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Making Skills Everyone's Business

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## **MAKING SKILLS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS**

**[Making Skills Everyone's Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States](#)** was released yesterday (February 24) by the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) of the U.S. Department of Education. This important report will change how OCTAE tackles adult education and workforce skills challenges in the U.S. for some time to come. It is a visionary approach and is must reading for everyone

involved at all levels of planning and service provision in this field.

***Making Skills*** sets forth a set of interconnected strategies and goals designed to expand, improve, and coordinate adult skills upgrading in the coming years for both employability and equity purposes. Making the most of WIOA is part of the vision, but collaboration with other federal programs and other kinds of partners is also abundantly in evidence.

**OCTAE has four broad goals:** (1) to increase adult access or upskilling services, (2) to reduce equity gaps between services for youth and adults, (3) to carry out skills activities that are linked to other large quality-of-life issues, and (4) to promote collective collaboration.

**Who Has Low Skills?** Part I of the report draws on the findings of the Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies ([PIAAC](#)) to discuss the groups that have low skills. For example, some 36 million adults in the U.S. have low skills and score below Level 2 on the literacy assessment of PIAAC (see note 1 below). The skills levels of our adults have "remained stagnant" over two decades, and contrary to the trend in the other industrialized countries that took part in the survey, our youngest cohorts out-perform our older adults only very slightly. About two-thirds of the low-skilled U.S. population, some 24 million adults, are employed. Three million in this group report that they would like to improve their skills but are not currently enrolled in any programs. Another 8 million are enrolled in education/training programs but say they want to do more.

These general statistics provide part of the underlying rationale for OCTAE's new approach. The following facts are also discussed in ***Making Skills***, providing additional fodder: One in every six adults has low literacy skills. One third of immigrants are low skilled. One third of younger Americans are low skilled. 35% of blacks and 43% of Hispanics have low literacy skills compared with 10% of white Americans. Children of less-educated parents are more likely to be low-skilled themselves as adults. The learning disabled are twice as likely to have low skills. The majority of those with low skills (more than 60%) have completed high school. Low-skilled Americans are four times more likely to have poor health than their higher-skilled counterparts. The earnings of 40% of low-skilled Americans are in the bottom fifth of the wage

spectrum. And finally, low-skilled Americans are limited in their civic and community participation, to their own detriment and that of the nation's.

**The White House Sets Course.** Based on PIAAC findings and other evidence, in [Ready to Work: Job-Driven Training and American Opportunity](#), the White House issued a call in 2014 for action by both public-sector and private-sector organizations. The plan was based on joint reports from the Departments of Education, Labor, Commerce, and Health and Human Services, and it was announced by the President in the State of the Union address.

The White House plan calls specifically for: (1) bringing 3 million nearly-ready-to-work adults back into jobs after more than 6 months of unemployment; (2) helping 24 million low-wage, low-skilled adults upskill themselves into better jobs; and (3) diversifying the ways that all Americans can be trained for the half million plus jobs that are unfilled today and hundreds of thousands of others that will soon emerge in information technology and other occupational areas. Its goals have been communicated to mayors and governors across the country.

OCTAE cites the White House effort and two other recent developments as the synergy for its effort to address the low skills needs of adults and narrow achievement gaps for minority groups. The other two foundational factors were the PIAAC assessment and related analyses, and the passage and implementation requirements of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

**Who Would Benefit Most From Services?** Part I includes an analysis of who would most benefit from higher skills attainment. It does so with reference to the specific and differing gains (e.g., economic productivity and employability, better health, increased family literacy, higher wages, reductions in the cost of healthcare, education, and social services) that would accrue to three categories of people: ***individuals and families, business and industry, and communities.***

**OCTAE's 7 Core Strategies.** Part II of ***Making Skills Everyone's Business*** accounts for about two-thirds of the report. It sets forth in detail OCTAE's seven core strategies for achieving its four goals stated above.

Each strategy is a priority area of action. The report gives a rationale and discusses both needs and priorities. An impressive array of efforts already in process are highlighted throughout the document, reflecting commitments not only from OCTAE, but the Department of Labor and other federal departments...the federal Institute of Museum and Library Science and other library groups...city, state and regional groups...union groups (which have operated many model service programs for years)...and others. Although some of the models are carried out independently, there is strong emphasis given to collaborative initiatives.

The exemplary work highlighted in the report not only illuminates a wide array of innovative and committed programming, but collectively it shows many of the new pathways through which significant funding is and can be made available for adult education and workforce skills development across the country--despite the profoundly negative pressures of sequestration on federal budgets at present.

**OCTAE's seven core strategies are:**

1. **Act Collectively to Raise Awareness and Take Joint Ownership of Solutions.** This strategy focuses on the need for program alignment, goal-sharing across stakeholder groups, and increased awareness; on more funding and more collective impact models; and on strengthening connections between low skills and larger goals such as improving health, economic growth, meeting workforce needs, and family literacy. The strategy includes Title II programs but is not limited to them. *[Links are provided to programs already in process to advance this strategy--for example, OCTAE's \$1.2 million collective impact immigrant integration model in five sites...Tulsa's Career Advance...Partners for a Competitive Workforce (an initiative in a tri-state region that includes Cincinnati...and New York State's Literacy Zones initiative.)*

2. **Transform Opportunities for Youth and Adults to Assess, Improve, and Use Foundation Skills.** This strategy aims to expand and improve access and participation in skills programs for both youth and adults at all levels. It aims to increase access and opportunity through increased use of technology, accelerated program models, prior learning assessments, and

such measures. *[Links include Institute of Museum and Library Services...Connect ED...DOL's \$2 billion Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program...Jobs Madness...the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Healthcare NW Training Partnership...and Digital On-Ramps and other programs of the Mayor's Commission for Literacy in Philadelphia.]*

**3. Make Career Pathways Available and Accessible in Every**

**Community.** This strategy aims to make pathways available in every community. It speaks about industry-relevant certifications, job acquisition and retention, professional development, and activities by college, states, regional areas, philanthropy, and the efforts of some 13 federal agencies including OMB. *[Links: The Health Profession Opportunity Grant program of HHS...multistate foundation initiatives such as Breaking Through, Shifting Gears, and Accelerating Opportunity...the Moving Pathways Forward and Advancing Career and Technical Education grant projects of OCTAE...work by the National College Transition Network developed in New England...and Texas' System for Adult Basic Education Support Integrating Career Advancement.]*

**4. Ensure That All Students Have Access to Highly Effective Teachers, Leaders, and Programs.**

This strategy focuses on the relationship between teachers and students. It calls for major improvements in professional development, leadership development, curriculum and instructional design, student assessment, and program monitoring and accountability, all essential if students are to have access to high quality programs. *[Links: Minnesota's Student Achievement in Reading (Star)..the Literacy Information and Communications System (LINCS)...and work being undertaken by the Greater Pittsburgh Literacy Council and the City Colleges of Chicago.]*

**5. Create a "No Wrong Door" Approach for Youth and Adult**

**Services.** A key aim of this strategy is to foster seamless program alignment at the community level. Under WIOA, each state is required to submit a unified 4-year plan that coordinates and aligns services. WIOA also mandates that adult education should represent a quarter of stakeholders at the planning table. OCTAE notes that the unified planning provisions of WIOA are

a **"game changer."** The plans must include alignment at the state and local levels and ties as appropriate to one-stops and other local community resources including WBS, business and labor, community-based, and adult education organizations. The one-stops are to be the main hubs for education and training at the community level. They and other partners to the planning effort must see to it that alignments are handled in a way that give youth and adults suitable referral information to career and pathways development programs suited to their needs and circumstances. The onus of providing information learners need to make program choices will be on the program providers.

*[Links are provided to: the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (a collaboration of 18 federal agencies)...the Myth Buster series of the Federal Interagency Reentry Council...HUD's new Moving to Work demonstration project...the Performance Partnership Pilots for Disconnected Youth launched in late 2014 and involving numerous communities and several federal agencies...the Welcome Back initiative...the SNAP-E&T program of the Department of Agriculture...and others.]*

## **6. Engage Employers To Support Upskilling More Front-Line**

**Workers.** This strategy focuses on the 24 million low-skilled working adults and the role of employers. Among the aims of this strategy are to enlist a higher level of involvement from employers to overcome barriers that low-skilled working adults face in participating in upskilling programs, especially programs offered by business itself (see note 2 below). Attention is given to blended programs, peer and cross-level tutoring, contextualized and integrated programming, restructuring jobs to include skills progressions, worker scheduling flexibility, and other approaches. *[Links: OCTAE's Employer Engagement Tool Kit...Walmart's Career Online High School...the English Works Campaign...the Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (which involves several federal agencies)...the Wadhvani Foundation's Race to a Job Initiative...the Community Health Care Association of New York State...and others.]*

## **7. Commit to Closing the Equity Gap for Vulnerable**

**Subpopulations.** At the core of this strategy is the belief that "we can no longer look away!" It reflects a sea-change view about this nation's obligation to provide equality of opportunity in education to vulnerable subgroups in the

population. The U.S. ranks highest in inequality of all the nations participating in the PIAAC survey, which means that a disproportionate percentage of individuals with low skills are minorities (as the statistics at the outset show). OCTAE calls this strategy "in many ways the most important" of them all. "The ladder of opportunity is broken in too many places. Doubling our skill development efforts for these subpopulations will be key to making sure the economic recovery is working for all Americans."

OCTAE's most passionate call to action is given in this strategical area. It calls on philanthropy and the business community to play major roles in "seeding collective action" at the state and local levels. And it lists from WIOA 14 subpopulation groups that have significant employment barriers. Recognizing that the needs of various vulnerable groups require often unique customized interventions, it calls for "focused investments in research, development, and evaluation" to support and identify appropriate interventions and program models. [\[Links: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correction Education \(Rand Corporation report\)...New York City's Young Men's Initiative...OCTAE's partnership effort with Benetech...Young Males of Color...Silicon Valley's Alliance for Language Learners' Integration, Education, and Success...the Federal Workforce Innovation Fund, an initiative of the Gila River Indian Community...and others.\]](#)

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In preparing this coverage of ***Making Skills Everyone's Business***, ALP interviewed the Acting Assistant Secretary of OCTAE, Johan Uvin.

We spoke about the variety of efforts in which OCTAE is already proactively engaged in relation to the report goals. In addition to the kinds of activity noted above, he noted that on an ongoing basis OCTAE is "co-leading the Career Pathways and Upskilling work stream of The Skills Working Group, which consists of 13 federal agencies, the National Economic Council, and the Office of Management and Budget."

We also spoke about the huge funding challenge the field faces as we work to advance adult education and workforce skills development. OCTAE is well aware of this funding need, but we live with the reality of sequestration and

he observes that "achieving it is likely to take time and we need to do some things now that lead up to and support that goal."

"Local, state, tribal, and national organizations and agencies can take a few steps. One is to better align funding so that we can get to greater access with the funding we have. A second step is to leverage and bring together various public and private sector resources. The private sector's investment in education and training is many times the public investment. A third step is to start thinking about using available resources differently. The evidence for certain program models and technology innovations is growing. Some of these innovations appear to get more people to higher levels of outcomes in relatively short periods of time. As the evidence base solidifies, it would be wise to redirect resources away from unproven interventions and towards programs that work."

"In addition to addressing the requirements under WIOA, OCTAE will continue its investments in several of the strategies such as career pathways. We are also interested in aligning our investments over time more tightly with the strategies. For instance, OCTAE acknowledges that there is a need for technical assistance in the area of place-based strategies including technical assistance around collective impact and network development approaches."

ALP asked Mr. Uvin how state and local groups could best help advance the OCTAE vision and specific agenda. He said: "States can incorporate the principles and strategies of ***Making Skills Everyone's Business*** into interagency discussions related to talent development including discussions relevant to planning under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act."

"In addition," he said, "states can work with leaders in business, industry, and labor to expand opportunities for advancement of frontline workers and find ways to backfill those positions with low-skilled job seekers. They can also consider how their State Leadership resources can be used to find new ways of creating opportunities for more low skilled adults to assess and improve their skills."

"At the local level, there are many opportunities. One is to work with employers, labor unions, industry, workforce development and human

services partners, libraries, housing authorities, public broadcasting organizations, and others on creating local career pathways that are physically and programmatically accessible. Another option or example would be for a local community to launch a community skills challenge. A third option would be for local providers to create partnerships with employers and unions to expand access to high-quality education and training. These partnerships can create internships and work-based learning opportunities."

**[Making Skills Everyone's Business: A Call to Transform Adult Learning in the United States](#)** is available from OCTAE. Readers are also encouraged to regularly check for updates in **[OCTAE's new Blog](#)**. OCTAE will use the Blog to report on developments in this initiative, tagging updates with the words "Making Skills" so that readers can easily find new items.

OCTAE's plan is visionary and comprehensive. It distills what we have known for some time and heeds the advice of many informed sources. It is an ambitious attempt, despite federal funding constraints, to put it all together and reach to the future.

This comment in OCTAE's report resonates above all others: **We can no longer look away!**

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**Note 1.** According to PIAAC, level 2 and below indicates limited ability to engage in text, work in numbers, and solve problems in technology-rich environments.

**Note 2.** The February 6th final newsletter issue #50 of the Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy covered a new report just put out from The Center on Education and the Workforce of Georgetown University. The report, **[College is Just the Beginning: Employers' Role in the \\$1.1 Trillion Postsecondary Education and Training](#)**, provides information on the currently low percentage of low-skilled workers who are beneficiaries of employer E&T programs.



## NEWS IN BRIEF



The **National Skills Coalition** offers an impressive array of reports and analyses on [adult education and workforce skills related to immigrant integration](#), all available at the NSC website. On February 19th, NSC released its [Recommendations to the White House Task Force on New Americans](#), an interagency group created by Presidential Memorandum in November 2014. In releasing the set of recommendations, NSC notes that "the adult education and workforce systems need significantly more capacity to meet existing and emerging demand." Among its recommendations is that states should be encouraged to engage immigrant-serving organizations as planning partners in the development of WIOA state plans.



In 1988, the **William T. Grant Foundation** issued its highly influential report, *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families*. The report was the result of a commission directed by the late Samuel Halperin, who subsequently founded the American Youth Policy Forum. In January 2015, some 25 years later, the Foundation has issued an update report called [The New Forgotten Half and Research Directions to Support Them](#). This report, by James Rosenbaum, Caitlin Ahearn, and Kelly Becker of Northwestern University, and Janet Rosenbaum of the State University of New York, is concerned with the high noncompletion rate of college-going high school graduates, noting that nearly half (46%) drop out within 8 years "earning no degree and incurring significant expenses." The report discusses the issues related to this phenomenon and provides suggestions on how to improve the college completion rate of such youth.



A [February 24th press release](#) from the **U.S. Department of Education**, regarding reauthorization of ESEA, shows that a currently-pending House Republican bill would allow billions in cuts for largest school districts in the country serving high black and Hispanic populations. It cites many of the schools that stand to suffer significant funding losses if the bill passes.



The **U.S. Department of Health & Human Services** offers two resources among many to those working in health literacy and public health: [Quick Guide to Health Literacy](#) and [Older Adults and Helping Older Adults Search for Health Information Online: A Toolkit for Trainers](#).



**High School Equivalency Testing In the News.** The apparent drop in high school equivalency test taking in general (whether the GED, the TASC, or HiSET) is a matter of serious concern at a time when the need for such testing is very high. (1) A Hechinger Report article, "[Pass rates dip and test takers decrease after first year of new high school equivalency exam](#)" discusses high school equivalency test taking in New York State after its first year using the new TASC (Test Assessing Secondary Completion). The TASC costs about \$54 for the complete exam (taken on paper) the report says, while the revised GED of ACE costs \$120 and is available only on computer. The NYS Board of Regents, New York is a pilot state for TASC, is working with McGraw-Hill to refine and further develop the test and notes that its overall decline in scores was only about four percent, much less than the decline in states where the GED is offered. (2) In Washington, D.C., according to an [article in the January 31st issue of the Washington Post](#), officials are considering whether to continue granting GED equivalency diplomas or a traditional high-school diploma being proposed by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education.

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