state works with adult education schools, community colleges, employers, community-based organizations, and state and regional agencies participating in various ways and combinations.³⁶ Massachusetts encourages workplace-education partnerships at the state and regional levels through funding requiring quality standards, technical assistance, and other guidance.³⁷

Investment

Federal dollars provide a fraction of most adult education budgets. Since federal funding is determined by a formula related to state demographics, one way to compare states' investments is to compare the ratio of state and other non-federal adult education spending to the federal funding provided to a state.³⁸ In the 2018-2019 funding year, Michigan delivered a ratio of 4:1, besting Massachusetts' 1.2:1, but falling quite short of California, Florida, and Minnesota, all of which exceeded 5:1. Generally, state government funding levels in many states have not recovered from prior cuts. For example, California has steadily increased its funding in recent years to stand at about \$570 million, or about 76% of the pre-Great Recession level of \$750 million.³⁹ However, Michigan's funding decline, which began before the Great Recession and has marginally increased only recently, amounts to a 78% decrease in state investment over the last 20 years.

³⁵ See Literacy Minnesota, www.literacymn.org, which received state funding for maintaining the state adult education website and resources, and Literacy Action Network, <http://literacyactionnetwork.org/>.

³⁶ Elizabeth Zachry Rutschow, Katie Beal, Chase Johnson, and Osvaldo Avila, "Beyond the Basics: Integrating Workforce and College-Readiness Training into California's Adult Basic Skills Programs," MRDC (July 2019), accessed October 29, 2022, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED596460>; California Department of Education, Office of State Superintendent, "State Superintendent Tony Thurmond Congratulates Adult Education Providers in Receiving National Recognition for Programs That Can Lead to Immediate Job Skills," Press Release #2113 (February 26, 2021), accessed October 29, 2022, <https://riversideregionadulted.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Adult-Ed-Providers-Receive-National-Recognition-Year-2021-CA-Dept-of-Education.pdf>.

³⁷ Adult and Community Learning Services, "Massachusetts Policies for Effective Workplace Education Partnerships FY2018 - FY2022," Massachusetts Department of Education (November 2020), and "Massachusetts Quality Indicators for Workplace Education Partnerships," both accessed October 29, 2022, <https://www.doe.mass.edu/acls/workplace/>.

³⁸ Some state funding for adult education may not be part of what was reported and used for this comparison.

³⁹ Authors' computations from data provided in National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, Adult Education Program Fact Sheets (Reporting Period: July 1, 2018, to June 30, 2019). Note that both dollar figures are rounded to the nearest \$1,000 and ratios are rounded down to the nearest whole number (except for Massachusetts, which is rounded down to the nearest tenth). National Association of State Directors of Adult Education, "Michigan Adult Education Program Fact Sheet, July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019,"

Outcome Targets and Measurement

As with governance, there is substantial variance in the attention states devoted to performance. On the face of the federally defined metrics (which are narrow if highly relevant), all states show disappointing results. All have opportunities for all to improve performance, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4. Comparison of State Adult Education Targets and Numbers Served for WIOA, Title II Reporting, 2020⁴⁰

	MI	AZ	CA	FL	MA	MN	TX
Estimated # of adults with <HSE by state ⁴¹	716,490	713,990	4,669,290	1,837,640	484,310	304,900	3,274,470
# Served	17,182	7,005	138,758	83,419	16,458	20,862	45,026
% Adults with <HSE Served	2.4%	1.0%	3.0%	4.5%	3.4%	6.8%	1.4%
Target Credential	40%	32%	22%	11%	25%	23%	34%
Actual Credential	40%	25%	12%	23%	28%	19%	41%
Skill Gain Target	50%	50%	46%	26%	47%	43%	44%
Skill Gain Actual	37%	20%	33%	25%	41%	23%	42%

What may be more telling is how data are or are not used. Michigan, among other states, limits data use to monitoring, with interventions principally to reinforce compliance. Other comparison states promote far more robust data systems based on a range of indicators that not only aim to ensure accountability with proactive interventions but also use data to drive program evaluation and improvement.

Arizona, Massachusetts, and Texas more heavily regulate providers at the state level than other states, though they differ somewhat in where the regulation is by statute (administrative rule or guidance), the terms of grant funding, or a combination of mechanisms.

Texas has established a strong and coordinated state system for regular communication and proactive response by region. Massachusetts is experimenting with a comprehensive provider evaluation and inspection system. Both states appear to favor more aggressive routes to assessing provider performance above and beyond WIOA requirements. In addition, a portion of state funding in Texas is allocated as a performance incentive.

California has established a pay-for-performance system by which to allocate all state adult education funding. Perhaps relatedly, these states take a more centralized approach for several system dimensions beyond program performance and improvement.

⁴⁰ National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), Reporting Tables: States and Outlying Areas List, accessed October 29, 2022, <https://nrs.ed.gov/rt>.

⁴¹ "Educational Attainment, 2019: ACS 1-Year Estimate Subject Tables." American Community Survey, United States Census Bureau. Last modified, 2019.

Starting in 2017, the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) standardized completion in their reporting to be represented by exiting a program with an employment gain, meaningful skills gain, or credential gains. Table shows Michigan’s 2017-2019 completion data. Completion is defined as a learner either gaining employment after leaving the program or leaving the program with a meaningful skills gain. Michigan also measures achievement of learner goals and incremental learning gains, such as registering to vote (for English learners), getting off public benefits, and two-generation literacy – strategies that create educational success for children and parents together. However, it is difficult to track these data since the state lacks a shared data system across its departments.

Table 5. Number of Learners Who Met Standardized Completion Metrics, Michigan

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Served	27,483	27,137	27,649	26,448	24,781
Employed in Q4 after exit	N/A*	N/A*	7,358	7,576	7,283
Left with meaningful skill gain	N/A*	N/A*	7,062	6,552	6,715

**Measures added in 2017.*

MICHIGAN OPPORTUNITIES

The research for this report identified multiple opportunities for creating a stronger adult education system. These included:

- How adult education is defined as part of workforce development
- Increased visibility, awareness, and respect
- Expansion of resources
- More consistent services and measurement improvements
- Engagement of employers
- Supporting learner persistence

Adult Education as Workforce Development

WIOA strongly shapes the adult education component of the workforce system in all states. It sets a floor for compliance, and WIOA mandates define many dimensions of state adult education systems, including outcome measurement.

The experts interviewed emphasized the need for improving system and program coherence by integrating adult education with workforce development at the state government level and locally. They also were acutely aware of tension between adult education and workforce development. For instance, one remarked that career-focused learning is not the only purpose for adult education (e.g., an older adult wanting improved literacy is still a legitimate goal), and what is learned cannot be limited to only what a particular employer needs at a given time. While some interviewees wanted to see the two connected tightly, with employment and career progression as a key goal, others

remarked on how adult learners were not often ready for the training opportunities and occupations offered by workforce agencies. Individual goals may be shorter-term and narrow to start, although the potential exists to move on to bigger goals in the longer term.

“I think the employment side of it is not a bad focus, but you still have to treat people like people. And you still have to be very highly aware of what shuts learners down.” – ADULT EDUCATION EXPERT, NATIONAL LEVEL

Integrated Education and Training: What it is

Integrated Education and Training (IET) provides adult education and literacy activities at the same time as occupational training – as opposed to requiring completion of adult basic education before starting occupational training.

Successful and sustained integration can realize results in part because it distinguishes adult education from previous school experiences for adult learners. It reflects many adult learning goals, needs, and methods, and it contextualizes the instruction, thereby demonstrating its meaningful purpose. This can encourage learner persistence, advance goals, and accelerate attainment of basic skills.

Integrated Education and Training (IET) is one strategy that ties together adult education and workforce preparation. This approach is supported by the literature and was mentioned by several experts interviewed. The comparison states share a focus on career pathways and IET — as prompted by WIOA — although with varying degrees of implementation. Michigan’s Office of Adult Education encourages IET, but the state reported fewer than 200 enrollees in that type of program in 2019-2020.⁴² This may be because this approach is generally seen as difficult to implement.

To bring together adult education and workforce development elements in other ways, some experts interviewed mentioned that local providers in Michigan are defining employment goals with learners, seamlessly transitioning learners between programs, mitigating barriers by offering transportation vouchers and other supports, and sharing data with employers. Interviewees also mentioned allowing “stopping out” when a learner needed a break and experimenting with paid learning time. Despite these efforts, more work is required, including developing ongoing interagency relationships and exploring more effective strategies for virtual learning opportunities, such as expedited high school completion options as an alternative to GED achievement.

Visibility and Respect

One prominent challenge on which practically all interviewees agreed is that adult education lacks visibility. They noted that it has also been long undervalued and misunderstood as limited to basic education and GED attainment classes. Worse, a stigma still shadows adult education programs and adult learners. Primarily funded and delivered through the K-12 education system, adult education

⁴² “Adult Education Program Fact Sheet, Michigan,” July 1, 2019-June 30, 2020 (National Association of State Directors of Adult Education), 2019 1-Year PUMS Edition. <https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/patricia.tyler/viz/NASDAEAdultEducationFactSheet2019-1-YearPUMSEdition/ProgramYear2019-20FactSheet>.

does not receive attention and support as a vital educational and talent development avenue in and of itself.

This national perspective lands at home with the finding that two-thirds of adult education providers surveyed for this report do not feel respected by the K-12 system, according to the survey results. This is particularly concerning as K-12 and adult education share a funding pool, and although both are due their resources, adult education providers see themselves as neglected in comparison to K-12 education. Providers also feel that K-12 and adult education differ significantly (94%) and that adult education instructors should have specialized training in adult education theory (88%).

Awareness and Capacity

Providers said they believe that the outreach they are doing is sufficient, a perception that likely reflects their capacity rather than need, given the number of potential learners who have not enrolled. All the providers responding to the survey acknowledged that most learners find out about them from friends or family. Focus group participants said they learned about programs through marketing, neighbors, counselors, family members, and employers.

Providers could reach far more learners with other advertising. Providers are likely aware of this, so a lack of broader outreach suggests they do not have resources to serve more learners.

Resource Expansion

In light of the unmet need for adult education, the funding issue is critical to address. Interviewees agreed that adult education is perennially underfunded, which limits access to services and the capacity to deliver those services, as well as professional development and compensation for educators. Professional development is necessary for educators to be culturally responsive to adult learners. Systemic improvement requires increased and stable resources.

Providers have complicated views about funding, according to the survey results. Most do not report a lack of funding for current activities, but over 60% indicated that funding needs to improve. In open-ended responses, providers seemed frustrated with what they were allowed to do with their funding. Most seem to think regulations are limiting if they are to expand their services and reach, and they are not happy with how funding comes to them. Suggestions included making more funding available for administration, supporting program improvements and innovation, and allowing more flexibility in the format for IET programs.

Consistent, Equitable Services

Interviewees saw multiple opportunities to improve services to those with disabilities and to be culturally responsive to adult learners. Interviewees connected effective adult education programs with addressing the whole person — an individual with their own lived experience and personal agency. Smoothing the path to and through adult education by preemptive barrier mitigation is one method of achieving this. Targeted professional development, careful location of facilities, and learner accommodations are others.

While controlling for employment level, age, attendance hours, region, starting level of skill and barriers, Black students are approximately half as likely to exit a program with an academic success (skill gain or credential), as compared to their White counterparts. In contrast, the next closest are Hispanic learners who are about 20% less likely to exit with an academic gain or credential as compared to White learners. Although Black students have similar numbers of attendance hours (86 hours vs. 81 for White learners), the gap in equity of outcomes needs to be addressed. Black families are already on average far more economically disadvantaged in Michigan, and any additional barriers would further hinder any gain toward equity.

Compared to their White counterparts, Black students are about half as likely to exit a program with an academic success (skill gain or credential); Hispanic learners are about 20% less likely to exit with an academic gain or credential.

Additionally, when everything else is held constant, those who have a barrier to transportation are about 20% less likely to reach academic success indicators than those who do not have problems with transportation. This corresponds with what providers said about transportation being a big barrier to students, although most programs offer online options. The transportation barrier seems to be worse for ELL students; among this group, those with a transportation barrier are 30% less likely to achieve academic success.

Research suggests independent online learning can be at least as effective as in-person learning options⁴³ and can be a far better option than no classes at all. However, these options do not work well for all learners. Students who struggle with in-person formats are also likely to struggle online. Regular coaching and interactions with learners, focusing more on individual learner needs, and establishing norms for learner engagement — such as regular check-ins — can help online learners to succeed.⁴⁴

Interestingly, those with child care barriers are about 15% more likely to achieve academic success. This is potentially due to a self-selection bias; those who have child care problems and choose to attend class anyway are likely more motivated to be successful. This would also imply that lacking

⁴³ T. Nguyen, "The Effectiveness of Online Learning: Beyond No Significant Difference and Future Horizons," *MERLOT, The Journal of Online Teaching and Learning* 11, no. 2 (June 2015).

⁴⁴ S. Loeb, "How Effective Is Online Learning? What the Research Does and Doesn't Tell Us," *Education Week* (March 20, 2020), <https://www.edweek.org/technology/opinion-how-effective-is-online-learning-what-the-research-does-and-doesnt-tell-us/2020/03>.

child care is a barrier to even deciding to enter a program in the first place, removing some parents from the pool of adult learners at the outset. In stark contrast, displaced homemakers⁴⁵ are over 50% less likely to leave programs with skills gains or academic credential, suggesting other barriers to progress and completion.

Michigan suffers from inconsistent access to adult education and support across the state. Several counties lack any provider or the capacity for sufficient programming. This worsens the transportation barrier since learners may have to travel longer distances to reach services. Interviewees suggested increased partnering, paid learning time, and online delivery options to lessen this burden. In addition, a system well-connected to community colleges and other partners could increase access and enhance adult education in communities, which could in turn help boost enrollment. Increasing the number of adult education providers is also an option, especially in underserved areas. To be considered, though, providers must provide evidence of program effectiveness, which requires the capacity to capture and report the data required by federal and state funders.

Employer Engagement

Respondents across two rounds of interviews emphasized the necessity of building strong partnerships with employers. Workplace adult education programs bring advantages, particularly when delivered during the workday and integrated with job-skills training. Employer involvement can offer flexibility and barrier reduction for adult learners, while also increasing program visibility.

Employers can also help motivate learners to access and persist in adult education, share important skill and other workforce data, and participate in program development and improvement. Adequately funded, properly targeted incentives could incentivize employer engagement. Furthermore, even high school completers, particularly those well past their graduation date, may benefit from refreshers through adult education, such as when additional training and credentials would modernize worker knowledge. The interaction between employer and educator in these cases could streamline the training and reinforce a relationship where the employer values the employee, which may help with worker retention and performance.

Meaningful Data

The selection and funding of adult education providers primarily depends on outcome measures of program effectiveness. WIOA provides for a negotiation process to set state targets, and states can add indicators of their own. Nonetheless, the federally mandated outcome measures focus more on career readiness rather than on what happens in the classroom holistically. Several experts interviewed indicated a concern that this approach pressures service providers to turn away adult learners with the greatest need for fear of dragging down program performance statistics.

⁴⁵ A displaced homemaker, as defined by WIOA, Section 3 (16), is an individual who (a) has provided unpaid services to family members and who was a dependent of another family member and no longer supported or (b) who is a spouse of an active duty military servicemember and the family income has been significantly reduced as a result and (c) is unemployed or underemployed due to difficulties finding or upgrading their work.

“It seems like those who have the lowest literacy levels, and the furthest to go, don't fare very well in a lot of the programs as they currently are. Because the programs are designed for people who are on the cusp, and these folks are not on the cusp, they've still got a long way to go before they'll be on the cusp.” – ADULT EDUCATION EXPERT, NATIONAL LEVEL

Further, the required measures may not be appropriate given many adult learners’ barrier-filled contexts and short time horizon for their goals. One interviewee pointed out that the adult learner’s experience is “heavily local and time bound, more than staff recognize ... students are thinking of that day ... not where they will be years from now.” Measures of longer-term outcomes may not be realistic (or fair) for adults focused on acquiring foundational reading skills. Many of these adult learners are not ready to embark on a rapid transition into a career pathway. Those who have already been marginalized by racial discrimination or economic disadvantage can be kept from reaching their potential. In other words, a mismatch of goals may occur between the needs of adult learners and standard system measures.

Adult Learner Barriers

Beyond skill and knowledge needs, learners might have one or more of the following challenges, such as:

- Housing instability – 3%
- Physical or mental disability – 6%
- Child care – 7%
- Learning disability – 9%
- Justice system involvement – 9%
- Transportation – 10%
- Unemployment – 28%
- Low income – 35%

Source: NRS, 2018-2021

More broadly, system and program evaluation and improvement, including innovation in outreach, barrier reduction, and instructional delivery, call for enhanced data collection, analysis, and sharing. Michigan has state indicators in addition to WIOA-required indicators, such as whether one or more test is passed. Richer data and understanding could result from refining the way the start-stop-start nature of adult learning is captured, how participant progression between one goal and another is observed, and how to incorporate more data from programs not funded by Section 107 or WIOA.

Learner Persistence

Providers overwhelmingly indicated that learner persistence was their number one need for improvement (although this was less dramatic for ELL providers). Providers stated that this was the top professional development need and that keeping learners motivated was their biggest challenge.

Digging deeper, just under half of survey participants indicated that somewhere between 30% and 75% of their learners exit before completing their goals. The vast majority (90%) of providers stated that more than 10% of their learners leave the program before completing their goals. In addition, 65% of providers said that most of the learners who leave do not return to finish their goals.

According to providers, most learners who leave before completing their goals do not return.

Motivation

For Adult Basic Education and high school equivalency students in focus groups, a key motivator was to prove to themselves (and sometimes family members) that they could accomplish their educational goals. To persist, however, was daunting for many. They stressed that peer support, such as discussion or study groups with other similarly aged adults in the program, validated their challenges, helped them find resources, and kept them positive about continuing. This was especially true of those who were learning independently or mostly online, who often did not have that support. Instructor support was similarly valued, and sometimes not available when students were doing their coursework (e.g., late at night).

“My car went out. I wasn’t able to go over there and get help. ... I only can work online later at night. And when you come home [from work], you got to do dinner and make sure everything is okay. ... [I am studying] at 11, and there is no one to help.” – ADULT LEARNER, IOSCO CO. RESA

Expectations

Focus group participants suggested that practice tests, understanding why they got a question wrong or did not pass a test, and the simple assurance that a test, such as the GED, is actually difficult for many to pass would be useful ways to help them persist in their goals. Moreover, providing additional GED or High School Equivalency Test centers may spur more frequent test-taking and progress checks, especially among those who would do better with or prefer on-site testing.

“I did try to go back before when I was 21, to get my GED. I took the same test. I scored so low, 5th grade math, for example. That turned me off to coming back. When I took it here, I tested roughly around the same. But they explained it to me, even the smartest people took the test and scored low. If someone told me that years ago, I would have stuck with it then.” – ADULT LEARNER, IOSCO CO. RESEA

“... They do find out what your strengths and weaknesses are. ... I knew I had not good math scores growing up. ... I scored at college levels [on the reading test] and things like that. That gave me a sense of confidence.” – ADULT LEARNER, BENTON HARBOR

Other barriers, like transportation, came up regularly in discussion. One focus group was delayed while a program staff member went to pick up two attendees, proving in real time the impact transportation can have on participation (as well as efforts of program staff to help learners engage). While some students were able to walk to class or learn exclusively online, others had to travel and struggled with transportation. Even those who could walk to the provider's location were concerned

about bad weather. Reducing these barriers requires a balance between leveraging remote delivery methods and having assistance for transportation in all types of geographic areas.

Children could be a strong motivator for the adult learners, but children also made attendance and studies more difficult. When a learner had to go to the program location, child care was often a necessity, but those learning online also had “noisy” children at home in the background sometimes. For those without family or others available to care for children, on-site child care could be a key support to persistence.

“Biggest challenge is children. Wish they had child care here [at the program location].” – ADULT LEARNER, DEARBORN

In addition, although ELLs students liked what and how they were learning, they saw potential to connect instruction more to workplace vocabulary and situations. This would allow them to more immediately apply the learning to real-life scenarios they faced on the job — like explaining a task to a coworker. Gaining a driver's license was also an ambition for many ELLs, which could also lead to work opportunities. For these learners, English was a gateway to other opportunities, including attending college and opening a business.

“Topics I would like to learn, vocabulary for work, for an interview. It is more formal.” – ADULT LEARNER, DETROIT

For other adult learners, the connection to the workplace came more so in the form of employment and advancement potential and a desire to have their learning occur more seamlessly with work (e.g., a learn-and-earn situation). ABE and high school completers/GED students remarked how the math they learned was not focused on math skills they may need at their jobs or in their normal lives (for example, math needed for their checking accounts). Students also commonly mentioned math when tutoring needs came up; they asked if there might be easy-to-follow books or more in-person help with math. Again, peer support and resource sharing came up as beneficial.

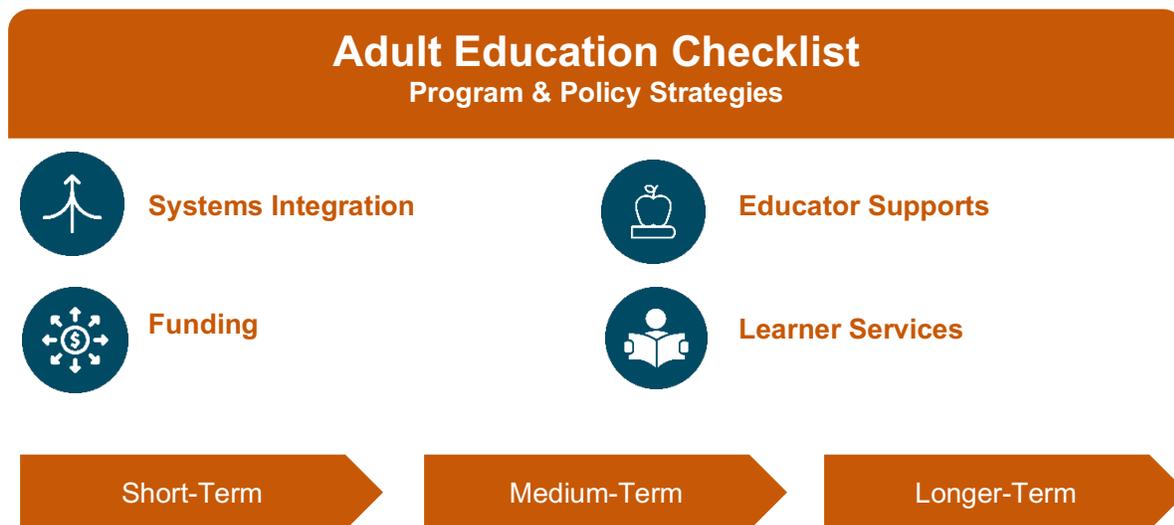
“When I started to speak English, I didn't have plan to change my work. But when I get better, I see a lot of options for me.” – ADULT LEARNER, DETROIT

Strategies Roadmap

Adult education has been a suboptimized aspect of Michigan’s workforce, economic, and community development systems for several decades. While jobs continue to go unfilled for lack of workers with the knowledge and skills required by employers, the talent pool that includes adults who require basic education, English language acquisition, and/or high school completion/equivalency continues to be unappreciated and overlooked, as is the system that serves them.

This does not come without a cost. The competitiveness and long-term growth potential of Michigan’s businesses suffer, and the negative societal impact of under-skilled adults has far-reaching implications, including long-term costs to taxpayers. In addition, improving the foundational knowledge and skills of adults influences the next generation of learners and workers. It benefits children when parents value education, earn more, read regularly at home, help with homework, and communicate with and act as partners with their schools. Parental success contributes to children’s success.

TalentFirst worked with Public Policy Associates, subject matter experts, and practitioners in the field to develop a model for adult education resource deployment. The 21 strategies detailed below can be categorized into four strategic areas (system integration, funding, educator supports, and learner services) and are organized into three phases of action (short-term, medium-term, and longer-term priorities), though improving infrastructure is necessary to achieve optimal results of increasing service volume. Some of the approaches recommended are already occurring, but additional intentionality and resources are needed to help them shine.



Essential to system integration are shared goals between education and workforce development, measurable outcomes, employer engagement, and ongoing program improvement, including support for innovation and professional development. Key to the educator supports category are professional recognition and development. Core to the funding category is sufficient investment in the system

components that foster success, such as support for system changes, inclusive funding access, and responsiveness to learner needs. For learner services, strategies address quality instruction, wraparound supports, and tools to foster learning and achievement of goals.

Achieving all the strategies outlined below will require collaboration among all who are affected by and have a role in adult education, which includes state government, education providers, workforce development organizations, employers, community partners, and other advocates. Strong state and regional leadership will be necessary to facilitate change.

Table 6 summarizes a proposed model intended to shift the resources — human, technological, and otherwise — needed to achieve the actions and strengthen the overall system. This approach elevates adult education at the state level while retaining and bolstering the regional partnerships necessary to deploy resources locally.

Table 6. Model for Strategic Adult Education Resource Deployment in Michigan

System Component	Functions
Governance	<p>State-level agency connected administratively and/or by way of Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with other relevant agencies who work toward more effective integration at state, regional, and local levels.</p> <p>Public-private partnerships at the regional level with well-defined partner MOUs govern provider procurement and oversight.</p> <p>A dedicated statewide task force of adult educators, workforce development professionals, business, and advocates advise the state agency and helps to monitor progress on performance, equity, employer engagement, and other system improvements. The regions also consult their existing community engagement advisory committee or other state-approved advisory committee.</p>
Funding	<p>The state braids federal and state funding and distributes funding to regional partnerships that meet criteria. The state agency ensures statewide coverage of service based on population need and equitable access to services.</p>
Delivery	<p>Local providers are contracted by regional partnerships. State-level agency ensures availability of relevant and sufficient professional development and educator certification. Regional professional development also occurs as needed to address localized needs.</p>
Performance Management	<p>The state sets the metrics with input from the state-level task force. The state holds regions accountable for performance. Providers are held accountable to these metrics via the regional partnerships, with regional reporting to the state level. State-provided technical assistance supports provider improvement and partner alignment/integration.</p>
Communication	<p>Two-way state-local communication channels keep information flows open and effective. State-regional joint marketing occurs to potential learners.</p>
Learner Supports	<p>The state requires regional partnerships (as part of funding) to provide wraparound supports and implement tools to foster learning and achievement. Partnerships pass these requirements on to providers, who deliver these services directly or through partners, with state-level coordination as feasible.</p>

Short-term strategies (0-24 months)



1. Make clear at every opportunity that adult education plays a foundational role in talent development, is a social determinant of health, and is a contributor to family economic stability with multigenerational benefits. At the state-level, educate partner agency leadership and staff about adult-learner needs, partner resources, and services to increase interagency coordination and positioning of adult education as a crucial component of the state's broader talent strategy.



2. Improve data sharing and coordination among all agencies operating within the adult education system by establishing best practice guidelines for robust memorandums of understanding (MOU), to detail how all partners will collaborate to support adult learner persistence and completion.



3. Improve language used and the outcomes to be gained in advertisements to increase program enrollment and employer engagement.



4. Elevate the office of Adult Education with the state Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity as part of the state's talent development in equal standing to efforts for early childhood, K-12, and post-secondary education and workforce development.



5. Increase adult education funding by \$15MM for FY 2023-24 to address unmet demand for services and stabilize program providers by ensuring a consistent level of state and federal funding is truly braided by providers aiming toward coherent goals.



6. Incentivize program providers to offer a hybrid, flexible adult learning models (e.g., HyFlex), where each learning activity is offered in-person, synchronously online, and asynchronously online to improve persistence and completion and ensure equitable access to programs.



7. Incentivize providers to develop individualized learning plans at intake that account for each learner's personal, professional, and digital literacy goals — including skill targets, barrier-resolution steps, and education and career-planning milestone — to contextualize programs to meet the unique goals and needs of each learner.



8. Revise the Adult Learning Plan (ALP) to be more inclusive and accessible for foreign-born learners, learners with visual impairments, and learners with low literacy levels.

- Barriers: include only terms with an addendum detailing explanations for providers to use but are not included on the form (mirroring structure of 2018-19 ALP). Providers should have flexibility to list only those barriers that are relevant to the services they provide or can potentially address.
- Race/Ethnicity: provide more options for learners to self-identify, avoiding options that are only applicable within an American context.
- Education: reword "U.S. based" and non-U.S. based" to "education in the U.S./outside the U.S."

- Language: include a field to capture information on the learner’s home language.
- Translation: translate the document into multiple languages or make clear that providers are welcome to translate the document into languages that reflect the needs of their learners.
- Goals: include goals before barriers, rephrase options to be more accessible to learners of all levels (e.g., “keep a job” instead of “retain employment”), or replace checkboxes with open-ended textbox allowing learners and providers to codevelop achievable, personalized goals.
- Accessibility: ensure the online ALP is compatible with screen readers across multiple languages for learners with visual impairments.



9. Ensure consistent evaluation and interpretation of performance across the continuum of adult education services, discouraging providers from filtering out hard to serve populations, by establishing separate performance benchmarks and outcome measures for adult basic education, English language acquisition, and high school completion programs that extend beyond WIOA-mandated measures. These outcomes should be developed by a committee comprised of representatives from state government, workforce development, business, and adult education.



10. Prevent provider monopolies and stagnation by expanding eligibility through Section 107 of the State School Aid Act to allow a portion (30%) of funds to be leveraged by community-based organizations, contingent on quality (using the refined outcomes described above).



11. Establish the Center for Adult Education Success with a five-year \$10MM grant modeled after the Center for Adult College Success to collaborate with interested adult education providers to expand services and pilot innovative practices that can be shared with other providers.

Medium-term strategies (24-48 months)



1. Incentivize providers to establish co-enrollment processes in partnership with Michigan Rehabilitation Services and/or other community organizations that offer disabilities testing and customized support to avoid duplication of services.



2. Increase Going PRO funding by \$5MM and expand eligible training activities under Going PRO to include high school completion/equivalency, literacy, remedial education, and digital skill development to encourage employers to partner with adult education providers to contextualize adult education and reduce childcare and transportation as barriers.



3. Establish robust and coordinated regional systems by enabling resource navigators and career coaches (from workforce development agencies) to co-locate with all adult education programs, or other community-based locations where adult education services

are offered, to facilitate greater collaboration among employers, community groups, and other parties acting within localized adult education ecosystems.

-  4. Facilitate systems change and improve equitable access to services in every county through targeted funding (e.g., for consistent staffing, technology tools, action planning, professional development, innovation, collaboration), including dedicated funding to expand testing locations.
-  5. Enhance the quality and scale of the adult educator workforce by increasing compensation and full-time positions for educators to achieve parity with peers and ensure that all providers have a certified teacher or teacher of record on staff.
-  6. Ensure accessibility in every county, including access to high school equivalency testing. Advertise services directly to potential students and indirectly through partners and other relevant groups.

Longer-term strategies (48+ months)

-  1. Create a secure, confidential database that shares data on all adult learners among key partners by developing a database for non-WIOA funded learners that is integrated with the Michigan Adult Education Reporting System (MAERS) and the One Stop Management Information System (OSMIS). Connections should also be made to the statewide longitudinal data system to allow providers to better report on outcomes related to postsecondary continuation.
-  2. Allow time for programs to build capacity and scale effective models by incrementally increasing state funding of adult education to \$80MM by 2030.
-  3. Secure policy waivers from the federal government under WIOA to enable greater funding coordination, spending flexibility, and data tracking.
-  4. Build credibility, professionalism, and expertise among adult educators by establishing a separate certification that recognizes the unique knowledge and expertise required of adult education professionals, with higher compensation for educators who achieve this credential.

Appendix A: Methods

Public Policy Associates (PPA) designed, conducted, and analyzed the results of multiple methods for this research-driven effort to define strategies to bolster the success of adult education in Michigan. The methods included:

- A review of the literature around adult education system components and operations, with a focus on the principal structures and processes in Michigan. Topics covered include system purpose and goals, system structure, delivery approaches, employer and partner collaboration, and considerations for policy and practice.
- A comparison of the adult education systems of Michigan and six other states.
- Exploratory interviews with a range of national experts and state-level organizations around adult education funding, access to services, system partners, system performance, and state and national contextual factors.
- Michigan-focused interviews with a state agency, service providers, workforce development and support organizations, and service providers around adult education and workforce development systems coordination and performance, adult learner barriers and supports, and the roles of employers and other partners.
- Examination of student records from Michigan's Adult Education Reporting System (MAERS) for the years 2018-2021, including racial demographics, barriers to education, employment status, age, attendance hours, starting skill gain for the academic year, ending skill gain for the academic year, date of program completion reason for exit and whether any credentials were gained.
- Focus groups with adult learners from English language learning, adult basic education, or high school diploma or GED programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PPA conducted a literature review between mid-March and early May of 2022. In collaboration with TalentFirst, and based on PPA team member knowledge, training, and experience in the field, PPA drafted an initial outline of topics and sub-topics for research in the literature, which was iteratively updated as the review proceeded. PPA then used several means to identify and compile source material for review. It began with (a) known reference works and similar publications by known authors/scholars and advocacy and research organizations in the field; (b) publicly available sources required or maintained by state and federal agencies, including those obtained during research to support the project proposal; and (c) online key word searches using common search engines such as Google, but also searches of scholarly and similar research publication databases using ProQuest and Google Scholar.

Having compiled and reviewed a baseline set of publications, a forward and backward "snowball" approach was taken to identify further literature. That is, team members sought out both earlier works that the baseline publications had cited and later works that had cited or were related to the baseline publications. Team members organized the resulting body of literature pursuant to the updated topic

outline and prepared an initial draft of the review. Several team members contributed to reviews, revisions, and additions of literature to multiple versions of the draft until a final version was delivered. Due to time, space, and other resources constraints, no literature review can be literally complete, and research and editorial decisions will unavoidably influence the conduct and results of any literature review.

STATE COMPARISONS

Between April and June 2022, PPA conducted internet-based research on six states' approaches to adult education, including their system structures, funding streams, expectations for providers and instructors, and other aspects of their systems. With input from TalentFirst, PPA identified the following states as leaders in adult education: Arizona, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and Texas.

Drawing on the literature review, PPA began state comparison data collection with a review of the state adult education and workforce development websites, including relevant publications and documentation accessible through those websites. PPA in addition reviewed relevant federal agency websites, as well as the websites of national and state adult education and workforce development organizations, to identify and obtain state-level data, and state-specific publications and documentation. PPA conducted further online searches to cross-check for publicly available sources of information and to investigate scholarly and similar research publication databases.

PPA analyzed the resulting data to determine the appropriate dimensions for comparison and to describe each state's adult education system along those dimensions. PPA created two Excel spreadsheets to compare the states, one summarizing the information on each state by system dimension, the other to present state-level statistical data. A narrative summary of the state comparison findings was also produced. With partial success, PPA sought clarification of certain points in individual state data by email and phone contacts to the relevant state agencies. One limitation of this research is that the data consists almost entirely of online posted or accessed information; it may be outdated, incomplete, inaccurate, or otherwise biased, and actual agency and staff practices may vary from the stated information.

EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS

PPA recruited and interviewed 10 individuals from state and national associations, academics, Michigan Department of Labor and Economic Opportunity (LEO) staff, and other experts. The PPA team conducted seven interviews between June 2022 and July 2022, using a semi-structured interview guide that included questions tailored to the position and expertise of the interviewees. The guide was developed iteratively in collaboration among PPA team members and with TalentFirst to investigate adult education topics such as funding, access to services, system partners, system performance, and state and national contextual factors. Potential interviewees were identified through literature review references, team members' knowledge and experience in the field, and recommendations from TalentFirst. They were recruited and interviews arranged via email contacts.

Transcripts of the interviews were made, and they were analyzed by question-based response categorization and comparison. The PPA team prepared a narrative summary and checked back against the analyzed body of evidence. Because the analysis and summary rest on a combination of purposive and convenience interviews, as opposed to another form of sampling, the data collected is not necessarily representative of the knowledge or experiences those working in the relevant field.

MICHIGAN-FOCUSED INTERVIEWS

PPA collected and analyzed data from 7 interviews of 11 representatives total from workforce development organizations, Michigan Rehabilitation Services, and adult education service providers. PPA conducted the interviews between June 30 and August 19, 2022, using a semi-structured interview guide keyed to the type of organization and its connection to adult education. The guide was developed iteratively in collaboration among PPA team members and with TalentFirst to investigate adult education topics such as adult education and workforce development system coordination and performance, adult learner barriers and supports, and the roles of employers and other partners. Potential interviewees were identified through team members’ knowledge and experience in the field, and recommendations from TalentFirst. They were recruited and interviews arranged via email contacts.⁴⁶

Transcripts of the interviews were made, and they were analyzed by question-guided, open manual coding. A narrative summary was prepared and checked against the analyzed body of evidence. Because the analysis and summary rest on a combination of purposive and convenience interviews, as opposed to another form of sampling, the data collected is not necessarily representative of the knowledge or experiences of those working in the relevant field.

PROVIDER SURVEY

Table 7. Region, Instructional Fields Provided, and Funding Sources of Provider Survey Respondents

Region	Number	Percentage (%)
1	1	2
2	1	2
3	1	2
4	10	17
5	4	7
6	8	14
7	1	2
8	7	12
9	7	12
10	18	31
Total	58	
Instructional Fields Provided	Number	Percentage (%)
HSD	35	60
HSE	41	71
ASE	19	33
ABE	47	81
ELL	31	54
Funding Source	Number	Percentage (%)
Section 107	40	69
WIOA	50	82

The provider survey was sent to 118 adult education service providers using contact email addresses from their websites and notices distributed to the Office of Adult Education (OAE) and Michigan Adult, Community and Alternative Education (MACAE) by PPA. Fielded from August 15 –

⁴⁶ Although the interview design included employer participants, extensive recruitment efforts over several months in collaboration with TalentFirst were unsuccessful.

September 19, 2022, a total of 58 of the 118 adult service providers responded to the survey, for a response rate of 50%.

PPA developed the survey with input from TalentFirst and the OAE. The survey covered topics such as challenges, funding, aspirations, organizational partners, and sentiments. PPA ran descriptive statistics and significance testing. Provider responses were also cross tabulated with administrative data from the MAERS system and OAE internal documents to glean a more thorough picture of the responding providers’ demographic characteristics and any notable patterns.

MAERS DATA

The PPA team pulled four years of learner data from the MAERS data system, as well as program information from all providers for the 2021 academic school year. Cox and logistic regressions were utilized to evaluate the characteristics of the most successful students. Region, barriers to entry, race, attendance hours, age, program enrollment, employment level, gender, and starting level were all evaluated as well as controlled for to try to isolate the factors that might impact student success.

Student success in this case is defined as an academic skill gain or a credential. Usually, added employment and income would also be included, as per the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) reporting standards. However, due to time frame the latest two years of employment and income gain would not be included, therefore these measures were not taken into account. To reduce bias of outliers, a sub-sample of the 100,000 students was taken for evaluation. Finally, students who exited their program due to medical reasons or death were removed from analysis.

FOCUS GROUPS

The PPA team conducted six focus groups with a total of 41 individuals from basic education, high school completion or equivalency, and English language learning programs. Participants were identified through four provider contacts: Michigan Works! Service Center in Benton Harbor on the west side of the state, Iosco RESA (which covers eight northern counties, including Alpena and other rural communities), Southwest Solutions in Detroit, and ACCESS in Dearborn (also in the southeast part of Michigan). The research team, TalentFirst staff, and the project’s advisory committee conferred on the locations, with additional counsel from the Michigan Adult Community and Alternative Education Association director. The demographics of the focus group participants are shown below.

Table 8. Focus Group Demographics

Race/Ethnicity	Gender	Age	Program Type
2% Asian or Pacific Islander	78% Female*	7% 18-24	66% ELL*
10% Black or African American	15% Male	10% 25-30	24% HSE
22% Hispanic or Latino/a	7% Not specified	17% 31-40	10% Not specified – HSE or ABE
7% Middle Eastern or North African		37% Over 40	
20% White		29% Prefer not to say/not specified	
39% Prefer not to say/not specified			

*ELL focus groups were held during the normal class times, which contributed to higher participation rates. One ELL class was entirely female to meet learner preferences.

Focus group topics included learner goals and motivations (including career goals), supports and barriers to persistence, and program experiences and satisfaction. The advisory group, OAE, and

MACAE had the opportunity to review the questions in advance. A PPA moderator and notetaker attended each session. Three occurred virtually and three in person. At one group, the language skills of the students necessitated translation of recruitment materials and including an interpreter in the session, who was a staff person of the provider but not their instructor. The participants received a \$75 thank-you for their time.

Appendix B: Supplemental Research Reports

- Literature Review Summary
- Targeted State Comparison Summary and Matrix
- Exploratory Interviews Summary
- Additional Interviews Summary

Public Policy Associates did not report on the provider survey and adult learner focus groups separately due to the close timing of the data collection and the final reporting (as intended). The key results from these sources are conveyed within the final report.



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