

# **Living with It: Federal Policy Implementation in Adult Basic Education**

***The Cases of the Workforce Investment Act  
and Welfare Reform***

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**NCSALL Reports #24  
September 2003**



**National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy**

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*NCSALL Reports* are funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers program, Award Number R309B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, through contract to Harvard University. The content of *NCSALL Reports* does not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



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## **Acknowledgements**

I want to thank Hal Beder, my close colleague at Rutgers University, for the support and assistance he gave me during every step of this study. Courtney Wymbs and Perrine Robinson-Geller provided research assistance without which the study could not have been completed. John Comings, Forrest Chisman, and Sheryl Gowen all provided useful feedback on earlier drafts of this report. I hope that I have come close to addressing their thoughtful suggestions here. Finally, I am extremely grateful to the state agency staff, program managers and coordinators, and instructors who took the time to tell me honestly and thoughtfully how their professional lives have been shaped by the significant changes in their work brought about by welfare reform and WIA. I hope that I have accurately portrayed their experiences in ways that are useful to them and their colleagues in programs around the country.



## Executive Summary

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (“welfare reform”) and the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) have influenced greatly the provision of services in adult basic education (ABE). WIA and welfare reform provide two excellent cases for the study of questions related to how federal legislation affects ABE practice at the program and classroom level. This study gathered data from six states through in-depth interviews on practitioners’ perceptions of how WIA and welfare reform changed their practices. The data provide hypotheses that can be explored through analysis of other data now available from the National Reporting System (NRS). It can also provide insights that may be helpful for policy discussions and plans related to the reauthorization of these two statutes, as well as future policy initiatives.

This study did not evaluate the extent to which policies had been initiated. Rather, it addressed the following questions:

- In what ways does the broader context (i.e., the state agency, the learner population, etc.) set the stage for policy implementation at the local level?
- What is the range of responses to federal policy at the state and program level?
- In what ways do policies written as statute at the federal level actually alter practice in the classroom?

## Findings

Although all state agencies studied had a similar problem to solve, they responded to the WIA and welfare reform policy shifts in diverse ways. The responses were shaped by the agencies’ anticipation of the policies, their perception of their role in supporting programs, the infrastructure they had in place for professional development, and a range of other contextual factors. Individual programs responded in a variety of ways to the requirements the state agencies placed on them as a result of the new policies.

Each level of the ABE system acts somewhat, but not completely, autonomously. Thus, while the movement of these policies is one-way, from the abstract when they first become statutes, to the concrete when program managers and instructors act on them, practitioners are not merely receivers of the policy. Rather, each level changes the policies to some extent; each responds to and reshapes them based on the nature of the context at the state, program, and classroom level. More

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specifically, the nature of the policy plays a role in the way it is perceived by practitioners. For example, the basic concepts of welfare reform were well understood at every level. However, practitioners did not have as much clarity about WIA, and the complexity of this legislation had a direct impact on practitioners' capacity to respond to it.

More detailed descriptions of the study's findings regarding the ways in which policy change was acted upon at each stage of implementation follow:

1. The responses of state leaders were shaped by the political context, as well as by their capacity and will with regard to the policies. Variations in readiness for change, definitions of leadership roles, infrastructure, working relationships between state staff and local programs, and specific actions taken at the state level with regard to policy implementation set the stage for programs to respond.
2. The program size, infrastructure, staffing, philosophy, and mission, as well as the will and capacity of key staff, all played a role in determining how a policy was implemented, but *within* the context of the state agency. Programs responded to new policies as refiners (58%), reinventors (8%), as both refiners *and* reinventors (17%), or resisters (17%).
3. The classroom context (e.g., the purpose of the class, who the learners are, the teacher's employment status, experiences, and training, and the class location—on-site or off-site) shaped the way policy was implemented. However, teachers' practice was shaped by the ways in which the broad policy context traveled to their classrooms.
4. At the program level changes in response to the policies were made with regard to operations and structures, assessment and documentation, and access to resources. Instructionally, the policies tended to shift the curriculum away from traditional academics toward a much greater emphasis on preemployment and job retention skills. Programs also placed greater emphasis on testing and documentation, as well as on goal setting. Rather than replacing classroom processes, these changes often added an extra burden to already over-taxed instructors.



## **Policy, Practice, and Research Recommendations**

Programs responded to policy change in three different ways, which suggests that policy changes cannot be made using a “one-size-fits-all” approach. However, the data indicate several specific actions that policymakers could take to make better policy and improve implementation in the future. Policymakers should:

- Clarify the connection between policies and the ultimate goals and purposes of ABE.
- Identify a clear unit of change and focus all efforts there.
- Consider and plan for the ways in which coexisting policies like WIA and welfare reform support, or obstruct each other from attaining, desired outcomes.

*In terms of specific issues of practice, policy development should strive to:*

- Include efforts to improve the professional climate and other factors that may inhibit practitioners’ optimal performance *before* raising expectations regarding accountability.
- Acknowledge the relationship between professional development and change by supporting the state agency’s capacity to leverage its system to respond to reform efforts.
- Seek ways to understand and plan for the variation in capacity of state agencies to implement change, as well as help states respond to the critical differences in capacity among their funded programs.
- Make clear choices about what is gained and what is lost due to changes in curriculum and format, with the ultimate goal of service provision as the frame of reference.
- Acknowledge the complexity of preparing a highly skilled workforce, which requires a focus on higher-order-thinking skills and conceptual work.
- Help instructors integrate new and old practices in meaningful and practical ways rather than simply adding on to what they already do.
- Create better mechanisms for communication across the ABE system.

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- Develop a more conscious alignment among mission, philosophy, goals, and intended outcomes as reflected in accountability mechanisms, instructional materials, and professional development.
- Allow practitioners to become active participants in shaping policies at both the micro and macro levels, in ways instructors believe are most constructive for learners.

### *Future research should:*

- Examine the relationship between implementation of policies and improved learner outcomes.
- Seek to discover the ways in which accountability drives, shapes, and/or changes instruction in the ABE context.
- Seek to understand how the differences in the ways programs respond to policy *matter*, in order to understand the opportunities and barriers that variability might entail.
- Explore how to separate the effects of the policies on learner outcomes from the effects of different program formats, sizes, resources, instructional approaches, and other differentiating features.

This study showed that state agencies, programs, instructors and classrooms, and learners applied the same federal policies in different, but interrelated and significant ways. Policymakers and researchers must take into account and support change at each level of the system in ways that are most appropriate to a wide range of contexts. Unless each level is attended to, the full potential of new policies will not be realized.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Two major pieces of federal legislation enacted within recent years have the potential to influence greatly the provision of services in adult basic education (ABE). The Workforce Investment Act (WIA), passed in 1998, was the first legislative reworking of federal funding for ABE<sup>1</sup> since 1991. This legislation came just two years after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (referred to throughout this paper as “welfare reform”). With the passage of WIA, ABE was, for the first time, subsumed within the workforce development system, where it became just one piece (known as Title II) of a broader reform agenda. Welfare reform was not aimed at altering ABE, but its goal “to end welfare as we know it” had a significant impact on a large pool of actual and potential adult learners, and on the services that they would require and be allowed to access.

WIA and welfare reform provide two excellent cases for the study of questions related to how federal legislation affects ABE practice at the program and classroom level. This study gathered data from six states through in-depth interviews on practitioners’ perceptions of how WIA and welfare reform changed their practices at the program and classroom level. The data provide hypotheses that can be explored through analysis of other data now available from the National Reporting System (NRS). It can also provide insights that may be helpful for policy discussions and plans related to the reauthorization of these two statutes, as well as future policy initiatives.

This is not an implementation study aimed at evaluating the extent to which policies have been initiated. Rather, it addresses the following questions:

- In what ways does the broader context (i.e., the state agency that administers Title II, the learner population, etc.) set the stage for policy implementation at the local level?
- What is the range of responses to federal policy at the state and program level?
- In what ways do policies written as statute at the federal level actually alter practice in the classroom?

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, ABE is defined as including adult literacy (beginning and intermediate reading, writing, and numeracy), preGED, GED/Adult Secondary Education (ASE), and ESOL.

## **The Workforce Investment Act, Title II**

The WIA legislation aims to reform the workforce development system. Some of its key goals (as articulated in Title I of the statute) are to provide system users with more individual choice, create a better match between training opportunities and locally available jobs, eliminate duplication of services by streamlining more than 70 workforce programs (Imel, 2000), provide more local control, and increase accountability. WIA focuses more on outcomes than inputs (Grubb, et al., 1999). Among the mechanisms designed to accomplish these goals is the mandate that all states implement a “one-stop” system that integrates a wide array of programs, services, and governance structures (ED 427177, 1998). The intent is that services for job seekers should be “seamless” so that clients can enter the system through any number of routes and never enter a “wrong door” (Grubb, et al., 1999).

In keeping with the idea of offering seamless and integrated services, ABE is funded through Title II of WIA. This integration aims to address both employment and education needs through entry into either system. Thus, adults with inadequate educational skills who are seeking workforce development services or low-literate adults who are unemployed or underemployed could enter the system through an ABE program and receive on-site job search skills, or they could enter a one-stop and be tested for placement and referred to a literacy class.

Integration with the workforce development system at the federal level is a major change for ABE. Previously it had been funded as part of education-oriented legislation. In addition to this implied philosophical shift, other major changes were made that are consistent with the broad goals of WIA. Most important, from the perspective of practitioners, is the mandate to create a performance accountability system that will assess the effectiveness of states in providing high quality services (in order to ensure a high return on the investment of federal funds in ABE). Unlike previous accountability measures, which made local programs accountable to their state agencies, Title II of WIA makes states accountable to the federal agency (i.e., the Department of Education) in a systematic way. Of nearly equal importance is the mandate that ABE programs partner with the local workforce development system.

A great deal of variation among states is possible in the partnering relationships required by WIA, but the accountability system is standardized nationally. Although federal reporting has been in place since 1983, the accountability requirements have focused on program management issues (inputs). The reporting of level attainment (i.e., beginner, intermediate, and advanced) for documenting learner outcomes was added in the Adult Literacy Act of 1991, but the levels were poorly defined, loosely understood, and very broad (Condelli, 2000). The American Institute for Research developed the National Reporting System (NRS) in response to the need for a systematic and standardized way to measure

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learner outcomes, as mandated by WIA. Each state agency decides how to implement the NRS and how to support local programs in providing needed data, but every state and local program must report learner outcome data using national definitions of educational gain along the dimensions of reading and writing, numeracy, and functional and workplace skills. The goal of the NRS is to have “defendable data to report to Congress” (Condelli, 2000) as a way to respond to lawmakers’ questions regarding “return on investment” in ABE (Merrifield, 1998). The NRS, then, needed to tie its “educational functioning levels” to standardized data. The levels are defined in terms of what adults can do, and each level is matched to score ranges on most of the commonly used standardized tests.

In addition to outcome measures related to educational abilities, states and local programs are also responsible for documenting outcomes for two other “core performance indicators.” These are “Placement in, retention in, or completion of postsecondary education, training, unsubsidized employment or career advancement” (Congressional Record, 1998) and receipt of a high school diploma or its equivalent (i.e., a GED).

## **Welfare Reform**

Welfare reform, as it influences ABE practice, is the other federal policy described in this report. By now, the basic ideas of welfare reform are familiar. A maximum five-year lifetime limit (shorter in some states) on availability of funds and more stringent requirements for participation regarding work-related/preemployment activities in the meantime, shift welfare from an entitlement program with a human capital development emphasis to a transitional program. The legislation puts a strong emphasis on “work first.” The rapid-employment strategy is based on the assumption that work is the best preparation for work, and with increased experience welfare clients can move on to better jobs (Imel, 2000). The legislation assumes that working at *any* job is better than collecting welfare benefits. However, many critics have suggested that welfare reform is more about decreasing the welfare rolls (i.e., cutting the cost) than reducing poverty, or addressing the causes that allow it to endure (Hayes, 1999; D’Amico, 1999).

As with WIA, devolution of power from the federal to the state and local level is a key component of welfare reform. Given the overall work-first philosophy of welfare reform, it is clear that education is a lesser priority than in previous versions of the welfare statute, but the ways in which this plays out from state to state vary considerably. For instance, states determine whether ABE can count as an allowable preemployment work activity. Ironically, just as welfare reform would

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seem to have increased the need for ABE,<sup>2</sup> the opportunities for welfare client participation have narrowed. According to Imel (2000), even those welfare clients who are allowed to participate in educational activities find that the focus has shifted from learning for the sake of growth in a wide variety of learner-identified areas to learning for the narrow purpose of getting work; from preparing for jobs to training concurrent with jobs; and from fostering social change to encouraging economic development within the status quo. Sparks (2001) claims that within the context of welfare reform, adult education is being called into service as a tool of social policy. Imel (2000) reports that the features of such programs include a focus primarily on employment goals, curriculum integration of basic and occupational skills, and work-based learning. In many cases, education is not a required activity and may be actively discouraged by welfare case managers. Fisher (1999) argues that when welfare clients are allowed to participate in ABE, the focus is more often on short-term, highly focused interventions. The goal is not so much “human capital development” as “labor force attachment” (Fisher, 1999). ABE programs certainly serve nonwelfare clients, but it seems likely that this change of emphasis would have broad influence on the field (Fisher, 1999; Martin, 1999).

Although WIA and welfare reform address different policy concerns, are aimed at somewhat different clients, and involve different service provision systems, there are clear similarities and relationships between them. For example, they have overlapping goals, such as “a focus on employment and a movement toward greater state and local decision making” (Fagnoni, 2000, p. 1). Another important similarity between these two policies is that they share a common philosophy of “work first.” Although state-by-state implementation of welfare varies, the goal of welfare reform in each state is the reduction of the welfare rolls by putting as many recipients to work as quickly as possible. Because WIA is focused on workforce development, many of the interviewees for this study saw these two goals as almost one and the same, and some even confused them. For example, some practitioners thought that WIA was the implementation legislation designed to enact welfare reform.<sup>3</sup> Also related to the work-first philosophy is a focus on concrete and measurable outcomes for which stakeholders—state agencies, caseworkers, programs and practitioners, and learners/clients—are accountable. Thus, the emphasis on accountability is common to both policies. Linkages between the welfare and workforce development systems are not required by either policy, but perhaps as a reflection of shared goals, 43 states have welfare as a one-stop partner on either a formal or informal basis.

Many studies of K–12 educational reform look at the relationship of policy to practice in terms of individual teacher change (Coburn, 2001). However this study

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<sup>2</sup> Research indicates, for example, that 75 percent of welfare recipients are at NALS Levels 1 and 2.

<sup>3</sup> More interviewees had a reasonably accurate working understanding of welfare reform than they did of WIA (78% vs. 51% for Title I of WIA and only 38% for Title II; 56% knew what the NRS is).

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examines this shift from the abstract (the legislation) to concrete (changes in practice) as it occurs among key stakeholders along the way. Perspectives from practitioners who are state staff, program managers, and instructors all help fill in the picture of how the federal policies have been interpreted and perceived in terms of practice in the context of each level of job responsibility. A “snapshot” of what this looks like in twenty-four programs in six different states is described in Chapters 3 and 4. In particular, Chapter 3 looks in detail at the state agency as one of the most important shaping factors of policy implementation in ABE. The role of the state leadership in policy implementation is described, followed by a discussion of how state leadership contributes to the ways in which programs (and, in turn, teachers) actually experience and carry out the policies. Chapter 4 analyzes the range of possible responses that occur within the bounds of a mandated policy, the types of secondary changes that occur as a result, and the relative costs and benefits of these changes at the program and classroom level. Chapter 5 explores implications of the practitioners’ perspectives for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.





## **Chapter 2**

### **Methods**

As a way to describe and understand the perspectives of ABE practitioners with regard to WIA and welfare reform, this multicase study utilized open-ended interviews as its main data collection strategy. Additionally, state plans and state Web sites were also examined. Twenty-four programs in six states were recruited and agreed to participate in the study. Data collection was done in two steps in each state. First, the state ABE director or other key staff person was interviewed about mandates designed by the state to assist them in complying with the requirements of WIA and about their state ABE's relationship with the welfare system. The state staff person then identified four programs in his or her state, representing a diverse range, for the second level of data collection. This second level of data collection involved interviews with program managers and practitioners about how welfare reform and WIA influenced their practice day to day. In all, six state staff people and 78 practitioners were interviewed. All interviews were conducted by phone and were transcribed for data analysis purposes.

#### **Site Selection**

A sample of convenience was used by selecting the state in which the study was conducted, four states contiguous with it, and one other state that provided interesting contrasts. The sample proved to be extremely diverse. Thus, although a sample of convenience was selected, a sample of diversity was found.

Four programs from each state were selected to participate in the second tier of data collection. Selected by the state-level staff person, there were no specific criteria for selection. Rather, the state staff person was asked to select programs that represented program diversity in terms of size, service provision, compliance with WIA policies, and interaction with the workforce development systems. Program relationships with the welfare system were also a consideration in selection.

#### **Data Collection**

In four of the six states, the state ABE director was interviewed. In two states, other upper-level state staff people were interviewed. The interviews focused on understanding the current context in which programs in the state operate. State staff people were asked to describe required program changes in policies and procedures (mandated by the state ABE office) as a result of WIA. They were also asked about ways in which state-level welfare policy affected how programs operate. This part

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of the fieldwork was designed to help researchers understand the nature of the changes faced by programs, as a way of contextualizing subsequent interviews with program staff.

Data collection at the program level began with an interview with the program director and/or manager. This staff person also identified additional staff members to be interviewed. In the case of two programs, practitioners supplied written responses to interview questions. In all, 24 programs participated and 78 practitioners responded to the interview. Interviews focused on gathering practitioners' perspectives on how WIA and welfare reform had changed their work, and how they (and those they work with) responded to the changes. Program managers also supplied general information about their sites.

### **Limitations of the Data**

The primary limitation of the data lies in the sample. There are at least three particular areas of concern. First, as discussed above, states were selected based on convenience. Although they are diverse along multiple dimensions, four out of five are from the same region. Further, although they are diverse, no analysis was made of this diversity to see how it compares to other states around the country. In other words, it is unknown whether the diversity among the six is representative of the diversity of states nationally.

Second, state directors selected the programs that participated. They were asked to select a diverse range of programs by size and response to new policies. However, selection criteria were not prescriptive and state staff may have selected programs that they believed would reflect well on them or programs with which they have good relationships. In most cases, there was no information on exactly why programs were recommended for inclusion. Thus, it is not known what the four programs from each state represent. However, the programs appear to be diverse and seem to have responded to the new policies in a range of ways.

Third, a similar selection process was used at the program level. Program managers who were initially contacted and interviewed were asked for assistance in making contact with other practitioners in their programs. There were no specific criteria for who or how many other practitioners would be interviewed. Rather, the initial program manager contacts were told that the study sought to interview a variety of staff representing a range of experience and knowledge, who work with a variety of learners. Study staff worked from a list of potential participants supplied by the initial program manager contact. Not everyone on the list was interviewed. Who was interviewed depended, to some extent, on the ease with which practitioners could be contacted. Thus, the sample of practitioners was drawn from a list supplied

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by program managers. This list was narrowed down by the recommended practitioners' willingness to participate and by the ease with which they could be contacted. At some sites, every staff member was interviewed (especially in very small programs), in others a small percentage of the total staff was interviewed. Therefore, the percentage of staff interviewed at each site varied.

In spite of these limitations, the data is richly descriptive and very diverse. It comes from practitioners who have worked in the field a short time and those who are very experienced. It comes from people who work in a variety of positions, with a wide range of backgrounds. They work in small, medium, and large programs affiliated with a range of institutions and organizations in urban, rural, and suburban parts of their states. It seems certain that the sample is imperfect, but it is likely that it has much to offer in building knowledge about the ways in which top-down federal policy influences practice.



## Chapter 3

### The State Context: Mediating Between the Policies and Programs

*[Policymakers] don't think about the ramifications of policy. They're trying to please everyone and so we end up with mish-mash and sometimes conflicting policies. The state has to figure out how to implement and the locals have to live with it. — A state director*

Federal money earmarked for ABE is an important source of program support, and because it flows through state agencies, the state potentially plays an important mediating role between the policies and programs. The state interprets policies and makes decisions about mandating and supporting program compliance with them. Thus, the question of how programs and practitioners respond to ABE policies has much to do with contextual issues at the state agency. This chapter focuses on the contextual issues that influence how ABE programs have responded to federal policies due to shaping by the state agency. Each state agency influenced the programs by the stance it adopted with regard to supporting programs; the changes it made to comply with the policy; and by the specific actions it took, and required programs to take, in order to receive funds.

#### The State Agency

To understand how federal policies influence practice, we must look at the state agency that administers federal ABE funds. As Chisman (2002) points out, states generally function in the important middle position in policy implementation for intergovernmental public-funded programs such as WIA. Due to its funding structure, this is especially true of ABE. While the federal government is involved in funding and setting regulations, and local agencies actually carry out the programs, the state is typically involved in governance, policy setting, and administration. For example, in ABE, the state administrative role includes distributing funds and ensuring quality through accountability, and may also include facilitating program improvement and articulation with other programs (Chisman, 2002). These roles are evident in the data collected from the six states in this study, but the degree of involvement and the ways in which states balance these roles vary considerably. In particular, there was significant variation in the ways in which state agency staff saw their role as leaders in supporting policy changes, their level of preparation for anticipated changes, and the ways in which they actually responded to the changes. These differences are particularly relevant with regard to the ways in which programs and practitioners responded to WIA.

## Demographic Information about the States

The six states that participated in this study vary in many important ways, despite their geographic proximity. First, they are very different in terms of size. From a total ABE learner enrollment of less than 4,000 to one nearing 200,000, the scope of service provision is immensely different. Similarly, the federal adult basic education allotment (under WIA, Title II; 2001 most recent data available) ranges from just \$1.3 million to nearly \$33 million for these six states. The state level of support for adult education is also diverse.<sup>4</sup> While one of the six states contributes at a rate of about 18 percent of its federal allotment, the state that makes the highest contribution to adult basic education does so at a rate of 319 percent of its federal allotment. Simply dividing federal and state dollars by the number of students enrolled does not necessarily reveal total per learner investment, due to the possibility of additional funding streams and some state-level discretion in how money is actually spent. However, this calculation does give some indication of the financial resources utilized for adult learners in each state. The high for per learner spending among the six states is \$778, and the low is \$305. The student population served is not related to total enrollment, but more likely to the demographics of the state in general. For example, the smallest state has the highest percentage of students enrolled in ABE<sup>5</sup> (75%); the state with the lowest enrollment of ABE students has 22 percent. One of the medium-large states has a 60 percent ESOL population (which represents the high; the low is 1%). The state with the highest percentage of learners enrolled in adult secondary education is 35 percent; the lowest is 10 percent.

Apart from the variance in their adult education statistics, these states have different ratios of rural to urban population, industrial bases, and unemployment rates.

## State Agency Stance on WIA

The interview data uncovered four key areas in which “stance” at the state level played a critical role in shaping and creating the context for programs to respond to federal-level policy change. These were the state agency’s perceived role in supporting compliance at the program level, the extent to which it anticipated or was in alignment with coming changes, the ways in which it was able to leverage

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<sup>4</sup> While states such as Colorado, Mississippi, Nebraska, and South Dakota receive the minimum state match (25%), others such as California, Florida, Indiana, Michigan, and New York have budgets for ABE that is 70 percent nonfederal funds. This is primarily state, as opposed to local, funds (Moore, et al., 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Although ABE is used throughout this paper to signify adult literacy, ESOL, GED, and adult secondary education, the U.S. Department of Labor divides enrollment into three categories: ABE, ESOL, and ASE.

resources, and the quality and quantity of communication it engaged in with program staff at the local level. Much of the data reflect the ways in which state agency stance mattered with regard to documenting learner outcomes (i.e., accountability) in particular.

### **Anticipation of, and Alignment with, WIA**

Four of the six states had done considerable work before WIA was enacted that gave them a significant head start on responding to new policies related to accountability. Whether they were acting on what they anticipated the changes would be or on their own ideas of good practice is not clear. However, in these states there was already some alignment with the policy changes required by WIA, which gave them the appearance of “preparedness.” For example, two states had previously given considerable attention to assessment and accountability issues. One of the states required that programs participate in assessment training, which, among other things, covered proper procedures for pre- and posttesting. Previously, it had been common for programs to make errors such as using different tests at initial intake and after 50 hours of instruction. Many, but not all, programs had completed this assessment training by the time WIA was enacted. In those that had not, an efficient and clear training mechanism was in place.

Another state had become a “CASAS”<sup>6</sup> state 15 years prior to WIA. Formal assessment had been a part of program culture for many years. Although the state agency did decide to do refresher training in CASAS after WIA was enacted, it was a reinforcement of what was already in place, rather than a radical change.

Two other states had highly evolved systems for tracking learner progress above and beyond standardized tests. These were relatively easily adapted to the NRS functioning levels and are being used to document learner outcomes in place of 50-hour posttesting in cases of early separation.

Four of the six states had operational, statewide management information systems (MIS) in place. Although these systems were still evolving, their use was fairly well established before WIA “kicked in.” One state has had a database system in place for about ten years. The state director there stated that programs have had the benefits of such a system “drilled into them.... They really get it now.”

Assessment procedures, alternatives to posttesting, and management information systems were all critical in preparing these states for the rigors of the NRS and helped programs adjust to the changes with less turmoil than in other

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<sup>6</sup> CASAS is a system for curriculum, instruction, and performance assessment. Some states have mandated that all funded programs use CASAS for assessment.

locations.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, neither the state-level staff nor program staff talked much about the specifics of tracking students after leaving programs. It is possible that this is due to the timing of data collection for this study, which occurred early in the tracking cycle.

### **Perceived Role in Supporting Compliance**

WIA does not specifically require anything of programs. However, it requires a great deal of the funded state agency. The statute determines which types of information each state agency needs to supply to the U.S. Department of Education, but it is up to the state-level bureaucrats to decide how to get this data. For example, in order to meet accountability requirements put in place by the NRS, states must decide how to collect and analyze learner outcome data. They were faced with questions about how to ensure that enough data are collected, that the data are valid, and how to organize and analyze the data. Fullan (1991) asserts that states can position themselves in relation to school districts along a continuum from bureaucratization, in which they primarily act as regulator, to engagement, in which there is active interaction and communication. This continuum also seems applicable to the relationship between state ABE agencies and ABE programs described here. Fullan argues that neither tight regulation, nor a hands-off approach enables successful reform efforts. Rather, he suggests that there needs to be a low-to-medium level of bureaucratization and high engagement. By necessity, all of the states acted bureaucratically with regard to WIA, but the degree of engagement varied considerably.

State directors positioned themselves differently in terms of their role in meeting the expectations laid out in WIA. At one extreme was a state-level staff person who spoke almost bitterly of the program staff in her state who griped about the requirements of the new policies. She stated that it was the program's responsibility to be accountable and that procedures for documenting accountability should already have been in place prior to WIA. According to her, if an accountability system was not in place, it was up to the program itself to implement one. When asked what she thought programs might say has changed for them in terms of state requirements regarding WIA she said,

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that the state with the greatest number of practitioners who seemed to be generally aware of Titles I and II of WIA were from one the most prepared states, a state with a director who was committed to involving practitioners in many aspects of their response to WIA. The state that had the lowest percentage of practitioners who were able to express a clear understanding of the legislation was one that was least prepared for WIA and whose state director had what seemed to be the most distant relationships with practitioners.



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I suspect [they'd say] they're being told to do a lot more without more money.... Many of the local programs ... cannot tell you what happens to their student population. If now the state is saying this is a piece of information that you must provide and that all of the sudden comes as a new requirement from the local's perspective, I have a difficult time having much sympathy with that. Because they should have been doing that all along. If Title II has forced that issue, it's long overdue. The complaint that I have heard most in the last year is the whole issue of record keeping which directly impacts how they know what happens to students. So what have they been doing in the past? If they can't do it now, how did they know what was happening to students [before]? One of the things that I have said over and over at the director roundtable meetings is that record keeping should not be for the state. Do it because you do not want your students to fail and that's a responsibility. Secondly, you provide that to the state annually because they're the funder. We're not "the bad guy" here. Any funder will ask for a report. I'm having a hard time understanding what is different under WIA.

The comments of a program director in this state indicate, however, that the practitioners feel lost when trying to respond to the changes brought about by WIA. She said, "We were told to do it without training. There is no state-approved system for reporting information, no database, information system; none of those systems [were] in place."

At the other end of the continuum was a state director who told the programs in her state, "If you don't look good, we don't look good" and backed up this statement with various training and other support mechanisms. This type of attitude was the far more pervasive one among the six states. Three other state directors, while not articulating their approach in exactly the same terms, would seem to agree. For example, each in her own way built accountability systems into state requirements and then utilized the existing statewide professional development system to help programs respond to these requirements, or developed other statewide supports for programs and practitioners to help them do what was needed for their state to meet WIA requirements and standards.

Thus, two states had a "sink or swim" attitude toward their programs, while the others worked to institutionalize and standardize responses to the changes in ways that would help programs. In the sink or swim states, programs were given neither guidance nor instruction in selecting or developing appropriate MIS systems for collecting and tracking accountability-related data. In one of these states, many, but not all, programs were using an MIS system developed through a regional professional development provider. The state planned to adopt this system for all other programs, but had yet to do so by the time of this study. In the meantime, programs were left to their own devices. In contrast, another state agency developed

a new common intake form in response to requests from local program staff for a systematic way to gather all the initial information needed for NRS reporting.

### **Leveraging Resources and Relationships**

The combination of a preexisting professional development system (Belzer, Drennon, & Smith, 2001) and a state director's leadership style and vision created a context that supported change for programs and practitioners in some states. In three of the states, a highly structured and developed accountability system was in place prior to WIA. Further, two of these states already had what could be construed as content standards that were aligned with assessment procedures, and which only needed minor tweaking to match the NRS functioning levels. These accountability systems were initiated through the vision of state directors, in collaboration with practitioner leaders who played a significant role in their development. Such efforts were combined with what one state director called "an intense system of professional development to help teachers get geared up." In these states, mechanisms were in place for both development and implementation through existing professional development systems. Also present were a history of state staff and local practitioners working together and a well-established sense of mutual support between state-level staff and program directors. Even though one state director from a state that was prepared for WIA declared the process of bringing her programs up to speed was "like flying a jet plane and repairing it at the same time," the programs in her state report a relatively smooth transition.

In the states that had a well-developed data collection system already in place, program staff saw the state directors as supportive, collaborative, and accessible. For example, a program director in one state identified his state director as an important source of support in implementing change.

This is a lady who has tried, and she's come through in many cases with things that have helped us. I'm glad we have her. If it was someone who was unfeeling, not in touch, cold and calculating, it would be a pretty ugly business. As it is, I feel like we're all trying to work it out together. I feel I'm part of a team and we're all in this together. I think we're all very fortunate to have her. She's savvy; she goes to D.C. a lot and finds out what's going on. She brings money in. She's done a heck of a job. She works so hard, and brings stuff back to us. She can be pretty demanding. But I've learned to live with that and work with that.

A state director in another state reported that initially, "The teachers were in a panic, but I told them we're going to work on this together." This contributed to programs' willingness to accept the required changes in that state. Practitioners in that state echoed these sentiments by also naming their state staff as key in their

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ability to make a smooth transition in response to new requirements. One practitioner observed that the small size of her state and the state's openness to collaboration and willingness to provide assistance were key to their success. She said,

Our state staff are very open to suggestions. They very much believe in pulling in the practitioners and trying to make it work. It's not a case of the top telling the bottom what to do.... You can just call them up and they get back to you. I think that's important.

A colleague of hers at another program made similar comments. She said, "I think that since we are [a] small [state], we have strong relationships in our state DOE. We have an excellent staff; we are all on a first name basis, and we have great staff development." In these states, the state staff could trade on preexisting good will and build on available resources to support and strengthen programs' capacity and willingness to comply—in constructive and meaningful ways—to the changes brought about by the new policies.

However, in the two states that did not have accountability, assessment, and data systems firmly in place, or a good relationship between state officials and program staff, it was too late to work out grassroots solutions or develop consensus once WIA was enacted. State staff had to work with what they had. A program director who was outside the area of the state that already had an MIS system in place when WIA was enacted, felt almost completely in the dark about whether what she was doing would address the state accountability requirements. She explained that she had every intention of providing the necessary data, but was unsure about what was required. However, the staff at programs that did have the regionally developed MIS system in place complained bitterly about it, reporting that it didn't work well and stating that the state staff were ill-informed in their decision to adapt the system for the rest of the state. In the other state, the state level staff person reported that she had only been on the job since the spring of 2000. She explained,

WIA was on us when I came, so we didn't have the luxury to take five to ten years to put stuff in place. Other states knew that it was coming and put together a variety of task forces and came to common decisions. They built consensus.

Unfortunately, no one had done this in her state before she arrived. One of her program director's comments underlines the fact that programs were, for the most part, left to their own devices in resolving the new demands placed on them by the state because of WIA. Although the programs with the least state agency support still had to comply with the requirements imposed on them by the state bureaucracy,

it is likely that they did so with more struggle, less assurance that they were in compliance, and, possibly, with less accurate data.

### **Commitment**

Another important aspect of state-level attitude regarding its role in implementation was in what and how staff communicated with programs about their commitment to comply with the law and how they supported compliance. In the states that didn't get an early start on WIA, the state-level staff had a sense that "a lot of people were thinking if we ignore it, it'll go away." However, in the states that had a more structured approach, the necessity of, and mechanisms for, getting on board were explained clearly to programs. For example, in one state that already had many of the required procedures in place when WIA was enacted, workshops that focused on some of the areas that programs needed to strengthen in order to make NRS a reliable and valid accountability system were held before the start of the program year. The state director's perception of the impact of these workshops was that, "I guess they sat up and took notice a bit more than they may have in the past." In another state, some programs lost funding due to their inability to meet standards related to the NRS. This state director said, "Now they know the seriousness of it... Initially I came on very strong with them. Now I'm coming on more relaxed. We're all in this together. What help you need, I'll provide it. They know it's not going away."

### **State Agency Actions**

Specific actions taken at the state level with regard to WIA implementation focused largely on building, improving, or supporting an accountability system through structural change at the state and local level. These changes often took the form of directives and mandates with which programs have to comply, but were usually combined with system-level changes that functioned as mechanisms employed to assist programs in doing so. Specifically, these included changes relating to instruction and access to the system, procedures, funding, and communication. To a lesser degree, state staff discussed structural changes at their level, largely related to issues of interagency collaboration. Finally, the states reported on the ways in which welfare reform has influenced the way they do their jobs, and in turn, those of practitioners at the local level.

### **System Changes Related to Accountability**

By far the greatest concentration of changes at the state level were made specifically to enable programs to provide valid and reliable data that state agencies need in order to comply with the NRS. For state agencies that had anticipated, or were broadly in

alignment with, the WIA's accountability requirements, these changes were related to revising or realigning the documentation of learner outcomes with NRS levels. For example, one state already had "educational attainment levels," but had to adjust them because there were only four, while the NRS has six. In another state, the state agency had to shift from documenting learner outcomes in terms of test gains to measuring NRS-level changes. This state also put in place an alternative system for documenting outcomes for learners who separated from programs before posttesting could be administered. In support of documenting learner outcomes, some states worked on improving their MIS systems.

### **System Changes Related to Instructional Improvement and Access**

Other changes were made in order to improve the potential of learners and increase their educational levels (based on NRS definitions that focused on instruction). Examples of these changes include realignment (i.e., revision) or creation of curriculum and educational attainment systems, program quality indicators, strategies for ascertaining and documenting learner goals, and the creation of MIS systems based on the NRS functioning levels; development of a single statewide intake form; development of ways to document level changes with or without posttesting; and an increase in the number of students taking pre- and posttests.

One state that already had content standards in place and simply tweaked them to match the NRS levels has seen significant learner gains in reading, writing, and math as a result.

When there's a gain, there is significant gain. They have had to scramble to make this happen. The programs that are doing well, other programs are calling them and asking them to visit. I have never seen this before... We have less variance between the programs. When learners go into programs, they know they're going to be able to have a quality program laid out for them.

Although there is ongoing discussion in the field as to whether the NRS has had an impact on learner levels of participation (i.e., that more systematic testing may discourage some adults from participating in programs), state directors did not report a dramatic change in total numbers (data for this part of the study was collected in 2001). Several directors did comment that welfare recipient participation in adult basic education was down, but that other adults had replaced them in programs. They also commented that the population of participants was becoming younger, poorer, needier, and harder to serve. These reports were anecdotal, since the data for the current program year was not collected at the time of the interviews. Only one state described making specific changes as a result of a shifting learner population. The state staff person in this state reported,

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A number of programs have had to change their focus. The biggest effect has come in the last year. That's the need to deal with people with multiple barriers. Now that we're getting down to people with disabilities and all sorts of problems, it's stretching the ability of these programs to deal with these problems.... We're involved in Bridges to Practice.<sup>8</sup> The department of labor is working ... on some pilots of some additional learning disabilities screening. These are supposed to help intake people develop screening and [be] able to make referrals more quickly. Bridges to Practice is a great improvement over what we had, which was nothing. We've committed very heavily to it.

Practitioner interviews yielded similar information about shifting learner populations and provided more information about how they are dealing with the changes (discussed in the next chapter). Two state directors did report that participation in ABE programs is down somewhat. One reported that they are using professional development and incentives to encourage programs to align more closely with the workforce system. Such action is viewed as a potential source of referrals with an eye toward increasing learner participation. Based on the assumption that many potential participants are now in the workforce and less able to attend classes, programs report that they are investigating the possibility of distance learning. They also are trying to encourage relationships with welfare case managers as a way of increasing referrals. One state director stated that "the biggest losers ... are the CBOs ... which would attract welfare clients.... Some are really struggling."

### Procedural Changes

The state agencies required, or state policies implied the need for, a variety of program-level procedural changes as a way to connect system changes with changes related to instructional improvements. These procedural changes included increased focus on the relationship between learner outcomes and program improvement; better use of data to inform decision making at the state and program level in order to support struggling programs and instructors; changed staffing patterns to deal with more intense data collection requirements, management, and analysis; changed intake procedures, including what one state director called "managed intake," making entrance into programs more systematic and regulated; and new or expanded orientations for students entering programs. In most cases, additional staff training is being offered to support and strengthen these changes. One state initiated a statewide intake form as a way to better identify learner goals and develop a more effective learning plan.

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<sup>8</sup> Bridges to Practice is a project funded by the National Institute for Literacy that produced a screening process and instructional materials for identifying and providing appropriate instruction for learning disabled adults.

## **Funding Changes**

At least two state directors are using their discretion to change funding procedures in their states. One state moved to performance-based funding. Some programs lost some of their money as a result. “Now they know the seriousness of it,” she said. Another state director used her authority to move funds into the workforce development system. She took money “off the top” of her state’s Title II federal funds and gave it to the “one-stops.” She then allocated the remainder to local programs. As “the only agency that gave them real money,” adult education consequently had more clout at “the table” when workforce development partners sat down to plan.

## **Communication Changes**

Although not necessarily the result of required changes at the state level, state-level staff reported that the variety of changes described above have had a positive side benefit—improved communication and collaboration. These new exchanges are happening at all levels of the system—across program providers, between programs and state staff, among state human services departments, and with Workforce Investment Board (WIB) partners. The extent of this exchange is inconsistent across states, but each state reports it occurring in some way. For example, one state director reports that working out a system of compliance with the NRS “has caused us to talk about our programs in a way we have not really talked about them previously.” This is the state where performance-based funding was used. She also sees that programs that are struggling to meet performance standards are calling the programs that are doing well for help. “I’ve never seen this before,” she reported. A staff person in another state remarked that “the most miraculous part of this has been the amount of cooperation between state agencies [and] between labor, welfare, and adult education. There was a realization that we all had to swim together or we’d all drown.”

## **The State ABE Agency’s Relationship to the Welfare System**

Welfare reform is a policy shift not directly aimed at adult basic education. Thus, the way in which it influences practice in this arena is somewhat peripheral and has more to do with the broader context of state welfare policy and long-standing relationships between welfare and ABE providers. In fact, few state adult education directors played any role in state welfare reform plans and many states ignored the potential of linking education and welfare (Manzo, 1997). Two states in this study have very little history of interaction between these agencies and neither welfare reform nor WIA altered the situation. In a third state, WIA brought about the end of

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a long-standing relationship between welfare and ABE. In that state, the differences in accountability requirements across the two systems were disparate, and it was not worth the effort for the welfare system to adjust to the NRS, especially since ABE brings a relatively small amount of money to their table.

However, in the three other states, the interactions between ABE and welfare providers are cooperative and productive. While the state's welfare rules and the allowability of education as a preemployment activity for welfare clients were important factors, in each of these cases, long-standing relationships seemed to make all the difference to the quality of service provision at the program level. Although the state whose relationship with welfare providers was severed explained that there was too great a philosophical difference between the players, in one of the highly interactive states, the state director described her agency's relationship with welfare as "remarkable." Regarding factors that seemed to make things work, she observed,

They really care about the clients and they see that this is mutual. This is what has helped the relationship to build... The key to this relationship has been the flexibility to meet their needs. We're willing to adapt our programs as needed. The environment is shifting, and we'll shift with it.

In another one of these states, a state staff person explained, "None of the three departments (labor, welfare, and adult education) could succeed acting on their own." This state described an interagency council that works out issues that cut across their areas of responsibility (e.g., transportation for clients). Thus, a long-standing relationship, a shared vision, and a sense of interdependence seem to be critical factors in bringing agencies and policies together in rational, coherent, and constructive ways that are most likely to serve client-learners in the long run.

Although state agencies were not in a position to shape welfare reform policy with regard to ABE programs, their interactions with state-level welfare agencies had an indirect effect on programs at the local level. The data indicate that state-level ABE staff were not necessarily able to be proactive in these interactions. Rather, they were players in a larger system, influenced by past history and current politics. This interagency context has indirect implications for ABE programs. Thus, there are implications for the ways in which the state ABE agency supports local programs with regard to changes that result from welfare reform. For example, the state agency can support programs that serve a needier population created by changes in welfare reform. In one state, as discussed above, this has meant disseminating "Bridges to Practice" to programs as a way to better serve students with learning difficulties, a population perceived to have increased there. In another state it has meant working with welfare agencies to provide an incentive system for nonvoluntary, often unmotivated learners to achieve their academic goals. Yet



another state was able to leverage its relationship with the welfare system to provide transportation to classes for both welfare and nonwelfare clients.

## **Discussion**

In their analysis of local capacity to implement educational policy in the K–12 arena, Spillane and Thompson (1997) point out that local education leaders who develop district policies are key to the success of a reform-oriented policy. They point out that these leaders need to understand the reform fully, and then be able to help (or marshal help) so that others can learn about and act on these new policies, practices, and procedures. They describe the motivation and ability to succeed as a matter of will and capacity. “Will” refers to the commitment to take action, and it can be motivated by a number of factors. Spillane and Thompson (1997) assert that there are three dimensions of “capacity”: human capital (commitment, disposition to learn, and previous knowledge), social capital (how players relate to others as a way of achieving more than by acting individually), and financial capital (the dollars allocated to staffing, time, and materials).

Somewhat parallel to the local education leader in K–12 is the state director and staff in ABE who help implement policy. Because state agencies are required by law to comply with WIA, the variation in will is not as great as the variation in capacity among the state staff. The levels of capacity, however, among the six state agencies appeared to vary tremendously, as is reflected both in their preparedness for policy change, and responses to it once it was upon them. Those with seemingly high levels of capacity were better prepared and seemed able to make a smoother transition that supported change at the program level.

However, it is unclear from this data the extent to which the differences among these state directors’ approaches to policies such as WIA and welfare reform are related simply to capacity. To some extent, it seems possible that the differences are based on these state staff people’s perceptions of what is best, rather than the best they can do. In other words, differences may be a reflection not only of capacity, but also of individual leadership styles, state agency histories, and political contexts. Chisman (2002) asserts that state-level leadership is critical in adult education and notes that developing capacity should be a priority in efforts to improve ABE. While this is surely true, capacity should be viewed within the greater context in which state staff must function. Thus, efforts to support state staff should be implemented with an eye toward the differences not only in individual capacity, but the differences in state contexts beyond the control of the ABE agency (e.g., location of ABE in the state bureaucracy, state agency staffing, state funding, scope of the professional development system, and interagency collaboration).



## Chapter 4

### Programs and Classrooms

#### The Programs

Twenty-four programs were involved in data collection for this study. They were diverse in terms of size, services offered, and populations served. Nine programs (38%) were categorized as small, serving 500 or fewer learners per year; eight programs (33%) were categorized as medium, serving 501 to 1,000 learners; and seven programs (29%) were categorized as large, serving more than 1,000 learners annually. The smallest programs were family literacy programs serving approximately 40 families; the largest, a multiservice county vocational-technical facility providing services for 4,500 learners. Altogether, the programs served about 23,000 learners annually.

All 24 programs reported offering adult literacy instruction. In addition, 19 offer GED, and 6 offer adult high school, high school completion, alternative high school, or external diplomas. Nineteen offer ESOL instruction. Thirteen offer family literacy programs, most (although not all) through Evenstart funding. Sixteen described themselves as doing workforce development, preemployment training, or other job-readiness-type instruction and preparation. Some offer training in specific areas such as certified nursing assistant. Only three programs provide workplace education. Most programs also offer a variety of other services such as personal enrichment, instruction for homeless adults, citizenship classes, alternative programs for youth on the verge of dropping out of high school, ABE for deaf learners, and skills review for college entrance.

The programs ranged from those funded primarily through federal Title II funds, to those that have more than 15 funding streams. In addition to Title II money and state department of education and/or labor funds, some programs also received money from local school boards, welfare departments, corporations, partnerships with economic development entities, the city library system, the city, foundations, and individual donors. It is not possible to quantify funding sources across programs because interviewees used different language to describe the same funding sources, did not always provide complete information, and did not always know the source of their funding.

Similarly, these programs were diverse in their affiliations. Four programs are part of their school districts' educational offerings. Two are part of community or city college systems. Twelve programs are exclusively adult basic education oriented. Six are either a part of a larger entity (other than those already described),

or run programs in addition to their adult basic education programs. Two Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) programs are represented in the sample. A Laubach program is affiliated with one of the largest programs. Five programs provide one-to-one instruction through volunteer tutors. The remainder (19) use group instruction led by paid teachers. (Table 1 in the Appendix provides detailed information on all 24 programs.)

### **Types of Program Responses to Policy Changes**

Every program in the study responded in some way to the policy changes brought about by WIA. Similarly, those that serve welfare clients were unable to ignore the changes in welfare reform that affect the students they serve. Given the funding and governance structure in ABE, this is unsurprising. An analysis of the data suggests that programs seemed to respond to policy shifts in one of three general ways: as refiners, reinventors, or resisters. There was some overlap across categories (i.e., refiner/reinventors and reinventor/resisters), but the distinctions were not differentiated clearly enough to merit separate categories for these shades of difference. The range of responses does not necessarily represent a continuum of change, as a refiner program and a resister program may both have changed little, but for very different reasons. A reinventor program may have changed a lot because it had to meet new requirements, but the change may have been more or less agreeable to the program (thus injecting a possible element of resistance).

The extent to which programs had to change, and the range of ways in which they did so reflected the relationship, or “fit,” between the program prior to the new policy and the policy itself. In other words, it depended on the gap between where the program was and where it had to get to be in compliance with new mandates and procedures. “Fit” can be defined in terms of administrative procedures and program goals. By virtue of the combination of program leadership priorities, philosophy, mission, history, funding sources, and learner population, programs had a greater or lesser fit, for example, with the requirements of WIA Title II. The fit was also shaped by the extent to which state agencies had anticipated the changes that would be brought about by WIA. In the cases where prior preparation by state mandate occurred to a greater extent, less change needed to happen after the passage of the statute. For example, programs that had an accountability system in place prior to WIA were in a position to tweak program and classroom procedures (refiners), rather than radically alter them (reinventors). Programs that saw themselves as having a workforce development emphasis responded differently from those with more academic or humanist goals. These latter programs were the most resistant. The range of responses has important implications for supporting policy change, which will be discussed in the final chapter.

## ***Programs and Classrooms***

Programs categorized as refiners simply did what was needed to be done to comply with the demands of the new policies. They made relatively minor changes in procedures at the program and classroom levels and did so fairly smoothly and willingly. As one program coordinator put it, “I just look at it as another program coming along and we just jump in and we do it.” At least two practitioners stated the belief that they have to be refiners because their funding depends on it. One said,

Basically our programs run around their policies because we get the money through them. So we have to provide the programs that fulfill their needs. So, to a certain extent we have to make adjustments and changes to comply with their policies.

In general, refiners tweaked and modified their programs to fit new requirements, rather than engage in major reform or restructuring. In most cases, tweaking was sufficient because the program mission, formats and practices were already closely aligned with the policies.

In contrast, reinventor programs perceived and responded to a significant gap between where they were and where they needed to be vis-à-vis new policies. While they kept some aspects of their program, making changes as required by new policy just as refiner programs did, they also made some dramatic changes that added to, restructured, or created other significant changes in program operations. In the most extreme example of a reinventor program, a shift in program goals and priorities emerged, resulting in a significant change in program complexion.

Resister programs fell into two categories—those that opted out of the system altogether and those that responded to policies in order to maintain funding, yet found ways around full implementation. In other words, they may have complied with the letter of the law, but not the spirit. For example, two programs admitted that they selectively report learner goals. One program adamantly defined itself as educational, rather than vocational, and has made a choice to stay out of the workforce development world. Therefore, for the NRS they reported all learner goals as education- rather than employment-related. In this way, they avoided having to collect work-related outcome data, a task they viewed as overly onerous and a distraction from their primary mission. Another program that serves very-low-level learners never reported “attaining the GED” as a learner goal, regardless of whether it was one identified by learners, because the program knew that if it were, the program would have a very low success rate as measured by comparisons of goals with outcomes. One program out of the 24 opted out of receiving federal funds altogether. The program decided to do so primarily because it serves a large ESOL population in a one-on-one setting. The staff did not feel it was consistent with the philosophy of the program, or appropriate for the population it serves, to require the reporting of social security numbers (which the state agency requires for learners to

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“count” in their program numbers). The state department of education in which this program functions was not willing to develop an alternative to tracking learners by social security numbers as some other states have done.<sup>9</sup>

Not surprisingly, the majority of the programs took the middle road when it came to responding to WIA and welfare reform. Most did not actively or explicitly resist these policies; very few radically changed as result of them. While these top-down policies certainly influenced practice in visible and significant ways, most programs adapted to them rather than adopt a whole new way of being. In all, 14 programs (58%) were refiners; 2 (8%) were reinventors; 4 (17%) fell somewhere in between these two categories; and 4 (17%) were resisters.

A cross-program analysis yields only limited information about what types of contextual features might have predicted the category of response to top-down policy shifts into which a program fell. Because the number of programs that resisted change was small, any conclusions drawn from such an analysis must be considered tentative. It is notable, however, that three out of the four programs that fell into this category were from the same two states that were least prepared for WIA and were least supportive in terms of offering professional development and other ongoing technical assistance. Also, state agency staff in these two states were least able to clearly communicate with programs about new requirements and regulations. There were also refiner programs in both of these states, so it is only possible to surmise that the state context made some difference in a program’s ability or willingness to comply with policy changes.

Another common feature among the more resistant programs is that they were all either small- or medium-sized, but not large. Responding to the shift in policy brought about by welfare reform and WIA, while difficult, seemed less wrenching for staff in large programs. This may have been due to the fact that, in general, large programs have multiple funding streams and significant capacity for responding to a host of requirements and regulations from a variety of sources. They are used to, and better set up for, responding to whatever comes down the pike.

Finally, these more resistant programs represented all types of programs except school-district programs. Similar to the difference between large programs

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<sup>9</sup> Folkman and Rai (1999), found a similar pattern of program response in their study of the new roles that ABE-related CBOs took on in reaction to welfare reform. Although they did not analyze program responses using the categories described here, these categories robustly describe what they observed. Of the four programs they studied, all but one were refiners or reinventors. The one exception was a program that did not fit the categories. It wanted to be a reinventor but could not be. It served very few welfare clients, but would have willingly made changes to do so. However, it had failed to establish a meaningful relationship with the local welfare system.

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and small and medium programs in their “culture of response,” school-district programs seemed particularly likely to be in compliance with a range of outside demands and expectations that may have little to do with their mission or their students because of the difference in age of the target population. In this type of program, however inconvenient or different from current practice, welfare reform and WIA may have been viewed as just another requirement, among the many to be dealt with.

Each program’s response to the new policies was shaped by the context of the program and the state agency. However, four primary areas of change occurred at the program and classroom levels as a result of WIA and welfare reform. These are changes in program operations and structures, changes in assessment and documentation procedures, changes in instructional emphasis, and changes in access to resources. These changes can each be traced to one of three elements found in the two policies: demands for accountability, a shift in emphasis from education to training and work, and required (often new) collaborations across social service agencies. These elements, while not requiring specific ways to change, functioned as triggers first at the state level (as discussed in Chapter 3), and then at the program and classroom level. In other words, while not specific, they were inevitable. As a way to provide a backdrop for understanding these changes, five programs representing the full range of responses to the policies will be introduced briefly. The descriptions of each program will be followed by specific examples of the changes made by these programs, with supplementary evidence provided by data from other programs.

### **Refiner Program: Hillside Community Services Center**

Hillside Community Services Center is housed within a community program that offers comprehensive social services for its clients. It has three full-time and two part-time staff members and serves about 40 students and their families annually. The target population is young parents between the ages of 16 and 21 who may or may not be receiving public assistance. Receiving welfare is not a requirement for participation, but as one teacher said, “our program is set up because of welfare reform.” Another reported that all the students receive some sort of public assistance. As a family literacy program (not funded by Evenstart), Hillside provides both academic assistance (ABE and GED) and training in parenting and child development, life skills, career development, and job placement. One teacher described the program as “broader” than a GED program. “We think they need something more comprehensive than just academics. They’re going to be best served if they are helped to deal with all these other kinds of things” (e.g., parenting, life skills, etc.).

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The program manager (who also teaches part-time) and three teachers were interviewed for this study. These staff members were cognizant of recent changes in policy. The program manager, who had worked at Hillside for five years and been a part of a statewide team involved in establishing the new state accountability system, was fully aware of and understood both welfare reform and WIA. The three teachers interviewed were all full-time at Hillside; none had worked there longer than one year. Other than making adjustments to meet the data reporting requirements of the NRS, program staff reported few dramatic changes due to policy shifts.

### **Refiner/Reinventor Program: Center for the Development of Human Capital (CDHC)**

The Center for the Development of Human Capital is a medium-sized, multiservice, “free-standing” program in one of the states that was relatively prepared for WIA. With 12 full-time, and 35 part-time staff, as well as about 10 volunteers, CDHC serves about 1,000 students annually. It offers ABE, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, workplace literacy, workforce development, welfare-to-work, and a nurse assistant certification. The program receives funding from Title II WIA funds; the state department of education, labor, and industry; welfare; and private companies.

Staff members who were interviewed reported that the changes to their program as a result of welfare reform and WIA were not major shifts in terms of mission or approach to providing services. Rather, they said that the changes related to accountability (more systematic and extensive assessment) and preemployment training (e.g., a shift in curriculum to more of an emphasis on “soft skills” job search strategies, etc.) were an intensification of what they had already been doing. One staff member noted,

I think that our program—it’s very individualized—we’ve always looked at the whole person and the employability issue. That hasn’t changed for us. The CDHC philosophy is a very individualized, whole person kind of approach. That’s why I think I haven’t seen as much of a change.

However, the program did, in fact, make major changes in response to the new policies. These changes were in service delivery, program operations, curriculum, staffing, workload, and external interactions. While some of the reinventing was, in a sense, nonvoluntary, much of what the program initiated was seen as positive and in alignment with program philosophy. In answer to a question about the apparent need to reinvent the program in response to new policies and funding priorities, the executive director observed,

In a way you do [have to reinvent yourself] and in a way you don’t. If it falls within the philosophy of the agency, then you do it. If it doesn’t, then you shouldn’t do it anyway. All of these welfare-to-work initiatives fall within the



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initiatives of what CDHC does. You have to retool and they [the staff] have to learn new stuff all the time, but it certainly is within what we're supposed to be doing as an agency.

### **Reinventor Program: Midcounty School District Adult Learning Center**

The Midcounty School District Adult Learning Center is another medium-sized program that offers ABE, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, and workforce education to its approximately 1,200 learners annually. With a full-time staff of fifteen, a part-time staff of fifteen and a few volunteers, the program utilizes funds from the state department of education and other sources of state funding (e.g., Department of Labor). Unfortunately, only the principal of this program was available for an interview at the time this report was written. She had been in her position for fifteen years and in the field for an additional five.

The principal attributed this program's reinvention to a radical shift in the quantity and quality of students it serves. This change was driven in part by the work-first philosophy of welfare reform, which pushed many past or potential learners into the workplace before completing educational goals.

Some of those who would have normally come here first, did not come our way.... We saw a decrease and then an increase. This was because the jobs they were given at first were not the jobs that they wanted to take. Then all of a sudden the daytime population went from heavily welfare, now to a smaller amount of entitlement. Most of our students now are employed, it might be part-time, but they are employed and they are here to get a better job or [switch to] daytime [from] nighttime.

Not only had the population shifted due to the impact of welfare policy on program participants, but the program itself had to change its priorities regarding whom it would serve. Because of pressure to produce certain quantitative and documentable outcomes, program staff decided that they needed to limit their services to those most likely to get a job during the short time allotted them to do so. The principal explained that the intake process had lengthened because the counselors needed to screen learners out of the program. She reported that they turned away people they would have taken in the past. "I think you have to make some hard decisions in order to do that," she stated.

Instructionally, the program changed in dramatic ways. In the past, the principal explained, many learners came to expand their general knowledge. "But now people come with more specific questions and they have a specific thing they want to do educationally or related to their workplace."

**Reinventor/Resister Program:  
Kingsboro Public Library Adult Literacy Program**

The Kingsboro Public Library Adult Literacy Program serves level one (very-low-literacy-skills) learners in small group settings facilitated by volunteer tutors. With a staff of 23 full-time employees, 12 part-time, and 100 volunteers, it serves about 790 learners a year. As a service of its city's library system, which views adult literacy learning as an extension of its mission, the program receives funding from the library system and the city, as well as state and federal funding through its department of education. The Kingsboro Public Library Adult Literacy Program operates out of six sites throughout the city. For this study, the program manager and two site supervisors were interviewed. All three were full-time. The program manager had worked at the program for 11 years. The other two staff members had been at the program five or more years, although one was new to her position (she was promoted to it five months prior to her interview).

Like all other programs that wish to maintain their federal funding, the Kingsboro Public Library Adult Literacy Program has been relatively compliant with the demands placed on it by policy shifts. With increased demands for accountability, for example, they adopted new assessment procedures. While the basic structure of the program has remained stable, these new policies have forced the program to change in a very concrete way. For example, the program continues to administer a holistic nonstandardized assessment instrument, but also now gives the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Program changes occurred that were major departures from how Kingsboro had operated for many years. For example, the program went from designating two levels of learners to six (to match the NRS functioning levels). In the past Kingsboro saw many cases of students testing out of the program and then being sent back because their TABE scores were too low to qualify for a higher-level program. Now that Kingsboro uses the TABE, students stay longer before they test out of the program.

At the same time that it made these changes, the program resisted other types of change—partly out of skepticism that this current round of reform would endure, and partly out of commitment to the program's core principles and educational values, which it sees as being in conflict with the policy changes. It is true that given the fact that programs have little choice, much of this resistance manifests more on an attitudinal than concrete level (e.g., staff talk about how destructive the new policies are for learners and the program mission). The program manager said,

It's just another hassle. I don't take it seriously because I have no respect for what it is. I don't see a beauty and a paradigm, how it's very focused or how it's going to help anybody. It's bureaucratic mumbo-jumbo....I do what I have to do because they're in charge. But this will pass....I'm not paying too

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much attention to it. I'm just trying to get this place to operate day to day. What we've concentrated on is what keeps people coming here.

Not only did staff express relatively strong feelings of resistance to the changes, but they also stated some ways in which they actually have resisted them. For example, the program manager reported that they would not meet their "WIA numbers" this year. She also said that the staff were not meeting their posttesting percentage goals. "I told them [state DOE] that I would send them a report to tell them how far behind they are, they say alright. But really you can only expect so much." While this was not the only program in the study that failed to meet its projections, it was the one that seemed the least distressed by this fact.

### **Resister Program: Sheffield College Learning Center**

Like Kingsboro, the Sheffield College Learning Center exists within another relatively large entity—a city college. With a staff of about 35, including about 9 full-time teachers, the program serves approximately 1,200 learners annually. The program offers literacy, GED, and ESOL instruction. Its relatively narrow range of program offerings is an indicator of the way in which Sheffield staff regard the program. They described it as an educational facility, as opposed to a vocational training or workforce development program. The program receives state and federal funding through its state department of education and also receives some funding from the city.

Although this program is described as an example of a resister program, like Kingsboro it has to maintain funding and thus, has had to comply in many ways with the regulations of the top-down policy imposed on it. However, in some key ways, this program resisted the shift in priority, whether implicit or explicit in WIA and welfare reform, toward workforce development.

The program saw a significant departure of students when welfare reform took effect. Students got jobs, were placed in a state-supported work program, or were moved to programs that were specifically aimed at meeting the welfare system client's educational requirements. In a fundamental way, the program resisted welfare reform because it made no effort to retool itself to meet the demands of this system. Although it was wrenching to lose so many students, the program had such a long waiting list that the spots left vacant by welfare clients were quickly filled by adults not in the welfare system.

While not retooling to address changes in welfare policy can be seen as a passive opting out, one teacher who was interviewed gave a clear statement of his active resistance to being pushed to teach to the test for accountability purposes.

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He said,

I'm not going to teach to the test...I do portfolios and miscue analysis for reading. So I don't pay much attention to the other forms being done. I view it as a disruption and want to get it done as fast as possible...There's an astounding commitment to this test [the TABE]. It's very bad for education. I'm going to resist, but I think there are a lot of teachers who feel they're going to be judged on this...It augurs ill for education.

This teacher stated that his classroom remained more or less unchanged by the current policies. At other programs, some teachers may have reported that their classrooms are relatively unchanged, but this is because they fell into a refiner category of practice. Their classrooms were, for the most part, well aligned with a work-first philosophy. However, this teacher, for the most part, resisted changing his class regardless of the lack of fit with the policies. "I don't think I pay much attention to it. I try not to," he said. He stated boldly that if he is pushed to change because of policy, "I'm going to push back." The program director affirmed that other teachers have taken a similar stance. She reported,

Teachers are doing the same thing they always did. They'll tell you that they're an educational facility. They're dealing with helping students learn to read and write. If they get a job, great. But they don't see their duty as getting students jobs.

One of the program coordinators reiterated the teacher's emphasis on education over training, and illustrated this by explaining that the program had decided to document every learner's goal as educational. Rather than turn itself inside out (reinvent itself in some ways) to follow up with learners after they attain a job (and likely leave the program), they felt that staying focused on educational goals was most realistic logistically and truest to the program philosophy. As the program director explained, "If they don't put a job down as a goal, we don't have to follow up on them." Should a learner get a job while in the program, this accomplishment is documented as an "additional outcome."

### **Areas of Specific Change**

The range of program responses illustrated in the descriptions above indicates many possible variations in implementation. The following sections illustrate the specific changes that programs made with regard to operations and structures, assessment and documentation, instruction, and access to resources.

## **Program Operations and Structures**

CDHC is one of two programs that significantly altered the way they structure their program offerings. The most radical changes made there were to the manner in which classes are offered and when. To accommodate a higher percentage of working students due to welfare reform, CHDC added Saturday classes and increased the number of locations in which classes are offered in order to cut down on travel time for those hard-pressed to fit classes into their busy lives. For welfare clients, CDHC increased the intensity of their offerings so that clients can participate for the required 20 hours a week. The program did this by creating a wider array of instructional offerings which, when combined, add up to 20 hours of instruction. CHDC did this, without extra funding, by “juggling around staff and programs in order to do that work.” To make reporting for NRS smoother, they developed three separate instructional “tracks” based on grade-level equivalency in reading. The higher the track, the greater the emphasis on job skills activities. All students, even those in the family literacy program and nonwelfare clients, were tracked.

Another program made a structural change that influenced instructional delivery in a very concrete way. It moved from a traditional class format to a “learning lab format.” Rather than holding specific classes at designated times, the program allowed learners to attend whenever they were available and work on their own individualized learning plan. A staff person there explained that this shift was made in response to the need to serve a larger population of working students. Previously, “if classes were held at a certain time and they couldn’t come, it was too bad.” Now teachers work closely with each other so that they are all prepared to work with whoever walks through the door at any time. This practitioner views this change in format as an experimental compromise. Although it is not her preference, she stated that they did it in an effort “to be as responsive to students’ needs [as possible].”

Other programs made less dramatic operational changes. Examples of this kind of change include adding or enhancing a student orientation process, and closing the program one day a week to give staff time to complete their paperwork. Student orientations were added in order to improve the quality of pretesting and other required intake procedures, increase appropriate articulation with one-stop services, and potentially improve learner retention by initiating participation in a more systematic way. Orientation also removed some of the burden on teachers involved in random “walk-ins” when students simply enter a class to initiate participation. In an effort to decrease staff stress and stay current with paperwork, the director at one program decided to close the center to students one day a week. As one teacher explained, “It just became impossible to do everything.”

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When programs have new requirements to which they must respond but have no additional funding, as occurred with welfare reform and the passage of WIA, they are forced to make choices about the allocation of resources—particularly with regard to staffing. Several programs involved in this study reported that they shifted staff members' jobs around or hired new staff so they could properly comply with the demands placed on them by the new policies. For example, one program hired an additional coordinator to work with evening staff to deal with the increased demands for documentation for the NRS. Another program hired a staff member to work with teachers in satellite sites to help them document level changes. Others turned a teacher into a data manager, or hired an additional clerical support person to assist in data management. Some programs hired additional staff to focus on the vocational aspect of the program—job developers and job counselors.

Generally these staffing shifts forced programs to decrease resources dedicated to instruction and increase resources directed toward managing paperwork or tasks only indirectly related to helping students reach educational goals. Although some program staff who were interviewed regretted having to make the shift in staffing, others saw that it alleviated some of the burden on teachers and made data collection less of an interference with the day-to-day work of teachers and learners. As one program director said, "If you don't do this, you just get a lot of very dirty data. We owe it to the teachers to do this. We need to have them give us good data." In other words, from her perspective, allocating staff in this way is more constructive than not doing so.

While some of the philosophy, purposes, and mechanisms of WIA and welfare reform are similar, programs were sometimes faced with a challenging contradiction between them in terms of target population. Many programs reported that welfare reform pulled away their higher-level learners who were encouraged or required to put their educational goals aside in favor of employment. This left the programs with the "hardest-to-serve" adults, those who could not find work. Meanwhile, because of accountability requirements imposed on ABE programs by the NRS, some programs felt encouraged to "cream," only accepting those students most likely to boost program statistics in favorable ways. Although no program noted this contradiction explicitly, a tension between meeting learners' needs and external expectations at the same time was expressed as a balancing act, a challenge, and a dilemma by many practitioners. On a deeper level, employment programs, in contrast to adult education, are rarely concerned with political, intellectual, or moral issues (Grubb, et al., 1999; Sparks, 1999). Thus programs and practitioners are potentially placed squarely in the middle of a number of possibly competing or contradictory programmatic missions.

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Welfare reform, in particular, has changed the face of the typical learner in many programs. The specifics of the change seem to depend on the local economy, the immigrant population in the community, and the local implementation and interpretation of welfare reform. In general, practitioners reported that the most able students quit programs to get jobs, leaving programs with the lowest level readers, the youngest, and/or those afflicted with the greatest personal challenges—such as drug addiction and other disabilities. In some cases, this has meant that programs serve fewer students; in others, the numbers have been maintained by the participation of nonwelfare immigrant students. Other programs reported that they are working harder than ever to recruit participants. In some cases, collaborations between ABE programs and other human service agencies that have been encouraged through welfare reform and WIA have strengthened referral networks. Not all programs have been willing or able to build these relationships, however. In some cases, a poor history of interaction among these agencies has not been erased by the realities of the new policies. In other cases, programs have been unwilling or unable to make the necessary changes in order to address the demands of outside organizations (e.g., increasing the number of hours of instruction for welfare clients).

### **Assessment and Documentation**

For many programs, the accountability demands of the NRS have meant instituting new assessment procedures, requirements, and deadlines. A few programs (especially tutor-based programs) adopted new assessment instruments. Here, the procedural changes were particularly wrenching. Many made a concerted effort to become more systematic about pre- and posttesting the maximum number of students. All programs had to adjust to new documentation procedures to systematically track and report student outcome data: some adjusted to procedures that were instituted in anticipation of an NRS-type accountability system and then tweaked once they were put in place; while others had to adopt a management information system once the NRS was implemented. These changes had multiple indirect consequences, such as changing the quality and use of the data collected, increasing noninstructional demands on staff, and shifting the focus with regard to learners' goals and attitudes.

At Kingsboro, the new assessment and reporting procedures pushed the program to make their reporting procedures more data-driven. “To be honest, we made up stuff [before]. Now we have to report out the actual assessment data,” the program manager stated frankly. At Hillside, staff used the collected data to constructively review and revise their course of action. The program manager, in spite of putting in many long hours to manage data collection, said,

It's highly beneficial because you have all of the information that you need and you can troubleshoot. You have it all right there at your fingertips. You

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have their hours, demographics, the programs that they're involved in, educational information. So with that in mind, with all the different aspects you can—it forces you to organize your data reporting system, accordingly.

One of the teachers seemed to second this remark when she said, “I like having a way to organize the data and have a way to look at the big picture. But when I'm sitting there entering data, it's making more work for me.”

Although many program staff felt they were collecting better data and making more strategic use of it, the increased demands spawned a “fudge” factor at other programs. For example, the staff at Kingsboro were frank about the ways in which policy that is unrealistic in its expectations can make programs feel compelled to “fudge” the data. A site coordinator there explained that when working with very-low-level learners, progress may not be evident on standardized tests but has occurred nonetheless.

We see growth and change, but we can't always capture it the way they want it to be captured. How can you see they have progressed even if they can't get past the first passage, but they have learned to do all this living stuff? It's putting the pressure on—either you show the change or you can get a decrease in funding. So how do you do it honestly? It's kind of pushing people to make up things.

Another site coordinator explained a similar problem slightly differently.

Also they want measurable goals—well that's really a hard thing too. Most who come here, they say I want my GED, regardless of level. At the end of this year, we're supposed to show that they accomplished this goal even if they came in at 1.1 grade level. Our students who are really low level, we can't tell them what the learners say because they'll never make it. So we don't report that as a goal.

While not exactly fudging data, Sheffield was selective in the data that it reported. By reporting educational goals only for its participants, it fudged by omission. Similarly, CDHC staff reported that they are more “careful” about reporting “getting the GED” as a goal if they have concerns about students being able to pass the test during the same reporting year. The director acknowledged that being held accountable for meeting students' expressed goals often detracts from a program's incentive to report those goals accurately. He went on to say,

You can't honestly report what the students' goals are when they're far from being able to reach [them]. You're not able to give a true picture of what the person is trying to do. I know that some programs aren't reporting everyone.



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They're reluctant to do that because they're afraid it'll count against them....People are manipulating the data.

Many of those interviewed stated that they felt that accountability was important because it enabled them to get a better sense of how they were doing. As the president of the board of a tutor-based literacy council stated,

I think on the whole it's good because it does make us evaluate ourselves a little more rigorously than we had before. I think programs like ours tend to go along on a feel-good basis and it's good to have some objective standards.

Others stated an understanding of why funders would want to ensure accountability. "If I was the state and I was putting out money, I would want to know that there was progress being made with it."

Despite the fact that many practitioners understood and valued the potential impact of better data collection on learner outcomes, in most cases, there was a cost for practitioners and learners. At Hillside, for example, the rigors of data collection required by the state in order to comply with the NRS were keenly felt. As the program manager reported, "It intensified the data management system that we [already] had in place. That was the downside." Although data collection did not really change the way this program provided services, it did add to everyone's workload in a notable way. For example, the program manager reported that she spent increased time on data collection. Entering each new student into the system took about two hours. When asked what she gave up to make time for this work, she said she hadn't given up anything. "I have to fit it all in." Consequently, she worked more hours. A teacher in that program reported similar demands. She said,

It's a lot of paperwork. It takes time away from me being in the class and teaching. I'm only in the classroom for 2 1/2 hours [a day]. You'd think the rest of the day is lesson plans and progress notes, but that's hardly what I do. I have to do that mostly on my own time.

A negative impact on practitioner morale was noted as well. Practitioners felt overburdened, burned out, and demoralized by the increased demands placed on them by the growing expectation to document learner outcomes.

In general, administrators have found that they are devoting more work time to documentation and less to educational leadership and professional development for their staff. For example, a program manager said, "We really place a great emphasis on paperwork. Consequently, that takes away from the student." A program coordinator stated, "I'm more focused on paperwork and compliance issues [now] than direct services, than actually doing case management. It seems like

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spending time with clients is less important than providing the piece of paper.” Another program coordinator said,

Time is the big thing. There’s just not enough time in the day if you’re going to work with students and do all this reporting. I almost feel like a data entry person all the time. I could be doing something with the students, but somebody has to be responsible for the numbers.

Teachers made similar comments. Even though she could articulate a rationale for increased accountability, one teacher said, “As a teacher, I resent the time it takes away from my students.” As they expressed it, the challenge for these practitioners lies in maintaining their programs’ missions and finding a balance between reporting requirements and the needs of the students. Almost every practitioner interviewed who talked about the pluses and minuses of accountability, spoke of it as a “zero-sum game.” To do accountability better meant that the quality and quantity of instruction would suffer. In other words, better accountability was usually viewed as coming at the expense of instruction. Some saw that with support and training, the problems caused by the demands of the accountability system would be minimized, but few were optimistic that the necessary support and training would be provided. A few commented that the main impact of the new requirements was on them, rather than on learners or the overall program. A program coordinator said, “The impact really has been, in all honesty, more paperwork, crossing our T’s and dotting our I’s” (i.e., it had not brought substantive change). Another commented that his program’s workload doubled merely “so that the state can report back to the federal government.”

There were many comments that indicated that an increased focus on assessment and documentation creates a risk of distracting, and detracting, from instruction. Practitioners reported that they have less time to spend with learners and less time to plan instruction. For example, one program reduced class days from five to four days a week to enable staff to keep up with their paperwork. One teacher there reported telling her boss that she would rather have students on Fridays than do paperwork. However, another staff member indicated that this decision was made so that when it was time to do paperwork, the staff could truly focus on it. It would seem true to say, too, that on class days they were freer to focus more on teaching than they might have been had they tried to do paperwork every day.

Many staff people interviewed saw these policies as shifting the focus in ABE from education to training; from personal development to workforce development. Further, some characterized these policies as pushing ABE into more of a production factory mode that is primarily concerned with concrete, measurable results. Accountability requirements and expectations have encouraged some to teach to the test. As the principal at Midcounty stated, “You can become an

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academy for test taking.” While no one questioned the importance of obtaining positive results, many wondered about the shift in priorities for those results. For example, results measured by currently available standardized tests seemed less important to some program staff than changes in learners’ lives, emotional well-being, or ability to function. They did not necessarily think the documentation requirements are able to capture the results that really matter. As one practitioner stated, “There’s the old saying that not everything that is measured is worth measuring. And not everything that is worth knowing is measurable.”

Accountability has also reduced access to services for some adults. Practitioners from at least three programs reported that they have started screening out some students they would have accepted previously. These programs worry, now that they are accountable in more formal ways, that they will be penalized if they accept students who are least likely to show quick gains. At Midcounty, the principal explained,

Some people [who are very low level] are getting turned away, who would have otherwise gotten services. Now they are referred to Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA). There is nothing wrong with LVA, but those only meet one hour a week, I am not sure how good that is....Actually we aren’t servicing some people that we used to service, because they are not going to make the criteria. They are not going to get a job during that short period of time, so I think that you have to make some hard decisions in order to do that.

As another program manager explained, if learners who cannot make a commitment to participate over an extended period of time are accepted into the program, “it will bring our statistics down and won’t allow us to make the gains that we need to report.”

For those students who are being served, some staff felt that they are receiving services in ways that are qualitatively different, but not always better. The program manager at Hillside said,

Now the quantitative analysis has become so important and I have increased my number of hours so that we can maintain quality of services. If you’re always number crunching, you’re not maintaining quality. You become very focused on meeting the goals and objectives; you’re not providing a quality program.

The director at CDHC noted that the focus on accountability has forced them to examine their priorities.

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The push is on not just to get the data, but to meet the standards—having to meet enrollment and retention goals. There's more talk of this than helping students and getting people things done. So it has changed the way we think and the way we do business, because we think about how it's going to help us meet the standards. People are asking if we're teaching for the standards or teaching for the people.

New assessment and documentation demands seem to have put CDHC and other programs in a position where they feel a conflict between maintaining their identity and goals and complying with the policy. Midcounty staff expressed a similar concern. Unfortunately, the principal there felt that the reinvention that occurred at her program moved them and their learners away from their core mission. Their students no longer come for the sake of learning or to improve the quality of their lives through the adult and academic development possible in an ABE program. Instead, she felt, the learners are focused exclusively on getting jobs and making more money. "The quality-of-life issue that we used to pride ourselves on in adult education? I don't see that anymore."

To maintain their core mission in this climate, programs are faced with new challenges. The director of CDHC was guardedly optimistic about the potential for creating a happy medium for all stakeholders.

First and foremost we're here to help the learners meet their goals. Somehow we have to work with the way we deliver service and measure outcomes so that it doesn't interfere with what they want to learn. We're supposed to be able to make it a seamless process so they're not feeling that they're being forced to do something that they aren't interested in. It's a system-wide process that we're trying to put in place that allows them to meet standards but doesn't impede on what they're supposed to be doing as teachers. Hopefully through program improvement and other initiatives it'll happen. It's possible to do both if you have the structure in place. If you have intensity and services that you can provide 50 or 100 hours of service and a sound curriculum, they will improve their skills. It is possible, but you have to look at your whole system and have the resources.

Changes in student morale were observed in a number of programs as a result of more intensive and systematic assessment and documentation procedures. Others noted that a better accountability system was helpful and encouraging to students because it enabled them to see the tangible results of their efforts. Practitioners reported that some students liked the formal testing procedures brought about by the demands of WIA because they gave students a better sense of where they were and what they had left to do, while others resisted testing and were discouraged by the results. Many noted that students felt tested to death and demoralized by poor results (for which they blamed the testing instrument rather than themselves, the teachers, or

the programs). At least one practitioner noticed that the increased testing negatively influenced the attrition rate in his class.

## **Instruction**

Teachers clearly have borne much of the brunt of altered expectations brought about by WIA and welfare reform. Teachers felt the strain of trying to take on more responsibility and often struggled to comply in whatever way they felt they could or should. While a small number of practitioners reported little or no change in their practice as a result of policy shifts—either because they were resistant to the changes or because their practice was well aligned with the policy shifts—many indicated that they *were* making changes. The changes, of course, were specific to, and congruent with, the policy. In general, the changes related to content; a greater emphasis on test preparation, testing, and documentation of results; and goal setting.

The first, and most prevalent, finding was that practitioners noted a shift in content away from traditional academics to a much greater emphasis on the “soft skills” of preemployment and job retention training, job search skills, and so-called “life skills.” Given the work-first philosophy of welfare reform and WIA, this is not a surprising shift. The director of CDHC explained,

They’re doing more job readiness things than they used to, probably more life skills like trying to find a job, more referring of students to their counselors for resume writing and things like that. They would have stuck with reading, writing, and math before, and that’s it... That isn’t something we would have done before. We used to do that, but only on an as-needed basis. Not as a regular part of the classroom activity... I think we’re doing more to integrate career information and workforce education into what we do every day. Not that we didn’t do it before, but we’re certainly more aware that it has to be done.

At Kingsboro, a site coordinator reported that they moved away from doing literacy instruction without a particular context or application (e.g., poetry or reading the newspaper).

But now with the philosophy of “put everyone to work immediately,” we figured we had to do something where they could say this was worth it. If they can leave that day and say now I’m able to fill out a check or money order ... our curriculum moved heavy into that... This was not really part of the program. Life skills were there, but they weren’t emphasized.

Examples of instructional changes at other programs involved a greater use of the Internet for conducting job searches, more lessons on résumé writing, on how to dress, how to behave at a job interview, and contextualizing lessons in the world of

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work. They also reported having employers come to talk to students, having students visit workplaces, and greater use of programs that refer students to employers. At Midcounty, the principal described an increased focus on job readiness and job search skills to be an expansion of their instructional offerings. She said, “So now we have really expanded. Now everyone is not just getting chili today, they are getting different things off the menu.”

Reaction to this shift in emphasis was mixed. The site coordinator from Kingsboro quoted above felt that the new emphasis helped keep students in the program because there was added relevancy in participating. “When I came here,” she said, “we didn’t have an emphasis on life skills. [Now it’s] about being able to function in the real world.” Another noted that the emphasis on life skills provided a much-needed focus. She said,

It gives the classroom hope now and [it’s] not just a warehouse or holding tank where they can learn a few more literacy skills. Now there is a real goal...Now I can apply a lot of what I teach to their reality. It has motivated the classroom to get more into what the students need in their lives.

Others felt that the work-first philosophy challenged them to perform a difficult balancing act between working on academics and working on job readiness. One person described this balancing act as “pressure to orient our classes toward the goal of immediate employment instead of expanding people’s educational level.” Another practitioner described it as “robbing Peter to pay Paul.” At a resister program, a Sheffield teacher talked about how he pushed back against the emphasis on job preparation and refused to let it sway him from his teaching goals.

I think this is sort of interesting and in the abstract I’m all for it, but I think it becomes, given the present mood, it’s just another way to move from education to training. So my tendency is to take my students at their word if they say they want school knowledge. They want their GEDs, and that is a test of school knowledge. Do I try to contextualize that? I sure do. I’ve always done that, but I wouldn’t design an entire curriculum around problems from work. I know that there are a number of national curriculum projects, which attempt to do that for adult education, but I think ... they have a different set of assumptions of what students are coming to do. So yes, we should always be looking to rely on and build on the knowledge that they bring. But what I don’t want to do is create a work-centered curriculum.

He was confident in his position, but noted that less-experienced teachers may more easily lose sight of their goals.

Another obvious change in practice described by teachers and program administrators alike was a greater emphasis in the classroom on testing and

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documentation for accountability purposes. There were many acknowledgements of the necessity, and even helpfulness, of accountability. Regarding the structure that additional assessment provides, a program coordinator noted,

[It] makes it easier to develop activities ... the reform tells you what it is they want us to do with the client. This makes it easier to create activities that are going to help with the purpose. It has made goals more concrete.

He added that the more detailed learner information they are forced to collect helped them get a better view of the clients that they work with. "It's helped us do our direct services more effectively." A couple of practitioners discussed ways they have integrated increased documentation demands into the day-to-day routines of their classrooms so they are not the interruption that some described them to be. One of them stated, "I do not let it take away from instructional time." The program manager at Kingsboro identified another positive outcome of a more serious focus on assessment. She explained that they were forced to find more meaningful and explanatory ways to talk with learners about assessment than what they had done previously. "Really, we had never talked about it [assessment] at intake and we hadn't talked about it in the learning group. Now we want them to know we do this and why."

Unfortunately, this concentration on accountability through assessment and documentation has been a distraction for many. A site coordinator said,

You have to think a lot more about teaching to the test. You have to think about giving the NRS what they need, students get what they need and we're not teaching like robots. It's very challenging. And we want to be funded. We need to do this so we can be funded. We have to retain our students and make it interesting. That's the challenge.

A teacher stated the problem succinctly, "They have to have more time for record keeping which gives them less time with their students. They're with the students, but it's not instructional time."

An increased focus on goal setting and responding to learners' goals was another reported significant shift in classroom practice. While some stated that this has been helpful in contextualizing class work in relation to learner goals, and felt that such efforts are easily integrated into their day-to-day routines, others saw this as an added burden because of the paperwork associated with documenting goals and goal attainment. On the plus side, a teacher reported that an increased emphasis on learner goals "helps [us] to stay focused." Another noted that although discussion of student goals is a different use of teacher time than "stand-up teaching ... I'm not sure that's all bad. The more time you spend talking with the students, the better you

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get to know them.” On the negative side, a part-time teacher with no permanent workspace complained of the difficulty of simply documenting her students’ goals. She said,

It becomes very cumbersome. I don’t have the resources to be efficient. I don’t have an office or a desk even. I have to leave my room at the end of my class because I am always in borrowed space. I can’t even update students’ goals efficiently because I can’t take 30 folders with me. Logistically it’s hard. Harder for part-time teachers.

Another noted that in an effort to show learning gains, sometimes teachers have had to move away from learner goals. A Hillside teacher observed that students sometimes resented this shift. “Sometimes what the students want isn’t necessarily what the requirements of the system [demand]. When this happens students can be especially unmotivated to participate.” Another said, “Somehow we have to work with the way we deliver service and measure outcomes so that it doesn’t interfere with what they want to learn.”

These instructional changes, according to many who were interviewed, have made teachers feel like they have to know more, do more, interact more with learners with regard to nonacademic matters, and work harder without additional support, paid work time, or salary. According to the principal of Midcounty, the teachers have faced many demands in addition to those to which they are accustomed. For example, they now fulfill a “policing” role by reporting to welfare workers on learners’ participation. In fulfilling career counseling roles, they have had to learn about resources in the community, and they have been trained to integrate technology into their classrooms. As another program administrator put it, “The teachers are teaching the same [amount of] time, but putting in more time for noninstructional activities.” Both WIA and welfare reform have put many practitioners in the position of needing to know more about other social service agencies and about job development and job search strategies. They have to expand their networks and their knowledge base with respect to local employers. Some have had to learn more about the Internet in support of the job search process. A greater emphasis on work has complicated the role the teacher plays and added to what she is trying to accomplish. For example, one teacher said, “We have more to teach, we have to teach them how to get jobs now, how to act, how to read, write, and do math. It doesn’t sound realistic to me.” She also reported that she felt much more responsible than she used to for the learners with whom she works because their work together feels as if it has higher stakes. “Now as a teacher there is so much more I need to dive into and help in order to get the person to succeed. It is a huge job now....I am willing to try, but it is not realistic.” Other practitioners noted that the job of teaching has changed because of the documentation responsibilities that teachers face. One said she felt she had changed from an educator “to a supervisor



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telling people you have to go to work.” Another said that the quantitative analysis involved in new accountability procedures pushed her to change her focus from responding to the learners to meeting program goals and objectives (note that they are seen as mutually exclusive). She said, “We have to be superhuman to do it all—to do the quality and to do the number crunching.”

A number of programs described a shift in student population served—there is a greater need to serve lower-level or “hardest-to-serve” adults. This shift, too, has made the job harder. Although most programs reported that they had the ability to respond well to this change, it was described as a new challenge. Many programs are serving more lower-level students as a result of welfare reform, as many of the most able have entered the workforce. Kingsboro, however, has begun to serve higher-level students as a result of new testing procedures. Now that Kingsboro uses the TABE, students stay in the program longer before they test out of it. This has meant using different strategies to meet the needs of higher-level students. In other words, they are now filling in a gap in ability between the top level of their old assessment and a TABE score high enough to qualify learners for other programs. This has resulted in learners doing more in-depth projects and using more library materials as well as making the needs of higher-level students a topic of tutor-sharing-support sessions.

Reports of the impact of these policies on learners were diverse. They included observations that the work-first philosophy and its influence on instruction (i.e., making it more focused on worker preparation and development) have helped learners feel more motivated, improved their self-esteem, and given them more of a purpose and focus for education. In contrast, practitioners reported that some students felt more anxiety and pressure, and some students who did not have a work focus felt pushed towards it. Apparently, the impact of these policies on learners depended on the learners’ personal circumstances. It seems less important to generalize about the influence of the policy on learners (since it is very diverse), than it is to acknowledge that it does have an effect on them, which in turn affects what programs need to do in response. This places a burden on programs above and beyond dealing with the mechanics of the policy requirements.

### **Access to Resources**

While staffing changes and compliance with accountability requirements were often construed as changes that take away from the potential to provide maximum direct service, some interviewees saw these policy shifts as opportunities to do more. For example, responding to the opportunity provided by the availability of additional welfare funds, CDHC applied for and received funds to implement a job-retention-support program and became an agent of the state, tracking down and working with

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welfare clients who had not yet signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with their caseworkers. CHDC also received funding to implement a class to help learners improve their job retention. While many practitioners complained that they and their programs were asked to do more without increased resources, a few programs added to their offerings by accessing welfare funds, leveraging resources through collaborations with other human services agencies, or through their partnerships at their local one-stops. In a few cases, practitioners who were interviewed were hired for their current job because of special additional funds made available through shifts in policy. Regarding welfare, one practitioner stated,

[It had] given the demand for our program. The grants have been able to give us the latest and best software for our students. We have wonderful rooms for our students, with plenty of storage and furniture. It is all for student usage and they love coming to our program.

While there were actually few examples of programs garnering supplementary financial resources to carry out additional programs or fund new positions, there were many, many examples of practitioners discussing collaborations that have come about either directly (e.g., via one-stop partnerships) through WIA, or indirectly as a result of welfare reform. For example, at Midcounty, the changes the program felt compelled to make were supported through collaborations with other local social service agencies. Prior to the passage of WIA, Midcounty had good working relationships with other social service agencies. “We have been a member of the team and a player on the team since the conception [of this collaboration].” Because of alignments across agencies, the principal was able to leverage additional funds for special projects in support of their workforce development efforts. In the great majority of cases (although not all), practitioners viewed these collaborations as new assets that improved their ability to provide services, and they felt that when agencies worked together, clients received better services. Practitioners also reported that their services were made available to a wider pool of potential students through collocation<sup>10</sup> in their local one-stops. Finally, programs reported that increased collaboration has improved communication across agencies so that more consistent messages are conveyed to students, redundancy has decreased, and services are more coordinated.

Despite having somewhat different “client” bases, WIA and welfare reform both encourage greater cross-agency collaboration. Although collaboration between ABE programs and the welfare system was not mandated, many programs found that they needed to work more closely with local caseworkers. In some cases, this was in

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<sup>10</sup> Collocation refers to the housing of multiple agencies in the same physical space. As a result of WIA, ABE programs typically provide some services at one-stops. These may include recruitment, assessment, or classes.

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an advocacy role on behalf of their learners to ensure that they received the services they were entitled to, such as clothing allowances and transportation money. Other programs found that they worked harder to recruit students as more and more potential students got jobs. In some cases this meant developing a closer relationship with caseworkers so that they would refer their clients to ABE classes. Programs also worked more closely with the welfare system as accountability requirements increased. On behalf of their students, ABE programs now reported on student attendance to local welfare offices. Not surprisingly, the quality of these relationships varied considerably, regardless of whether or not they were mandated.

In some cases where collaboration worked well, there was a history of good relationships and cooperation across agencies, but others noted a marked improvement since the change in federal policies. As one practitioner said,

I've seen a lot of improvements. The clients have been pleased with the level of communications across [agencies], knowing that they can come to one place and know that they can have a lot of their needs met....I think it's been a good thing for everyone all around.

This particular person believed the improvement occurred due to collocation. "Having all our agencies within one building, gaining support from one another, and being able to share frustrations and successes and helping each other out—the whole one-stop thing is what makes it work." Another practitioner reported similar good results from the mandate to work together.

Now we have partnerships built that weren't there before, which is good....With the WIA making people work together, it is very beneficial. We have meetings and bring cases into that room and we talk about our participants and brainstorm how we can work together to help that participant.

Unfortunately, collaboration has not functioned in such a positive way in every case. Some practitioners reported that collaboration simply does not happen, or that it doesn't work effectively. Sometimes this has come on the heels of long-standing poor relationships between welfare workers and ABE practitioners. It also seems that the policy shifts strengthened and built relationships if there was no negative history among agencies. It seems clear, however, that the policy could not always overcome truly negative past relationships.

## Discussion

Clearly, federal policies such as WIA and welfare reform have influenced practice at the program and classroom level. The ways in which they have done so vary significantly, but in general changes seemed to cluster in the areas of program operations and structures, assessment and documentation, instruction, and access to resources, even though the WIA legislation explicitly addresses only one of these areas (the establishment of a new accountability system). The extent to which other changes occurred provides evidence of the fact that state agencies, programs, and classrooms all operate within an interconnected system and that changes in one area have significant impact on all aspects of operation. This has implications for the ways in which policy change is supported. For example, as accountability influences many aspects of programs and classrooms, practitioners may need help adjusting to far more change than those involved in properly administering valid, standardized, pre- and posttests. In addition, the help should be targeted. Given the range of program response types, not all programs will need the same level of support. Limited resources for professional development and technical assistance should be focused on those programs that have the farthest to go to meet the required changes. Such strategic decisions should be made at the state and local level.

These findings raise significant questions for further research. We need to know more about how the differences in the ways state agencies managed the policy changes shape the potential of practitioners to positively impact learner outcomes. We also need to know more about how changes at the classroom and program level affect practitioners' ability to help learners. While many of the practitioners interviewed saw the changes as being implemented at the cost of practices that they value as effective strategies for assisting learners in meeting their goals and improving outcomes, the reality is that this assumption is untested. Research on the relationship between program and classroom practices that have changed as a result of WIA and learner outcomes is of critical importance as reauthorization of WIA and welfare reform are considered.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion and Implications

The data presented in Chapter 3 indicate that state agencies responded to the WIA and welfare reform policy shifts in diverse ways that were shaped by their anticipation of the policies, their perception of their role in supporting programs, the infrastructure they had in place for professional development, and a range of other contextual factors. Although they all had a similar problem to solve, they did so in a variety of ways. Similarly, the data in Chapter 4 show that programs responded in a variety of ways to the requirements the state agencies placed on them in response to the new policies. States and programs that receive federal funding must respond to the policies the federal government enacts. Therefore, it is not surprising that there were changes made in response to federal policies at all levels.

The detailed description of these changes provided here demonstrates the range and variation in responses. This variation suggests implications for policy development in the future, and for further research (both qualitative and combined qualitative and quantitative) that can strengthen implementation. In addition, the findings suggest specific actions and considerations to which practitioners and policymakers could respond.

#### The Policy Journey from the Top Down

Given the governance and funding, and mission and formats of ABE, it is unsurprising that practitioners reported that federal policy-oriented statutes such as WIA and welfare reform had a significant impact on practice at the state and local level. Similarly unsurprising is that there was significant variation in the ways state agencies perceived and acted on the changes in policy, which, in turn, gave rise to variation in the ways the policies were implemented at the program and classroom level. As educational policy researchers in K–12 have argued, policy does not get implemented in a “pure” way, in a vacuum. There is no direct, straight path between policy and practice. Rather, this path involves interpretation and as a result will be enacted differently each time it is operationalized (Coburn, 2001; Cohen & Ball, 1990). As the policies passed through the state agency, the way they were shaped by specific requirements at that level to some degree determined the ways in which programs were likely to respond. However, the particular program context, in turn, played a role in the way instructors perceived the policies, and the ways in which their practice would be altered or opportunities for learners might shift. At each level, stakeholders perceived the policies in unique ways, which in turn influenced how the level below would experience them.

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First, the nature of the policy plays a role in the way it is perceived by practitioners. For example, the clarity, complexity, quality, and practicality, as well as the perceived need for the change (Fullan, 1991) can influence how well various players understand it and develop effective ways to implement it within the realities of the state and local context. In the case of welfare reform, it seems that the basic concepts were well understood at every level. However, because ABE is only an indirect player in this policy, practitioners are somewhat at the mercy of those more directly involved (e.g., county welfare officials and caseworkers). Practitioners did not have as much clarity about WIA and the complexity of this legislation had a direct impact on practitioners' capacity to respond to it.

When WIA made its way to the state agencies and the effect of welfare reform began to be felt in ABE, the responses of state leaders were shaped by the political context, as well as by their capacity and will with regard to the policies. What got conveyed to the local programs via the state agency was a composite of the policy itself and the way in which the state agency decided to act on the policy. This was expressed in the form of mandates, rules, and regulations developed by the state agency based on its unique attributes. Importantly, although the previous chapter makes clear that programs had their own ways of responding to the policies as they were interpreted by the state agencies, these responses were strictly within the context that the state agency provided for implementation. For example, program actions related to managing data were a real reflection of the choices the state made with regard to an MIS system. Choices programs made about assessment tools and procedures were within the limitations placed on them by the state agency. In the cases where states made little concerted effort to provide programs with guidance, the lack of common responses among programs within the state reflected this absence of guidance. At the state level, variations in readiness for change, definitions of leadership roles, infrastructure, working relationships between state staff and local programs, and specific actions taken at the state level with regard to policy implementation set the stage for programs to respond.

Although Odden (1991) suggests that an analysis of "will and capacity" is too simplistic for explaining differences in implementation of educational policy across contexts, policy analysts continue to find this a useful conceptual frame for understanding local responses to reform (e.g., Bulkley, et al., in press). As some have defined it, "will" is the embodiment of the relationship between the ways in which policy is implemented and the ideals that policies seem to embody (Firestone, 1989; McLaughlin, 1987). However, "will" is a somewhat problematic analytic category in terms of WIA and welfare reform. Neither WIA nor welfare reform (with regard to ABE) seems to have concrete, explicit ideals to which an analysis of "will" can be applied because they both require largely procedural changes by practitioners. Another way in which "will" is understood—as the commitment to

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truly understand the ideas of the reform—also does not really fit the circumstances here. Because WIA is a mandated policy, it was essential for program administrators and state directors to understand the policy. However, the notion of capacity (Spillane & Thompson, 1997) perhaps explains in part the accuracy and depth of understanding (or lack thereof) exhibited by state leaders and practitioners, as indicated by the ways in which they responded to the policies. Capacity contributed to the ability of states and programs to implement WIA.

Although the state agency seemed to play a dominant role in how programs ultimately received and acted on the policies, this is not to say that the program managers and instructors were unimportant in understanding the ways federal policies alter practice. The program size, infrastructure, staffing, program philosophy, and mission, as well as the will and capacity of key staff all played a role, but *within* the context of the state agency. Programs shaped the policy, but could only do so within the limitations of what “arrived” at their site.

Finally, the practitioners’ experiences of the policies, some of which are described in Chapter 4, illustrate the ways in which the classroom context (e.g., the purpose of the class, who the learners are, the employment status, experiences, and training of the teacher, and the class location—on-site or off-site) shaped the way policy was implemented at that level. However, because teachers felt constrained by the need to protect their job, they had only limited leeway in interpreting or making choices with regard to the policy. Their actions took place within the context of the program, which acted within the context of the state agency. This interrelationship underlines the importance of the broader context in how teachers made sense of, and acted on, new policies (Coburn, 2001). For example, teachers at CDHC now teach in a context where there has been a shift in emphasis in the curriculum, assessment procedures have changed, and classes are now organized by “tracks.” These are changes that were made at the program level in response to mandates from the state agency in response to federal policy. Teachers’ practice is now shaped by the ways in which the broad policy context traveled to their classrooms. Yet, they are autonomous and respond to the policies within the context of their beliefs, abilities, and specific teaching situations.

Each level of the ABE system acts somewhat, but not completely, autonomously. Thus, while the movement of these policies is one-way, from the abstract when they first become statutes, to the concrete when program managers and instructors act on them, practitioners are not merely receivers of the policy. Rather, each level changes the policies to some extent; each responds to and reshapes them based on the nature of the context at the state, program, and classroom level.

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The following implications for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers are drawn from the data described in Chapters 3 and 4, the above observation of the path that policy follows from implementation in statute to implementation in classrooms, and the literature on policy implementation and educational reform.

### Implications for Policymakers

The data indicate several specific actions that policymakers could take to make better policy and improve implementation in the future. These include clarifying the connection between policies and the ultimate goals and purposes of ABE, identifying a clear unit of change and focusing all efforts there, and considering and planning for the ways in which coexisting policies like WIA and welfare reform support, or obstruct each other from attaining, desired outcomes. In terms of specific issues of practice, policy development should include efforts to improve the professional climate and other factors that may inhibit practitioners' optimal performance *before* raising expectations regarding accountability. Policies should be developed in such a way that they acknowledge the relationship between professional development and change by supporting the state agency's capacity to leverage its system to respond to reform efforts. (In cases where the system is not strong, assistance should be provided.) In general, policy development needs to seek ways to understand and plan for the variation in the capacity of state agencies to implement change, as well as help states respond to the critical differences in capacity among its funded programs.

Based on an analysis of the statutes and how they are reflected in the data reported here, WIA and welfare reform (as it influences ABE) are largely, but not exclusively, intensification and first-order-change efforts. That is, they increase regulation in the hopes of improving effectiveness and efficiency (Fullan, 1991). In an effort to do so, the NRS has wrought major procedural changes. The work-first philosophy and the accompanying shift in learner population have pushed programs to change curriculum and format. Despite these operational changes, however, there is no clear evidence in the data of substantive change in the nature of the work practitioners do. Rather, they often portrayed themselves as trying to maintain their mission, purpose, and process in spite of the policies. Practitioners' perception of the value of the changes that have occurred are mixed. It is clear from the data, however, that in many cases the changes—whether viewed as positive or negative—come at the expense of something that *had* been valued. In this case, it seems important to keep in mind the relationship between the nature of the reform and central questions regarding the goals and purposes of education, what kind of knowledge is most important, and what materials and instructional strategies are needed to address them (Fullan, 1991). This is particularly tricky in ABE where the purpose and process are still evolving. Yet, it is a pressing question that needs to be



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addressed. In other words, policy development should be based on articulated choices about what is gained and what is lost, with the ultimate goal of service provision as the frame of reference. In cases where “loss” and “gain” do not clearly point to improved outcomes (as is the case at this point with WIA), provisions should be made for addressing the question of opportunity cost (i.e., is what is gained more beneficial than what is lost, and for whom?).

In considering more general issues of policy formation, it is important to consider what the “unit” of improvement is. The policy should then reflect this conscious focus. For example, if the focus is on improving instruction, then policy is needed that explicitly addresses instructional practice. Here, it seems clear that practitioners should have a hand in shaping such policy. It is not clear that WIA is actually aimed at improving classroom practice per se. Certainly welfare reform is not. The data in this study do not suggest that the nature of the changes is significantly oriented toward improved classroom practices (although in some states such efforts were integrated with more procedural types of changes). In fact, the data that will be available through the NRS will not be especially useful in determining whether changes in classroom practice have occurred because of problems with assessment instruments (Bingman & Ebert, 2000). Until policy is explicitly aimed at improving practice (and definitions of what this means will need to be articulated), changes in this arena will be incidental, rather than systemic. Therefore, if the goal is to improve learner outcomes, an explicit focus on instruction is critically important.

In addition, welfare reform and WIA are in some ways complementary but in others contradictory. As Grubb and colleagues (1999) argue,

The practices associated with “work first,” particularly in their more extreme form, violate many of the developments states have been trying. They undermine the provision of education and training and, therefore, undermine the quality agenda; they replace holistic and responsive programs with categorical and rigid approaches; they distract state policymakers from the stable development of their own workforce development visions; and they have alienated employers. States need to consider carefully the costs of welfare “reform” and “work first” for the rest of their workforce systems, and may need to develop more moderate versions. (p. 92)

Thus, policymakers must seek ways to resolve conflicts in mission that occur when multiple policies are in place. In setting new policies, every effort should be made to reconcile differences in ideals and mandated practices so that practitioners do not find themselves forced to choose between competing directives or contradictory goals. The data indicate competing or contradictory goals in a number of areas including increasing standards for learner outcomes (WIA) at the same time that the

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system is increasingly being asked to help the hardest to serve (welfare); and using testing to make programs and teachers more accountable for learner outcomes, which in turn encourages programs to “cream,” downplay the importance of learner goals, and teach to the test. Contradicting goals also have the potential to put practitioners in the uncomfortable role of being an advocate for the student while at the same time acting as an enforcer for the welfare system.

A fundamental necessity for improving practice through reform-oriented policy is creating working conditions for practitioners that are conducive to change (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; Fullan, 1991). “What teachers do and the institutional context within which they do it sets primary conditions for the limits and possibilities of reform” (Elmore & McLaughlin, 1988; p. 38). Similarly, Fullan (1991) writes, in reference to accountability oriented reforms,

If the point of introducing student performance standards is to raise the quality of teaching and the level of learning in schools, then doing something about the conditions that create low quality, lack of commitment, and demoralization is a condition for introducing the standards by which that commitment will be evaluated. (p. 59)

One “climate” issue that is not explicitly discussed here is the punitive aspect of some policies. For example, the NRS has at its core the purpose of gathering data as a means to give states incentive to meet higher performance levels through performance-based funding. Thus, poor performance is potentially treated punitively.

This creates a climate that may worsen morale instead of improving performance. Grubb and colleagues (1999) explain,

If programs are held accountable but lack the capacity to change, then accountability can only identify poorly performing programs without improving them—a politics of humiliation rather than improvement. But if local programs can develop capacity to change through technical assistance, then accountability can stimulate improvement. (p. 24)

Similarly, Fullan (1991) argues that if the capacity of the system is the problem, policies should be aimed at increasing capacity, rather than surveillance. The implications here for professional development are obvious. Without capacity-building professional development and technical assistance for state-level staff and, in turn, local practitioners, policies that relate to accountability are not destined to truly improve, and may in fact hinder, the potential outcomes of learners. Grubb, et al. (1999) argue,

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An issue about performance measures is not simply whether they force programs to pay more attention to outcomes, it is also whether programs attain those outcomes in ways related to enduring effects, or whether they engage in behavior—creaming, preparing for short-term over long-run effects, creating displacement, or simply cooking the numbers—that make programs seem effective without changing the prospects of clients. (p. 89)

A further implication for policymakers is the need to shape policy that acknowledges the complexity of preparing a highly skilled workforce. Accomplishing this requires a focus on higher-order thinking skills and conceptual work. For many, such a goal would require new approaches to teaching. Such approaches are not easily implemented and require long-term, in-depth opportunities for professional development.

Some states have strong professional development systems that are coherent, accessible, of sufficient scope, and grow out of a cooperative leadership model (Belzer, et al., 2001). However, many states do not have such an infrastructure in place. As has been suggested here,

[P]rofessional development systems are critical vehicles for putting policy into practice. Policymakers should make these systems an integral part of any policy implementation plan and make the funding of these systems a priority. Policy will likely fail unless policymakers recognize that professional development is crucial to any strategy intent on institutionalizing change. (Belzer, et al., 2001; p. 184)

A priority focus on professional development—not just for local practitioners, but for state-level staff as well—is not just nice for morale and possibly good for the learners, it is critical to the success of the policy. There is a synergistic relationship between policy implementation and professional development that should be acknowledged and planned for in the shaping of any new policy for the field.

The data indicate that when policy shifts push instruction in a new direction, practitioners do not simply stop doing what they have been doing but often try to integrate the new with the old in such a way that they are left with an added burden. This suggests a clear implication with regard to specific professional development needs. The challenge is to help instructors integrate new and old practices rather than adding on, in a mounting pile, to what they already do. The potential to accomplish this, to some extent, probably depends on the nature of the shift required rather than on external factors like time and resources. However, when teachers believe that instructional changes that come about due to outside forces do not correspond to their core mission, they will probably resist dropping what they

## LIVING WITH IT: FEDERAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

already do in favor of what is new and will feel forced to add to their current duties and practices.

In a broader sense, the issue here is supporting the development of capacity for change. The data indicate that capacity for change in ABE, given its structure, is weak. To some extent this is a matter of limited resources, but as Spillane and Thompson (1997) argue, capacity is a more complex set of factors than just financial capital. In part, addressing the variation in capacity within policy development would speak to the wide range of state- and program-level responses seen in the data. The fact that programs responded to policy change in three different ways suggests that such efforts cannot be made using a “one-size-fits-all” approach. While professional development is obviously an important response to the capacity challenge, so are better mechanisms for communication across the ABE system and a more conscious alignment among mission, philosophy, goals, and intended outcomes as reflected in accountability mechanisms, instructional materials, and professional development.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that achieving better outcomes may be at least as much a resource issue as it is a policy issue. In their study of programs that successfully integrated basic skills training into welfare-to-work activities, Murphy and Johnson (1998) found that these programs typically spent significantly more than average than less successful programs. This is not to say that reform-oriented policy cannot play an important role in improving outcomes in ABE. However, it probably cannot do so without also providing sufficient support to programs and practitioners to help them do the best job possible. If no additional resources are forthcoming, the optimal number of students served should be a consideration.

### **Implications for Practitioners and Programs**

The implications that emerge from this study for practitioners and programs have largely to do with maintaining a focus on, and commitment to, the core mission of ABE in light of competing or contradictory demands placed on them by top-down policies. Whether policies are viewed as constructive or distracting, programs and practitioners have to adapt to them. Thus, WIA increases the burden of, and demands on, resources at the local level. The most obvious implication is that policies should not be put in place without appropriate supports and mechanisms being made available simultaneously. However, maintaining the core mission for many who were interviewed is far more complicated than simply getting more time and money. The challenge seems to be how to do this in ways that, at best, improve practice and, at worst, do not detract from what is working well.

## ***Conclusion and Implications***

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) assert that federal policies tend to favor external authority over the expertise of practitioners. This seems to be particularly true in the case of intensification-type policies like WIA. Here, one of the main objectives is universal compliance rather than substantive problem solving. Unfortunately, they write, “Compliance drives out discretion.... Ironically, the policies that aim to reduce variability by omitting teacher discretion constrain effective practice” (p. 5). Within the context of ABE, Sparks (2001) and Sheared, et al. (2000) echo these observations by noting that practitioners are marginalized and have little power to affect policy. “ABE practitioners have little opportunity to influence policy implementation or share what they know about ABE practice. Further, ABE practitioners have been relegated to implementing government policy and servicing the interests of the states,” asserts Sparks (p. 136).

The solution to the problem of being relegated to a passive role is for practitioners to become active. It is important for them to participate in shaping policies at both the micro and macro levels, in ways they believe are most constructive for learners. In a general sense, the first step is for them to maintain an active stance in educating themselves about the change process and in taking “responsibility and action to exploit the many opportunities for bringing about improvements” (Fullan, 1991; p. xiv). Sheared, et al. (2000) suggest that an important step in this process is for practitioners to engage in a self-critical analysis as a way to determine what really needs to be done to improve their lot, gain greater voice, and have more control. This means examining instructional strategies, missions and goals, and strengths and weaknesses in achieving them.

In her study on how welfare reform has influenced practice, Sparks (2001) found no evidence of resistance or subversion among practitioners, despite teachers’ sense that the policy was detrimental to learners. Manzo (1997) argues that few adult education directors played any role in state welfare reform plans. Many states simply ignored the potential of linking education and welfare in productive ways. Equally important, many practitioners did not envision their potential to participate in shaping policy at the state level.

However, some hold out optimism for the role of practitioners in shaping the field. For example, Hayes (1999) observes that there is no opting out of unlikable or impractical policies in ABE. She asserts then that practitioners need to become involved in advocating for change by being well informed about the law, educating policymakers and caseworkers, and creating new networks. In fact, some practitioners who were interviewed for this study had been involved (at the state level) in determining implementation procedures for WIA, and were thus well positioned to use their connections and knowledge to support appropriate program change. Imel (1998) suggests that adult educators should advocate for a balance

among education, job training, and work experience if there is ever to be economic mobility for learners (and not just employment). Practitioner inquiry and action research seem to be important ways for practitioners to build knowledge and participate in policy-level discussions about what is “best” for learners in the field (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1992; Quigley, 1997). Based on knowledge generated by systematically investigating problems found in practice, such research provides practitioners with data about teaching and learning with adults that can then contribute to policymakers’ understanding of problems and solutions based on the realities of the field.

### Implications for Researchers

There are many important and interesting questions for researchers to pursue specific to WIA and welfare reform. Of special interest are those that build knowledge about the relationship between implementation of these policies and improved learner outcomes. For example, in the case of WIA, in particular, further research can help us understand whether policy simply improved reporting or whether it actually reformed practice and improved outcomes (Merrifield, 1998). Secondarily, there are many questions about the ways in which accountability drives, shapes, and/or changes instruction in the ABE context.

Clearly, every state agency was obligated to respond to WIA, but they did so in ways that are unique to the political context within which state-level staff work, as well as within the limits of their capacity, resources, and leadership style. We know from the six states examined in this study that these factors produced variation in general (e.g., how state staff saw their role in policy implementation), and specifically with regard to the policies (e.g., how they responded to the NRS). We know nothing about what difference these variations make, except for the finding that “sink or swim states” were more likely to have resister programs (although we do not know if there is a direct cause-and-effect link here). Similarly, within the mandates that state-level agencies created, programs engaged in a process of adaptation that resulted in some amount of diversity in their responses to the policy. The implication for research here is the need to understand in what ways these differences matter. This is a more macro-level version of implementation research that goes beyond asking how implementation influences outcomes, to how various forms of implementation do so.

Elmore and McLaughlin (1988) suggest that variability in policy implementation should be encouraged because it means that locally appropriate solutions to problems can be applied. However, it seems a leap of logic to assume that this is what causes variability or that that is what it accomplishes. When it is a reflection of a lack of capacity, for example, variability does not necessarily seem to

## **Conclusion and Implications**

be a healthy local response to policy implementation. If more were known about what drives state-level and local staff to respond in the ways they do, a much greater understanding of the opportunities and barriers that variability might entail would result.

With regard to programs and classrooms, the reactions of teachers reported here are consistent with Corbett and Wilson's (in Fullan, 1991) contention that unintended consequences of "intensification"-type reforms like high-stakes testing in K-12 are the creation of negative consequences for the professional lives of teachers and the opportunities for learning that they can offer students. They note that the tendency to come up with solutions in order to address a specific issue, such as low test scores, can narrow instructional strategies, create a crisis mentality, and divert energy and attention (as preparation for tests takes time away, for example) from other areas of instruction that may more closely address learners' goals and interests. In addition, the demands of high-stakes testing can create an intensification of labor for teachers, which encourages getting done what has to be gotten done instead of getting done what needs to be done.

Perhaps because her work looks specifically at the impact of one particular policy on practice, Sparks (2001) articulates the issue slightly differently. Through her interviews with ABE teachers regarding the influence of welfare reform on practice in one state, she found that the policy generated dilemmas for them related to reconciling competing missions and purposes, making needed changes in program formats that increase demands without the benefit of additional resources, and limiting students' opportunities to learn. Similarly, Sheared, et al. (2000) note that many tenets of adult education are in direct conflict with the quick-fix approach currently being funded, in which work is emphasized over lifelong learning. While many practitioners did reflect a negative response to the policy changes, others felt that the new policies had resulted in welcomed changes to their programs.

One question that remains unanswered is, what is the net gain/loss of the changes described at the program/classroom level? For example, it may be that the immediate feeling among practitioners is that there is a loss to the learners as resources are drawn away from direct instruction. On the other hand, such reallocations and changed emphases may ultimately help programs do better for learners. Similarly, although fewer students might be served, this is not necessarily bad. Maybe those who are getting services are getting *better* services.

Given the fact that, in general, WIA and welfare reform did not generate more resources and clearly put greater and different demands on programs, the changes that they did make occurred within a closed system of resources. Thus, any changes that cost time, money, or staff energy drained resources from one area of the

## LIVING WITH IT: FEDERAL POLICY IMPLEMENTATION IN ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

program and supplied them to another. Because there is no baseline data, we will never know if this resulted in better or worse learner outcomes. Further complicating this question is the conflicting mission of adult education (Quigley, 1997), which brings into question what “better” learner outcomes actually look like. Additional complications arise from the fact that there is such great diversity in programs. A challenge for researchers is to separate the effects of the policies on learner outcomes from the effects of different program formats, sizes, resources, instructional approaches, and a wide range of other differentiating features.

The way in which ABE is structured means that federal policy is clearly an important lever for change in the field. Therefore, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers all have an important obligation to maximize the potential for reform by developing and implementing thoughtful and constructive policy that is truly aimed at improving the lives of the adults who seek to improve their skills. In order to do this, policy must be based on the realities of learners’ lives, the experience and know-how of practitioners, and the principles of adult education. This study has shown that the same federal policies are applied by state agencies, programs, instructors and classrooms, and learners in different, but interrelated and significant ways. This means that policymakers, in establishing new policy, and researchers, in studying it, must take into account and support change at each level of the system in ways that are most appropriate to a wide range of contexts. Unless each level is attended to, the full potential of new policies will not be realized.



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Appendix

**Appendix  
Table 1: Programs**

	<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Number of Staff</b> (Full-time, Part-time, Voluntary)	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Services Offered</b>	<b>Primary Funding</b>	<b>Program Type</b>
<b>State 1</b>	<b>Program A</b>	1, 15, 6	1,000	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy/Evenstart, ESOL, Workforce, HS completion	Local School Board, State DOE	Responder/Reinventor
	<b>Program B</b>	5, 6	200–250	Basic and occupational skills, Literacy, GED and ESOL (all Voc. in nature, Job readiness, Computer training, etc.)	TANF and State DOE WIA	Responder
	<b>Program C</b>	3, 3	40–50 Families (Core of about 30)	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy/Evenstart	Evenstart and local matching	Responder
	<b>Program D</b>	14, 1, 250	150	Literacy, Preemployment, Personal enrichment (aerobics, art, sewing, etc.)	Corporate, Fund raising activities	Responder
<b>State 2</b>	<b>Program A</b>	3, 2	40 Families	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, Parenting/Child development, Job Readiness	DOE, DHHS	Responder
	<b>Program B</b>	12, 150, a few	4,500	Literacy, GED, AHS, ESOL, Apprenticeship, Certificate programs, WIA training program, Evenstart Family Literacy, Private sector preemployment training	State DOE, Federal money, Private sector, Joint partnership with economic development office	Resistor (Title I and Welfare); Refiner/Reinventor (Title II)
	<b>Program C</b>	4, 100+, 6	300	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, Workplace, Homeless, Noncredit continuing ed., High school students at risk of dropping out	State, Federal	Responder
	<b>Program D</b>	3, 2, 225	300	Literacy, Family Literacy, ESOL	State, Federal, Local foundations, Corps, and Indiv. donations	Indeterminate



Table 1 Continued

	<b>Program Name</b>	<b>Number of Staff</b> (Full-time, Part-time, Voluntary)	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Services Offered</b>	<b>Primary Funding</b>	<b>Program Type</b>
<b>State 3</b>	<b>Program A</b>	8, 6, 2	650	Literacy, GED, ESOL, ASE, GED testing site	DOE, College	Responder
	<b>Program B</b>					Resistor
	<b>Program C</b>	25, minimal, 85	3,000	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, Workforce, Workplace, Deaf literacy, NJ Youth Corp, Alt. work experience, Hire attire, WIA	Various state sources, Federal literacy	Responder
	<b>Program D</b>	15, 15, ½	1,200	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, Workforce	DOE and other various state funding	Reinventor
<b>State 4</b>	<b>Program A</b>	26, 10, 1	2,500–2,800	Alternative HS, Literacy, GED, ESOL, Workplace, Workforce	15–17 sources	Responder
	<b>Program B</b>	23, 12, 100	790	Literacy	DOE, Library, State	Resistor/Reinventor
	<b>Program C</b>	3, 25, 4	1,300	Literacy, GED, ESOL, External diploma, ESOL Distance learning, Citizenship training, Job readiness, Family Literacy, JOBS	DOE, EDGE, JOBS, Title II	Responder
	<b>Program D</b>	35 (about 9 full-time teachers)	1,200	Literacy, GED, ESOL	State, City, WIA	Resistor





Appendix

Table 1 Continued

	Program Name	Number of Staff (Full-time, Part-time, Voluntary)	Number of Students	Services Offered	Primary Funding	Program Type
<b>State 5</b>	<b>Program A</b>	8, 9, 100	1,000	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL workforce	Title II, State Family Literacy	Responder
	<b>Program B</b>	12, 35, 10	1,000	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, Workplace, Workforce, Welfare-to-work, Certified nursing asst. training	Federal and state literacy, Labor and industry, Welfare, Private companies	Reinventor/ Responder
	<b>Program C</b>	0–10, 94	185	Literacy, ESOL	Federal and state, Foundations, Individual donors	Responder?
	<b>Program D</b>	2, 8, 75	160	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL	State and federal, County	Responder
<b>State 6</b>	<b>Program A</b>	3, 8	550	Literacy, GED, ESOL, Workforce	Federal and state	Reinventor/ Responder
	<b>Program B</b>	3, 6	575	GED, Skills review for college entrance, and Vo-tech, ESL, TANF	Federal and state	Responder
	<b>Program C</b>	9, 45, 10	1,550	Literacy, GED, Family Literacy, ESOL, Workplace, Workforce, External diploma	Federal and state, Various grants	Reinventor/ Responder
	<b>Program D</b>	1, 6, 1	508	Literacy, GED, Testing center, Workforce	State and federal	Responder





National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

### **NCSALL's Mission**

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) provides information used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, and adult secondary education. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research in four areas: learner motivation, classroom practice and the teaching/learning interaction, staff development, and assessment.

NCSALL conducts basic and applied research; builds partnerships between researchers and practitioners; disseminates research and best practices to practitioners, scholars, and policymakers; and works with the field of adult literacy education to develop a comprehensive research agenda.

NCSALL is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, Rutgers University, Portland State University in Oregon, and the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. NCSALL is primarily funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

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