

# A REVIEW OF STATEWIDE LEARNER COMPETENCY AND ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS

March 1996

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Office of Vocational and Adult Education  
U.S. Department of Education

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Ensuring program accountability by focusing on issues of program quality and evaluation has been an emphasis of the Adult Education Act (AEA) since passage of the 1988 AEA program amendments. Provisions of the National Literacy Act of 1991 further expanded accountability and evaluation requirements by mandating the establishment of state indicators of program quality. As a result of these provisions, states have focused their attention on determining:

- How to assess whether a local adult education program is succeeding;
- Key variables related to student performance that should be measured; and
- The relationship between measuring student performance and the content of the instructional program.

The diversity of goals of adult learners, who mostly participate on a voluntary basis complicates efforts to ensure program accountability and to implement more rigorous evaluation strategies. As stated in the legislation, the goals of adult education programs are to:

1. Enable adults to acquire the basic educational skills necessary for literate functioning;
2. Provide these adults with sufficient basic education to enable them to benefit from job training and retraining programs and obtain and retain productive employment so that they might more fully enjoy the benefits and responsibilities of citizenship; and
3. Enable adults who so desire to continue their education to at least the level of secondary school.

Due to the diversity of learner goals and the voluntary nature of individual participation, there has been considerable flexibility in instruction within most adult education programs. Rather than following a formal curriculum package, programs typically use a variety of instructional materials, including materials that are either purchased from publishers or are developed by instructors themselves. Often these materials are not standardized across, or even within, sites of a single program.

Another impediment to state efforts to enhance program accountability and conduct evaluations is the status of learner assessments by local adult education programs. Administering standardized assessment instruments is not a priority for most programs; pretests are often administered only to participants whose literacy is considered to be at a sufficient level and very few programs have post-test data, even for learners remaining in a program for a substantial number of hours. Furthermore, standardized assessment instruments are often selected for ease of administration rather than because they reflect the content of what is being taught.

Ongoing concerns about program effectiveness, along with legislative proposals under consideration that may focus adult education into an employment-related basic skill program, are causing states to reconsider the individually-directed nature of adult education programs. Many states have undertaken activities to design a more accountable adult education program by developing consensus about what should be taught, designing a core adult education curriculum that often emphasizes employment-related basic skills, and identifying assessment instruments to measure what has been learned by participants.

**Objectives of this Paper**

Over the past two years, the Division of Adult Education and Literacy’s *Technical Assistance Project for State Accountability and Assessment* has been assisting states in their efforts to enhance program accountability and assessment systems. Through the course of this project, we have learned about a number of state efforts to develop a statewide system of learner competencies, curriculum, and assessment. In this paper, the initiatives being undertaken by 11 states in this area are described:

|            |               |          |
|------------|---------------|----------|
| Colorado   | Connecticut   | Delaware |
| Florida    | Georgia       | Iowa     |
| Kentucky   | Oregon        | Texas    |
| Washington | West Virginia |          |

Through telephone interviews, as well as a review of materials on the development of statewide learner competency and assessment systems, the following types of information were obtained:

- Background data on the processes states have undertaken in developing competency and assessment systems.
- Learner competencies selected and sample curriculum guides to support instruction related to these competencies.
- Assessment instruments and procedures for measuring learner competencies.
- Procedures for recognizing the progress learners make in meeting the competencies.

### **Organization of This Paper**

The next section of this paper summarizes the processes and procedures states have followed in developing statewide learner competency and assessment systems, the content of the competencies and instructional curriculum, learner assessments, and learner recognition efforts. In the final section of the paper we discuss the lessons learned from these states' experiences that are relevant for other states. Appendix A summarizes, on a state by state basis, the activities undertaken by each of the 11 states. Appendix B provides sample state competencies and examples of learner recognition activities or certificates.

## **AN ANALYSIS OF STATEWIDE LEARNER COMPETENCY AND ASSESSMENT SYSTEMS**

Drawing on the information obtained through telephone interviews with state staff and a review of materials that they provided, we have developed a descriptive framework that delineates the development process. Figure 1 presents components of this process:

- A systematic and informed process through which competencies have been determined.

- A curriculum package that is directly related to the learner competencies that have been identified.
- Assessment instruments that measure the skills and knowledge to be conveyed through the curriculum.
- Procedures for recognizing learners as they achieve difference competencies.

**FIGURE 1**

**Components of a Statewide Learner Competency and Assessment System**

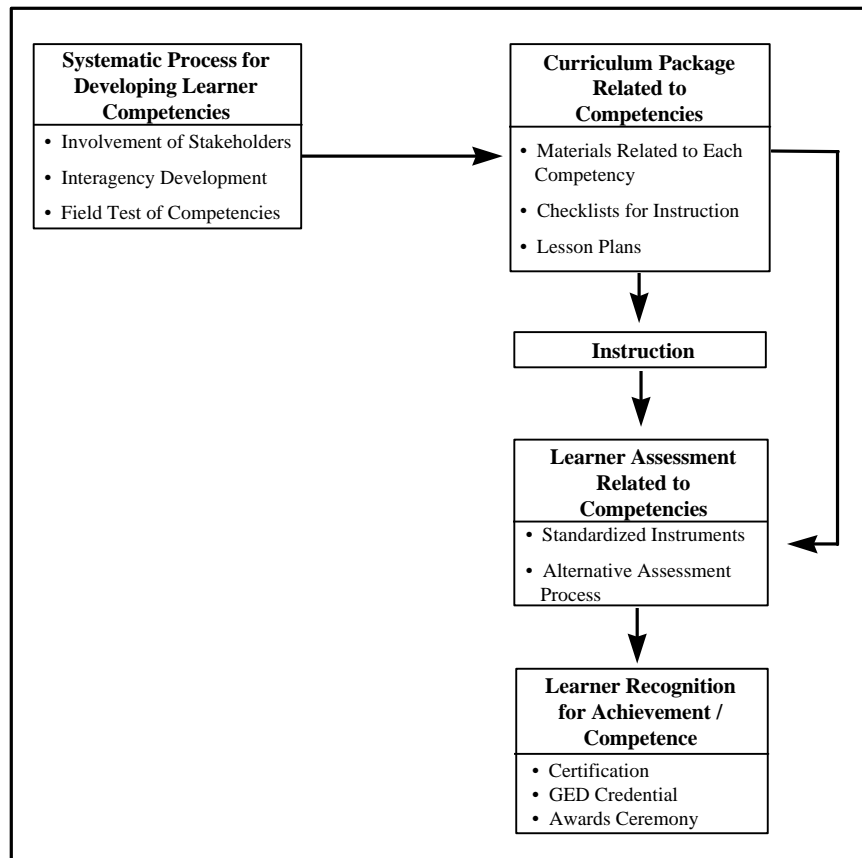


Table 1 shows the status of statewide learner competency and assessment systems using this framework. Statewide systems are currently operating in seven of the 11 states we contacted: Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Oregon and Washington. In four of these states (with Delaware, Florida, and Georgia being the exceptions) the competencies are drawn from CASAS and often have an employment orientation influenced by the work of SCANS. While five of these states have developed a curriculum or framework related to the competencies, local programs usually are not required to use the curriculum. Three of the states — Connecticut, Georgia, and Oregon — require local programs to use a specific assessment instrument. Four states have established statewide procedures for recognizing when learners achieve their competencies.

Four states — Iowa, Kentucky, Texas, and West Virginia — are in varying stages of developing statewide learner competency and assessment systems. Iowa is developing learner competencies based on CASAS. West Virginia competencies are based on SCANS and ASTD's *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want*. There appears to be interest by at least two of these states — Kentucky and West Virginia — in developing a statewide curriculum to accompany the competencies.

In the remainder of this section, activities undertaken by the 11 states in developing a statewide learner competency and assessment system are described for each of the four components mentioned above: (1) a systematic process for developing the competencies; (2) a curriculum package directly related to the competencies; (3) appropriate assessment instruments; and (4) procedures for recognizing learner achievement of competencies.

**TABLE 1**

**Status of Learner Competency and Assessment Systems  
In Selected States**

|                                  | <b>Statewide<br/>Competencies</b> | <b>Statewide<br/>Curriculum/<br/>Framework</b> | <b>Required<br/>Assessment<br/>Instrument</b> | <b>Learner<br/>Recognition</b> |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|---|--------------------------------|
| <b><i>In Operation:</i></b>      |                                   |  |   |                                |
| Colorado                         | Yes                               | Yes  | No  | State determined               |
| Connecticut                      | Yes                               | No   | Yes   | Locally determined             |
| Delaware                         | Yes                               | No   | No  | State determined               |
| Florida                          | Yes                               | Yes  | No  | Locally determined             |
| Georgia                          | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes   | State determined               |
| Oregon                           | Yes                               | Yes  | Yes   | State determined               |
| Washington                       | Yes                               | Yes  | No  | Locally determined             |
| <b><i>Under Development:</i></b> |                                   |  |   |                                |
| Iowa                             | Yes                               | No   | No  | Planned                        |
| Kentucky                         | Yes                               | Yes  | To be determined                              | Locally determined             |
| Texas                            | Yes                               | Yes  | No  | Planned                        |
| West Virginia                    | Yes                               | To be determined                               | To be determined                              | Planned                        |

**Systematic Process for Developing Learner Competencies**

State development of competencies for adult learners represents a shift in the traditional orientation of the adult education program delivery system which since its inception has emphasized the diversity of adult learner goals and offered a variety of instructional materials. When states develop learner competencies, they are taking the first step in establishing an instructional framework to guide what is taught by adult education programs. An essential first step then is to follow a systematic

process that reflects the opinions and interests of all stakeholders in order for the competencies that are identified to have the legitimacy necessary for them to be accepted by service providers and learners.

### **Process and Procedures for Establishing Competencies**

Most states we contacted have developed learner competencies through interagency task forces that have included representatives from adult education, JOBS, JTPA, and often offices of employment security, and social services. Many, if not all, of these activities have been supported through the special projects provisions of Section 353 of the Adult Education Act. The competencies and curricula have often been subjected to a pilot testing process at several local adult education programs before being implemented on a statewide basis.

Following are brief descriptions of the processes and procedures for establishing competencies followed in the 11 states. More detailed summaries are presented in Appendix A.

**Colorado:** Competencies selected by a task force comprised primarily of adult education instructors which met over an 18 month period. The competencies were then field-tested at 11 pilot sites for one year. Ten adult education programs worked with JTPA providers to examine the use of certificates of accomplishment and the processes for verifying that competencies had been attained. ESL competencies were developed and field tested in 1993-95.

**Connecticut:** The Connecticut Departments of Education, Labor, and Social Services have jointly implemented a statewide competency-based assessment and basic skills remediation program called the Connecticut Competency System.

**Delaware:** Statewide competencies have been established for ABE and ASE through a grassroots effort to develop a skills certification process. After a group of adult education instructors and program administrators identified a set of skills thought to be needed by adult students, specific competencies were developed by the state's Interagency Council on Adult Literacy, which included representatives from health and social services agencies, private industry councils, JTPA, JOBS, corrections, and employers. Certificates of Educational Attainment (CEA) were field tested at three program sites, with staff at these sites receiving training and technical assistance in implementing the CEA process.

**Florida:** Statewide competencies have been in place in Florida since the early 1980s. They were developed in response to the state's interest in promoting accountability and a functional approach to the delivery of human services. A Florida Adult Literacy Policy Team consisting



of representatives from school districts, community colleges, Literacy Volunteers of America and Laubach programs, and State Labor and Health and Rehabilitative Services departments oversaw implementation of statewide competencies, while a team of local adult educators developed and refined the competencies.

**Georgia:** A Task Force on Evaluation and Assessment was established in 1990 to examine adult education's assessment and evaluation procedures. Members of the task force included directors and instructors of adult literacy programs, university professors, and representatives from the State Adult Literacy Office. Activities in other states were examined as were products from commercial vendors. The process, including identification of competencies, development of curriculum, and staff development for instructors, occurred over a one-year period.

**Iowa:** A statewide customized competency system was developed based on responses to the Iowa Basic Skills Survey which identified a number of competencies that the state encourages, but does not require, local programs to adopt. Respondents included representatives from business and industry, employment service providers, adult education providers, and adult learners. In 1993, a pilot test of the competencies was started at seven adult education and employability services programs.

**Kentucky:** A three-year project is being conducted to develop outcome-based competencies. An interagency task force, including adult educators, employers, social services agencies, and labor representatives are involved in overseeing the project. The list of competencies they identified has been circulated to 100 randomly selected adult educators for review. During the second phase of the project, curriculum guides will be developed and during the third phase the guides and assessment books will be field tested at 14 sites in Kentucky and three sites in West Virginia.

**Oregon:** An interagency task force has overseen the development of learner competencies and a competency-based curriculum. Participants in the process include: representatives from ABE and ESL programs, JOBS programs, JTPA, alternative schools, dislocated workers, vocational technical education programs, and correctional education. The competencies and curriculum were field tested by 18 instructors at eight pilot sites. Local sites have received intensive training on using the competencies and curriculum. Local programs prioritize competencies based on learner needs.

**Texas:** Five categories of learner outcomes have been developed. Learner outcomes for ABE and ESL were developed and field tested in 1991-92. Approximately two years later, outcomes were replaced by Indicators of Program Quality. These indicators were developed in five areas, cutting across ABE, ESL, and ABE outcomes: academic development, real world applications, preparation for transition, work force development, and personal development. The specific learner outcomes continue to be used in the form of skills checklists for teachers and are cross-referenced in curriculum guides for ABE and ESL.

**Washington:** Implementation of the Washington State Core Competencies Project took place over a five year period. During the project's first phase, competencies, subject areas, and levels for ABE, ESL, and GED programs were identified. A model curriculum was developed during the project's second phase. In 1995, the Core Competencies were expanded to include workplace skills. Input for the development of the competencies and statewide curriculum was provided by an interagency steering committee consisting of representatives from state education and employment-related agencies, including JTPA, the Board of Education, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the state Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the Employment Security Department, JOBS, and the Department of Education. The competencies were field tested and training was provided to pilot sites. Subsequently, assessment tools for the competencies were field tested.

**West Virginia:** The state is in the process of developing a statewide system of learner competencies that are designed to serve the adult learner as a worker, parent, and citizen. The goal of the program is to provide adult learners with a broad range of skills that are valued in the workplace while also helping them to meet their specific learning goals. During the summer of 1996, West Virginia plans to familiarize instructors with competency-based education at the state conference and, in the summer of 1997, the state plans to provide full-time adult education and JOBS instructors with a week-long training institute on the entire curriculum.

### **Content of Competencies**

Employment related basic skills is a common theme of the learner competencies developed or under development in these states. In the following six states, the skills and competencies are based on CASAS life skills and employability competencies or influenced by SCANS.

**Colorado:** The state has developed statewide competencies in basic skills and life skills related to: basic skills/functions, community services, consumer economics, employment, health, housing, transportation/directions.

**Connecticut:** Connecticut's competencies were originally drawn from CASAS competencies and later prioritized by adult education instructors according to instructional importance. Competencies are outlined for ABE and ESL participants in a Priority Competency List for Adult Basic Education that includes consumer economics, community resources, employment, health, government and law, computation, and learning to learn.

**Iowa:** Eleven top priority competencies have been identified: communication in general interpersonal interactions, communication in the workplace, communication regarding personal information, working with people, ability to use thinking skills, basic principles of getting a job,

using problem-solving skills, using language clarification, using whole numbers, understanding job performance concepts and materials, and organizational and time management skills.

**Oregon:** The state's competency system for basic skills is the Basic Adult Student Inventory System (BASIS) and consists of employability and life skills adapted from CASAS in the areas of consumer economics, community resources, health, occupational knowledge, and government and law. Work skill and life skill competencies have been developed in the areas of reading comprehension for employment, math computation for employment, learning to learn, group effectiveness, personal self-management, influence, thinking skills, and domestic skills.

**Washington:** Originally the state's learner competencies emphasized academic skills rather than life skills. In 1995, the competency system was expanded to include workplace skills competencies from the state's I\*CANS Project, which was based on SCANS, findings from ASTD's *Workplace Basics*, and an adaptation of CASAS competencies. These competencies include interpersonal and problem-solving skills.

**West Virginia:** The state is in the process of finalizing its skills and competencies based on SCANS and ASTD's *Workplace Basics*. Learner competencies are organized into three general tracks: work-based, parenting, and citizenship. Workplace core skills include: communications, math, thinking and learning, team building, technology, personal management, multi-cultural awareness, career development, and wellness and safety. Parenting and citizenship core skills include: family relationships and parenting, home care, and law and citizenship.

Functional learner competencies have also been adopted by Kentucky and Texas for ESL learners.

**Kentucky:** The state's competencies are organized into 16 subject areas, including: science, health education and wellness, mathematics, technology/tools, consumer economics, home management, family relationships, interpersonal/social skills, self-management, employability and occupational skills, communications skills, thinking skills, social sciences, government/citizenship, cultural diversity, and community resources.

**Texas:** Competencies for ESL learners include money management, civic rights and responsibilities, community services, employment, health, shopping, and transportation. ABE learner outcomes are included in the areas of oral communication, reading, study skills, and mathematics.

In three states — Delaware, Georgia, and in Texas for ABE — learner competencies are based on academic skills and not functional competencies. Florida's student performance standards are divided into two separate tracks — one for basic skills (e.g., reading, language arts, mathematics, science) and one for functional skills such as consumer resources, health/wellness, and career development.

### **A Curriculum Package Related to Competencies**

Instruction at adult education programs has rarely been guided by a formal curriculum package and, for the most part, states have traditionally not been involved with specifying the instructional materials to be used by local programs. With the development and implementation of learner competencies, this situation appears to be changing, at least in many of the states we contacted. Once a state has taken the step toward specifying learner competencies for adult students, they are likely to then develop a cohesive curriculum package that will support instruction directly related to those competencies.

Seven of the 11 states contacted — Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Oregon, Texas and Washington — have established statewide curricula or curriculum guides that are related to learner competencies. West Virginia is currently in the process of developing such curricula. Three states — Connecticut, Delaware, and Iowa — have not developed state curriculum related to their learner competencies.

Although most of the 11 states have or are developing state curriculum to accompany the learner competencies, these are typically models or suggestions. Georgia is the only one of the 11 states to have developed a curriculum that local programs are required to follow. Most of the remaining states have either developed curriculum or curriculum guides for use by local programs.

### **States with Required Curricula**

**Georgia:** A statewide curriculum guide provides recommended resources for each competency area and an optional student competency check list for instructors to use in documenting learner progress.

### **States with Suggested Curricula or Framework**

**Colorado:** Statewide competencies in basic skills and life skills for ABE are detailed in a Curriculum Guidebook that is linked with the Colorado Certificate of Accomplishment

**Florida:** A curriculum framework has been developed by the state.

**Kentucky:** Competencies for ABE and ESL are linked to a statewide curriculum. For each competency or a group of related competencies, a curriculum guide lists related skills, prerequisites, progress benchmarks, relevant terminology, and “reflections” on the use of the competency or skill in everyday life.

**Oregon:** A competency-based functional life skills curriculum in ABE and ESL is being implemented throughout the state.

**Texas:** Curriculum guides for ABE and ESL have been issued by Texas and, according to the state, all programs have adopted or adapted these guides for their programs.

**Washington:** A model curriculum associated with the competencies was developed by Washington and was field tested at more than half of the program sites in the state. However, local programs are not required to use the model curriculum. Any curriculum that programs choose to use, however, must reflect the statewide student competencies.

### **Curricula Under Development**

**West Virginia:** The state’s system of learner competencies will become part of the statewide curriculum that is being developed for West Virginia’s adult education programs.

## **Learner Assessment Instruments**

Numerous standardized tests are available to adult education programs. The tests used by programs, however, are usually used to satisfy federal reporting requirements, are selected for ease of administration, and are not directly related to the instruction offered by local adult education programs. Furthermore, states have typically not required all of their local programs to use a single standardized assessment. This situation is inconsistent with the development of learner competencies and curriculum packages. Unless learner assessment instruments reflect the curriculum and directly

measure expected learner competencies, states will continue to find it difficult to provide policy makers with data that demonstrate the effectiveness of program services.

All of the 11 states contacted collect standardized test data from local programs. Recognizing the limitations of standardized assessments, some states are also beginning to consider alternative assessments, and to require learner portfolios, as part of their assessment system.

### **Standardized Assessments**

Three of the seven states in which a statewide learner competency and assessment system is currently operating — Connecticut, Georgia, and Oregon — require local programs to use a specific assessment instrument, although other assessment instruments are also used by local programs.

**Connecticut:** Local programs are required to report on student gains using the CASAS, although some programs continue to provide supplemental reports using such measures as the TABE and SORT.

**Georgia:** Local programs are required to use the TABE and ABLE for ABE students and the BEST and ESLOA for ESL students.

**Oregon:** For ABE, the state uses the CASAS pre-and post-tests and applied performance measures. For ESL, the short form of the BEST is used for placement. A common writing assessment also is used. Student performance levels are used to benchmark progress.

Kentucky and West Virginia, whose learner competency and assessment systems are under development, also have selected a specific assessment instrument (TABE in Kentucky and CASAS in West Virginia). Six states have not attempted to require that local programs use a single assessment instrument and these states report that local programs use a variety of assessments.

**Colorado:** Primary assessment instruments are CASAS and TABE.

**Delaware:** Delaware does not require a specific assessment instrument. Skills are verified through attainment of a minimum score on one of five possible instruments: TABE, ABLE,

Learning Unlimited, and program completion through Literacy Volunteers or Laubach Literacy Action.

**Florida:** Four standardized tests have been approved for reporting purposes: TABE, ABLE, the Minimum Essential Test (MET), and the BEST. The vast majority of programs, however, use the TABE.

**Iowa:** CASAS is the assessment instrument that has been recommended by the state to be used with the identified competencies. Iowa is developing its own norming and customized assessment instrument based on the CASAS. Local programs also use the TABE and ABLE for reporting purposes.

**Texas:** The state's current assessment system is based on TALS.

**Washington:** Approximately 80 percent of local programs use the TABE to assess student competencies, while the other programs use CASAS or other assessment measures.

### **Alternative Assessments**

Six of the states contacted also use learner portfolios as part of the assessment process. These portfolios typically include documentation of learning processes in addition to standardized assessment instruments, including writing samples.

**Colorado:** Adult learners are required to submit a portfolio that includes documentation of course work.

**Delaware:** Delaware is planning on moving away from reliance on standardized tests and toward widespread use of portfolio assessments. Portfolios are developed to include standardized tests and writing samples.

**Georgia:** Informal assessment measures such as portfolios, performance samples, and interviews may be used by local programs to monitor student progress.

**Kentucky:** The state is planning to use an optional informal assessment component including unit or mastery tests, writing samples, teacher notes and comments, examples of student work, and progress benchmarks.

**Oregon:** The content of learner portfolios is determined by local program standards. Teacher committees from ABE and ESL have defined elements of a good portfolio and gathered samples as examples for other local programs.

**Texas:** The state is promoting portfolio assessments and is shying away from using individual standardized assessment instruments to measure learner progress. Local programs determine what materials are included in learner portfolios.

### **Learner Recognition**

Accompanying the movement toward specifying learner competencies for adult education students has been the establishment of procedures and processes for recognizing learner progress or completion of specific competencies. Four of the states where statewide learner competencies have been developed — Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, and Oregon — have also established statewide procedures for recognizing learners who have achieved those competencies. In Connecticut, Florida, and Washington, local programs are responsible for determining what recognition should be provided for adult learners.

Procedures for recognizing learners that have achieved certain competencies also exist or are planned in all of the states where learner competency and assessment systems are under development — Iowa, Kentucky, Texas, and West Virginia. In Kentucky, local programs have discretion over the award of certificates.

Following are descriptions of learner recognition systems:

**Colorado:** When learners have attained all of the proficiencies required for each level, they are eligible to receive a Colorado Certificate of Accomplishment. Local program directors must submit an application to the state, including the learner’s test score, portfolio, mastery of textbook material, and demonstration of competencies. Colorado’s certificate process is modeled after the Delaware process.

**Delaware:** Certificates of Educational Attainment (CEAs) are issued by the State Department of Public Instruction and awarded by local programs to students upon attainment at each of three competency levels. CEAs are used by local programs to certify student outcomes, recognize student achievement, verify JTPA termination points, and meet JOBS goal targets. They are also used by adult learners as a documentation for employment, achievement in the workplace entry into training programs, continuation of government services, and personal development.

**Georgia:** A structured, statewide student award process enables adult education participants to compete for awards in any of seven categories representing ABE, ESL, and GED program



levels. Nominated students are expected to submit to the state Office of Adult Literacy a biography, three letters of recommendation, and a signed release form. Competition for state awards occurs at the county level, SDA level, “consortium” level, and state level. Declared winners in each category are designated “Ambassadors for Literacy” and may serve as literacy spokespersons around the state. The state encourages graduation ceremonies, but these are established at the local level.

**Iowa:** The state office plans to create a system to document attainment of competencies and award certificates of completion.

**Kentucky:** Learners who have demonstrated mastery of basic skill competencies may receive a Certificate of Proficiency, although local programs have discretion over the award of certificates.

**Oregon:** The state has established a certification process for learners who attain specific levels of competencies on the various assessment measures (e.g., CASAS). Local programs issue the certificates.

**West Virginia:** The state plans to issue certificates of mastery as learners achieve specified levels of functioning.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER STATES**

The experiences of these 11 states offer some valuable lessons for other states that are now or soon will be considering developing a statewide learner competency and assessment system. In this final section, we present three specific suggestions:

- Involve all state and local stakeholders.
- Recognize that developing and implementing a learner competency and assessment system will take time.
- Provide local staff with sufficient opportunity for professional development.

### **Involve State and Local Stakeholders**

A statewide learner competency and assessment system cannot be designed or successfully implemented without the involvement of local providers, including instructors and administrators. Active involvement of state and local personnel will help ensure that the competencies and curriculum

developed are appropriate and will facilitate acceptance by local providers during the implementation phases.

It is equally important to involve other types of service providers, both from the state and local levels who have an interest in or involvement with adult basic skills. Among the programs that should be represented are JTPA, JOBS, employment services, Even Start, and correctional education.

When involving practitioners not associated with adult education, it is also important to recognize and acknowledge that for such a system to be successful, all service providers will have to view this as a collective effort and one that requires development of a common culture, set of values, and program terminology. This is particularly important as human service agencies become more outcome based, and in preparation for potential funding cuts and shifts to block grant funding.

### **Recognize That Developing and Implementing a System Will Take Time**

Designing and implementing a learner competency and assessment system is a complex undertaking that involves substantial changes in the way adult education instruction is provided, its content, as well as procedures for assessment. Successfully developing a new system requires a state to evaluate and assess how its statewide adult education program is operating. Sufficient time also needs to be devoted to field testing competency systems in local programs so that potential bugs can be worked out and instructors develop an understanding of the competencies and assessment. Also, it is essential to acknowledge that developing and implementing a learner competency and assessment system is a continuous process where “nothing is ever done.”

### **Provide Local Staff with Sufficient Professional Development Activities**

Implementing a learner competency and assessment system often requires local programs to provide instruction in a very different manner from traditional approaches, focusing on specific competencies that they want learners to achieve, and using different curricula and assessment instruments. Instructors, particularly part-time staff and volunteers, for example, may be reluctant to follow different assessment procedures and may need assistance in becoming familiar with the relationship between learner competencies, curriculum, and assessment measures. Instructors and

administrators will need to be involved with sufficient and appropriate professional development activities if the system is to operate as intended. Such activities may include on-site training, regional training, or technical assistance.

# APPENDIX A

## State Summaries

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## COLORADO

### Overview

Development of statewide competencies for adult education took place over a two-year period between 1991-93. A field task force comprised largely of adult education teachers selected the competencies, meeting over an 18-month period. These competencies were also field tested at 11 pilot sites for one year. Ten adult education programs worked with JTPA providers to examine the use of certificates of accomplishment and the process for verifying attainment of competencies. Competencies for ESL were developed in 1993-95 through a similar process.

The Department of Education offers a multi-layered rationale for development of the competencies:

- Means for accountability;
- Documentation of skill acquisition;
- Recognition of learner accomplishments;
- Provision of a consistent statewide framework;
- Means of reporting progress; and
- Impetus from the national standards movement and school reform in K-12.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

Statewide competencies in basic skills and life skills for ABE (reading, writing, and mathematics) are detailed in a state *Curriculum Guidebook* that is linked with the *Colorado Certificate of Accomplishment*, now in its third year of implementation. Competencies are delineated in *Skills Verification Checklists* for each of three skill levels. The competencies and verification package for ESL were developed through a similar process and disseminated to the field in 1994-95.

The three competency ABE levels outlined in the curriculum guide correspond to CASAS and TABE levels:

- Level 1 is equivalent to the CASAS A or TABE E level;
- Level 2 is equivalent to CASAS B or TABE M level; and
- Level 3 corresponds with CASAS C or TABE D.

A fourth CASAS level, Level D, corresponds with pre-GED levels— TABE A (8.6-12.9) or an SPL of 9 or higher. Completion at this level is documented by passage of the GED Tests and obtaining a GED certificate.

Certificate levels for ESL correspond to the MELT student performance levels as follows:

- Level 1 is equivalent to MELT 0-2;
- Level 2 is equivalent to MELT 3-4; and
- Level 3 is equivalent to MELT 5+.

When they have attained proficiencies outlined for one of Levels 1, 2, or 3, adult education participants are eligible to receive a Colorado Certificate of Accomplishment. In order for a student to obtain this recognition, the local program director must submit a certification application with documentation in the four areas (the student's CASAS, TABE, or BEST test scores, portfolio, mastery of textbook material, demonstration of competencies). The application must be reviewed by the state adult education office (about 80 percent of the portfolios for nominees are approved the first time they are submitted<sup>1</sup>). A state Board of Education member, the state commissioner of education, the state director of adult education, and the local program director sign the certificate to verify that a student has mastered the set of competencies for a given level. Upon their approval, the student is issued a certificate.

Certificates are numbered and printed in different colors to indicate level differences. For ABE, Level 1 is green; Level 2 is blue; and Level 3 is gold. ESL certificates use different colors: Level 1 is brown; Level 2 is red; and Level 3 is green.

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<sup>1</sup>This figure does not remain constant.

All award ceremonies are determined by local programs. State office staff attend as many graduation ceremonies as time and schedules permit. This certificate and award process was modeled after Delaware's program.

### **Assessment Instruments**

The primary assessment measures are CASAS and TABE for ABE students, and BEST and CASAS for ESL students. Competencies are taken from the CASAS topic areas of occupational knowledge, health, consumer economics, community resources, and government and law. Additional topic areas used in ESL are basic skills (language functions), community services, employment, housing, and transportation and directions. Attainment of skills is also documented through three other sources: (1) a portfolio of documented course work, (2) mastery of textbook material demonstrating skill attainment, and (3) demonstration of competencies. Skills Verification Checklists for each level specify the CASAS, BEST, or TABE test item corresponding to each competency. For each skill or group of skills, the Curriculum Guidebook cross references related competencies and provides recommended lessons from textbooks and suggested activities toward mastering the competency.

### **State and Local Impact**

Support letters from employers around the state affirm that the certificates are being used to verify skill levels for non-high school graduates and to explore skill areas for education and training. The state adult education division also reports that programs can work toward consistent instructional goals and student outcomes while maintaining flexible methods of instruction and materials.

## CONNECTICUT

### Overview

The Connecticut Competency System (CCS) was formerly known as the Connecticut Adult Performance Program (CAPP). Instituted in 1986, CAPP was a five-year initiative geared toward strengthening the state's basic skills services. The impetus behind the program was pressure by state staff for all adult basic skills programs to adopt a competency-based approach to service delivery by 1990 in order to receive funding from the state's Department of Education.

Following the CAPP initiative, the Connecticut Departments of Education, Labor, and Social Services jointly implemented a statewide competency-based assessment and basic skills remediation program, the Connecticut Competency System (CCS).

### Competencies and Their Assessment

CCS competencies for ABE and ESL participants are outlined in a *Priority Competency List for Adult Basic Education*. The competencies in this list were originally drawn from CASAS life skills and employability competencies and later prioritized by adult education instructors according to instructional importance. Competencies were field tested at selected program sites.

The Competency List groups **enabling/basic skills** into two areas: reading and computation. These skills are presented within an applied life skills context drawn from seven CASAS skill topic areas (consumer economics, community resources, employment, health, government and law, computation, and learning to learn). CCS employability skills include: basic employment mathematics and reading, pre-employment competencies, and work maturity competencies.

Competencies are grouped into four levels for ABE students (beginning, intermediate, advanced, and beginning secondary) and three for ESL students (beginning, intermediate, and advanced). Recognition for advancement to each level is left up to local programs; some programs award certificates of achievement.

### Assessment Instruments



Local programs are required to report on student gains using CASAS-developed assessment instruments, although some programs continue to provide supplemental reports using measures such as the TABE and SORT. The CASAS is used for initial appraisal to determine program placement, interim assessments to measure student gains (pre- and post-tests), and final assessments (certification and/or level tests).

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

In developing a statewide competency system, Connecticut faced and addressed a number of challenges. These included: (1) developing a data management system that collected data about individual learner progress; (2) offering sufficient training to staff and technical assistance to local programs; and (3) promoting continuing interagency cooperation between the Departments of Education, Labor and Income Maintenance.

A key component of the CAPP approach was staff development. The Connecticut Adult Education Staff Development Center (now the Adult Training and Development Network) trained local program staff in the implementation of the CAPP model and provided ongoing technical assistance.

### **State and Local Impact**

Between 1986 and 1991, the number of learners reporting that they had achieved their goals through participation in adult education more than doubled. Additionally, the number of adult learners participating in the assessment process grew significantly during that time and learners' average scores on assessment instruments remained constant, in spite of the increasing numbers of participants.

## DELAWARE

### Overview

Adult education teachers and administrators introduced the concept of a skills certification process and awarding of certificates of achievement. A group of teachers and local program administrators represented a skills identification group that determined what skills were needed by adult education students and how to assess those skills. These individuals examined assessment instruments and helped match the appropriate tests to the skills they identified. The state's Interagency Council on Adult Literacy, which included representatives from health and social service agencies, private industry councils, JTPA and JOBS, corrections, and employers, reviewed and approved the CEA. Each agency agreed to adopt the competencies. Agencies representing the council sought better accountability and reporting in adult education programs and other programs serving a similar population.

The certificates were pilot tested in 1991 and were instituted statewide in 1994. Three adult education programs volunteered to participate in the pilot test, although all programs funded through the Department of Public Instruction were invited to participate. Staff at these sites obtained approximately 12 hours of training from the State Literacy Resource Center, as well as ongoing technical assistance in implementing the CEAs. Participants were given checklists and a written explanation from the state explaining why some requests for CEAs were approved and others were not. This enabled local program staff to understand what needed to be included in the application.

The CEA helps local programs certify student outcomes and recognize student achievement, verify termination points in JTPA, and determine goal targets in JOBS. For students, the CEA also serves as a motivational tool and tangible evidence of success and clearly defined steps to meet their goals. The certificates can be used as documentation for employment, achievement in the workplace, entry into training programs, continuation of government services, and personal development.

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## **Competencies and Their Assessment**

Statewide competencies have been established for ABE and adult secondary education levels in reading, writing, and mathematics for adults and out-of-school youth who lack a high school credential. Adult education students are given formal recognition and support for their educational accomplishments through the Delaware Certificates of Educational Attainment (CEA), which are issued by the Department of Public Instruction and awarded at the local program level.

State certificates are issued to individuals for three levels of educational attainment in reading, mathematics, and writing. Level 1 corresponds to completion of the 4th grade; Level 2 corresponds to completion of the 8th grade, and Level 3 is equivalent to completion of high school skills in the areas of math, reading, writing, social studies, and science. To achieve a CEA for Level 1, students must score a minimum of 5.0 on one of the following:

- TABE Test (Level M— problem solving and computation)
- ABLE Test (Level 2)
- Learning Unlimited (Level B in Math, Level C in Reading)
- Literacy Volunteers Program Completion
- Laubach Literacy Action Program Completion

To receive a CEA for Level 2, students must score a minimum of 8.0 on one of the following:

- TABE Test (Level D)
- ABLE Test (Level 3)
- Learning Unlimited (Level D in Math, Level E in Reading)

For Level 3, students must complete either of the following two requirements: (1) Method I: pass the four-hour GED Practice Test with a minimum total standard score of 240 and no subtest under 45; and write two content samples, one in social studies and one in science (minimum 200 words); (2) Method II: pass the new 8-hour GED Practice Test with a standard score of at least 240. Score a 45 or above in Subtests 1 to 4, and at least 40 on Subtest 5; and write a social studies or science sample.

### **Curriculum**

The competencies do not coincide with a mandated statewide curriculum, but most programs use a common curriculum, such as *Learning Unlimited*, a computer-managed curriculum.

### **Assessment Instruments**

Skills are verified through attainment of a minimum score on one of five possible instruments: the TABE, ABLE, Learning Unlimited, and program completion through the Literacy Volunteers or Laubach Literacy Action. In developing the competencies, the state task force looked at SCANS skills and basic skills and tied them initially with the skills tracked in Learning Unlimited (which is tied to the TABE). The task force, which consists of teachers from Department of Public Instruction-funded programs, JOBS providers, and statewide trainers, determines what tests are acceptable and the cut-off points for each level.

Portfolios are developed using standardized tests, a mastery certification program, and/or classroom demonstration with writing samples. Portfolios are reviewed by the teacher, followed by the administrator and the statewide Skills Review Team (SRT). Training for the review of portfolios was provided during the pilot test. The SRT meets monthly to review applications, and to verify achievement, consistency, and uniformity.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

Several challenges were noted in the developmental and implementation stages of the skills certification process. Teachers were hesitant to embrace multiple ways of documenting student progress, even though that was a natural outgrowth of their approach to adult education. Teachers also were intimidated by the inclusion of the writing requirement for Level 3 (GED level) and how to teach to it and score it. Much training was needed to familiarize teachers with the competencies and link them to different assessment measures. Despite training, many of the initial applications for CEAs had to be sent back because they were not properly understood or documented.

Another difficulty was in changing aspects of the system in the middle of the implementation process. This can make for a difficult adjustment among the stakeholders involved. For example, the initial name chosen for the CEA was “Basic Skills Certification”; this was changed, however, because of negative connotations associated with it. In addition, some assessment categories had to be removed (e.g., problem solving), because they were too difficult to assess and document.

### **State and Local Impact**

As a result of the implementation of the skills certification process, anecdotal evidence from adult educators and students has shown that the number of student contact hours has increased and program staff have found that they are better able to document student basic skills growth and program completion. Writing quantity and quality has improved noticeably from what was observed from samples taken during the pilot tests, as this is a requirement of all three levels of the CEA. In addition, teachers have shown that they now have a more uniform understanding of what the levels mean, and what an individual must do when a person completes a level. This is evidenced in the fact that, during the pilot and initial implementation of the competencies, the SRT frequently had to return applications to programs because they were not properly documented; currently, the SRT rarely has to return an application to a program.

One unexpected outcome the state has experienced is an increase of students, particularly those at the CEA Level 3, moving on to the high school diploma program, and a decrease in students seeking the GED credential. Students who dropped out of high school in the 11th or 12th grades, especially, are demonstrating a willingness to take the time to work toward a high school diploma rather than obtaining a GED credential. In addition, employers that have established workplace education programs in diverse industries such as poultry, manufacturing, and chemicals, have begun to buy into the idea of using the CEA and are tying the certificate to incentives for participation in workplace education programs.

### **Plans for the Future**

The state is continuing to move away from reliance on standardized tests and toward portfolio assessment. Interagency representatives have discussed the need for work-related competencies, but they feel that the state is not ready to move forward on this issue. Outcomes for the certificate are not

likely to change, but with changing standards for K-12, academic skills and curriculum alignment with standards may be adapted.

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## FLORIDA

### Overview

The state of Florida has had statewide adult education competencies in place since the early 1980s. Among the factors influencing the development of statewide competencies was the state's interest in program accountability and a functional approach across human service programs, school reform efforts, and a desire for adult basic education to adhere to the state's K-12 standards.

Over the past decade, 353 funds have been used to support projects in which adult education teachers write and update curricula for a competency-based approach, and identify appropriate materials to be used to teach to the competencies.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

The student performance standards are grouped into two tracks: functional skills and basic skills. The **basic skills track** includes standards for reading (e.g., demonstrate appropriate skills for obtaining information, recognize sounds and their association with letters, demonstrate inferential comprehension skills), language arts (e.g., compose grammatically correct sentences, write a paragraph expressing ideas clearly), mathematics, science (e.g., basic life science, physical science, earth/space science), health, social sciences, and consumer education. The **functional skills track** includes standards for consumer economics, community resources (e.g., use the telephone and telephone book, use community agencies and services), health/wellness (e.g., understand diet, exercise, stress management, use of medications), career development, government and law, family literacy, comprehension skills on practical living skills, document literacy, arithmetic skills on practical living skills, personal care skills, and social skills.

### Curriculum

In 1993, Orange County developed a functional skills curriculum framework that is used widely around the state. The Division of Applied Technology and Adult Education has published *Curriculum Frameworks and Student Performance Standards for Adult General Education*.

### Assessment Instruments

The state has approved four tests for reporting purposes, but the vast majority of grantees use the TABE. Other tests that have been approved are the ABLE, Minimum Essential Test (MET), and the BEST. Though the TABE is used widely, the state has test piloted a number of tests to find one that might be more appropriate to a functional context approach.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

One of the biggest challenges has been finding a sufficient number of adult educators to help keep curriculum materials up to date. This has been important as the curriculum needs to be updated frequently to keep up with changes. The best way to obtain competent teachers in significant numbers has been to pay them through 353 funds. Without this resource, it would have been difficult to establish and maintain the competency-based system that exists. In Brevard County, for example, teachers are more easily brought in because their travel was paid for.

Another lesson learned from the process was the importance of including Management Information (MIS) representatives in the decision making process.

### **State and Local Impact**

Adult education programs, adult educators acknowledge, have been criticized in past because they have not measured outcomes. Through the state's student tracking system, which is being piloted in several counties, a computer program can show how individuals master competencies. This information enables the adult education system to document, for example, that adult education is more successful than K-12 in preparing individuals for the workforce. Information on GED completion is the most concrete evidence of student progress. In general, adult education programs have found that they are more likely to reach students if they teach toward functional competencies.



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## GEORGIA

### Overview

Georgia developed a structured competency-based system that is tied closely to a traditional grade-level system. Efforts to that end began in 1990, when a Task Force on Assessment and Evaluation was established to analyze the state's assessment and evaluation process and to provide a more systematic approach to assessment. The task force included the following: state's adult literacy directors (from public and private programs), university professors, instructors, and representatives from the Office of Adult Literacy.

In the process of developing a statewide curriculum, the task force solicited input from other states who had embarked on similar projects and examined existing vendor products. The state's adult literacy directors conducted several reviews of the draft curriculum before it was finalized. After the curriculum was finalized, training was provided to all adult literacy directors and teachers. The entire process of identifying competencies, developing a curriculum, and conducting staff development activities took approximately one year.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

Statewide competencies are tied in with a statewide curriculum that is organized into three general competency areas of reading, writing, and mathematics. Competencies are grouped into three levels for ABE and three for ESL, in addition to the adult secondary or GED level.

ABE/ESL levels include:

- Level I (grades 0-4.9);
- Level II (Level II-A = grades 5-6.9; Level II-B = grades 7-8.9); and
- Level III (grades 9-12).

## **Curriculum**

Through the collaboration of public and private literacy providers, state staff, and university personnel, competencies are linked to a statewide curriculum used by all instructors. The curriculum guide provides recommended resources for each competency area and an optional student competency check sheet for teachers to document student progress.

## **Assessment Instruments**

Georgia's statewide curriculum standards require that local programs utilize the TABE and ABE for ABE students and the BEST and ESLOA for ESL students. These measures are to be used for placement, diagnostic assessment, and assessment for evaluation. Standardized tests must be used to evaluate skill levels after 75 hours of instruction. Nonstandard or informal assessment measures such as portfolios (e.g., collections of writing, documentation of materials read or real life tasks completed), performance samples (e.g., class presentations, reading aloud, community activities), and interviews also may be used to monitor student progress. A formal, statewide assessment summary is completed and distributed annually.

A structured, statewide student award process enables adult education participants to compete for awards in any of seven categories representing ABE, ESL, and GED program levels. For instance, the GED Golden Eagle Award is granted to GED recipients who are over 60 years old. Nominated students are expected to submit to the state Office of Adult Literacy a biography, three letters of recommendation, and a signed release form. Competition for state awards occurs in four stages: at the county level, SDA level, "consortium" level, and state level. Declared winners in each category are designated "Ambassadors for Literacy" and may serve as literacy spokespersons around the state. The state encourages graduation ceremonies, but these are established at the local level.

## **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

A primary lesson learned through the development of a statewide competency system is the importance of a collaborative approach in developing a statewide competency system. "People tend to support what they help create." In addition, states should include an aggressive, organized marketing plan tailored to the state's needs, and should follow Federal guidelines and suggestions.

### **State and Local Impact**

The state reports that its adult education program has witnessed a variety of benefits since instituting a statewide competency system:

- Classes can be organized in a specific manner.
- Student achievement levels can be tracked by student and teacher.
- Assessment has been standardized.
- The system assists in establishing student goals. Success is defined individually and provides more ownership for the learner.
- Recruitment and retention of students has improved due to more clearly defined goals.
- The number of GED graduates has increased significantly.
- Public awareness and credibility of the GED credential has improved.

## IOWA

### **Overview**

Iowa has recently established a customized, statewide competency system based on the *CASAS Competency List*. Findings from the research of SCANS were used to support the assumption that basic skills should be assessed and taught in context. The state conducted the *Iowa Adult Basic Skills Survey (IABSS)* in 1993-94. From this survey, a list of top and high priority-level competencies has been identified. While the use of these competencies is not mandated, the state encourages their adoption by local programs.

In 1993, seven sites started a pilot implementation of the CASAS in adult basic education and employability services programs. A task force consisting largely of community college program representatives familiar with the CASAS system provided guidance in the development stage of this implementation effort. The pilot test supported the suitability of the CASAS system in Iowa's adult education programs.

To provide guidance for developing a research-based curriculum and assessment system that would improve program effectiveness and accountability for Iowa's adult basic education programs, Iowa conducted the *Iowa Adult Basic Skills Survey (IABSS)*. The IABSS asked five basic groups of respondents (business and industry, employment service providers, instruction providers, learners, and others) to rate the importance of 55 specific competencies. Priority-level rankings were generated to explore the relative importance of the competencies.

### **Competencies and Their Assessment**

Use of the competencies is not mandated statewide and is not linked to a statewide curriculum. However, Iowa provides all of the adult basic education service providers with competency priority lists and encourages the development of curricula and assessment for these competencies by local programs.

The IABSS identified *basic communication* as the top competency area, followed by *learning to learn, employment, and health*. The following list delineates the 11 competencies designated as top priority level across survey respondent groups:

- communicate in general interpersonal interactions;
- communicate effectively in the workplace;
- communicate regarding personal information;
- demonstrate effectiveness in working with people;
- demonstrate ability to use thinking skills;
- understand basic principles of getting a job;
- use problem solving skills;
- use language of clarification;
- compute using whole numbers;
- understand job performance concepts and materials; and
- practice organizational and time management skills.

### **Assessment Instruments**

CASAS is the primary assessment measure that is recommended for use with the identified competencies; however, programs also use the TABE and ABLE for reporting purposes, as well as a variety of other standardized and informal measures such as the WRAT, SORT, personal observations, oral presentations, role playing, writing assessment, video feedback, and life simulation scenarios. In consultation with CASAS staff, Iowa is developing its own norming and customized assessment instruments.

Competencies are grouped according to the CASAS levels. The state office plans to create a system to document attainment of competencies and award certificates of completion.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

Iowa cautions states who plan to modify their existing adult education systems not to assume that the entire system needs an overhaul. Instead, they recommend that states systematically and honestly evaluate the current functioning of their system to identify areas in which the programs excel and areas that would benefit from change. Other lessons learned during the process of identifying the priority competencies included: (1) recognizing that the change process is long term and having a long-range plan to accomplish goals; and (2) basing change on research, including knowledge about learner needs and accomplishments.

## KENTUCKY

### Overview

Through a three-year, 353-funded project, the state developed outcome-based competencies and a statewide curriculum for ABE and ESL. Phase I of the project involved bringing together committees of adult educators, employers, social service agencies, and labor representatives to develop a competency list and curriculum guide<sup>2</sup>. Utilizing SCANS and CASAS competencies, the committees developed the list that was circulated to 100 randomly selected adult educators for review. During Phase II, curriculum guides were developed for each competency. In Phase III, the curriculum guides and assessment notebooks were field tested at 14 Kentucky sites and 3 West Virginia sites.

Workplace literacy programs are competency-based but do not have an accompanying curriculum. However, Kentucky is currently developing a workplace curriculum for use in its *Job Advantage* program. Job Advantage is a program that provides basic skills instruction within the context of four occupational sectors — manufacturing, construction, hospitality/service, and health care.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

Approximately 130 outcome-based competencies and a statewide curriculum for ABE and ESL have been developed.

Competencies are divided into 16 subject categories or “duty areas,” including:

- science,
- health education and wellness,
- mathematics,
- technology/tools,
- consumer economics,

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<sup>2</sup>Several committees (comprised of a diverse set of stakeholders) performed various activities throughout the development process. The committees included an advisory council, competency review panel, curriculum committee, and assessment panel.

- home management,
- family relationships,
- interpersonal/social skills,
- self-management skills,
- employability and occupational skills,
- communication skills,
- thinking skills,
- social sciences,
- government/citizenship,
- cultural diversity, and
- community resources.

Each duty area is divided into three levels of instruction: beginning ABE, intermediate ABE, and adult secondary education (pre-GED).

### **Curriculum**

Competencies for ABE and ESL are linked to a statewide curriculum. For each competency or a group of related competencies, the curriculum guide lists related skills, prerequisites, progress benchmarks, relevant terminology, and “reflections” of the use of a competency or skill in everyday life. Sample learning activities include benchmark tasks (e.g., using a calculator to reconcile a bank statement); listing basic content areas under those tasks (e.g., comparing check stubs with bank statement and canceled checks; identifying outstanding checks; verifying deposits); and listing resources that may be used (e.g., lessons from commercial texts or real-life materials).

### **Assessment Instruments**

The assessment plan calls for both formal and informal measures. The formal assessment component, the TABE, is required for all program sites. The informal assessment component is optional; it includes a menu of options from which teachers may choose measures appropriate to instruction. These options include performance assessment items and portfolio work (e.g., unit or mastery tests, writing samples, teacher notes and comments, and examples of students' best work), and progress benchmarks.

As conceived by some of the framers of the competency system, assessment is used appropriately when it is driven by the curriculum and informs instruction. Performance assessment is seen as a way to link the curriculum more closely with assessment. Results of assessments also should be consistent with the new quality indicators.

Six levels of progress benchmarks— from performance of basic procedures and accomplishing simple tasks to high levels of knowledge and skill in performing complex tasks and problem solving— have been developed to indicate the level of mastery of a competency. Upon satisfactory completion of a level within a duty area, students may receive a certificate that highlights the competencies mastered (local programs have discretion over the award of certificates). Certificates are typically granted after students demonstrate mastery of progress benchmarks for a given duty area and level.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

The project's development activities centered around a high level of involvement of adult educators, industry, public agency representatives, and others. This involvement facilitated relevance and applicability of the competencies and curriculum as well as statewide implementation. One lesson learned during the process of developing the competency system was the need to allocate ample time to training.

### **Plans for the Future**

Kentucky is in the process of developing a contextually-based basic skills instruction program — *Job Advantage*. *Job Advantage* is a collaborative effort of the Kentucky Department for Adult Education and Literacy, the University of Kentucky Community College System, and the Kentucky Labor Cabinet. The state plans to develop a curriculum for each of the occupational sectors that comprise the program (i.e., manufacturing, construction hospitality/service, and health care). Demonstrated mastery of the basic skills for a given sector will be rewarded with a Certificate of Proficiency. The SCANS competencies are included in the *Job Advantage* curriculum.



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## OREGON

### Overview

Through an interagency consortium, Oregon has developed a competency-based set of competencies and accompanying curriculum for adult basic skills instruction. In addition to ABE and ESL programs, other providers of basic skills instruction utilize the competency-based system, including JOBS programs, alternative schools, dislocated worker programs, vocational technical education programs, correctional education, and JTPA. Based on task force meetings and long-range planning efforts from more than a decade ago, the state has been committed to finding ways to move disadvantaged adults from dependency to self-sufficiency and to accomplish this without duplicating efforts across human service agencies. These agencies conduct ongoing joint planning, seeking ways to link employability and education efforts while looking at program participants as “whole people.”

In 1994, focus groups were convened to suggest ways to develop standardized accountability measures that communicate what students accomplish in education/job readiness programs. Focus group participants included volunteer tutors and representatives from community colleges, alternative education, skill centers, Even Start, JTPA, and dislocated worker programs. The focus groups concluded that they need benchmarks, some indicators that let them know that they are moving up in the system.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

The Oregon Competency Based Steering Committee developed and field tested a competency-based functional life skills curriculum in ABE and ESL programs around the state. The multi-agency committee consisted of representatives from community colleges, correctional institutions, JTPA, state economic development and employment departments, professional technical education, and JOBS programs. The curriculum and accompanying competencies were field tested by 18 teachers at eight pilot sites during 1988-90. Intensive training on the competencies was provided. In addition, quarterly meetings are held to share, recommend changes, and define implementation strategies.

The competency system for basic skills, called *BASIS* (Basic Adult Student Inventory System), consists of employability and life skills adapted from CASAS. Workforce competencies, or *Workplace*

*Basics*, also were developed in conjunction with Washington State, under the leadership of an interagency consortium.

Suggested core competency areas for basic skills (adapted from CASAS life skills) are consumer economics, community resources, health, occupational knowledge, and government and law. Work skills and life skills competencies have been developed in the areas of reading comprehension for employment, math computation for employment, learning to learn, group effectiveness, personal self-management, influence, thinking skills, and domestic skills. Each competency area includes a listing of appropriate skill domains (e.g., reading labels on equipment, finding ratios, interpreting transportation schedules). Local programs prioritize these competencies based on student goals and program goals.

Based on scoring on the BASIS test, which is converted to CASAS scale scores, a student may place in one of six levels. The levels are linked to CASAS scores and provide a general indication of basic skill levels and job readiness:

- Pre-A = 199 and below
- Level A = 200-210 (beginning basic skill development)
- Level B = 211-220 (intermediate basic skill development)
- Level C = 221-235 (advanced basic skill development)
- Secondary = 236-245
- Secondary High = 246-256+

The Oregon Workforce Quality Council developed a similar scale that places individuals along a “Mobility Continuum” for multiple measures; basic skills are one of these measures included on this continuum. CASAS levels are anchored to the Continuum. The first three levels address individuals with abilities at or below the level of a high school education:

- (1) *Extremely limited* — based on a score of under 225 on the BASIS reading or math test and Level 1-2 on a 6-point writing test. Represents low literacy skills and extremely limited employment options (e.g., would be able to read a simple menu or fill out a

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simple form but would have difficulty reconciling a bank statement or calculating gas mileage).

- (2) *Limited* — based on a score of 225-235 on the BASIS test, and Level 2-3 on the writing test. Represents an ability to handle basic reading, writing, and computational tasks and qualification for entry-level employment (e.g., can reconcile a bank statement and interpret a payroll stub but would have difficulty maintaining a family budget or writing an accident or incident report).
- (3) *Average* — based on a score of 236-256 on the BASIS test and Level 3-4 on the writing appraisal. Represents good basic skills and the likelihood of entering employment that has some degree of complexity (e.g., able to create and use tables and graphs or communicate personal opinion in written form, but would have difficulty understanding college textbooks or highly technical manuals).
- (4) *Above average* — these individuals generally have education beyond high school, perhaps a two- or four-year degree.
- (5) *Target mobility* — these individuals have substantial education beyond high school, are proficient in using computers and other technological aids, and highly skilled at career development.

The Mobility Continuum allows partnering agencies to identify and target services designed to move Oregonians along a lifelong learning design for services. Student portfolios include certification received at the different levels in different subject areas.

### **Assessment Instruments**

The first time the state selected a common assessment instrument was in 1987 during pilot programs for welfare. For ABE, the state uses the CASAS pre- and post-tests and applied performance measures. For ESL, the short form of the BEST is used for placement, and student performance levels (SPL) are used to benchmark progress. Workplace literacy programs use BASIS for placement, a workforce checklist, and *Workplace Basics* measures such as simulations, applied performance, and group demonstrations. CASAS content areas are used to prioritize large areas for course content. Information from test content guides some of the “how-to’s” for teaching (e.g., the need to include graphs and charts). CASAS pre- and post-test scores are not used as discrete skill indicators; instead, outcomes are used to show progress from one level to the next. Test profiles are used for planning instruction.

Oregon also developed a common writing sample assessment, called the BASIS Writing Appraisal, to be used by agencies that provide basic skills education. The writing assessment is available to all students and was adapted from the GED Essay Scoring Guide. The writing assessment is used to determine placement and goal setting and serves as the initial writing benchmark. Subsequent samples are scored to demonstrate growth and certify level progress.

The Office of State Community College Services also is collaborating with Oregon Literacy, Inc. and others to develop a skill checklist for tutors to demonstrate movement through levels. These checklists match priority demonstrations of skill of the assessment system. Success can be demonstrated through a variety of ways.

Portfolios are designed and customized at the local program level. For example, a portfolio at an Even Start program is different from what would be developed in a JOBS program. The standing teacher committees from ABE and ESL have had subcommittees, which have defined elements of a good portfolio and gathered samples as examples. Only the CASAS, writing, and SPL certificates are standardized.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

One of the biggest lessons learned is that success cannot happen without the engagement of local providers, especially teachers, in the development and design of the system. In addition, implementation of statewide student competencies is a continuous process where “nothing is ever done,” and takes more time than people think it will take to develop. Not every adult education program is at the same stage of implementation, although the vast majority of grantees are nearly fully implemented. The majority of federally funded programs are consistent in their use of CASAS in assessment, as well. The various stakeholders involved have had to learn how to develop a common culture, values, and terminology and to see their efforts as a collective way to help the “customer.” In Oregon, the community college system proved to be a useful one to work under, as community colleges are part of a larger teaching and learning community than just adult basic education.

Based on early JOBS pilots in the late 1980s, adult education programs and other providers determined that they could not approach delivery of services with the assumption that students are self-managed. They also found that programs need to devote time up front with learners to stop the

“revolving door.” As a result, adult education and partner agencies have focused on extensive orientation and classes in time management, goal setting, and planning to help learners understand their own skills and abilities.

### **State and Local Impact**

As a result of implementing a competency-based system, program delivery is much different from traditional models, and the state reports broad and marked improvements in program and student outcomes since 1990. The traditional open-entry, open-exit delivery system has been replaced by a “managed opportunities” approach, which strives to conduct regular intake and orientation, with the goal of matching access with other tools and planning needed for student goals and success. Now, programs provide a mix of classroom instructional approaches, with an emphasis on group work and virtual elimination of workbooks and manuals.

Local programs are better able to show how participants move through the system and how the delivery system impacts retention rates. Customer satisfaction samples (student focus groups) also support the effectiveness of a competency-based system. Continuity in the system has been maintained through a variety of political environments as stakeholders at all levels remain committed to seeing the statewide system continue.

### **Plans for the Future**

Oregon's primary goal is to continue the variety of activities — training, technical assistance, teachers-as-leaders curriculum committees, targeted 353 projects, intensive cooperative learning implementation and other interagency projects — that support a dynamic, outcome-based basic skill development system. Integration into a total service plan across agencies also is expected to fit well with integrated block grant planning in the future. Oregon is moving to an automated accountability system for adult education, and is continuing to develop checklists for volunteer tutors, as well.

## TEXAS

### Overview

Texas established suggested learner outcomes for ABE and ESL programs in the early 1990s. Texas A&I University developed specific ESL learner outcomes, an accompanying checklist, and curriculum, field testing them in 1991 and 1992. At about the same time, learner outcomes for ABE Levels I, II, and III were developed and field tested with input from adult education teachers. Two years ago, the specific learner outcomes for ABE, GED, and ESL were replaced with the broader Indicators of Program Quality (IPQ) for Adult Education and Literacy Programs. The change was made in response to concerns that adult education practice had strayed from the research on learner outcomes. The feeling in the field was that learner outcomes were too skill specific, not holistic enough, and that subjects were not integrated. The IPQs provided more generic skill areas that could be used across the program areas and that would be easier for adult educators to remember in tracking learner progress. IPQs can be used to indicate individual learner success as well as overall program success.

### Competencies and Their Assessment

Curriculum guides for ABE and ESL have been developed. Every local program has been reported to have adopted or adapted these guides for their program. The ESL learner outcomes were based on CASAS, MELT, and the ESL curriculum from the Chicago Urban Training Skills Institute. These programs further served as the model for Texas' ESL curriculum guide. ESL topic areas include money management, civic rights and responsibilities, community services, employment, health, shopping, and transportation. For each of these topic areas, the curriculum guide includes a particular outcome or group of outcomes, suggested teaching strategies, sample life situations, and sample language for a role play.

The ABE learner outcomes were based on Essential Elements competencies developed for the K-12 system. ABE learner outcomes for low-level literacy learners (approximately 0-4) were developed in the topic areas of oral communication, reading, study skills, and mathematics. Topic areas

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for the next level, approximately grades 5-8, are similar to the GED Test topics of reading, writing, math, social studies, and science.

IPQs are not separated into functional levels; however, the old learner outcomes were divided into sequential levels. ESL outcomes are broken down into five levels: Level 0: pre-literate; Level 1: beginning; Level 2: intermediate; Level 3: intermediate; and Level 4: advanced. ABE learner outcomes were initially divided into three standard levels corresponding with traditional literacy levels of 0-4, 5-8, and 9-12, but with the emphasis on portfolio assessment and potential programmatic changes at the Federal level, these levels are not expected to be relevant. Learner outcomes delineated on skills checklists have been integrated into a matrix that shows the relevant levels and competencies for each indicator. For example, ESL learner outcomes, depending on the indicator and competency area, may be included on several or all five levels for each indicator. These IPQs are categorized as follows:

- Academic development: Levels 0-4;
- Real world application: Levels 0-4;
- Transition: Levels 3-4;
- Work force: Levels 0-4; and
- Personal development: Levels 2-4.

### **Assessment Instruments**

The state is now promoting portfolio assessment and is shying away from individual standardized assessment instruments to measure learner progress. In keeping with this approach, the skills checklists adapted from the learner outcomes allow the instructor to note whether a student's performance was evaluated through teacher observation, oral response, a written test, or other method. Texas also is beginning to move away from using an outcomes checklist or tying an outcome to a particular text; instead, the emphasis is more on use of real-life materials.

Local programs determine what materials go into a portfolio. Programs must have dated samples and a goals list in these portfolios. Teachers may use standardized tests or observations;

whatever assessment instruments they use must show that students are progressing. Most programs have received training on portfolio assessment through one of the state's grantees. The state office makes available sample instructions for student tracking and portfolio assessment, which were developed by a school district in San Antonio.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

State staff found that much training of adult education teachers was needed to teach them the outcomes and their assessment. The Adult Education Staff Development Curriculum Consortium, including approximately seven contractors, provides training on the curriculum guide to local programs at their request. This was especially important because so many of the state's adult educators are part-time or volunteer staff, and turnover can be high, bringing in many new staff. Initially, teachers saw the implementation of statewide assessment as just another cumbersome paperwork requirement. Once they were trained and informed of the process and its link to instruction, they realized that in many ways they were already doing it. Competencies were considered to be too specific initially, and many practitioners felt that they should be sequential. With the implementation of the IPQs, however, teachers found they did not have to be sequential.

Several other important lessons have come out of the process: (1) the importance of collaborating with other agencies to design the outcomes; (2) the need to devote sufficient resources and staff to decide how much to provide to program operation vs. research and development efforts and to implement competencies; and the importance of having sufficient time set aside to provide training on implementation.

### **State and Local Impact**

The state has begun to adapt its ABE and ESL curriculum guides to fit the state's new holistic approach to assessment. Use of a set of core measures in the broad IPQ areas is transferable across providers, including adult education, JOBS, and JTPA.



### **Plans for the Future**

Depending on the scope and direction of legislative changes, the indicators may change. Some ABE administrators are concerned that if funding for staff development is cut or removed, teachers will not have access to the latest research and best practices. Others are concerned that revised legislation may move adult education to more of a traditional focus on reading.

The state adult education office is expressing an interest in a performance measurement assessment system similar to what the Texas Employment Commission has instituted for its participants. Under this system, portfolio assessment is to be based on performance measures. In addition, the state is attempting to integrate more SCANS skills into the curriculum guides.

## WASHINGTON

### Overview

Implementation of the Washington State Core Competencies Project took place over a five-year, multi-phase process. As early as 1985, state ABE staff explored competency-based adult education efforts in other states. A steering committee of practitioners recommended that Washington develop its own model for identifying student outcomes. As a result, Washington's model differed from many other states in that it emphasized a sequence of basic academic skills rather than life skills. The first phase of the project, which spanned approximately 15 months, involved identification of the competencies and designation of levels and subject areas for ABE, ESL, and GED programs. The second phase of the project, around 1990, involved development of a model curriculum.

Input for the development of the Core Competencies and statewide curriculum was provided by a steering committee composed of representatives from education and employment-related agencies, including JTPA, the state Board of Education, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (K-12), the state Board for Community and Technical Colleges, the state Employment Security Department, JOBS, and the state Department of Labor. Representatives from corrections and community-based organizations were also involved. The Adult Basic & Literacy Educators' Network (ABLE-Net) managed the project, with funding from the state superintendent's office of public instruction and Section 353. Since 1992, the state's Office of Adult Literacy has managed the project.

The design and development of Washington's statewide competency system for workplace literacy, called I\*CANS (Integrated Curriculum and Necessary Skills), began in 1990. I\*CANS, a multi-agency partnership emphasizing new approaches to teaching and curriculum development, was based on findings from the American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want* and adaptation of SCANS competencies. The competencies were field tested and pilot sites received training in 1992. Assessment tools were field tested in early 1993.

In 1995, the Core Competencies were reviewed and revised following a survey of providers, and the system was expanded to incorporate workplace skills competencies from the state's I\*CANS Project. One rationale behind the revision was to encourage basic skills programs to contextualize their

instruction, which many programs already were beginning to do. Revisions to the Core Competencies were made by simplifying the language, removing duplication, and identifying competencies that were not being used. With these revisions and an eye toward a more integrated instructional delivery system, the state wants to refer to the competencies as “student competencies” rather than “Core” or I\*CANS. Individuals involved in the revision process represented ABE programs, correctional education, Private Industry Councils, employment security, social and health services, and local literacy councils.

### **Competencies and Their Assessment**

Competencies are divided into several skill areas, including basic skills (i.e., reading, writing, computation), and interpersonal and problem-solving skills (formerly the I\*CANS skills: learning to learn, thinking skills, personal management, group effectiveness, communication, and organizational influence). Basic skills are divided into three levels for ABE and three levels for ESL. The interpersonal and problem-solving skills are not leveled; rather, they are integrated into instruction at each academic level, as appropriate. Broad Basic Skills Competency Indicators are used to explain to providers and users of basic skills services what competencies students have when they complete a level in ABE or ESL. They are used to provide consistency in making decisions about adult learner placement, progress, and completion.

The Workplace Basics Project's 22 competencies were validated with more than 400 representatives from business, educators, government employees, and job trainers. Each competency area describes the objective, domain specification, model test item, and eligible test content that are appropriate to that competency area. Pilot tests were conducted at about 20 program sites.

### **Curriculum**

A model curriculum linked to the competencies was developed by the project steering committee between 1989 and 1991. Local programs are not required to use the curriculum; they may adopt it, adapt it to their own curriculum, or ignore it, if desired, as long their curriculum is based on the state's competencies. The curriculum was field tested in 1990-91, with more than half of the program sites in the state participating.

### **Assessment Instruments**

Approximately 80 percent of basic skills programs use the TABE for assessment of student competencies. The others use CASAS or other standardized assessment measures (e.g., ASSET, a college placement test; ABLE; and Nelson).

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

Washington involved multiple interests in the development of its competency system and recommends that other states interested in creating such a system ensure that it is a multi-agency effort. Another success of the Washington system was that participants focused on clearly defining competency levels that would be used consistently across the state. One challenge faced by Washington during the development of competencies was a lack of one-to-one correspondence between the competencies and existing assessment instruments. In addition, planners found that workplace competencies could not be leveled as academic competencies are.

Finally, Washington recommends that states interested in developing a competency system incorporate work/life skills into their base curriculum (using a contextual model) and build in ways to assess these skills.

### **State and Local Impact**

Establishment of statewide competencies has provided a common language and consistency of interpretation that enables providers in a variety of contexts (e.g., welfare, job preparation, education) to understand what each level means with regard to a learner's progress. The Office of Adult Literacy has distributed the competency indicators widely to partner agencies. The competencies also provide a framework for local program curriculum development.

### **Plans for the Future**

Development of state competencies is seen as work in progress. A statewide assessment working group of partner agencies is looking for an assessment system that might work across providers and is exploring ways that the different agencies may share results on their clients. At present, it is unclear if the TABE will continue to be the primary instrument for ABE programs.

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## WEST VIRGINIA

### Overview

West Virginia is in the process of developing a statewide system of competencies, designed to serve the adult learner as a worker, parent, and citizen. The goal of the system is to provide adult learners with a broad range of skills that are valued in the workplace while helping them to meet their specific learning objectives (e.g., obtain a GED credential).

The work of SCANS and the findings from the American Society for Training and Development's (ASTD) *Workplace Basics: The Skills Employers Want* served as the impetus behind the identification of skill areas. A task force comprised of state agency, private sector, and community-based organization representatives worked to identify skill areas and develop the competencies. Task force members included representatives from the following state agencies and interests:

- Department of Education;
- Bureau of Employment Programs;
- Department of Health and Human Resources;
- Office of Economic Development;
- Department of Higher Education;
- Office of Corrections;
- community-based organizations;
- volunteer literacy programs;
- business; and
- educators.

West Virginia's competency development process was supported by several related initiatives. Concurrent with the task force's activities, the West Virginia Education Fund conducted a statewide survey of employers and higher education to identify necessary skills of workers and students. The task force used the results of this survey to validate the skill areas they had selected. In addition, West Virginia sent a number of its teachers to Kentucky to learn the curriculum of a similar statewide system of competencies.

Program improvement was the primary motivation behind the development of the statewide system of learner competencies, although accountability to the legislature and to businesses also played

a role. During the initial planning, there was an awareness that future legislative changes would demand greater attention to work-related skills.

### **Competencies and Their Assessment**

Over the past year, West Virginia has begun developing skill areas, competencies, and learning objectives in three areas — work-based, parenting, and citizenship curriculum tracks. These tracks reflect the current needs of the adult learners participating in the state's adult education programs.

Core skills in the work-based curriculum include: communications, math, thinking and learning, team building, technology, personal management, multi-cultural awareness, career development, and wellness and safety. Core skills in the parenting and citizenship curricula include: family relationships and parenting skills, home care, and law and citizenship. West Virginia is still in the process of fine-tuning the list of skills and competencies; objectives are nearly completed for each competency in three functioning levels: beginning (0-5 grade level), intermediate (6-8 grade level), and advanced (9-12 grade level).

### **Curriculum**

The system of adult learner competencies described in this summary will be a part of the statewide curriculum being developed for adult education programs in West Virginia.

### **Assessment Instruments**

West Virginia plans to adapt the CASAS for use in assessment. The state also plans to issue certificates of mastery as learners achieve specified levels of functioning.

### **Challenges/Lessons Learned**

A major challenge anticipated by West Virginia is successfully focusing on both general work-place skills (e.g., communication) and specific learner objectives (e.g., obtaining a GED credential). They anticipate difficulty convincing teachers and adult learners the value of looking beyond immediate goals (e.g., obtaining a GED credential) to master the broader range of skills important in the work place and plan to counter potential resistance with formalized teacher training. A related challenge is to

ensure that teachers instruct using a work-based reference while continuing to prepare learners to achieve specific goals.

West Virginia also recognizes the challenge associated with identifying and defining core or minimum standards or levels of functioning that will be accepted by employers, and plans to work with business leaders (through the task force) to identify at what levels workers or learners need to function in order to perform successfully in the workforce (or higher education).

While West Virginia is still in the process of developing a statewide system for student/learner competencies and assessment, planners and implementers of their system have learned several lessons to date. Specifically, they stress the value of “piggy backing” on current efforts (such as the West Virginia Education Fund’s survey of employers and higher education institutions and the Kentucky project). Additionally, West Virginia realized that while a task force is a valuable way to get the input of a diverse group, it is important to realize that successful collaboration requires flexibility. Finally, technical assistance to identify states that have implemented similar initiatives facilitated “piggy backing” and collaboration.

### **Plans for the Future**

During the summer of 1996, West Virginia plans to provide training on the intermediate level skills and associated learning activities to three pilot sites (the intermediate level is the only one for which curriculum will be completed by this time). They also plan to re-examine the existing set of performance indicators and measures (e.g., educational gain) and to define standards and make decisions about assessment before completing the learning activities for the advanced and beginning skill levels.

During a statewide conference in August, 1996, West Virginia intends to familiarize teachers with competency-based education and, in the summer of 1997, plans to provide week-long training institutes on the entire curriculum for all full-time adult education instructors and JOBS instructors.