

**Adult Charter Schools:  
Creating Economic Opportunities for America's Families**

**April 5, 2017**



## THE NEED

Nationwide, millions of adult learners lack the educational opportunities necessary to help them support their families, contribute to the economy, and fulfill their potential. Consider:

**Less than five percent of adults lacking a high school diploma are being served by current programs**

- More than 30 million U.S. adults lack a high school diploma.<sup>1</sup>
- Fifty-five percent of adults over the age of 25 who did not graduate from high school are not participating in the workforce.<sup>2</sup>
- **36 million adults** are unable to read above a fifth-grade level.<sup>3</sup>
- Literacy skill level among adults in the U.S. is below the international average in 23 countries.<sup>4</sup>

Our current educational system is unable to meet this overwhelming need. Each year, federal, state, and local investments in adult education total between \$1 billion and \$1.5 billion<sup>5</sup>—less than one percent of the funding that supports K-12 schools<sup>6</sup> and about one percent of the funding for higher education.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, less than five percent of adults lacking a high school diploma are being served by the programs that these funds support and there are waiting lists for adult education classes in all 50 states.<sup>8</sup>

These statistics and their implications outline an enormous challenge, yet also show the immense opportunity presented by expanded educational opportunities for adult learners.

1 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Literacy, Numeracy, and Problem-Solving in Technology-Rich Environments Among US Adults: Results from Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies*. Institute for Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics. (2013)

2 United States Bureau of Labor and Statistics. *SEASONALLY ADJUSTED A-17. Employment status of the civilian non-institutional population 25 years and over by educational attainment, sex, race, and Hispanic or Latino ethnicity*. (2014)

3 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *Time for the U.S. to Reskill? What the Survey of Adult Skills Says*. (2013)

4 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*. (2013)

5 Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education National Reporting System

6 U.S. Census Bureau. *Public Education Finances: 2014, Summary of Public Elementary-Secondary School System Finances by State*. (2014)

7 Pew Charitable Trust. *Federal & State Funding of Higher Education*. (2015)

8 McLendon, L., Jones, D. and M. Rosin. *The Return on Investment from Adult Education and Training*. McGraw Hill Research Foundation. (2011)

## THE OPPORTUNITY

American families, communities, and the nation as a whole stand to reap enormous benefits from increased adult educational opportunities:

**A mother's education level is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success.**

- **Increased labor productivity and global competitiveness:** A skilled, adaptable workforce is an essential component of a healthy, growing economy. Low literacy skills cost the U.S. \$225 billion or more each year in terms of workforce non-productivity, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.<sup>9</sup> Better alignment of worker skills with industry needs—particularly in today's rapidly advancing technological environment—is the key to creating a strong, future-ready workforce.
- **Improved K-12 student achievement and long-term outlook:** Investment in adult education yields benefits for generations to come. The majority of adult learners are parents or caregivers of school-aged children. Better educated parents are better able to support their children economically and educationally. A mother's education level is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, outweighing other factors such as neighborhood and family income.<sup>10</sup>
- **More prosperous communities:** Adults with the education necessary to advance in the job market reduce their dependence on community housing, healthcare, and social service support, as well as boost local economic activity through spending.

<sup>9</sup> National Council for Adult Learning. *Adult Education Facts that Demand Priority Attention*. (2015)

<sup>10</sup> National Institutes of Health. *Improving Mothers' Literacy Skills May Be Best Way to Boost Children's Achievement*. (2010)

## THE POTENTIAL OF ADULT CHARTER SCHOOLS

Innovative, collaborative solutions are needed to address the nation's adult education challenges. A growing movement to create more adult charter schools, while in the early stages, represents a significant opportunity to expand educational access for adults. Adult charter schools are uniquely structured and positioned to help adult learners achieve their educational and career goals through:

**Using very little federal funding, adult charter schools have the potential to increase equity of access to educational opportunities.**

- **Expanded access:** Adult charter schools possess the ability to leverage existing resources within local K-12 charter and state college systems, allowing for exponential growth that could rapidly expand access to education for the millions of adults on waiting lists nationwide.
- **Improved quality:** The growing adult charter school movement—which includes adult education practitioners, education policy makers, researchers and evaluators, and national associations—brings with it the expertise, technological capabilities, infrastructure, and resources of its diverse, experienced participants and advocates. This synergistic alignment of knowledge and resources will allow for maximized innovation and effectiveness.
- **Increased cost-effectiveness:** Adult charter schools are authorized to utilize a diverse portfolio of non-governmental funding streams, including a proposed Adult Charters Funders Network, pay for success social impact bonds, private investments, and philanthropic gifts, and have the ability to maximize public dollars through public/private matching.

Using very little federal funding, adult charter schools have the potential to increase equity of access to educational opportunities, which will in turn boost prosperity, create a more highly skilled workforce, and improve the lives of working families.

## THE MISSION AND VISION OF THE ADULT CHARTER SCHOOLS MOVEMENT

This growing movement seeks to create a cohort of organizations with the specific goal of expanding adult charter schools that have the ability to access state, federal, and/or private and philanthropic resources. In fact, the U.S. Department of Education has recommended a goal of establishing 100 schools in the next three years.

Our vision is that low-skilled adults have access to high-quality adult schools and adult charter schools that support them in the completion of an effective and high-quality secondary education experience and the transition into postsecondary education or training and meaningful work.

## MAKING THE VISION A REALITY: RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Realization of this vision will require significant collaboration among various stakeholders. Key organizations would include districts, states, and charter school authorizers (local education agencies, state education agencies, independent chartering boards, non-educational government entities, higher education institutions, and not-for-profit organizations), investors, and charter school intermediaries.

To promote discussion and generate recommendations, the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, the Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, and the U.S. Department of Education co-hosted the Adult Schools Growth Forum on December 1, 2016. This event gathered individuals and organizations with a vested interest in expanding access to high-quality, cost-effective schools for adults, including adult charter school operators, community leaders, charter school authorizers, city and state education policy decision makers, national associations, researchers and evaluators, potential investors, and federal agencies. Recommendations emerging from this forum included:

- **Convening of authorizers:** Jim Goenner, President and CEO, National Charter Schools Institute, recommended, as a first step, the convening of authorizers who have high capacity and high commitment.
- **Ensuring an accountability framework for schools:** Naomi DeVeaux, Deputy Director, D.C. Public Charter School Board, shared that it took about five years—and a partnership among all Washington, D.C. adult charter schools dedicated to finding common assessments—to create a framework for common accountability.

**This movement has the potential to provide new pathways to economic prosperity for adult learners and their families.**

- **Engaging private and philanthropic sectors:** Liza McFadden, President and CEO, Barbara Bush Foundation, offered to create a funders network to support this effort.
- **Creating start-up manuals:** Emily Bloomfield, CEO and Co-founder, Monument Academy, recommended funding the creation of start-up manuals to facilitate replication of successful models. Bloomfield also discussed the importance of choosing models that allow for individualization, noting that 55 percent of students have a special education plan.
- **Ensuring a return on investment for students:** Hector Torres, Vice President, Capital Hotels and Suites, stressed the importance of determining return on investment. This recommendation aligned with remarks made earlier by Allison Kokkoros, CEO, Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School, who noted a demonstrable return on investment as a key success factor for the school. On average, Carlos Rosario students experience a 33 percent increase in wages after only two semesters of study—a return of at least \$2.50 in taxes alone for every dollar invested in the school.

Much of the discussion centered on the importance of ensuring maximum value and economic impact for adult students, whose needs and objectives are quite different from those of K-12 students. By leveraging existing resources to expand and maximize the cost-effectiveness of adult education opportunities, this movement has the potential to provide new pathways to economic prosperity for adult learners and their families.