



NASDAE
National Association of State
Directors of Adult Education

Adult Education: Equity Policy Considerations

An investment in adult education is an investment in the future. It is an investment in social, racial, educational, and economic equity by federal, state, and municipal governments and by the adults themselves who invest their time to learn academic and workforce skills, improve their English proficiency, and attain secondary and industry-recognized credentials. Adult education programs and students are overcoming decades of inequities and centuries of systemic barriers that have created generations-long educational attainment and earnings gaps and are reducing the historic burden of the intergenerational impact of low educational attainment.

The adult education system is not funded at a level that allows it to serve the number of adults with skill needs or to support marginalized communities to fully recover from past educational attainment and earning inequities. The [Survey of Adult Skills](#) estimates that 36 million adults in the United States have low literacy skills, yet the adult education system served only 1.1 million students in 2019. Addressing systemic injustices for the adults and families whose lives and livelihoods have been scarred by marginalization and trauma, structural injustices, and limited education and skills will take deliberate and concerted leadership and investments at all levels of government. We must acknowledge the magnitude of the current educational attainment and earnings gaps and recognize that a commitment to closing these gaps is a moral, social, and civic responsibility. Adult education leverages educational attainment, workforce preparation, and occupational training to bridge these gaps.

As state directors of adult education, we know that adult education serves a unique and important role in the educational landscape of the United States. There is no other education system through which adults can build the skills needed to enroll in postsecondary education or training, earn an industry-recognized credential, or to assist more fully with their children's education. We are committed to advocating and taking action to ensure our programs are educational environments that exemplify diversity, equity, and inclusion. We are equally committed to examining our policies for unintended inequities to ensure equitable opportunities and success for all our students. At this time of an increasing awareness of the compounding effects of implicit biases and the structural and systemic injustices that continue to impact adults, our society, and the recovering economy, we call on federal leaders to recognize that structural solutions are required.

Adult education serves marginalized communities. For the past 20 years (see nrs.ed.gov), the majority of adult education students have been students of color. In 2019, people of color were 78 percent of adult education enrollments. The barriers to education and employment that adult education students face are significant: in 2019, 23 percent self-identified as low-income, eight percent as single parents, four percent as having a disability, nearly seven percent as ex-offenders, and five percent as long-term unemployed. Students who were enrolled to learn English made up half of the national enrollment in 2019. Ten percent of the total enrollment were served in correctional facilities. In the longstanding conversation about the digital divide, our students and their families are among those most in need of solutions. The lack of available and affordable computer devices and high-speed internet is severely hampering adult students' and their families' ability to engage with remote instruction, access government and health services, and build necessary digital skills to participate in our nation's economic rebuilding efforts.

As state directors of adult education, we can attest that an investment in adult education has the power to change lives and remove barriers, yielding empowered individuals, engaged communities, and uplifted families. Now is the time to make that investment and work to close educational attainment and earnings gaps.