



**NASDAE**  
National Association of State  
Directors of Adult Education

# A Goldmine of Data: Twenty Years of Data Available on Adult Learners

An Informational Brief from the  
National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE)

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## Purpose

This brief outlines the scope of the data on adult learners and adult education programs stored in the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS) and corresponding state data collections systems. These data systems hold a vast potential for research and analysis of student outcomes, program participation, and performance that has been largely untapped. The data referenced are collected by Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Title II, adult education programs, a data bank that includes over 42 million adult learner records. The National Reporting System (NRS), which is managed by the U.S. Department of Education, the state management systems established to collect and report learner data, and the over 51,000 trained practitioners are invaluable resources to gain insight into adult learners' academic and workforce development trajectories and support new service initiatives to adult learners. The brief closes with questions for additional analyses and recommendations for the practical uses of this data.

# Overview

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Federally-funded, state administered adult education programs have served out-of-school youths and adults since 1964. Funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), now authorized as Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act of 2014 (WIOA), these programs offer adult basic and secondary education leading to a high school credential, English language acquisition, workforce readiness and digital skill building, employability and civics skills, integrated education and training for specific occupations, workplace adult literacy, and family literacy in cooperation with other education and workforce development partners.

Since 1999, AEFLA has mandated federal reporting of student characteristics, educational history, goals, attendance, academic attainment, barriers to employment, employment status upon entry, and follow-up outcomes into the National Reporting System (NRS) for program accountability. The NRS has become more complex over time, responding to changing authorizing legislation as well as changes in educational research and practice. As of program year (PY) 2021-22 data, **the NRS contains data from more than 42 million adult learner records.**

This aggregate data is publicly available on the [NRS.ed.gov](https://nrs.ed.gov) website with reports for national trends at the national, regional, and state levels. From program year 2021-22 data, there are intriguing data points about the adult education program that are readily apparent at the national level, including the following:

**77.5%**

Adult education is a minority-serving program, enrolling 77.5% **non-white population**

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**42%**

Adult education students are working learners: 42% reported being **employed** at intake

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**50%**

Nearly half of adult education students are **enrolled to learn English**, and 11% of foreign-born students are internationally trained professionals with a postsecondary degree or credential

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**89,822**

Adult education offers a critical path for incarcerated adults and those reentering society: 89,822 **correctional students** were served in PY21-22

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**49,572**

Adult education is a career pathway program, enrolling 49,572 **students in integrated education and training programs** to earn industry-recognized credentials for employment and career advancement

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# Current National Data Collection and Practices

The NRS required data fields are listed in Exhibit 1. These data fields are reported annually by states in aggregate to the NRS although they are collected as student records at the provider level where much more data are maintained for provider accountability and state guidance. Federal reporting requires the disaggregation of some data by sex, race/ethnicity, age, and barriers to employment on the **Statewide Performance Reports**; these are published by each WIOA title program annually. WIOA reporting requirements establish time-based cohorts for follow-up measures which allow states to document indicators of clients' outcomes within a year of exit from the program such as transition to postsecondary education and training, credentials earned, employment, and median earnings.

To enhance data collection and reporting while maintaining data quality, states and local programs have made significant, ongoing investments in data systems and accountability procedures. State-maintained and enterprise software require regular modifications to meet changing requirements. States and local programs have invested heavily in professional development for practitioners who are well-practiced in high-quality data collection methods. Federal technical assistance contracts have also made a steady investment to assist states to maintain compliance, analyze their data, and use data for program improvement. **These investments and enhancements yield resources within adult education programs that can serve to inform new adult workforce development efforts, such as those authorized in the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022, as they are established in states and communities.**

## Potential for Enhanced Analyses

The NRS data collection, at both the federal and state levels, holds great untapped potential to reveal learner and program participation and performance trends. Although secondary analyses of the data for these purposes have not been undertaken on a large scale, such studies could be highly valuable for uncovering long-term growth patterns and outcomes of learner populations, along with promising practices for program improvement, such as:

-  connecting follow-up outcomes and later life benchmarks to learners' gain attainment;
-  capturing "completion" of a program of study as distinguished from credential attainment or transition to postsecondary institution;
-  documenting the educational progress of learners who are enrolled over more than one year;
-  identifying patterns of attendance and gains for students and for subpopulations; and
-  connecting student gains with teacher or program characteristics or programming initiatives.

State data systems are largely designed for federal reporting and program compliance. Resources are limited and many state agencies have neither the in-house capacity for further analysis, the mechanisms to facilitate data sharing agreements, nor the ability to link student data to other administrative datasets to track related outcomes. Some systems interface with their State Longitudinal Data Systems for additional research and opportunities, while others do not. These limitations are diminishing as the data systems are modernized but such challenges must be taken into account if further research on this data is undertaken. A 2015 **report** by the American Institutes for Research detailed lessons learned while working with state-level systems and administrative data for secondary analysis.

# Recommendations

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NASDAE recommends that researchers, state and federal administrators and policy makers, and philanthropic organizations consider the high-quality data available in the NRS and state systems as a resource for establishing trends and understandings about adult learners' and their educational gains, outcomes, and trajectories. We encourage consideration of secondary analyses of the data and partnerships with adult education practitioners for their wealth of knowledge as any new and existing workforce development or adult education programs establish data collection and reporting requirements.

## How to Use this Information Brief

Consider ways to further awareness of the data on adult learners represented by the NRS and adult education providers.

**Review the state and national adult education data** and analysis tools available in the National Reporting System (NRS), including a public access option, which can be found at [NRS.ed.gov](https://nrs.ed.gov).

- Compare individual state data to the national trends
- Use the reporting tools to demonstrate individual state data over time
- Inform longitudinal studies of outcomes for learners persisting for multiple years

## Share this Brief with:

- Agencies establishing new workforce development initiatives
- Entities interested in adult learning and workforce development yet unfamiliar with the WIOA adult education program
- Researchers and philanthropic organizations and discuss the interest in additional analyses

## Exhibit 1.1 Summary of NRS Indicators, Measures, and Definitions

Reproduced from the Technical Assistance Guide for Performance Accountability Under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act: National Reporting System for Adult Education ([www.nrsweb.org](http://www.nrsweb.org))

Topic	Measures	Categories or Definitions
<b>Performance Indicators</b>		
Performance Indicator – Measurable Skill Gains (MSG)	Educational functioning level gain	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Documented achievement of at least one educational functioning level in reading, writing, speaking, and listening and functional areas, as measured by an NRS-approved assessment</li> <li>▪ Earning enough Carnegie Units or credits to move from ABE level 5 to ABE level 6, according to state rule</li> <li>▪ Enrollment in a postsecondary educational or occupational skills program after exit and by the end of the program year</li> </ul>
	Attainment of a Secondary School Diploma	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Receipt of a secondary school diploma or recognized equivalent during enrollment or after exit and by the end of the program year</li> </ul>
	For IET and Workplace Literacy Participants Only: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Secondary or Postsecondary Transcript</li> <li>▪ Progress Toward Milestone</li> <li>▪ Passing Technical/Occupational Knowledge-Based Exam</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Exhibiting progress on a postsecondary transcript</li> <li>▪ Showing progress toward milestones</li> <li>▪ Passing a technical or occupational knowledge-based exam</li> </ul>
Performance Indicator – Employment Measures	Second-quarter employment	Employment in the second quarter after the exit quarter
	Fourth-quarter employment	Employment in the fourth quarter after the exit quarter
	Median earnings	Median earnings of participants employed in the second quarter after the exit quarter
Performance Indicator – Credential Attainment	Attainment of secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent	Receipt of secondary school diploma or its recognized equivalent and employed or entered into postsecondary education with 1 year of exit
	Attainment of postsecondary credential	Receipt of a postsecondary credential while enrolled or within 1 year of exit

Topic	Measures	Categories or Definitions
<b>Descriptive and Participant Measures</b>		
Demographics	Barriers to employment	Displaced homemaker; ELL, low-literacy or cultural barriers; exhausting TANF within two years; ex-offender; homeless or runaway youth; long-term unemployed; low income; migrant or seasonal farmworker; individual with disabilities; single parent; youth aged out of foster care system
	Race/ethnicity	American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Black or African American (non- Hispanic), Hispanic or Latino, White (non-Hispanic), more than one race
	Gender	Male, female
	Age	Years since date of birth
Status	Labor force status	Employed, not employed, not in labor force, employed but received notice of termination or pending military separation
	Highest degree or level of school completed	Highest grade level of school completed in U.S. or abroad, college, secondary school diploma, postsecondary degree
Student Participation	Contact hours	Number of hours of instructional activity
	Program enrollment type	ABE, ASE, ESL, family literacy, IET, IEL/civics education, correctional education, community corrections programs, other institutional programs, distance education
Teacher Descriptive	Years of experience in adult education	Total number of years of experience teaching in adult education
	Teacher certification	Certification in K-12, special education, adult education, TESOL

Topic	Measures	Categories or Definitions
<b>Optional Measures</b>		
Family Literacy	Involvement in children's education	Participant increases help given for children's school work, contact with teachers to discuss education, and involvement in children's school
	Involvement in children's literacy-related activities	Participant increases the amount read to children, visits libraries, or purchases books or magazines for children
ELL Civics	Achieved citizenship skills	Achieve the skills needed to pass the citizenship exam
	Voting registration	Participant registers to vote or votes for the first time
	General involvement in community activities	Participant increases involvement in community activities

ELL=English language learner • TANF=Temporary Assistance for Needy Families • ABE=adult basic education • ASE=adult secondary education • ESL=English as a second language • IET=integrated education and training • IEL=integrated English literacy • TESOL=Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages