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Youth in Adult Literacy Education Programs

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The growing number of youth enrolling in adult literacy education is a little-documented trend across the nation that is having a major impact on programs in some areas but appears to be unnoticed by educational policymakers and researchers. Relatively steady high school completion rates conceal the fact that a growing proportion of young adults is earning an alternative high school credential rather than completing a traditional high school program (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b). Although not all of these youth enroll in adult literacy education, adult programs are serving increasing numbers of this population.

A central question is whether youth enrollments provide an opportunity for adult literacy education to serve dropouts as soon as possible after they leave school (thereby improving their ability to obtain better jobs, pursue further education, and contribute to their communities), or whether problems associated with serving these youth outweigh any benefits. The information I gathered for this chapter does not suggest a definitive answer to this question, but it does lay the groundwork for a more informed response. There is clearly a need for more research to determine, for example, whether adult literacy education is successful in helping these youth earn high school credentials. In addition, there are important policy issues, such as whether adult literacy programs should receive additional funding to serve such youth.¹

DEFINITION OF TERMS

I use adult literacy education as an umbrella term to refer to several kinds of educational programs described here: adult basic education (ABE), consisting of basic skills instruction at a pre-high school level, and adult secondary programs (also referred to as high school completion programs) that provide instruction at a high school level and are typically oriented toward helping students earn one of several alternative high school credentials. Most frequently they prepare students to earn a

certificate of General Educational Development (GED) by taking a five-part examination that assesses test takers' knowledge of content areas representative of high school curricula (accordingly, ABE classes are sometimes referred to as "pre-GED"). Another option, adult high school programs, allows students to obtain a school district diploma by earning high school credits through independent study or adult education classes. A third option for people in adult secondary programs is the External Diploma Program (EDP), which awards a diploma based on students' demonstration of proficiency in a number of academic and life skill areas, such as consumer knowledge and health and safety skills. The EDP is usually considered most appropriate for adults who have gained skills through life experiences, such as holding a job or managing a household. Presumably for that reason, it was not mentioned by respondents in the interviews I conducted for this chapter as an option for youth.

To understand youth enrollment in adult literacy education, it is also helpful to understand what other educational options are available to young dropouts. Typically the emphasis in most states has been on dropout prevention programs rather than programs for students who have already dropped out (Varner, n.d.). The most obvious option for dropouts is to return to traditional high school, unless they were expelled for disciplinary reasons. Some school districts offer at-risk students special programs, such as alternative high schools, teenage parent programs, and programs for substance abusers. In some cases, adult education programs have received funds from school districts and become formally designated as alternative high schools. The federal Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) of 1983 provides support for programs that combine job training and high school completion for dropouts. The 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act has promoted the development of school-to-work programs for out-of-school youth as well as those in school. However, despite this seemingly wide array of alternatives, most states do not have comprehensive policies or systems for serving dropouts. Accordingly, the availability of educational programs for dropouts can vary considerably from one state or school district to another.

For the purpose of this chapter, I use the terms youth or teens to refer to sixteen and seventeen year olds. I focused primarily on young people of these ages because they seemed to present the most distinctive issues and challenges while also representing the group with the most significant increase in number. These young people are likely to be enrolling in adult literacy education with little or no break after leaving high school. There are societal and familial expectations that they should be in school. State GED testing policies often place certain restrictions on their pursuit of an alternative credential. In addition, this group tends to be considered

the responsibility of the public schools, while the more traditional target population for adult literacy education is people over the age of eighteen. However, I could not always exclude people outside this age group when collecting information. In some cases, the only statistics available are for a population defined as sixteen to eighteen or sixteen to twenty-one years old. Similarly, professionals in the field sometimes included people eighteen, nineteen, or twenty years old in discussions of issues related to youth enrollment. Thus I have tried to indicate when these older students were discussed. No magic age determines adulthood in terms of maturity levels, but specific ages do play a role in terms of issues such as the effects of legislation and responsibility for funding.

DOCUMENTING THE TREND

Obtaining concrete data on the number of youth enrolling in adult literacy education is a difficult task. In fact, data on youth are not compiled at the national level, and few states and programs could provide data on only sixteen and seventeen year olds alone. In this section, I report what data I could obtain about youth enrollments in adult literacy education. I also discuss two more indirect indicators of youth enrollment: data on school dropouts and GED testing statistics. In reporting these data, I do not make a distinction between youth enrolled in adult basic education versus those in GED or other high school completion programs. In general, this distinction was not made by the practitioners who gave me information. For the most part, practitioners described their work with youth in the context of high school completion classes. The primary exception to this tendency concerned programs in a few states with mandatory school attendance policies that prohibited youth from enrolling in GED preparation programs. In these cases, youth were sometimes enrolled in adult basic education until they reached the legal age for moving into GED classes. This emphasis on high school equivalency studies may not reflect teens' skill levels as much as the extent to which earning a credential is a driving force behind their participation in adult literacy education.

Adult Literacy Education Program Data

On the national level, the youngest age category for data reporting until 1997 was students sixteen to twenty-four years old. (The youngest age category was changed to sixteen to eighteen years for fiscal year [FY] 1997, but at the time I was collecting information, these data were not available on a national level.) Since the mid-1990s, the numbers in this category have not grown noticeably (P. Dorsey, U.S. Department of Education, personal communication, July 1, 1998).² Obviously, though, this category is too broad to indicate trends specifically in enrollment of younger teens. Yet it is worth noting that this age category represents a significant proportion of the total adult literacy education enrollments—approximately 37 percent in 1996. Some states have considerably higher

proportions of enrollments in this age group. For example, in Louisiana, Kansas, and North Carolina, where I spoke to practitioners experiencing large youth enrollments, the proportion of sixteen to twenty-four year olds was 62 percent, 52 percent, and 47 percent, respectively. Conversely, there were also states with much lower proportions in this age group. For example, students ages sixteen to twenty-four make up only 19 percent of the 1996 enrollment in Massachusetts. These figures suggest that youth enrollments vary considerably in scope and, presumably, in impact among states. There does not seem to be an obvious relationship between youth enrollments in adult literacy education and state dropout rates. For example, in 1994ñ1995 Louisiana and Massachusetts had comparable dropout rates of 3.5 percent (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b).

On the state level, most of the nineteen state directors who responded to my inquiries indicated that state-level data were limited to the national reporting category of ages sixteen to twenty-four up to FY 1997. Accordingly, most of them could not provide actual data on trends in youth enrollment statewide. However, the proportion of sixteen to eighteen year olds in programs for adults in 1997 is an indication of the significant presence of this group. Seven states providing information in this category reported that students sixteen to eighteen years old made up between 13 percent and 21 percent of the total adult literacy education population served. In Wisconsin, separate statistics have been compiled on sixteen to eighteen year olds who are served in adult literacy education through contracts with local high schools. The number of students in these programs grew from 673 in FY 1991 to 4,571 in FY 1997. Four state directors (North Carolina, South Dakota, Arkansas, Arizona) were able to provide separate statistics for sixteen to seventeen year olds over a period of several years. Data from each of these states indicated growth in the proportion of teenagers. For example, in South Dakota the proportion of this age group grew from 11.9 percent in FY 1995 to 20.6 percent in FY 1997. In Arizona, teenagers composed 14.5 percent of adult literacy education students in FY 1997, up from 5.1 percent in FY 1993. Other states described informal reports of growing numbers of teen enrollments. The state director in Kansas estimated that almost 60 percent of non-ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) students in many programs in her state were now youth.

Only three state directors who responded did not report data or observations of noticeable increases. In Michigan, new state legislation prohibits enrollment of students under the age of twenty in state-funded adult education programs, and there has been a decrease in number. I talked to program directors in the other two states (Iowa and Tennessee) that did not report a large increase in youth enrollment. Both programs, although not observing an increase in youth, were serving significant

numbers of teenagers in school district-funded programs. I talked with a number of practitioners in other states who served youth in separately funded programs. This suggests that adult literacy education enrollment data will not provide a complete picture of how many youth are served by adult literacy education programs, since these figures are likely to include only students in federally funded programs, not those who are in classes funded through other sources.

I gathered program-level information from twenty-three practitioners in twenty states. Obviously one or two programs cannot be representative of trends in an entire state, but they did provide a varied picture of programs across the country. Most practitioners reported informal observations of increased youth enrollment. Among those who could provide statistics, there was considerable variability in the proportion of youth served by their programs. Several gave statistics on the enrollment of sixteen to eighteen year olds in 1997, which ranged from 16 percent to 50 percent. Five had data on 1997 enrollments of sixteen to seventeen year olds, which ranged from 14 percent to 30 percent. Even the programs with lower proportions of youth indicated that they were having significant effects on the program.

National Even Start data provide another indication of trends in youth enrollment in adult literacy education. According to Tracey Rimdzius of the U.S. Department of Education (Planning and Evaluation Services, personal communication, Aug. 17, 1998), the proportion of teen parents (those under age twenty) in Even Start programs grew from 9 percent in 1994-1995 to 13 percent in 1996-1997. Among new enrollees only, 17 percent were teen parents in 1996-1997, a trend partly attributed to welfare reform policies.

School Dropout Data

School dropout data are relevant in suggesting whether there has been an increase in the number of teenage dropouts that might increase the number of youth potentially seeking adult literacy education. Nationally, the percentage of students who dropped out of school in 1996 was 5 percent, a rate that has not changed considerably since the late 1980s (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b). Some of these dropouts eventually return to traditional high school or some alternative program. Recent NCES data show an increase in the proportion of eighteen to twenty-four year olds who ultimately earn an alternative credential versus a traditional high school diploma. In 1988, the NCES began to collect data that distinguished regular graduation from alternative routes to earning a high school diploma. From 1988 to 1993, about 80 percent of eighteen to twenty-four year olds completed high school through regular graduation, and about 4.5 percent completed through an alternative route (the remaining 15 percent had not earned a

credential). Since 1993, the percentage completing through regular graduation decreased nearly 5 percentage points to 76.4 percent in 1996, while that completing through an alternative route increased to 9.8 percent. This trend would be concealed if only the overall high school completion statistics for this age group were examined, since these have not changed substantially over the past decade; the overall rate was 84.5 percent in 1988 and 86.3 percent in 1996 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b).

The NCES does not report the ages at which the population completed an alternative credential, nor does it specify how the alternative was earned. Of course, not all youth who earn an alternative credential participate in an adult literacy education program. They may take the GED without attending classes, and a few states have permission to administer the GED for special cases in the context of traditional high schools. These youth may also earn another type of alternative credential developed by states or local districts. However, the rise in alternative credentialing does provide an indirect indication that more youth may be leaving school and entering alternative programs such as adult literacy education.

Other national data indicate that more dropouts are returning to complete their high school credential at relatively young ages. According to *The Condition of Education 1996* (National Center for Education Statistics, 1996, p. 50), dropouts from the 1990 high school sophomore class were more likely to return to school within two years than dropouts from the 1980 sophomore class. Although 66.4 percent of 1980 dropouts had not returned to school or earned a diploma two years after leaving school, only 42.5 percent of 1990 dropouts were still dropouts after two years of leaving school. By 1992, approximately 31.0 percent of 1990 dropouts were enrolled in some kind of educational program: 1.9 percent returned to a traditional high school, and 29.5 percent had entered an alternative program, which could include adult literacy education. Although these figures do not provide direct evidence of a growth in youth enrollment in ABE, they do indicate that dropouts who return to school are likely to be younger than in previous decades.

GED Testing Data

GED testing data offer some additional evidence that growing numbers of youth are seeking to earn alternative high school credentials. There have been variable trends since 1990, but overall the proportion of younger test takers has increased. The proportion of GED test takers ages sixteen to seventeen dropped somewhat from 10.2 percent in 1988 to 8.3 percent in 1991. Since 1991, however, the proportion has grown steadily to 14.6 percent of GED test takers in 1997 (GED Testing Service, 1988–1997). The proportion of test takers ages eighteen to nineteen in 1997 was 26.8 percent, contributing to a total of 41.4 percent of GED test

takers who were under the age of twenty (GED Testing Service, 1988–1997). In serving such a high proportion of youth, the GED Testing Program is clearly serving a population much different from the one it was originally intended to serve. In terms of trends, it is notable that over two decades, the proportion of test takers under the age of twenty has not shown dramatic changes, varying between about 31 percent and 40 percent of the total test-taking population (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997a). The recent fluctuations may seem particularly dramatic since they have occurred in a relatively short time frame. Most recently, the proportion of sixteen to nineteen year olds taking the test grew from a low of 32.5 percent in 1992 to the current high of 41.4 percent. Notably, the proportion of sixteen to seventeen year olds grew more substantially in this five-year period (increasing from 8.7 percent to 14.6 percent of test takers) than that of eighteen to nineteen year olds (increasing from 23.8 percent to 26.8 percent of test takers) (GED Testing Service, 1988–1997).

Trends

This brief assessment provides indications of an overall trend toward greater youth enrollment in adult literacy education, although the extent of this trend is quite variable across states and programs. The exact number of students sixteen to seventeen years old has not been compiled by all programs, but among those that could provide statistics, there were often dramatic increases in youth enrollments. Over the past few years, the proportion of youth doubled and even tripled in some programs, with youth now accounting for up to a third or more of their total student enrollments. Annual high school dropout rates have remained fairly consistent over recent years. However, the number of dropouts who eventually earn an alternative high school credential has increased, and they are earning these credentials at younger ages. This trend may be linked to the recent growth in the proportion of GED test takers who are below the age of twenty.

EXPLAINING THE TRENDS

These trends are affected by broader national issues as well as by a diversity of state and local policies and populations. Some of these figures, particularly the GED testing data, raise the question of whether the currently climbing number of youth is really a novel and potentially lasting trend or part of a pattern of increasing and decreasing youth enrollment. This question was also raised by some of the long-term practitioners I interviewed, who described past periods of greater emphasis on serving youth in adult literacy education.

Increase in the Youth Population

More rapid growth in the number of youth in the overall population,

relative to older age cohorts, may be one factor contributing to their increasing number in adult literacy education. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1996), from 1990 to 1994 the number of youth of high school age (fourteen to seventeen years old) grew by 8.4 percent—higher than for any other age groups except adults ages thirty-five to forty-four and adults age seventy-five and older. In contrast, the number of adults ages eighteen to twenty-four actually declined by 5.8 percent. The growing youth cohort is particularly notable given that the number of fourteen to seventeen year olds overall declined by 17.5 percent between 1980 and 1990.

These figures suggest that while the overall high school dropout rate may have remained fairly constant in the early 1990s, the actual number of dropouts may have increased, reflecting the overall increase in the high school age population. In fact, from 1992 to 1996, the number of dropouts ages sixteen to twenty-four grew, with some fluctuations, from 3.4 million to 3.6 million (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b). Furthermore, these figures suggest that the variations in proportions of young GED test takers, as well as youth participation in adult literacy education, may be attributable at least in part to the changing number of youth in the overall population.

Employment-Related Factors

Two additional factors that may be affecting youth enrollment in adult literacy education are the higher skill levels required for many jobs and the correspondingly higher educational levels expected of potential employees. Young dropouts are less employable than in the past and thus may recognize the importance of a high school credential at a younger age. There is mixed evidence of an increase in the skills required for all jobs, with some analysts pointing to a growing number of low-skill, but also low-wage, jobs (Bernhardt, Morris, Hancock, & Scott, 1998). It is evident that higher-level skills and more credentials are needed for employment that offers a living wage. In addition, it is taking longer for young workers to find full-time employment than it has in the past. A recent study found that high school dropouts in particular are more likely to experience intermittent unemployment and to rely on part-time jobs for more years than in the past (Bernhardt, Morris, Hancock, & Scott, 1998). One state director commented that up to the past decade or so, it was quite possible for youth who dropped out of school to find a job that paid a living wage—and often a higher salary than their well-credentialed teachers were earning! Now, however, such jobs are harder to find.

This situation may account for the increasingly higher educational aspirations of high school students in general. According to Forgione (1998), in 1992, 69 percent of high school seniors said that they hoped to graduate from college, compared with 39 percent of 1982 seniors. The

proportion going directly on to college rose from 51 percent in 1982 to 65 percent in 1996. Some practitioners reported that the desire to go on to college was mentioned by some teen dropouts who enrolled in their adult literacy education programs.

Parents may now have higher educational expectations for their children and may put more pressure on their children to stay in school or earn an alternative credential. A number of practitioners mentioned parental expectations as one reason that youth enrolled in their programs. As one practitioner put it, parents are giving their children an ultimatum: stay in school or get out of the house. Those young people who have left school are not ready to work, so they enroll in adult literacy education. Perhaps the strong economy and low unemployment may mean that parents are more likely to have jobs and an income to support dropouts if they enroll in adult literacy education. In less fortunate times, they might instead be encouraging their children to find jobs and contribute to the family income or become self-supporting.

Educational Reform Efforts

School reform, a perennial issue, has surfaced as a particularly prominent national concern. The reform efforts are linked to concerns that schools are not adequately preparing youth for the increasingly sophisticated demands of the workplace. The National Education Goals, the Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, and the 1994 School-to-Work Opportunities Act are several of the more prominent examples of national efforts to spur school reform on state and local levels. Among other directives, states are being asked to develop standards for educational achievement, develop new means of assessing achievement, prepare students for the workforce better, and develop more rigorous curricula. The National Education Goals established by the U.S. Department of Education include increasing high school completion rates while instituting higher expectations for student performance, goals that may seem contradictory. In general, schools are expected to find alternative means of educating youth who in the past might have dropped out: "The pressures placed on the educational system to turn out increasingly larger numbers of qualified lifelong learners have led to an increased interest in the role that alternative methods of high school completion may play in helping some students meet these goals" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997b, p. 1). These alternative methods may include adult literacy education programs.

The national reform efforts provide a context and impetus for state legislation that directly or indirectly encourages young dropouts to enroll in adult literacy education. States and local districts have great leeway in deciding how to operate their educational systems, which makes it difficult to generalize on a national level. Many states were

implementing their own legislative changes and reform efforts prior to the national legislation, and examples of how these have affected adult literacy education are available from several states. In the mid-1980s, Wisconsin raised its compulsory school attendance age from sixteen to eighteen years to encourage more youth to complete high school. However, it soon became apparent that an alternative was needed for youth who were not able to succeed in traditional high schools. Accordingly, the state passed legislation that allowed high schools to contract with adult literacy education programs to provide basic education and high school completion courses for youth ages sixteen to eighteen. The number of youth in these programs has grown dramatically since the early 1990s.

In 1992 the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction implemented a policy allowing local schools to count students who enrolled in community colleges as transfers instead of dropouts. As a result, adult basic education programs (which operate primarily through the community colleges in North Carolina) saw a jump in the enrollment of sixteen to seventeen year olds from 4,205 in 1992-1993 to 12,229 in 1993-1994, with a slow increase to 15,514 in 1996-1997.

Up to 1993, Arkansas had a compulsory school law requiring students to remain in school until they graduated or reached the age of eighteen. In 1993, an additional law was passed that allowed a waiver for sixteen and seventeen year olds to leave school and enroll in adult literacy education with certain provisions. This led to an influx of youth into adult literacy education programs that reached a statewide high of 7,343 participants who were sixteen and seventeen years old in 1994. According to the state director, one year the enrollment of sixteen and seventeen year olds in adult literacy education represented 12 percent of all sixteen and seventeen year olds in the state.

In Kansas, already experiencing a considerable increase in youth enrollments, the legislature recently passed a new law that may increase these enrollments still further. The law raises the age of compulsory school attendance from sixteen to eighteen and strengthens penalties for truancy. However, parents can withdraw sixteen and seventeen year olds from school through a waiver process. According to the Kansas state director, parents whose children are sanctioned under the new, stricter truancy laws have essentially two choices: go to court and face potential penalties or withdraw their child from school. Apparently many parents are choosing the latter course and then enrolling their child in adult literacy education. Further, some courts are trying to mandate enrollment of fourteen and fifteen year olds suspended for truancy in adult literacy education because there is no other place to refer them.

In the early 1980s, reports such as *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) severely criticized the quality of school curricula and levels of student achievement. In response, many states increased graduation requirements, insisting that students earn a larger number of credits and take more advanced academic courses. According to a U.S. Department of Education report (1994), there have been virtually no studies of the effects of these reforms on school dropout rates, which could lead to a greater enrollment in adult literacy education.

Anecdotal evidence from Louisiana suggests how such reforms could contribute to increased youth participation in adult literacy education. In a telephone interview, one adult literacy education program director explained that in the mid-1980s, the state board of elementary and secondary education began to raise the standards for high school graduation, implementing new requirements for completion of more academically rigorous course work. As a result, many youth who had difficulty meeting these requirements began to leave high school and enroll in adult literacy education. Their numbers became so significant that in 1991, federal grant monies intended for research, pilot efforts, and staff development were instead used to create a staff development conference on youth that was offered several times.

The unexpected effects of such policies have led some states to make policy revisions that may reduce the number of youth enrolling in adult literacy education, or at least limit the increase. The North Carolina policy of counting dropouts as transfers was reevaluated, and according to the state director, schools are now required to count such students as dropouts. It is too early to determine the impact of this change. Because of the huge number of youth enrolling in adult literacy education, Arkansas in 1995 instituted more requirements for students to meet before being free to drop out, leading to some reduction in adult literacy education enrollments of youth, although numbers still remain high. In contrast, Michigan is an example of a state in which legislation has effectively restricted the number of youth in adult literacy education. In 1995 the state legislature eliminated the eligibility of most youth under the age of twenty for enrollment in adult literacy education programs. According to the state director, the prevailing feeling among policymakers was that youth under the age of twenty could return to K-12 schools or to alternative programs operated by the schools. They did not want to provide state funding for such youth in adult literacy education programs. Unfortunately, this had the negative effect of forcing some smaller programs to close because of lower enrollments. This suggests just how significant younger students are as a clientele for adult literacy education.

GED Testing Policies and Compulsory School Attendance

States' GED testing policies have a significant impact on youth's eligibility for taking the test and, accordingly, on their enrollment in adult literacy education programs intended to prepare learners for GED testing. The GED Testing Service set national guidelines in 1992 requiring test takers to be age sixteen or older and not enrolled in high school (a small number of states have received approval to administer the GED to in-school youth). States have the option of setting their own age requirements as long as sixteen remains the minimum age of eligibility. Consequently, age policies vary tremendously across states. Some states make a distinction between the age required for testing and that required for issuance of the credential. More than 20 percent of states permit a sixteen year old to take the test under special conditions but withhold the credential until the individual reaches age eighteen or his or her high school class graduates (L. R. Hone, special projects manager, GED Testing Service, personal communication, July 6, 1998).

The more stringent state policies set minimum age requirements for testing and issuance of the credential at eighteen or nineteen years old, often linking the policies to compulsory school attendance ages. Typically such policies include a few exceptions for younger individuals in special circumstances, such as those in correctional institutions. For example, in Wisconsin, test takers must be eighteen years and six months of age or their high school class must have graduated. Special permission may be granted for seventeen year olds to take the test if they are incarcerated, enrolled in a federal Job Corps program, or in school and determined to be at risk in accordance with a waiver program granted by the GED Testing Service. In contrast, other states set a minimum age of sixteen with a few additional restrictions. For example, in Arkansas test takers must be sixteen years of age and meet provisions specified in the state's adult literacy education attendance and enrollment policies.

South Dakota offers a recent example of the potential impact of GED testing policies. According to the state director, the minimum age for GED testing in South Dakota was lowered in 1997 from eighteen to sixteen years. The change was made to make the policy consistent with the compulsory school attendance law allowing individuals to leave high school at sixteen years of age. The percentage enrollment of sixteen to seventeen year olds in South Dakota adult literacy education programs grew from 11.9 percent in 1995 to 20.6 percent in 1997.

More stringent age policies for GED test taking have the effect of restricting enrollment of youth in some states. The need for waivers and other approval can make it more difficult for youth to enroll, and in some cases age restrictions prohibit their enrollment altogether. A Tennessee program director explained, for example, that she was not allowed to

enroll youth under the age of eighteen in any state-funded adult literacy education classes. An outreach specialist in California noted that it was not legal to serve anyone under eighteen, with few exceptions, in GED preparation classes. However, in these programs and in others, youth may be enrolled in different kinds of high school completion programs. Wisconsin serves underage youth through a special contract system with the public schools. The Tennessee program director reported that she developed separate classes for seventeen year olds funded by the local school district. Similarly, in the California program, the outreach coordinator described a variety of separate programs designed specifically to serve youth, in some cases allowing them to earn credits that their referring high school will count toward their regular high school diploma. Maine's state GED test administrator notes that the age restrictions for GED testing have led most youth to enroll in adult high school programs, where the age restrictions are determined by local school districts. Thus, the impact of GED age restrictions varies greatly, and even in situations with more stringent restrictions, programs may be serving a considerable number of youth in alternative programs.

Welfare Reform

Recent welfare reform efforts have been another factor affecting youth enrollment in some adult literacy education programs. Welfare reform seems to have affected youth enrollment in two ways. First, the emphasis on work first and greater restrictions placed on educational participation for welfare recipients have reduced the number of adults participating in adult literacy education programs, according to reports from several program staff members. Some programs have begun to recruit more youth to offset dropping enrollments of adult students. A director of a family literacy program in Indiana explained that the threat of a dwindling number of adult students, who now had to work rather than attend adult literacy education, led her staff to seek out teen mothers to maintain enrollment levels in their program. In this case, the majority of teens were recruited through a residential program for young mothers. In other cases, the stipulation that teen mothers receiving welfare must stay in school and can count high school or equivalency programs as approved work activities has increased the number of these young mothers who participate in adult literacy education programs. Quite a few practitioners described classes initiated specifically for this population.

Availability and Effectiveness of School-Based Alternatives

The availability of alternative educational programs can affect both the number and the type of youth served by adult literacy education. In some regions, adult literacy education appears to offer virtually the only alternative form of high school completion for youth who drop out of school. For example, a Louisiana program director observed that at the

time the state high school reform efforts were put into effect, adult literacy education was one of the few alternative programs available to dropouts. Not surprisingly, the program was inundated by youth unsuccessful in meeting the new graduation requirements. In other cases, adult literacy education is a last resort for students who have been unsuccessful in various school-based alternative programs. A program director in Idaho noted the existence of several alternative programs in her area, adding, "We get those who've been through the whole system." Typically these are students who have been incapable of meeting attendance or behavior requirements, which means that adult literacy education is being left with the most difficult of all dropouts to serve.

The relationship between the adult literacy education program and the school system serving such students varies. At a minimal level, most high schools have to provide some kind of consent form or waiver allowing the student to study for an alternative high school credential. On the other end of the spectrum are adult literacy education programs that have contracted with school districts to become providers of district-funded alternative high school programs. Some of these arrangements are recent, and others are long-standing. For example, a director of a program operating through a community college in Iowa reported having had a cooperative agreement with local school districts to provide alternative high school classes for more than thirty years. In between are programs like one in West Virginia that has cultivated referrals from schools without formal designation or transfer of funds. In addition to increased referrals from high schools, some programs are seeing growing numbers of young offenders referred by the courts to adult literacy education to complete a high school credential rather than returning them to the schools.

It was beyond the scope of my efforts here to determine if increased youth participation in adult literacy education can be attributed to the general ineffectiveness of other alternative programs or to problems in the high schools themselves. Some adult literacy education program staff mentioned that schools in their areas were making considerable efforts to retain at-risk students and were meeting with some success. These reports tended to come from staff who were serving youth in their programs, including some who had well-developed alternative programs specifically for youth but had not seen noticeable increases in recent youth enrollments. On the other hand, some staff suggested that increased use of drugs and violence in the schools was contributing to more student dropouts and more referrals. Yet national figures do not indicate an increase in high school dropout rates, though it does appear that more students are being served by alternative programs. There have been few rigorous evaluations of dropout prevention programs, and therefore little documented evidence of their effectiveness is available.

Some well-publicized program models seem to have promise for increasing the achievement and completion rate of these students, but existing studies suggest that many programs often fail to have significant impact (U.S. Department of Education, 1994).

I located only one study that provides insight into the reasons that high school dropouts give for why they might choose adult literacy education over the option of returning to their high school. Metzger (1997) surveyed 158 high school dropouts in one Illinois county. Of these dropouts, 75 (47 percent) returned to school within one year of dropping out. The reasons these youth gave for returning to school do not seem to differ tremendously from reasons commonly reported by older adults. The most commonly reported reason was "wanting a better job and a better life." More notable, 45 of these returnees entered a GED program, while only 26 returned to high school. Reasons given by students for choosing the GED program included its flexibility, its "personal approach," and the perception that it was the shortest option leading to a credential. The drawbacks of reenrollment in high school included the time it would take to make up missed credits and the more rigid daily schedule. The dropouts also described the stigma of having dropped out as a barrier to returning to high school. They anticipated that teachers might question their seriousness and peers might be critical and ridicule them for having dropped out. In fact, dropouts who did reenroll in their high school reported such reactions from teachers and peers. Metzger observes that for some dropouts, reentering high school was an admission that leaving school was a mistake, implying that they had failed both in school and out of school. The fear of failing again in the same environment could prompt them to seek out adult literacy education—a fresh start in a new situation.

Of course, many dropouts who enroll in adult literacy education do not have the option of returning to high school, because they have been expelled or otherwise prohibited from returning. Even for those who do not have a choice, peer groups may be an important influence on their decision to enroll in adult literacy education rather than stay out of school altogether. Metzger (1997) found that feelings of social isolation were commonly described by the dropouts he interviewed, particularly those who could not find decently paid employment. Returning to school was a way to reconnect with a peer group. Other dropouts in an adult literacy education program might be perceived as a more compatible group than potentially condescending peers still in high school. The North Carolina program director suggested that growth in teen enrollments has made it more acceptable for others to enroll in adult literacy education, where they could socialize with friends from high school who had also dropped out.

Trends

A variety of factors appear to contribute to the growing number of teenagers in adult literacy education. The recent increase in the overall number of youth has created a larger high school population as well as a larger number of potential dropouts. The overall national concern with improving the skills of the workforce and reducing the number of welfare recipients has led to new policies that require schools to raise academic standards and at the same time find new ways to educate the least successful students. These young people themselves may seek out educational alternatives in an effort to increase their chances of securing employment that pays a living wage. They may choose adult literacy education because they want to avoid the stigma associated with returning to traditional high school and because they prefer a more flexible schedule.

YOUTH'S IMPACT ON ADULT LITERACY EDUCATION

Currently educators and policymakers appear to be in a state of flux regarding how best to serve youth at risk. Overall, there seems to be little concrete evidence of what type of education would best help these youth succeed academically and in the workplace.

Characteristics of Young Dropouts

Most of the adult educators I interviewed described changes made in their programs to accommodate the needs of youth better. In general, teens were described as less mature, less motivated, and less responsible than typical adult students. One coordinator rather fondly described them as still being "fun-loving children." They were often characterized as directionless, with poorly defined educational and career goals. Behavior problems were often mentioned, ranging from students' hanging out in halls and wasting time to using drugs and engaging in fights. Some practitioners made distinctions between certain "types" of youth when describing their needs and concerns. One group of young teens mentioned by several practitioners were home-schooled youth who were seeking a high school credential. The number of such students apparently has not grown significantly, and they typically were described as well behaved and having no significant impact on the program. Teen mothers receiving public assistance were described as less problematic than the youth population overall by one teacher, because they seemed to be more motivated and had the support of case workers. Several practitioners said that an increasing number of youth had learning disabilities (LD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD), factors contributing to their lack of success in traditional high school. The most difficult group to handle appeared to be youth who were mandated by court to attend the adult literacy education program.

Accordingly, the type of youth served was significant in determining the program changes deemed necessary to meet their needs. For example, the Tennessee program serves only teens referred out of public schools for truancy; students removed for discipline problems were sent to another alternative school. Not surprisingly, the director of this program reported few discipline issues in her classes. As another example, one program in Maine was designed to serve primarily youth with ADD or LD, and its instructional approach was oriented specifically to address these students' learning differences, which minimized behavior problems. These examples suggest that one useful strategy for adult literacy education programs may be to designate particular groups of teens to be served and to turn down other youth unless the program is equipped to meet all of their special needs.

Frequently program staff felt that the characteristics of youth were not suited to the adult-oriented education that they were used to providing. Much adult literacy education stresses self-paced, individualized instruction, assuming that most adult learners are self-motivated, goal directed, and willing to take responsibility for their own learning. These assumptions are clearly at odds with how the youth were perceived. In a few rare cases, program staff reported that they were refusing to serve youth, but most often they were trying to find ways of handling youth, with different levels of enthusiasm and success.

Integration Versus Separation

One point of debate in serving youth is whether to integrate them into classes with adults or set up separate classes. In some programs, adult students have been so disturbed by the influx of youth and their behavior that many have dropped out.

In programs that integrate youth with adults, a key strategy reported by a number of staff is to keep the proportion of youth low, at most less than half, while others suggested less than one-third or even less. Some programs assign youth to different classes to separate them from peers who create disruptions when together. Other practitioners reported that even a few youth could create enough problems to disrupt the class and alienate the adults. But many felt that youth responded to the more serious atmosphere of a largely adult class and improved their behavior, rising to the adults' level of maturity. A benefit of mixing adults and youth was that the adults could be positive role models in terms of the value they placed on education and their diligent study habits. Teens could also become more motivated to earn their credential by being exposed to some of the hardships that these adults had experienced as a result of their lack of education. One staff member reported that her program deliberately pairs adults and youth so that they can serve as peer tutors and learn from each other. She cited an example of a sixty-six-

year-old man paired with a sixteen-year-old boy. The young man helped his older partner with math, and the senior assisted the teenager with English. A further benefit, she reported, was that the teenager became much less of a problem in class.

The few studies on research that have examined the effects of age-integrated classes on adult and adolescent students suggest that age integration has benefits similar to those reported by the practitioners I interviewed. Elder (1967) and Carter (1988) found that age integration in adult literacy and vocational education courses had positive effects on youth, including encouraging appropriate, adultlike behavior and increasing the young students' desire to do well. Outcomes for adult students were not reported, except for one benefit that Elder (1967) noted: adults felt that their interpersonal relationships with youth improved, in the class as well as in other contexts. A more recent study by Darkenwald and Novak (1997) of adults and traditional-age students in college classes suggests that higher proportions of adult students might have a positive impact on academic performance for both youth and adults. However, as noted in this study, the outcomes of age integration may be affected by a wide variety of other factors, including the students' academic ability, topic of study, and mode of instruction. Mixing youth and adults may not be beneficial in all situations.

In a few extreme situations, adult literacy education programs have become almost entirely focused on serving youth. A Louisiana program director reported that the great increase in young dropouts resulting from curriculum reforms in that state, combined with adults' resistance to enrolling in classes with youth, led to a situation in which many programs were serving only teens. He resisted this trend in his program by deliberately designing classes to attract older students, thus keeping the proportion of youth to a less disruptive level. In particular, his program serves a high proportion of adults with high school diplomas who are preparing for employment testing. He believed that the adults provided a stabilizing influence and positive role modeling for the teens.

Other programs have established separate classes for youth to avoid disrupting adult students and to provide alternative methods of instruction. In some cases programs have been required to create separate classes because they receive special funds from school districts to serve as alternative schools. In a few instances, the segregation seemed to occur on its own. A program director in North Carolina explained that most youth were counseled into the adult high school program, since it was more structured and more suited to their needs. As a result, most adult students had begun to enroll in the GED preparation classes to avoid the youth's disruptive influence.

One strategy used in some programs employs an initial interview or trial period of instruction, and sometimes both, to determine a teen's maturity level. Based on the teen's maturity, he or she is either assigned to a class for youth or allowed to attend a class with adult students. A New Hampshire program uses this approach to assign youth to an alternative high school program or to the adult GED class. The alternative school has highly structured classes, with twelve to fifteen teams of students in a class, taught by pairs of teachers. The GED classes are less structured, but youth are expected to stay drug free, focus on their studies, and attend class regularly. A student-created and -enforced attendance policy requires students with more than three absences to defend their absences before a committee. Approximately 25 to 30 percent of students in the adult program are teens.

Other youth-specific classes are worth noting as examples of how programs are handling this population. The most extensive and well-developed system for serving teens I found through my interviews operates in the Los Angeles school district and reflects extensive collaboration between high schools, vocational training programs, and adult literacy education. Overall, the system is intended to prevent youth from dropping out of high school rather than serving them once they have left. Students at risk of dropping out are given a wide range of educational alternatives to enable them to meet school requirements and complete their degrees. Alternative Work Education Centers (AWECs), operated in connection with adult literacy education programs, provide counseling, courses, and referrals to other programs. Students still enrolled in school can take vocational courses in the evenings and receive elective high school credit. They can also take alternative high school classes offered by AWECs to make up missed or failed classes. The AWEC classes are designed exclusively for teens, while the vocational courses serve primarily adults, with small numbers of teens allowed to attend any course. According to the outreach specialist, state law bars enrollment of anyone under the age of eighteen in GED preparation classes (unless certain conditions are met), and young people must be seventeen years, ten months old to take the GED; AWECs thus provide an initial stop-gap for younger students. The outreach specialist suggested that one reason for the apparent success of the AWEC program is that the classes are small; no more than 100 to 150 students are enrolled at a site, in contrast to the 1,000 or more students who are often served in a Los Angeles school.

Another program with several youth options, part of Mechanic Falls ñ Poland Adult and Community Education in Maine, was described by its alternative education coordinator. This woman appears to be the driving force behind the development of these options, and her passion for working with youth is obvious even over the telephone. She has

extensive experience working with youth in other settings, particularly those with special needs. Many adult literacy education program directors in Maine have been resistant to accepting youth, partly because school districts have been reluctant to provide district funds for their instruction. However, this program coordinator was able to negotiate with the local school board to become designated as an alternative school and receive district funding. This effort was prompted by a large influx of youth a few years ago, which the coordinator speculated was due to an increase in the length of high school classes to eighty minutes each. Eighty-minute classes appeared to be too long for students with LD or ADD, who could not sustain their concentration for the entire class period. In the adult literacy education alternative program, students prepare learning contracts, specifying objectives they will complete to earn adult high school credits. The program offers a couple of different classes for at-risk youth still enrolled in high school. The Graduate Support Program provides summer school courses for teens who need to make up failed or missed courses. A Graduate Homework Support Program provides after-school tutoring for high school students during the school year. Finally, the Young Adult Education Program allows teens who are living independently to attend classes with adults if they demonstrate appropriate maturity levels.

The California and Maine examples are very different in some ways. The Los Angeles program is a large-scale collaborative effort supported by state legislation, which provided some funding for staff to develop and manage the program. In contrast, the Maine program was initiated by individual effort in the context of one smaller program. Particularly notable in both, however, is the emphasis on dropout prevention as well as recovery. In other words, program staff are actively working with school districts to provide means of keeping youth in school, not just serving as a dumping ground for dropouts. Both states provide a variety of options for youth, recognizing the differing needs within this population. Each program built on strengths of adult education as an alternative to what the traditional high school offered. The Los Angeles outreach specialist noted that adult education was selected as the site for the AWECs because of its open entry/open exit format and its competency-based curriculum, both perceived as important ways to keep at-risk students engaged in education. In Maine, the program was able to provide classes that supported the regular high school curriculum, but at different times and with more individualized attention. It also offered more flexible class formats and teaching styles that could accommodate special needs. Additional funding was important for establishing and sustaining the separate youth programs, although the Maine coordinator noted that staff pay was not proportional to the actual effort they devoted to the teen program.

Changes in Instruction

Some of the program staff I contacted for this report stated that few changes were made in their instructional approaches and that the youth responded well to the existing format. Indeed, many felt that adult education could be more responsive to the needs of youth than the regular high school because it allowed for individualized, self-paced instruction. However, those who thought no instructional modifications were necessary were definitely in the minority. These tended to be staff who were dealing with smaller proportions of youth integrated into adult classes.

Most programs have at a minimum established new rules for attendance and classroom behavior for youth in both integrated and separate classes. Some programs present these rules to students in the form of a written code of conduct that students must sign and agree to follow. For example, an Arizona learning center's code of conduct consists of nine guidelines, several of which were mentioned frequently by staff in other programs. One rule, "Students should not disturb others in the classroom," is intended to minimize disruptions for adult students in particular. Another common problem was addressed by this rule: "Lingering or remaining idle about the hallways, classrooms, etc. without any useful reason for being here is prohibited." Other rules addressed issues such as attending class, using drugs and alcohol, dressing properly, and tampering with computer equipment. West Virginia has developed a set of procedures for dealing with sixteen to eighteen year olds who are attending adult education because they have withdrawn or been expelled from school, who are meeting requirements for obtaining or maintaining a driver's license, or who have been ordered by a court to attend. Students are given a sheet listing "Rights and Responsibilities of Adult Students" and must sign a contract agreeing to maintain regular attendance, appropriate behavior, and educational progress. How strictly rules such as those in Arizona or West Virginia are enforced seems to vary across states and programs, but most staff agreed that it was better to be strict than lenient. One staff person said that by refusing to compromise the rules, staff let the teens know that they are serious about supporting their learning. When students do leave the program, staff hope they will return later, when they are more motivated to learn. In fact, several practitioners gave examples of youth who did leave their adult education programs only to return years later with more motivation to learn.

In terms of teaching methods, many staff in a variety of states described the need to provide youth with more structure by giving more specific assignments with due dates and doing more goal setting and generally more monitoring of youth progress. Many staff described the benefits of smaller classes for teens, contrasting the size of adult education classes with high school classes. Some staff indicated that they deliberately kept

classes small, some to as few as twelve students per class. The importance of good rapport and a close student-teacher relationship was mentioned as a means of counteracting the experience of the many teens who felt they had been ignored in school or that previous teachers had not cared about them. A few staff noted that hands-on learning strategies were more suited to the learning styles of most teens. Others found that computer-based instruction was particularly appealing to teens. Some relied primarily on individualized instruction, and others used combinations of individualized, small group, and structured classes.

Except for the provision of rules and more teacher direction, none of the instructional methods described for use with teens seemed to be radical departures from methods used with adult students. Several staff described instructional innovations that seemed effective with adults as well as teens. One program coordinator commented that it was inaccurate to claim that one instructional approach works for adults and another for teens. Rather, some adults and teens could benefit from a more structured, teacher-directed approach, while other adults and teens benefited from a more self-directed, independent approach.

The extent to which appropriate instructional methods for adults differ from those for children and youth has been the object of a longstanding debate in the field of adult education. Similar conclusions have been drawn by other adult education practitioners and scholars: instructional methods for both adults and youth should vary according to the learner's individual characteristics, the subject matter, the goals of the educational program, and so on. Self-directed, independent instruction may pose particular problems for youth because it contrasts so greatly with the instructional format they have learned to expect in school. They may need to be introduced to a less structured environment more gradually.

Curriculum Changes

Curriculum changes were less frequently mentioned by practitioners, and many indicated that they used the same curriculum with youth as with adults or that curriculum changes were being made to benefit both groups. High school credit programs offering courses to be counted toward the referring school's high school diploma were perhaps the most distinctive developments. A few practitioners mentioned that the curriculum had to be relevant to hold the youth's attention, and so they tried to incorporate instruction in life skills with hands-on activities, such as cooking a meal in a unit on nutrition.

A number of interviewees mentioned teens' need for career guidance and job skills. In particular, they expressed the belief that teens needed more sophisticated skills, such as more advanced math skills, the ability to think critically, and computer skills, to find jobs that paid a living wage.

Welfare reform has had effects on most adult education programs, and many are moving toward a more work-related curriculum for adults as well as teens. A program director in West Virginia described Workscans, a school-to-work type curriculum that seemed to appeal to both youth and adults. The Iowa program coordinator described a major effort to provide teens with more career development activities. This adult education program is associated with a community college that has been contracting with local public schools to provide alternative education classes for several decades. The teens can study for the GED, work toward an adult high school diploma, or earn credits toward a local high school diploma from their referring school. In the past few years school districts have requested that additional career development activities be provided for the teens they refer. Among other reasons, eastern Iowa has seen a growth in technology-based jobs that require higher skills. Since the school districts provide funding, the program has been able to hire career development specialists who are putting together activities such as job shadowing, internships, and other types of work-based learning. Most programs, however, lack the funding to support such activities. No one, for example, mentioned receiving funds through the federal or state school-to-work program. At this point, adult education programs seem to be primarily trying to integrate more work-related material into their existing curriculum for teens.

Staff Development

A number of interviewees emphasized the importance of preparing teachers to handle young students. Louisiana developed a statewide training workshop using federal funds and offered it several times in the early 1990s, when there was a major influx of youth to adult literacy programs. Others mentioned that working with young students had been the topic for sessions at their state adult education conference. The Tennessee program coordinator who oversees the classes for seventeen year olds stressed the provision of staff training and explained that it is always available to teachers of these classes. This training covers a wide variety of topics, including workshops led by local police on how to identify and address drug-related problems. Because the teachers' salaries were paid by district funds, she noted, the teachers could attend in-service programs offered to all teachers in the local schools. A Nebraska program director explained that all staff have attended mediation and conflict resolution training and that "effective staff communication has proven to be the most effective tool in preventing problems. Staff realize that what they say and how they say it can either promote a confrontation or diffuse a potentially difficult situation."

Trends

The impact of youth varies across programs and locales. In many cases, the growing number of young students has led programs to adopt new

rules, impose more structure, adapt instruction and curriculum, and even create new classes. In some situations, serving youth has interfered with programs' ability to attract and retain adult students. Although some practitioners feel successful in their efforts to work with this younger population, others are less sanguine. Educating youth in adult education programs raises not only practical questions but also philosophical ones about the purpose and role of adult education.

ISSUES FOR RESEARCH, POLICY, AND PRACTICE

This review suggests a number of issues for further research, policy, and practice: determining the reasons youth are enrolling in adult literacy education and their degree of success in earning an alternative credential or in pursuing other outcomes, such as employment; determining whether adult literacy education should serve youth at all, and, if so, what funds should be used to support programs that serve youth; and determining the best ways to meet the educational needs of youth while continuing to serve the older adult population effectively.

Research

One starting point for research is to document trends in youth enrollment in adult education more systematically. Separate documentation of youth enrollment up to this point has been limited or nonexistent in many programs; most have included sixteen-to-seventeen-year-old students in the larger age category of sixteen to twenty-four year olds. Now that states are required to report separate data on sixteen to eighteen year olds in federally funded programs, national and state data on trends will be more accessible in a few years. However, all youth served in adult education programs may not be included in these data, which may have to be collected on a local program level. Such information is important as a basis for policymaking and funding decisions.

We need more information about why young dropouts are enrolling in adult education programs, what the characteristics of such youth are, and what alternative programs exist. Are youth enrolling in adult education because they recognize the benefits of completing a high school education, or are the majority enrolling because of mandates from courts or social service agencies or pressure from parents? How many of these youth have learning disabilities or emotional and behavioral problems that affect their ability to learn in any setting?

A further question is how these enrollments are affected by school reform initiatives. There is little research to date on how school reform affects dropout rates. If school systems are successful in their efforts to meet the directive of the National Education Goals to reduce dropout rates and improve the achievement of all students, these efforts might

reduce the number of dropouts enrolling in adult education. Based on my interviews, it does appear that more alternative high school programs are being developed, at least in some regions. In addition, policies that initially increased youth enrollment in adult education have been revised in some states. Monitoring more closely the relationship between adult education participation and school reform efforts could lead to more informed policymaking as well as greater understanding of the factors affecting young people's educational paths.

A particularly important question for further study concerns the outcomes for young dropouts who enroll in adult education. How many are successful in earning a GED or other high school credential? Some practitioners I interviewed thought they had a high success rate with youth, while others were far more pessimistic, suggesting that most youth repeated their previous pattern of dropping out of school. A number of practitioners believed that youth who dropped out of adult education often returned to the program a few years later, when they had more real-world experience that increased their maturity and motivation to complete their education. Thus their early introduction to adult education should not be considered a failure but rather an opportunity to make them aware of adult education options and give them a positive impression of the program. Charting the patterns of young dropouts' participation in adult education would provide a greater understanding of how adult education affects youth's attitudes toward education, as well as their attainment of the more concrete goal of earning a credential.

Aside from earning a credential, what are other outcomes of adult education participation for young dropouts, such as employment and further education? A recent report on high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Education, 1994) identified concerns about youth enrollment in GED preparation programs based on the findings of a study by Cameron and Heckman (1991). Cameron and Heckman concluded that GED graduates are comparable with high school dropouts in terms of employment variables such as wages and job tenure and that they are substantially worse off than regular high school graduates. However, their study had several weaknesses, including the fact that the comparisons were made in young adulthood, when the GED graduates had an average of six years of work experience as graduates-less than what high school graduates would have had. This inexperience may have limited the opportunities GED graduates had for comparable career advancements.

In a more recent, carefully controlled study, Tyler (1998) found that earning a GED had a "substantial" impact on the earnings of white dropouts sixteen to twenty-one years old five years after they obtained the credential. However, he points out that the increase in annual

earnings was only \$1,500, not enough to move the recipients out of poverty. In addition, earning the GED appeared to have no significant impact on the earnings of nonwhite GED holders.

As suggested in the Department of Education report, to determine adequately the benefits of GED completion for youth (and older adults), there is a need for more controlled, longitudinal studies of GED recipients, high school dropouts, and traditional high school graduates. Do relative outcomes vary according to the age at which the GED credential is earned? For example, we might expect that earning a credential at a younger age would enable young dropouts to advance more quickly in a career path. But perhaps older GED recipients have more concrete goals and have developed other skills through experience that enable them to make more immediate and substantial employment gains. Findings from such research could have implications for the kind of alternative education provided for high school dropouts of all ages.

Finally, researchers might take note of the criticism in the same report that research on school dropouts has been largely atheoretical. Most studies have been descriptive, focusing on the characteristics of dropouts rather than providing explanations of their behavior. Accordingly, many dropout prevention and recovery programs have been based on unexamined assumptions about at-risk categories of youth. The Department of Education report describes several theoretical perspectives, including social capital, achievement motivation, social bonding, and authentic education, that could provide frameworks for research and more explicit rationales for the design of education for young dropouts. Critical educational perspectives offer a framework for exploring the significance of race, class, and gender in the experiences of young dropouts within the contexts of traditional high schools, adult education, and the workplace. Fine's (1991) work provides an excellent example of a critical ethnographic study of these factors in the high school experiences of dropouts. Horowitz's (1995) participant observation study of teen mothers in a GED preparation program offers another example of research exploring these factors. Perspectives such as these might be fruitfully applied and developed in future investigations of young dropouts in adult education.

Policy

While further research can provide more information about youth in adult education, a significant policy issue is whether youth should be served by adult education. Most of the practitioners interviewed agreed that the best place for youth is in a traditional high school program. However, opinions were mixed about whether adult education should serve youth who were not successful in the traditional high school environment. Should young dropouts be allowed, even encouraged, to attend adult

education classes if regular school is available to them as an option? One approach to policy, reflected in Michigan's legislation, is to prohibit youth from participating in adult education as a means of discouraging them from dropping out.

From another perspective, some young people need a different learning environment from the traditional high school. To address their needs, policies should ensure that adult education, along with other options, is available to provide a more flexible and perhaps more feasible instruction for this group. In addition, from a policy perspective it might seem advantageous to provide additional support for adult education programs that serve youth successfully. If adult education can help dropouts improve their skills and earn a credential at younger ages, these young people's lifelong earnings and their roles as parents and citizens may be considerably enhanced, benefiting not only themselves but society as a whole.

The allocation of funds—for example, Adult Education Act (AEA) grant funds, school district dollars, special grants for alternative programming—to serve youth is an integral part of this issue. Currently local and state policies vary considerably about the use of funds to serve youth. Policies are partially dependent on mandatory school attendance requirements. In Wisconsin, for example, with mandatory school attendance up to age eighteen, it is not legal to serve youth under age eighteen in AEA-funded high school completion programs. In states with lower age requirements, funding arrangements vary. While some school districts provide full financial support for youth programs offered through adult education, a more common complaint was that adult education receives no school district dollars for these students. Some practitioners argued that if funds are provided to school districts for these youth, the school districts should either serve them or transfer the funds to adult literacy education. From this perspective, serving youth in adult literacy education takes away from the limited funds available to serve older adult students.

On the other hand, AEA funds are currently mandated to support programs that serve out-of-school individuals age sixteen and older. Adult literacy education programs do not provide the wider range of courses or as many hours of instruction as high schools typically offer. Is it therefore justifiable to use only adult literacy education funds to support these programs? Further, if adult literacy education is successful with young dropouts, the number of older adults who need basic education and high school completion programs will gradually decline, reducing the likelihood that such adults will be displaced by younger students.

Another issue that emerged from this review concerns the process of

establishing educational policy in general. It seems evident that many educational policies are established with little or no consideration of their potential impact on adult literacy education (such as raising standards, lowering the dropout age, and mandating education for juvenile offenders). In general, adult literacy education needs to be considered as part of the entire educational system when policies are being developed. While adult educators have been increasingly active in influencing public policies that directly relate to adult literacy education, we must also make more concerted efforts to identify and contribute to policies that will have less direct but no less significant impact on which students programs are expected to serve and how they serve them.

Practice

If we assume that the trend toward more youth seeking alternative credentials continues and that policies support the continued enrollment of youth in adult literacy education, how should practitioners respond? How can programs best serve the needs of youth while continuing to serve the older adult population?

One primary issue concerns the role that adult literacy education should take in providing education for youth. Ideally, adult literacy education should not be a dumping ground for any student that high schools cannot serve. Programs already take on a variety of roles, ranging from serving selective groups of students (such as habitual truants or those with learning disabilities) to supporting dropout prevention programs for in-school youth. Finding ways to collaborate more closely with school systems, social service agencies, and the criminal justice system seems to have been important for programs that gave the most positive reports about their work with young dropouts. In defining their role, practitioners may need to decide that they are not equipped to serve the needs of all young dropouts. This can be a tough decision for practitioners with a tradition of serving anyone who walks through their door, but in the long run it may be in the best interests of students and programs.

It is not clear whether one kind of instructional approach is more appropriate and helpful than others in serving all youth. Like adult students, youth have diverse needs and abilities, and a variety of instructional options may be successful. I can tentatively suggest that young dropouts served in adult literacy education seem to have certain characteristics that distinguish them from many adult students. Some prominent examples are a greater tendency for inappropriate behavior, difficulty staying on task, and more desire for socialization with peers.

To some extent, these tendencies may be explained by the life situations of these youth. Youth are less likely to have experiences that develop a sense of responsibility and maturity, such as raising a family or holding a

long-term job. Youth may have a greater need for social bonding than older adults. For many young people, their peers at school form their primary social group, while adults may have more well-developed social networks outside classes and be more focused on family and work relationships. Quigley's (1992) research indicates that dropouts may generally value education but resist schooling because of negative previous school experiences. Resistance to any form of schooling may be more acute for youth since they have been so recently alienated from school. Some are mandated to attend, and their behavior may reflect resistance to this externally imposed requirement. Their disruptive behaviors could in part reflect an acting out against the culture of schooling rather than immaturity per se.

How to respond to these and other concerns remains a key issue for practice. One approach is to maintain a low proportion of youth in relation to adult students, which seems to moderate problematic behavior. However, this approach may be possible only in programs serving smaller numbers of youth, and it raises again the issue of whether adult literacy education programs should restrict the number of youth they are willing to serve. In programs serving large numbers of youth, separate classes are one strategy. In this case, a key issue is to what extent instruction should be designed to replicate the structure of traditional high school in terms of attendance rules, closely monitored instruction, and so forth. If adult literacy education becomes more like a traditional school, will it simply recreate the conditions that led these youth to drop out in the first place?

Closely related to instruction are issues of appropriate curriculum. One practitioner felt that youth should be provided with a bare bones curriculum—just enough to help them earn a credential and prepare them to enter the workforce. Others suggested that to make the transition to the workplace, youth need more extensive support, such as career exploration opportunities. In addition, adult literacy education might provide preparation for other life roles, such as parenting or community involvement. Or should youth be provided with a broader academic curriculum, more or less equivalent to high school, that will prepare them for further education? Clearly these issues apply to curriculum for adult students as well, but they may be more acute for youth if adult literacy education is expected to take on more of the role of traditional high schools and as standards for school achievement are scrutinized.

Responding to these issues involves practical as well as philosophical considerations. Most programs have limited time and funding, so curriculum decisions need to be made within the context of these constraints. Another practical issue is that of staff development. There seems to be widespread agreement that staff development is essential to

prepare adult literacy education teachers to work with youth. But what teachers need to know is not completely clear, since evidence of what works in educating young dropouts is limited. One key focus for staff development seems to be what might be described as human relations training. Teachers may need to learn conflict resolution strategies, develop different communication skills, and otherwise gain more ability to build positive relationships with youth (as well as to help youth develop positive relationships with other students). In addition, teachers may need more insight into the life situations of these youth and the problems that affect their learning, such as drug abuse and gang violence.

CONCLUSION

As one administrator commented in his reply to my survey, we commonly talk of a future vision of lifelong education and the benefits of intergenerational classrooms. Youth involvement in adult literacy education might be seen as a step toward realizing an ideal of seamless connections across educational contexts and age groups.

The realities of youth involvement in adult literacy education, however, suggest in a very concrete way how this ideal may pose some challenges to our current educational structures and philosophies. In particular, the issue is not simply one of combining age groups. The youth enrolling in adult literacy education have not succeeded in school systems that have far greater resources than most adult literacy programs. Is it realistic to expect adult programs to be more effective with even less support, while at the same time serving adult students who also have significant barriers to learning? By even enrolling such youth, are adult educators guilty of relieving the public schools of their responsibility to find more effective ways of educating these young people? As one program director stated, these youth deserve a chance-but who will provide it?

Serving such youth may be an opportunity for adult literacy educators to assume an enhanced and more integrated role within a higher-quality educational system that serves all students more effectively. Or young dropouts could overburden already understaffed and underfunded adult literacy programs, resulting in inadequate education for the traditional adult clientele as well as for youth. Whether young dropouts become an opportunity or a problem for adult literacy education may depend on how we respond.

Notes

1. Since the growth in youth enrollments appears to be a recent trend, there are few published resources that provide relevant information. The Internet allowed me to collect information that

otherwise would have been difficult and much more time-consuming to locate. I made use of government documents available on-line from the Web sites of agencies such as the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). I used listservs to make initial inquiries and contacts with practitioners across the country. E-mail was helpful in allowing me to contact state directors of adult education and local coordinators of adult literacy programs. I used telephone interviews to get additional information from practitioners who were identified by state directors as potentially helpful contact persons. Some practitioners gathered comments from youth themselves for use in this chapter. I obtained responses from state directors in nineteen states and twenty-three practitioners in twenty states: Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Montana, Nebraska, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. Other states or programs may not be experiencing similar trends, but this small, nonrandom sample is sufficient to suggest that youth enrollments are having enough impact across the country to merit greater attention.

2. When citing information provided by the respondents to my survey, I refer to them by title only to avoid a distracting number of personal citations. The only informants I cite by name are three people who were not part of the survey of administrators and program staff. They work in federal offices and provided me with national statistics.

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[Chapter 4](#) ➡