

## Consolidating Workforce Training Programs? A Case for Adult Education

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Due to a 2002-03 budget crisis, K-12 adult education is at a crossroads. Adult schools face a drastic cut in funding, if not complete elimination, if a governor's proposal for workforce preparation is approved (Governor's Budget Summary, 2002-2003). This proposal would fold all workforce readiness education into the community colleges and create a new Labor Agency Department to oversee the funding and accountability. This new agency may potentially add to the state-level bureaucracy. While the Labor Agency concept may have merit, the Governor fails to recognize the unique and indispensable role adult education has played since its beginnings in the early part of the 20th Century.

Today, California's adult educators through the present system, quietly reach over 1.7 million adult learners annually (California Department of Education, 2002). Additionally, two-thirds of the non-credit students statewide are served (ACSA, 2002, February), and are served in lean fiscal efficiency. Can the community colleges promise the same?

The ambitious proposal suggests eliminating \$59 million from K-12 administered adult schools (Governor's Budget Summary, 2002-2003). This would effectively gut many locally offered workforce preparation programs, with the expectation that regional community colleges pick up the workload. However, questions surface about facilities and faculty. Most adult schools share classrooms with area K-12 schools that in evenings transform into educational community centers. Most Community college campuses are already filled to capacity, both day and evenings. Additionally, adult education teachers are paid on the average ten dollars less an hour than college faculty. Besides the increase in faculty costs, this statewide shift to community colleges could potentially displace 16,000 full and part-time teachers, 500 pupil personnel and 600 administrators (California Department of Education, 2002) who are faithfully serving local adult learning communities. Most of these teachers do not have master's degrees and would not be retained by the community colleges.

Adult schools serve an array of special needs populations. Serving special adult and near-adult populations has long been the core mission of adult schools. Adults with disabilities and our communities' older adults have not traditionally been served by the community colleges and yet are two significant constituencies for many adult schools. A small but significant number of at-risk-students that have not graduated from traditional high school attend evening classes where alongside adults they are also determined to earn a diploma. Finally, over 800,000 limited English speaking students in 1998-99 felt comfortable attending adult schools that offer open-entry and open-exit courses designed for mastery with none of the college enrollment barriers of application, student fees, and semester schedules.

Adult school funding necessitates a lean organization, operating on 60% of K-12 average daily attendance apportionment (California Department of Education, 2002). These students have never faced fees for student body activities, transcripts, or parking. The vast majority of classes and accompanying instructional materials are free (adult basic education, parenting, English as a second language, older adults, seniors, adults with disabilities, and high school subjects). Offering the same array of free classes may not be possible at community colleges because of their substantial financial obligations to maintain libraries, gymnasiums, athletic fields and scores of other campus buildings. Out of financial necessity, many adult schools operate on pre-existing K-12 schools avoiding the cost of maintaining a single physical plant.

The transfer of all workforce readiness classes to community colleges might be an unfortunate choice from a student's point of view. The total number of non-credit participants will likely decline once the choice of a local adult school is eliminated. Variety and local choice are important to adult learners. In a time when the economy has cooled off, California cannot afford fewer persons seeking educational opportunities, especially in the areas of language acquisition and workforce readiness. Likewise, neighborhood schools are perceived by adult learners as safe learning environments, especially for recent adult immigrants.

There is potential and merit in part of the Governor's plan (Governor's Budget Summary, 2002-2003). The budget language suggests creating a new Labor Agency. If it is a priority to focus workforce training on statewide economic development, then the current collection of oversight agencies (Community College System, California Department of Education, and the Secretary for Education) may be in need of consolidation. Either a more concerted effort among these agencies or a single Labor Agency would be preferable to the current condition of differentiated funding levels,

accountability systems and oversight. More coordination would also state clear and consistent program priorities to all providers--community colleges, adult schools or Regional Occupational Programs (ROC/Ps). Oversight consolidation has merit if done correctly.

The state coffers are facing a \$23 billion shortfall. Drastic cuts must take place, but it should not come at the expense of this relatively small budget, high impact, locally-driven program. Additionally, if the state budget is built upon a healthy tax base of working Californians, a plan that displaces adult school personnel as well as limits educational opportunities to those who are striving to become productive citizens should be considered a foolish divestment.

#### Summary Points

##### Ø Adult schools...

...serve 2.6 million adult learners annually which are two thirds non credit classes.

...fulfill the mission to serve special-needs populations, as well as, the most disenfranchised.

...hold classes locally in partnership facilities with schools, non-profits and businesses.

...offer most classes at no expense to students.

##### Ø Consolidation...

...eliminates student choice.

...potentially displaces thousands of employees statewide.

...negatively impacts local economies.

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