Literacy proficiency among its citizens is essential to a nation's economic well being. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007), if the 30% of the class of 2007 who dropped out of high school had actually graduated, the United State's economy would have benefited from an additional $329 billion in income over their lifetimes. This projection is supported by current data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics which reveal that the 2009 unemployment rate for individuals without a high school diploma was close to twice the median rate for all workers. In addition, the median weekly earnings for that subpopulation was less than half that of individuals with a bachelor's degree. Further reinforcement can be found in a recent study conducted by Reder (2010) from Portland State University. He found “strong relationships between literacy proficiency and earnings among high school dropouts” (p. 19). In fact, Reder demonstrated that an increase in an individual's literacy proficiency has a positive impact on subsequent earnings.

Adult education programming throughout the United States has been critical toward improving the literacy skills of adults with demonstrated need. Services are provided free of charge through Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and English Language Acquisition (ELA) programs. ABE programs address basic level literacy skills, and ASE programs offer instruction for adults who have basic level literacy skills and seek a secondary credential, such as a high school diploma or a General Education Development credential (GED). The focus of ELA programs is instruction for adults to build proficiency in English. During 2007-2008, there were over 2,300,000 adults enrolled in these programs nationally. Of those, over 260,000 students were enrolled in adult education programs in Florida (Condelli, 2010).
For the 2008-2009 academic year, Florida again reported an enrollment of over 260,000 students in adult education programs. An analysis of the enrollment by age indicates that 82% of those students were between the ages of 16 and 44, a population representing key members of the U.S. labor force for many years. At the time of enrollment, 59% of those students were unemployed. By the end of that academic year, 42.67% of the students who had identified employment as a reason for enrolling had achieved that goal. In addition, 46.30% of students who sought further education or training met their goal of entering postsecondary education or specific training programs (Rogers, 2010).

The School District of Hillsborough County has been a major contributor to the educational opportunities available to adults in Hillsborough County through its Adult and Community Education Program for more than 60 years. This program, administered under the Division of Curriculum and Instruction, serves over 35,000 adult students annually throughout the county. Adult students improve their academic, English language, and workplace skills at more than 150 locations in Hillsborough County. The Adult and Community Education Program awards an average of 2,300 diplomas each year to GED and Adult High School graduates (Hillsborough, n.d.). Based on Reder's longitudinal study, improvement on the literacy proficiency of those students will have a demonstrable impact on both the local and state economy.

Key Points to Consider

Given the particular economic importance of literacy, the reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, which contains within it, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, is critical. Some of the challenges that have presented themselves as a result of the delay in the reauthorization include the following:

- The current economic situation has revealed a greater need for strong literacy skills to attain and maintain employment in a more competitive market.
- Between 2000 and 2007, funding for Workforce Investment Act programs for adults, dislocated workers, and youth declined by about 12 percent (United States, 2008).
- With smaller budgets and fewer staff, programs cannot accommodate the numbers of adult students wishing to enroll, and have resorted to long waiting lists.
- Without any postsecondary education and training, individuals will be denied access to the middle and upper income classes (Carnevale et al, 2010).

Support for adult education must be a focus of legislation at both the national and state levels if we expect to see a growing economy. Legislators need to move swiftly to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act to ensure adequate funding and provisions that are relevant to contemporary demands. To guarantee a competitive workforce for the 21st century, the WIA must address these issues:

- Adequate funding to ensure equitable access to education and training
- Transitional programs that help individuals address barriers to employment and get connected to jobs
- Career counseling and goal setting that create pathways from low-wage jobs to high-skilled careers

References


