

Content Standards in Adult Education:

Recommendations from the Literature to Guide Development in Virginia
A Research Report

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The logo for the Virginia Literacy Institute (VLI) features a stylized graphic of an open book on the left, followed by the letters 'VLI' in a large, bold, serif font. Below this, the full name 'Virginia Literacy Institute' is written in a smaller, sans-serif font.

Virginia Literacy Institute

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Introduction

Across the U.S., states are preparing to comply with reauthorization of the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003 with amendments to Title I of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 and Title II, which includes Part A: Adult Basic Skills and Family Literacy Education. The Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act enumerates conditions for federal funding at the state level. These conditions require states to fund programs that succeed based upon reporting of measurable gains, to expand options and choices by funding non-traditional providers such as faith and community-based organizations, to provide for smoother transition to work, and to reduce bureaucracy and increase flexibility (D'Amico, 2003). Adult education and literacy programs are being called upon to account for results through the development of measurable content and performance standards. Numerous reports herald this standards-based reform movement in adult education (Merrifield, 1998; T. Sticht, 1998; Stites, 1999; Wills, 1997). The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) notes, "An aligned system of standards and assessments will meet its goal of improving student performance only if curriculum is also part of the aligned system" (LaMarca, Redfield, Winter, Bailey, & Despriest, 2000) To state this simply, content or curriculum must align with performance expectations or outcomes in order to be effective. Hence, the development of

content standards along with performance standards is essential to the success of adult literacy education. The importance of content standards is reflected in a recent study of teaching practices in K-12 education (McMillan & McKelvey, 2003).

Since the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) relies upon state and federal funding allocations, careful attention must be given to the development of aligned content and performance standards. Following enactment of the America 2000 goals, content and performance standards were developed and instituted for K-12 education. Now, the focus has shifted to adult education, which can benefit from lessons learned through the K-12 process. The AELS can also help to ameliorate drop out statistics that have remained unchanged over the last decade (NCES, 2002), not only through the education of adults to join the workforce, but also through parental transfer of literacy to their children.

Defining Content and Performance Standards

The distinction between content and performance standards is often a source of confusion. Although these terms are used widely in the field of instructional design (Dick & Carey, 1990; Saettler, 1990), their meaning is not generally well understood. Recent legislative mandates for standards-based educational reform necessitate clear understanding of this distinction by both educators and the general public. This understanding is the first step to aligning content and performance standards.

A concise distinction between content and performance standards can be found in the September 1999 issue of Focus on Basics. Stites notes that “while content standards shape what goes into a curriculum, performance standards set benchmarks – specified levels of achievement – that shape expectations for educational outcomes, provide a basis for measuring learning

outcomes, and provide the criteria for imposing rewards and sanctions” (1999, p. 3). In other words, content standards define the scope of what is to be taught, while performance standards measure the success of learning and instruction. Performance standards are necessarily aligned to content standards since they specify the level of achievement needed to demonstrate proficiency. Content standards specify what to teach, while performance standards specify what level of achievement is required.

Developing Content Standards

Given these definitions and the importance of aligning content with assessment, the task at hand is to develop content standards for each curriculum or learning domain. Regardless of whether content standards are developed for K-12 or adult education, they describe a concise framework for each learning domain. This requires the involvement of content experts to carefully pare down existing curricula by determining succinct descriptors for each learning domain. The process involves using an instructional design approach to evaluate the needs of the population, to state the goals of instruction, to articulate the content to be included, and to specify how performance will be assessed. Content and performance standards simply provide a framework for continuous revision and improvement of instructional strategies. Based upon this framework, adult educators can individualize curricula and the instructional strategies to address the specific needs and appropriate context of adult learners. Performance measures, also referred to as assessment, must reflect the goals specified and the content presented.

The Role of Adult Education

According to a recent report from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), 76.8% of students completed high school and 9.2% completed an alternative program such as the American Council on Educations' General Educational Development (GED) test in 1999 (NCES, 2002). Likewise, 2000 U.S. Census data show that 81.5% of Virginians above 25 years are high school graduates (U.S. Census, 2000). Does the fact that approximately twenty percent of our citizens have not completed high school affect the literacy of subsequent generations? Full discussion of this important question is beyond the scope of this report, however, parental education and involvement are correlated with the academic success of their children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Kaestle, Campbell, Finn, Johnson, & Mikulecky, 2001; T. G. Sticht, 2001). The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) noted that "In Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States, a young person aged 16 to 25 whose parents had eight years of schooling would on average score about 250 points, whereas someone whose parents received 12 years of schooling would on average score about 280 points." (IALS, 2000, p. 4) Given this correlation between parental educational level and higher literacy scores, parents play an important role in the transfer of literacy to their children. According to Gordon and Gordon, "Successful learning is an everyday activity involving the time of both parent and child" (2003, p. 301). It is clear that adult education has a vital role to play in advancing the goals of the recent "No Child Left Behind" initiative (Kadlic & Lesiak, 2003) and, more broadly, in fostering literacy in the United States.

Overview and Purpose

This report summarizes current progress in the development of content standards for adult education. The purpose of this summary is to inform the Office of Adult Education and Literacy, Virginia Department of Education of findings from other states in the United States. A thorough review of the literature on standards-based reform in adult education provides insights that form the basis of this report. Three agencies have created content standards for adult education that are used nationally. They include the National Reporting System (NRS), the Equipped for the Future (EFF) Initiative from the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), and the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS). Independently, twelve states and some local programs within Virginia, in addition to these agencies, have developed content standards. The standards of these organizations, states, and local programs are summarized to provide a starting point for the development of content standards for Virginia.

This summary also categorizes existing content standards in an effort to compare their characteristics. Three criteria are used to review and categorize existing content standards. These criteria include the level of specificity, the format, and the usability or ease of use. For example, some content standards are presented in a sequential, linear format, while others are presented in tabular format. Some content standards are highly specific, while others are more general. Since the purpose of this report is to assist the Office of Adult Education and Literacy, Virginia Department of Education in evaluating existing standards, commentary and recommendations are made based upon these criteria.

Pedagogical Considerations

In 1998, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) enacted legislation requiring states to develop performance standards and report progress through the NRS database of adult education assessment. By requiring states to develop performance standards, this legislative mandate assumes that content standards exist at the state level. When content standards have not been created, the pedagogical principles of instructional systems design (Schiffman, 1991) are violated, putting “the cart before the horse.” This has contributed to confusion regarding the distinction between content and performance standards.

The instructional design process is both sequential and cyclical with the goal of reflecting upon each component for continual refinement of instructional strategies. The cyclical nature of the instructional design process has given rise to an alternative method known as backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998). This approach determines the goals of instruction based upon desired outcomes. Using traditional instructional systems design, learners are analyzed to determine characteristics such as prior knowledge and entry-level skills. Next, goals and objectives of instruction are specified. Subsequently, content and instructional strategies are developed to meet the specified goals. Finally, assessments are conducted to determine the level of achievement and the overall success of the instructional design process. Regardless of the pedagogical approach, learners must be informed of the content to be assessed. The cyclical nature of instructional systems design, illustrated in Figure 1, ensures that performance

assessment is focused on educational goals, content, and teaching strategies in a continuous feedback loop. For this reason, content standards are an essential precursor to performance standards.

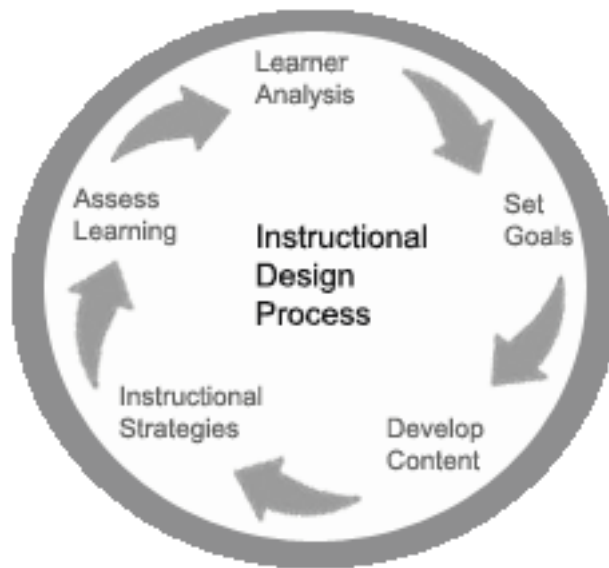


Figure 1. The sequential and cyclical instructional design process

The instructional design process, in conjunction with work that has been accomplished throughout the field of adult education, provides a framework to begin the task of developing content standards that are aligned with performance standards. The considerable progress made to this end through the NRS, EFF, CASAS, individual states, and within local programs in Virginia will be summarized in the following section of this report.

Aligning Content Standards with Performance Measurement

A great deal of discussion has centered on alignment between content and performance standards. Merrifield notes that concerns were expressed by the General Accounting Office (GAO) regarding the absence of clearly articulated objectives in adult education (2000). Similar observations are evident in additional reports and articles within the adult education literature (Condelli & Kutner, 2002; Elliott & Hayward, 1996; NRC, 2002; NRS, 2001). Establishing clear goals is one way to address this need. According to Bingman, Ebert, and Bell, however, “Performance accountability – judging programs by results – assumes a consensus on standards and goals as well as effective ways to measure outcomes and results. Performance accountability is a driving force in adult basic education, but there is no consensus about goals. Effective tools for measuring the complex variety of outcomes the learners report, or even the narrower goals of WIA, do not exist” (2000, p. 15). In spite of this lack of consensus, the fact remains that program reporting requires adherence to NRS guidelines.

NRS guidelines define core outcome measures using functional level descriptors for three knowledge domains including basic reading and writing, numeracy skills, and functional and workplace skills. As Alamprese notes, “While a common theme among ABE practitioners is that existing tests of general literacy skills do not adequately measure the content of ABE programs, there is a growing recognition that assessment is necessary and can provide valuable information for guiding the instruction of learners” (1999, p. 7). This is evident from a recent study of K-12 educators who use standardized tests results to modify the way they teach (McMillan &

McKelvey, 2003). NRS guidelines provide a useful framework for the development of ABE content standards and assessment measures. Unfortunately, controversy over assessment seems to be as contentious as defining content standards. As Comings notes, “An evidence-based adult education system must clearly define outcomes and identify or develop tools to measure those outcomes” (2003, p. 9).

What is clear from the considerable efforts and scope of these research reports is that no *one-size-fits-all* approach to performance assessment will address the diverse nature of adult education (Stites, 2003). A multitude of performance measures will need to be developed and approved for use in accordance with NRS guidelines. It is likely that numerous measures have been developed and are currently in use within various programs across the United States, as well as internationally. Unfortunately, at the present time there is no readily available mechanism for peer review and dissemination of educational resources, teaching strategies, learner profiles, and assessment instruments such as skills checklists, surveys, portfolio templates, or rubrics save through word of mouth, networking at conferences, and via electronic discussion forums. An adult education repository with peer review is a potential solution to foster research and development. This report proposes the development of a national database that will be described in greater detail under the heading, Using Technology to Facilitate Research.

In the absence of such a system, adult educators are forced to rely upon more traditional and time-consuming methodologies to ferret out the pearls of research and development efforts. The following summaries of existing standards are provided using the three criteria of level of specificity, format, and usability or ease of use. Specificity refers to the detail found within the content standards presented. The volume of description for each of the content standards is compared relative to the other content standards. Format refers to how content standards are

made available to the public. Linear format describes document or PDF files. Tabular format describes content standards that are presented in a table.

Although most content standards were found online, few were presented in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) format. HTML format supports interaction through a web browser, allowing the user to move back and forth through the presentation format. Most standards were found in document PDF format. PDF files must be downloaded to be reviewed on a computer screen or printed. Comparison of usability or ease of use is based simply upon usage and observation. If a linear document or PDF file presents information in fragments, this is noted. For example, if a linear document presents standards in one chapter and refers to indicators in another chapter, this diminishes ease of use since it necessitates flipping back and forth in order to assimilate the information. A matrix outlining existing adult basic education (ABE) content standards is presented in Appendix A. Website addresses are provided for each entry when available. Be advised that this matrix is a working draft. The author encourages comments, corrections, or additional information, which may be emailed to rmcknight@vcu.edu

National Reporting System (NRS)

Most adult educators are familiar with NRS core measures and functional level descriptors, which are mandated for programs that receive Federal funds. ABE educational functioning level descriptors describe what learners are able to do at each level and provide test benchmarks that categorize each literacy level. These content standards apply to reading, writing, numeracy or math, and applying these skills to activities such as completing a job application. They are available in downloadable PDF format. It is significant to note that the U.S. Department of Labor, Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) compendium of

tests are not among the test benchmarks listed for assessment of educational gain. NRS guidelines note, however, that “Test benchmarks are provided for each level as examples only and these tests do not need to be used when assessing the learner” (NRS, 2001, p. 19). The NRS website also provides reports, training, and survey documents via downloadable PDF format. Functional level descriptors are formatted in tables that are easy to read and understand. The website does not support perusal of this tabular information interactively.

Equipped for the Future (EFF)

Equipped for the Future: What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century (Stein, 2000), is the culmination of six years of collaborative research and development under the direction of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL). These standards are based upon the roles adults are required to apply in their everyday lives as citizens, workers, and family members. EFF content standards describe broad application of life skills that are best suited to performance-based assessment (Ananda, 2000). In August 2003, EFF presented working drafts of performance assessment of reading and math. Rubrics were introduced for use in performance assessment (NIFL, 2003). Observational checklists, such as those used in the credentialing process for nursing assistants, may prove to be useful for assessing EFF content standards. Content standards are presented in both downloadable PDF and interactive web-based format. Although additional time will be required to develop performance measures for EFF content standards, this framework provides a comprehensive approach to the real life contexts of adult learners.

Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS)

CASAS provides skill level descriptors and markets integrated competencies, curricula, and assessments. Skill level descriptors are available for download at the website in PDF format. Competencies, curricula, and measurements cannot be accessed via the website. A review from the Buros Institute notes, “more complete description of the calibration and validation samples would improve the assessment documentation. In our opinion, more thorough descriptions of study samples, clear specifications for instrument construction, and analysis of data from field-tested ‘performance measures’ are needed. These additions would facilitate the general use of this extensive system for adult learner assessment and strengthen the program links among placement, instruction, and assessment” (Mueller & Freitag, 1998). Further investigation of the CASAS is required since most of the integrated CASAS system is proprietary and not available for review.

State Standards Developed Within the United States

Twelve states were found to have developed curriculum frameworks or content standards, including Arizona, California, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Texas. Three criteria were used to categorize characteristics of the content standards found in all states. These criteria include level of specificity, format, and usability or ease of use and are described in greater detail on pages 9-10 of this report. On the following page, Table 1 summarizes these categorical characteristics by state. A matrix of similar characteristics for all states in the U.S. can be found in Appendix A. Website addresses are provided for each state within this matrix. As noted previously, there is a need to develop the means to disseminate resources and foster communication across the adult education community.

Resources such as Table 1 and the matrix presented in Appendix A are examples of media that other state and international agencies might wish to access via an online repository. Online repositories have been utilized effectively by other disciplines, particularly those with varied subspecialties, such as medicine and education. For example, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) promotes the exchange of timely information and resources at <http://www.nih.gov>. Such repositories allow for juried and peer review, promote research and development, and provide a venue for sharing educational and research resources on a broad scale. The notion of online repositories will be described in greater detail in the Summary of this report.

Table 1.Categorical Characteristics of Content Standards by State

State	Content Standards	Specificity	Format	Usability	Comments
Arizona	ESOL Math Reading Science Social Studies Writing	High	PDF	Linear, sequential, requires flipping back & forth	Performance Standards with interpretation, glossary, and sample activities are also available
California	ABE ASE ESOL Parent Education Older Adults	Medium	DOC	Linear, sequential, requires flipping back & forth	Currently under revision to follow same format as K-12 Content Standards
Florida	Math Reading Language Workforce/Workplace	Medium	Web-based & PDF	Easy to use, lists	Concise lists with coded benchmarks
Iowa	Reading Math	Low	PDF	Proprietary	Use CASAS Skill Level Descriptors
Maryland	ESOL	Medium	PDF	Linear, tabular, easy to use	Referenced to NRS level, CASAS, SCANS, Technology, Cultural, & Metacognitive Skills
Massachusetts	English Language Arts History & Social Sciences ESOL Math & Numeracy Science & Technology/Engineering Health	High	PDF	Easy to use, tables	Concise lists without coding; instructional design, descriptors, & structural schemas are variable
New York	English Language Arts Math ESOL GED	Low	Web-based	Easy to use	Goal statements
Oregon	ASE/GED Math ASE/GED Reading ASE/GED Writing	Low	Word DOC	Easy to use, tables	Use CASAS Educational Functioning Level Descriptors
Pennsylvania	Foundation Skills in 20 categories	Low	PDF	Easy to use, tables	Adapted from EFF
Rhode Island	ABE ESOL Citizenship	Low	Web-based DRAFT	Easy to use, tables	Tables are arranged with NRS levels in left column with learning domains across columns
Tennessee	ESOL Curriculum Resource Book	High	PDF	Easy to use, book	Alignment between curriculum & assessment strategies
Texas	ABE Math, Reading, & Language Arts Adult ESL ASE/GED Science, Math, Social Studies, Reading, & Writing	Medium	PDF	Easy to use, tables	Concise tables with coded indicators

A summary of state and federal adult education programs and standards, along with a link to available websites, can be found in Appendix A.

Initiatives and Recommendations for Virginia

In a report to the Virginia Board of Education in 2001, a task force recommended appointment of an Advisory Council on adult education noting, “The Standards of Learning create a strong foundation upon which we are educating our children. Now it is time to help adults in Virginia who are challenged by the same basic skills of reading, writing, and using mathematics – especially those adults who can help their children learn” (Davidson & Emblidge, 2001). In 2003, Governor Mark Warner launched an initiative to address this problem. This report is a first step toward developing Adult Basic Education (ABE) content standards for Virginia. Content standards are a means to focus on quality within the adult education system. Some programs have already being engaged in the development of content standards. In Henrico County, for example, an ad hoc committee has been working for several months to create curriculum guides. These curriculum guides are modeled on the successful curriculum guides used in K-12 public schools in Henrico County. Similarly, Chesapeake has adapted curriculum frameworks from Florida’s adult education system. Likewise, the City of Richmond has developed curriculum frameworks. Additional exemplars of quality in adult education can be found throughout Virginia.

One such example is the inquiry-based approach to adult education called *GED as Project: Pathways to Passing the GED* (Foucar-Szocki, 2003), which is available online at <http://web.jmu.edu/gedproject/>. The project is a model of productive collaboration between the Virginia Department of Education’s Office of Adult Education and Literacy, Virginia's

Workforce Improvement Network (WIN), James Madison University, and the Virginia Literacy Foundation. Another, the *Virginia Adult Education Health Literacy Toolkit* is available both online, at <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/publications/healthlit/>, and in print-based format. The toolkit provides innovative approaches to help adult learners understand the complexities of the healthcare system (Singleton, 2003). The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) provides an online instructional system for teachers assisting adult ESL students at http://www.arlington.k12.va.us/instruct/ctae/adult_ed/REEP/reepcurriculum/index.html. As students learn English, they learn to access, evaluate, and use information and resources in a variety of lifeskill contexts. The Arlington Education and Employment Program (REEP) was awarded the U.S. Department of Education (ED) Secretary's Award for Outstanding Adult Education and Literacy Programs in 1992. These accomplishments are but a few of the many innovative programs provided by Virginia's adult education system.

The Metropolitan Educational Research Consortium (MERC) is a collaborative effort between Virginia Commonwealth University and public school systems to improve educational practice through the dissemination of evidence-based action research. In a recent report from K-12 education, researchers investigated how 722 teachers engage in professional development to understand and use Standards of Learning (SOL) student assessments to inform instructional practice (McMillan & McKelvey, 2003). This MERC report summarizes principles of good practice for high-stakes assessment, as well as professional standards for utilizing test score data. The study found that teachers expressed the intent to modify the way they teach based upon SOL student assessment results. Of particular importance, is the fact that, based upon test scores, 75% of teachers reported they would place more emphasis on “the depth given to certain topics” (McMillan & McKelvey, 2003, p. 21) versus 67% who reported they would place less emphasis

or make no change in the breadth of what is taught. This finding seems to reflect teacher confidence in alignment between content standards and assessment results. Although subsequent surveys can provide a picture of how the modification of instruction impacts test scores, this study, nevertheless, highlights the importance of sound pedagogical practice that follows the cyclical instructional design process whereby assessment informs teaching practice.

Recently, Governor Mark Warner unveiled a Workforce Initiative as part of his Education for a Lifetime program to serve Virginia's adult workforce. This leadership fosters dissemination of training across state programs through the Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center at <http://www.aelweb.vcu.edu/>. The Resource Center will play a pivotal role in the development and implementation of ABE content standards. Although the full extent of program activities related to curriculum development must be explored in greater detail, additional efforts are likely to be forthcoming. Given the quality of adult education initiatives throughout Virginia supported by the Office of Adult Education and Literacy, Governor Warner's Education for a Lifetime Initiative, and the Virginia Literacy Institute, the alignment of content and performance standards for Virginia's adult learners is expected to reflect the capacity and collaboration of this focused initiative.

Using Technology to Facilitate Research

A 1998 report prepared for NIFL advises researchers to “Develop a stated dissemination process that takes into consideration the practitioners and policymakers who would benefit from the research and the ways in which research findings can best be communicated to them” (RTI, 1998). A viable methodology for dissemination of this project, to be used in conjunction with more traditional means, would be to develop it through the Internet. While information could be readily disseminated, feedback from distant programs throughout Virginia could also be enhanced through timely communication as the project unfolds. Web-tracking data collected from the website could provide information about the utilization of particular pages or components of project development that are of most or least value to practitioners. The website could provide documentation of progress through transcripts of discussion forums, surveys, and field-tests. Access to remote parts of the state would be maintained in a timely manner at the convenience of practitioners.

This methodology was recently employed at the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) at Harvard through a moderated online discussion workgroup at <http://www.communityzero.com/ebae>. This forum focused on a recently published article, “Establishing an Evidence-based Adult Education System” (Comings, 2003). The guided discussion encouraged adult education professionals were encouraged to share ideas and comments about ways to establish evidence-based practices. Such innovative uses of technology

provide a forum for sharing ideas and insights to foster the transfer of research to practice and improve the adult education system.

The Internet provides a platform to facilitate communication, share instructional strategies, track progress, and foster new research methodologies. Within the business community, web-tracking usage data are common marketing and customer satisfaction strategies. Data collected in this way allows reflection on how users navigate through a website. Similarly, web-tracking usage data can help the educational community. Based upon web-tracking usage data, developers can modify the design of website navigation to enhance the availability of educational resources and better meet the needs of website users. Tracking website usage is a constructivist approach that can guide teachers, developers, and researchers to a better understanding of how both learners and educators use educational resources, when they use them, and how instruction can be modified to help learners (McKnight & Demers, 2003). The Virginia Adult Learning Resource Center recently began tracking website usage to assist in redesign. Another innovation to foster collaboration and information dissemination is the use of resource repositories and reusable learning objects.

Resource repositories and reusable learning objects are a new trend in information dissemination that is widely embraced by education, government, and the armed services (ADL, 2003; SCORM, 2003). Reusable learning objects are simply educational media that are stored in educational repositories. Examples of repositories that foster research and information dissemination can be found at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) medical repository at <http://www.nih.gov> and the Multimedia Educational Resources for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT) educational repository at <http://www.merlot.org>. The use of learning objects is rooted in constructivist learning theory, which proposes that users shape the way they

gather information and, thereby, the way they learn. The development of a resource repository for the adult education system could provide both juried and peer review of resources across the wide spectrum of specialties in adult education. Such a repository could facilitate access to teaching and assessment tools, and promote large-scale field-testing and research replication.

The 2000 Literacy Summit published a report calling for quality, access, and resources. The report notes that, “Adult education, language, and literacy instruction can be accessed anywhere and at any time” and outlines action steps that include “Action 5. Create, test, and disseminate models for integrating distance learning technologies with more traditional teacher and tutor-based instruction, especially in rural areas and correctional institutions.” (NIFL, 2000)

With the advent of the Internet, we are able to share information, to network with other professionals, and to serve the needs of adult learners in ways that were previously impossible. These recommendations provide a springboard for research, for disseminating information, and for fostering communication within Virginia’s adult education system.

Summary

A 1999 NCES report based on the National Household Education Survey (NHES) notes that participation in adult education increased from 58 million in 1991 to 90 million in 1999 (Kim & Creighton, 1999). According to the U.S. Department of Education, “The Federally funded system of adult basic and literacy education serves approximately 2.7 million adults each year (D’Amico, 2003). In spite of the expansion of adult education participation noted by the NHES Survey, it appears that only 3 percent of adult learners benefit from federal funding. Thomas Sticht cites vast disparity between federal funding for adult education, which receives \$212 per adult and the Head Start program, which receives \$6500 per child (2003). This funding disparity hampers the adult education system’s ability to provide adequate services to adult learners, to develop the tools necessary to ensure accountability, to engage in research, and to create pedagogical frameworks such as content standards. It is clear that leadership must come from other sources, if we are to address the needs of a burgeoning number of adult learners who seek to improve their skills in the workplace.

In a report from the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Merrifield notes that, “Adult basic education is struggling to create a national accountability system without a national service delivery system” (1998, p. vi), stating further that, “The key to designing accountability is getting clear about goals, about what ‘good performance’ would look like” (1998, p. 27). Since adult education, like K-12 education, is administered at the state level, a state service delivery system is, perhaps, the most appropriate way to develop content and performance standards to be reported to the NRS. Rising to the occasion, Virginia’s Governor

Warner recently launched the Education for a Lifetime Initiative in support of adult education. “The Governor's Initiative has three parts: (1) increasing the education levels of Virginia's workforce by doubling the number of GEDs earned in Virginia; (2) creating a career readiness certificate that gives workers a portable, recognized workforce credential and shows employers that job seekers have the required job skills; and (3) reorganizing Virginia's 22 workforce development programs into a more streamlined and effective workforce development system” (Warner, 2003). This initiative provides support for improvement of Virginia’s adult education system.

This report summarizes findings from the adult education and literacy field related to content standards. Existing content standards are evaluated based upon three explicitly described criteria. Recommendations are made to implement a systematic approach to developing content standards aligned with performance measures. Innovative applications of technology are described that can foster research, ease of use, and statewide dissemination.

Input from adult educators and content-experts is essential to the success of this project. Their participation and professional insights from experience in the field will enhance knowledge about adult learners in Virginia. Since content standards merely provide a framework for instruction, the involvement of educators at the program level will facilitate implementation. Once content standards are aligned with performance measures, a comprehensive training and dissemination process will foster data collection and evidence-based research. Content standards are a vital component of Virginia’s adult education service delivery system and are essential to sound pedagogical practice. With support from Governor Warner’s Education for a Lifetime Initiative, adult educators are uniquely poised to improve the provision of services to adult learners.

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