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ABSTRACT

An understanding of the magnitude of illiteracy or adult undereducation in the southeast U.S. and identification of the social, political, and economic conditions related to it are essential to developing effective policies for reducing or eliminating adult illiteracy in the region. Literacy is defined as the intellectual, social, vocational, and civic skills and abilities expected of a high school graduate who has had a "reasonably good" education. Nationally, about half the adult population has less than a high school-level education (50 million), one-quarter of these less than fifth grade ("functionally illiterate"), and three million cannot read or write in any language. The Florida population is about average, the rest of the Southeast 10% to 14% below national levels. Since the Southeast is also moving faster in terms of rate of development and change, it is a time when critical choices can mold the region's development and serve as a model to other areas. The correlates of illiteracy must be seen; poverty, exploitation, alienation, and related conditions are highly associated with being illiterate in a highly literate society. Thus major changes are required in political, economic, and educational policies and priorities especially in regard to development of under-realized sources of tax revenue, gross under-utilization of educational resources for formal and non-formal lifelong learning, and continued development of foreign-based labor intensive industries. While present adult basic education (ABE) programs have not failed, they represent a holding action at best. Main needs are for sufficient commitment of resources, integrated economic-educational planning, and use of already existing knowledge and technology. (JT)

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ILLITERACY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEVELOPMENT THROUGH ADULT EDUCATION IN THE SOUTHEAST

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This paper is an attempt to outline the magnitude of illiteracy or adult undereducation in the Southeast, an identification of some of the more obvious social, political and economic conditions related to this situation, and a recommendation of certain policies and principles for consideration.

Adult education is or, ought to be a highly political and value laden activity. This means that when individuals are involved in education they tend to expand their awareness of self and environment, their range of wants and interests, their sense of justice, their need to participate in decision-making activities, their ability to think critically and reason rationally, their ability to create alternative choices of action, and ultimately their power or control over the forces and factors which affect them - and this is political action.

And what else is democracy as Lindeman pointed out, but a "conception of sovereignty founded upon the assumption that ultimate power can only be safely trusted in the hands of the people, a conception of human equality based upon the assumption that basic human needs are similar and that these needs will be more readily satisfied through democratic rule than by any other method

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of governing, a conception of human relationships which moves ideally from exploitative and mechanistic patterns towards mutual and organic patterns, and finally a conception of the interrelatedness of all varieties of human experience." Lindeman also pointed out that social action is only justified when the force behind it is democratic and this means that it must be derived from intelligence and reason - a task involving adult education.

The Essentiality of Adult or Lifelong Education

To paraphrase a report of the President's Advisory Council on Adult Education, we cannot afford an educational system that is predominantly child-centered. It would be too expensive. Adults, not children, are making the decisions that affect all functions and actions of our government. Adults, not children, are responsible for our productive output - or lack of it. Adults, not children, are confronted with the decisions of parenthood and decisions which determine the quality of family life and the quality of education for children. Adults, not children, are challenged by environmental or political problems that threaten all future generations. Adults more than children, are faced with the increasing cost of living and the stagnant economy.

For these reasons, adults, even more than children, need relevant and pertinent education now. They need access to learning opportunities which will enable them to effectively gather and analyze the information necessary for attaining higher order solutions to increasingly complex problems.

They need opportunities for individual and shared learning experiences that will foretell the consequences of alternative decisions which must be made

now and each day thereafter. They need learning experiences to enhance their ability to contribute to the business of a free society; to resist the influence of mass persuasion and propaganda; to avoid stereotyping their fellow men in negative ways; to develop an open and inquiring mind - mind free of prejudice and premature closure to new ideas, life styles and values; and to expand their unique potentials for economic and social development, for creative leisure, and for self-actualization. Adults who have dropped from or been passed by our formal educational system and who usually represent the poverty stricken and the functionally non-literate need especially designed practical basic education to more effectively function as workers, parents, responsible citizens, consumers, users of leisure time, and continuing learners.

The increasing number of older citizens need especially designed education to enable them to lead more meaningful and satisfying lives, to supplement their incomes through part-time or second or third careers and to contribute to the improvement of our communities. Middle-age workers need dynamic learning opportunities to train and retrain for the fast changing requirements of the occupations and professions.

Our social, political and economic institutions and neighborhoods need educational opportunities that will help facilitate orderly growth, planned change and continuing renewal.

In short, our citizens need opportunities to create a learning society capable of intelligent self-renewal and change.

Basic Assumptions

With the foregoing in mind, the following assumptions are proposed as basic in designing the form and function of public adult education:

1. The Southeast has a wealth of natural resources, physical resources, and a multitude of organizations and agencies - public, private and voluntary. But its two greatest resources are its people - people with no known limits in their abilities to develop, to grow and learn, and to solve problems, and its capabilities to create new knowledge and technology through education and research.

2. Nearly all of our major problems and issues are the result of human action and decisions or inaction and indecision. These problems being of human origin can and will yield to human actions and resolutions.

Such problems include: failure of our educational system to appropriately respond to many children and youth, widespread adult illiteracy, poverty, crime and delinquency, drug abuse, pollution, environmental decay, energy shortages, malnutrition, broken homes, inadequate housing, mental illness, overcrowded cities, and inequality of opportunity.

3. The Region has a great advantage over certain other areas in that none of our problems appear to be of such serious proportion that they are nearly unsolvable in regard to our social, educational, scientific and technological capabilities. Given the knowledge and desire, we can effectively address our major problems and substantially and continuously improve our quality of life through democratically directed processes of planned change.

4. While education by itself cannot solve our major social, economic, and environmental problems, its provision in adequate and effective forms is crucial to the solution of any or all of them.

5. The creation of a self-renewing and learning society is more than solving problems. It is conceiving and attaining desired futures, it is fostering and nourishing the potential interests, abilities, and constructive aspirations of each individual throughout her or his lifetime.

6. Our goal is improving the quality of life and living should afford all our citizens at every station and stage of life, the opportunity to maximize their potentials to the fullest extent of their abilities.

7. The quality of our lives and the lives of our children and the usefulness of our social and organizational structures (today and tomorrow) will depend heavily upon our ability to create and maintain viable networks for adult education - for it is the adult, not the child whose decisions and actions define the nature of our environment - ecologically, politically, economically, socially, culturally and spiritually.
8. People, whether gainfully employed or not, need and want a life's work, a sense of contribution and meaning in what they do and multiple career opportunities.
9. People want to learn to live more cooperatively and at the same time learn to be more self-reliant - as individuals, as families, as neighborhoods, as communities, and as a nation - i.e., they want the opportunity to individually and collectively affect the decisions and forces that shape their lives.²
10. All education should become more individually need-centered, reality-based, problem-focused and functional in contrast to existing lock-step, discipline-based, and overspecialized schooling which assumes that nearly everyone should learn the same thing, at the same rate, during the same time, in the same way.
11. Learning and living (working, leisureing, socializing, creating, etc.) should become more fully integrated wherein we cease the early sorting for vocational training for some and academic education for others. Instead of maintaining separate educational systems for those who work with their hands and those who work with their heads, we should recognize that most people need to be able to do both, and that all people need to better be able to think critically and reflectively, and that all of us need an opportunity to stay current and become updated in terms of our skills and competencies.
12. Finally, opportunities and patterns for learning should become more varied and flexible - with easier access to and exit from our agencies of basic, secondary, and postsecondary education.

In examining the foregoing assumptions about our nature, problems, and goals (as individuals and as a society), it seems as though our philosophy should be based upon the concepts of the "learning society," a society that recognizes change as its most constant variable and one that determines and directs the nature of change primarily through widespread citizen participation in an ongoing stream of educational activities.

Such a society would create an environment wherein the community itself becomes the educational agency or network wherein the full range of public and private institutes (schools, colleges, stores, churches, local government, industries, universities, parks, zoos, museums, broadcasting services, correctional centers, etc.) are interrelated to maximize their educational utility and impact.

Given some acceptance of the above ideas, the task for us becomes one of delineation and clarifying our role in creating the "learning society." In this regard, a major goal is the near term reduction or elimination of adult illiteracy.

THE MAINTENANCE OF AN ILLITERATE SOCIETY

As with many complex concepts, literacy like democracy, beauty, and truth is not something one arrives at or becomes perfect in - rather it is a goal that one must continuously move toward.

The Ph.D. scientist or postgraduate engineer who spends most of his/her life learning more and more about less and less can easily become less literate than the non-schooled migrant worker regarding the practical affairs of life or the general conditions of community. And the civic illiteracy of an increasing supply of highly schooled specialists who tend also to occupy key policy and decision-making posts in our agencies of government and business may well be a larger threat to our survival than the academic illiteracy of that much larger segment of society who have less than a high school education.

The Problem of Definition

Illiteracy, or its converse literacy, are vague and ill-defined concepts. Literacy has variously been defined as simply the ability to read and write one's

name, as having completed a prescribed number of years of formal schooling, as more elaborate functions involving communication, computational, and problem-solving skills, and as detailed descriptions of performance levels needed to function with a certain degree of efficiency and effectiveness in a variety of social roles in a highly technological, knowledge-based, rapidly changing society.^{4,5}

For purposes of this paper and at the risk of oversimplification, literacy is defined as the intellectual, social, vocational and civic skills and abilities expected of a high school graduate who has had a "reasonably good" education. At this level of ability, a person ought to be able to continue his or her education, to retain (though not necessarily find) a job, to calculate the itemized deduction version of the federal income tax form - albeit with considerable difficulty, and to effectively cope with or adapt to most of the routine and ordinary conditions of life and society. Such people in appropriate environments might learn to become rule-makers and changers as well as good rule followers!

The Scope of Illiteracy

Despite our efforts to the contrary, present social and institutional structures tend to operate more to maintain than reduce illiteracy! This is a strong indictment considering we represent one of the most highly educated societies the world has ever known. But look at the facts.

By current Census data slightly more than 50 percent of our population over age 25 have graduated from high school. And nearly 80 percent of American adults over age 16 and not enrolled in school have less than a high school level education.

Except in Florida where only 52 percent of the males and 53 percent of the females, 25 years of age or over, graduate from high school, (it is likely that many of these graduated in other states), the figures for the South are significantly below the national average ranging from the high 30's in the Carolinas and Kentucky to the low 40's in the other states represented here. In terms of number of persons who have less than 8 years of schooling, the rates are two times as high in the South as in other regions. And these data, i.e., Census data, are very conservative to say the least. That is because many people tend to remember years of school completed on the high side.

Data developed by State Departments of Education show that 66 million of our 16 years of age and over, out of school population have not completed high school and 24 million of them have not attained an elementary level education.

Such data also do not account for the fact that many high school graduates are not literate - i.e., cannot read, write or compete at the 5th grade level, cannot pass the adult GED exam or the Army entrance tests. Given such a situation, we submit that the actual state of illiteracy is unknown in this country. Consequently, we prefer to use gross or approximate data as a more helpful way of understanding the scope of illiteracy.

The Florida population is about average in terms of the national situation - but it has an above average participation in public adult education and more than one of every six or seven diplomas awarded is an adult high school or equivalency diploma. The rest of the population in the Southeast are from 14 to 10 percent below the national levels in terms of number of high school graduates. On the

bright side, the Southeast is gaining faster than the rest of the country in rate of almost any kind of development one can measure - i.e., levels of education, income, population, etc.

Here is what we view as a simple and appropriate way of remembering the condition of our illiteracy. Nationally, about half of our adult population have less than a high school level education (50 million). Half of these have less than an 8th grade level of education (25 million), half of these have less than a 5th grade level of education and are called "functionally illiterate" and approximately three million of us cannot read or write in any language.

In this instance, "functionally illiterate" means that 12 million of us cannot read an urban newspaper or listen to a national newscast with good comprehension, or fill out most job application forms, differentiate unbiased reports from propaganda, or readily enter into a job skill development program. So half of us are illiterate by any high school definition, and half of these are illiterate by the USOE definition of functional literacy.

In our Southeastern states, 13.5 million adults over age 18 have not completed high school and 6.5 million have not completed the 8th grade. When we examine enrollment in our ABE programs and the relationship between cumulative participation in ABE and the magnitude of the target audience, it is clear that present efforts to reduce illiteracy represent a holding action at best. (Figure 1.)

Depending on whose estimate or set of figures one uses, from 700,000 to 1,000,000 youth drop out of our formal K-12 school system each year and our

present public programs of adult basic education reach slightly less than this amount or one percent of the target population. And while we continue to increase the percent of high school and college level members of society, in absolute numbers more of us are counted as illiterate each day.

Relationship of Populations

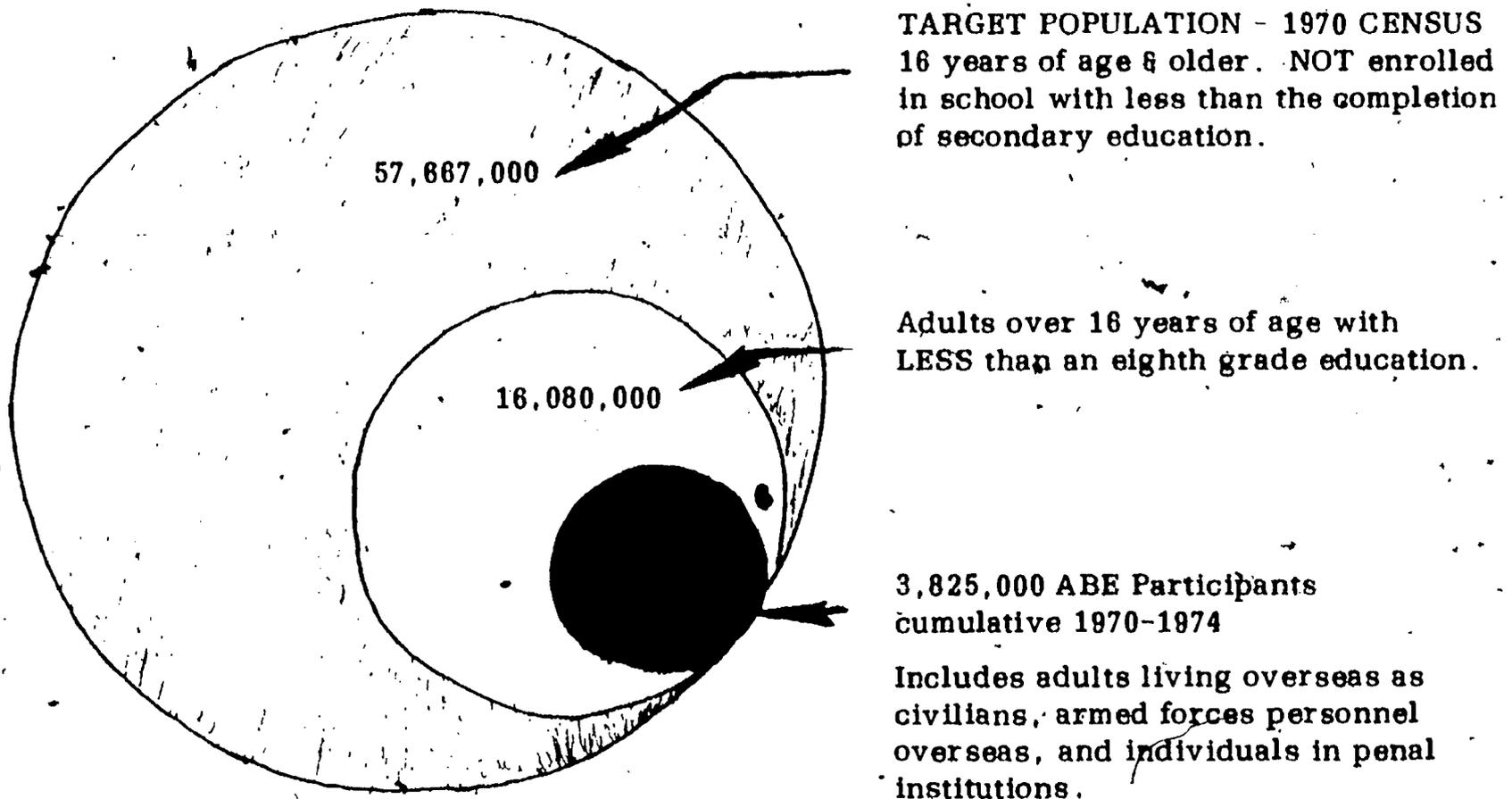


Figure 1

Source: A Target Population In Adult Education, Report of
the National Advisory Council on Adult Education,
U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.,
1974, p. 53.

In the mid 1960's in Florida, illiteracy was about evenly divided between urban and rural, between black and white. That same relative distribution probably remains today and the other states in the Southeast are probably not much different. This also means that the rural and the black are considerably overrepresented in our illiterate society. And surprisingly, the bulk of us who

are illiterate are not the old folks - no we're between the ages of 16 and 45!

Given sufficient political, economic and educational commitment, this is all avoidable. Illiterate adults want to become literate and they do have the ability to learn.

THE CORRELATES OF ILLITERACY

Given that thousands of illiterate or semi-literate American adults are socially responsible, contributing citizens, illiteracy is still a tremendous handicap - to the individual, the family, the community and the larger society.

Nearly any undesirable human, social or economic condition one can identify, bears a statistical relationship to illiteracy. Persons who are undereducated are more likely than those who are more highly educated to:

- a. have serious difficulty in income maintenance
- b. be victimized by creditors
- c. be unemployed or underemployed
- d. be on welfare
- e. have inadequate conditions of physical and emotional health - including hypertension, poor hearing and poor vision
- f. have inadequate nutrition
- g. live in substandard housing
- h. lack reliable transportation
- i. pay more for meeting basic survival needs as well as non-essential items
- j. have difficulty with the role of parent
- k. have children who will face problems much like their own

- l. have more children than they want
- m. not vote or engage in civic or political affairs
- n. have difficulty in obtaining needed social, health and/or economic services provided by the community
- o. feel helpless or powerless to work the system or control the forces that most influence their lives
- p. be incarcerated.
- q. not participate in any organized form of continuing education
- r. experience more accidental injury
- s. live fewer years.

The message is clear - poverty, exploitation, alienation and related conditions are among those that are highly associated with being illiterate in a highly literate society.

The recent literature of adult education and related social sciences abounds with conclusive evidence of the interacting and complex relationships that exist between substandard living and substandard levels of education.

And while the condition of illiteracy is as much an urban problem as a rural one, or a white as a black one or a male as a female one or an old age as a young one, the relationships that exist between undesirable conditions of life and community and illiteracy are even stronger if you are black or rural, stronger if you are both! Consequently, if one lives in the Southeast, his or her chance of not being illiterate aren't really too good.

Yet in spite of such harsh statistics, the existence of and opportunities

for desired human, social and economic development and change in the South are greater than in any other part of the Nation. It is not only that we have farther to go in terms of human resource utilization and economic development which provides the opportunity, it is because we are moving faster in terms of rate of development and change as well.^{6,7,8} We believe our region has a critical choice to make. We can either assume the responsibility for our own destiny and deliberately build toward desired futures - and simultaneously serve as a model for other areas of the country; or we can ignore our opportunities, imitate the historic growth patterns and change of the north and become a 21st century replica of 20th century northern areas.

To assume such leadership, major changes are required in certain political, economic and educational policies and priorities - especially in regard to the development of under-realized sources of tax revenue, gross under-utilization of educational resources for formal and non-formal lifelong learning, and continued development of foreign-based labor-intensive industries.

The Southeast region exhibits certain characteristics not uncommon to a number of progressive, rapidly developing "underdeveloped" nations. Perhaps a few comparative or cross-cultural studies of some of the more successful models of human and economic development on other continents would prove enlightening and relevant to our own particular problems and needs.

One thing that has been learned from extensive research in world literacy programs is that by itself, literacy education is insufficient as a catalyst to economic development.⁹ To be effective adult basic education must be system-

atically incorporated into a larger, carefully planned design including:

- a. capital and material resource development and utilization
- b. urban, rural and regional planning
- c. development of public and private work opportunities
- d. parent, family and community-wide education
- e. effective information delivery and knowledge sharing systems
- f. widespread participatory involvement of citizens in change processes
- g. coordinated, cooperative and in some cases merged social, health, rehabilitative and educational delivery systems

All of the above are, of course, predicated on the assumption of on-going efficient needs assessment activities, monitoring of relevant change indices and trend data and scientific evaluation of process and product variables.

Weaknesses and Strengths of Present Activities in Adult Basic Education

Over the past decade adult educators and social scientists have consumed millions of dollars in attempts to improve the efficacy of adult basic education through research and teacher training activities. The response of the private sector in the development of innovative learning materials and effective educational technologies has been phenomenal. As a consequence, we have acquired the knowledge and the technology needed for implementing high quality adult basic education programs. But observations of the practice of ABE in nearly any community reveal that we have utterly failed in our ability to apply what we know. Among many of our deficiencies include:

- a. The public is generally unaware of the problem of illiteracy.

- b. ABE is by and large a "moonlighting" operation carried on by part time, short term day school teachers of children - too tired and ill-prepared for the demanding work of adult education.
- c. Members of the potential audience for ABE are not attracted to the types of programs offered and usually are unaware of opportunities that exist.
- d. The concepts of practical and functional education based on adult performance levels are for the most part not being operationalized.
- e. There is little integration between adult basic, vocational and career education - or with any other facet of adult education.
- f. There is no schema for incorporating ABE into an overall plan for social and economic development, no follow-through with former participants, little effort to provide the undereducated with opportunities for or a view of lifelong learning, and no effective coordination between manpower, welfare and education specialists at any levels of their bureaucracies.

While ABE has not been resoundingly successful, it has not been a failure either. Quite the contrary, since 1966 ABE has significantly contributed to the quality of life of millions of Americans. USOE has documentation on hundreds of thousands of participants in ABE who have gained or advanced in employment, left welfare, paid taxes, increased the educational climate of their homes, initiated participation in civic and political affairs, etc.

Thus far, the academic growth of participants in ABE has exceeded the rates of advancement of youth per units of time and money. And the rates of dropout in ABE have been as low or lower than in our K-12 programs for children! The main problem appears to be one of insufficient commitment of resources, lack of integrated economic-educational planning, and lack of policies and administrative practices necessary for the effective use of already existing knowledge

and technology. Given adequate political commitment and appropriate policy, adult education has a key role in creating alternatives to welfare, a viable economy, and a socially healthy democracy.

SUGGESTIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

The challenge to the Southeast is to begin the development of policies addressed to the following goals:

1. Establish adult basic education as an enterprise having equal priority with youth education - an enterprise that is fully integrated or coordinated with all levels of education and with vocational-technical, career and community education.
2. Establish adult basic education so that its leadership and instructional personnel are employed for full-time service with full-time commitments - i.e., ABE should not rely on part-time, day school teachers of children. Rather its staff should represent a blend of educators including:
 - a. persons especially prepared for adult education
 - b. persons with specific skills in technology, agriculture, business, etc.
 - c. persons who simultaneously work in youth and adult education
 - d. persons who are retired or semi-retired who can make significant contributions to part or full-time service in ABE
 - e. young persons who are in training for service in education (interns, community college students, etc.)
3. Create a system of public education which blends education, working, citizenship and leisuring for all ages so that the ideals of career and community education can be fully implemented. Youth should have sufficient apprenticeship experiences (in both the private and public sectors) so that they are employable should they elect to leave school prior to graduation.
4. Remove the stigma of school drop-out and provide attractive opportunities for recurrent career long, lifelong education so that individual's can combine working and learning at any stage of the life cycle.

5. Establish research priorities to provide useful data on the economic and social benefits of adult and recurrent education.
6. Re-define the concepts of working and welfare so that income maintenance is provided to unemployed members of the work force through their participation in full-time adult education and training activities. This would require collaboration between government, industry and organized labor.
7. Establish priorities and needs for public works and service projects so that public employment and education are addressed to significant community needs and problems.
8. Establish regional training centers, clearinghouses, and demonstration projects designed to further the goals of lifelong learning, economic, and social development.
9. Determine the undesirable and desirable consequences of labor intensive industries and establish relevant goals and policies relating to them, i.e., while the exploitation of "cheap" labor by foreign industry is detrimental to the economic and social growth of the region, there may be opportunities for labor intensive employment through home industries or crafts for retired persons who want to supplement their incomes and who want to find satisfying work.
10. Redirect the role of teacher colleges to pre and in-service education for the expanding needs in recurrent and lifelong education as needs continue to lessen for teachers of children.
11. Create regional, state and local councils for lifelong education to facilitate integrated economic, social and educational planning in terms of:
 - a. inter-agency cooperation and coordination
 - b. needs assessment
 - c. efficient use of the technologies of mass and non-formal education
 - d. follow-through opportunities for continuing education as a natural consequence of participation in ABE/APL programs
 - e. dissemination of results of research and demonstration activities
 - f. continuing program evaluation

- g. effective linkages between the adult and non traditional education activities of community schools, technical institutes, community colleges, universities, social work agencies, business and industry, the mass media, libraries, most government agencies and organized labor.

In summary, economic development, recognizing the negative outcomes of a "bigger is better attitude," and concurrent adult education are both crucially interrelated in the development of people, communities, and the quality of life. The above ideas on adult education for development are based on the assumption that a high and continuing priority be given to the elimination of existing patterns of racial and sexual discrimination throughout the Region. Communities in which children are racially segregated between public and private schools and wherein all sorts of discrimination by race, sex, age, religion, income or vocation exists can humanly develop only to the extent that such conditions can be overcome. For in the final analysis, the goal of development--be it economic, social or educational--is human development. Such are the problems of the nation and the world. Can this Region serve as a model in their solution?

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