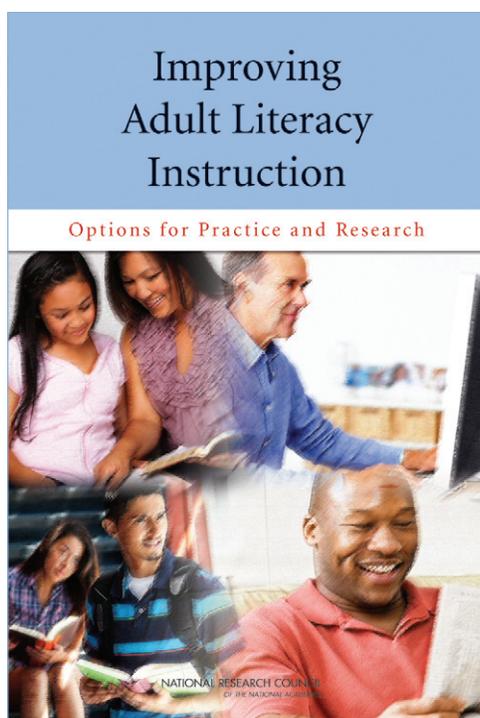# IMPROVING ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION:

OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

More than 90 million adults in the United States lack the literacy needed to have fully productive and secure lives, according to the most recent survey estimate. The effects of this shortfall are many: Adults with low literacy have lower rates of participation in the labor force and lower earnings when they do have jobs. They are also less able to understand and use health information, and they are less likely to read to their children.

At the request of the U.S. Department of Education, the National Research Council convened a committee of experts from many disciplines to synthesize research on literacy and learning in order to improve literacy instruction for adults in the U.S. Although little rigorous research has been conducted on effective literacy instruction for adults, the committee concluded that other research – on literacy instruction for children and youth, general principles of learning, and teaching spoken language – can guide the development of adult instruction. Studies are needed, however, to determine how these principles can best be applied with adult learners.

The committee's report, *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction*, recommends sustained and systematic research to identify promising instructional methods and to develop and test approaches that could be implemented on a wide scale. Studies are also needed to determine what practices work best with particular groups of learners – those learning English as a second language, for example, and those with learning disabilities. The results of such research can help inform federal, state, and local decisions about how best to support adult learners and improve the nation's literacy overall.

RESEARCH FOR IMPROVING PRACTICE

Improving adult literacy instruction will require a range of studies, from basic research on adult learners and their needs to studies on how best to scale up approaches that prove effective in small-scale trials.

Priority areas for research include:

Instructional approaches and materials. Research is needed to develop and evaluate approaches and materials that apply principles of effective instruction and foster the literacy skills adults need for education, work, and social and civic participation.

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Supports for persistence. As with learning other skills, becoming literate requires thousands of hours of practice. Many adults drop out of instruction before making enough progress toward their literacy goals. Research is vital to identify the practices, program components, policies, and systemic factors – for example, the availability of child care – that could help adults persist in their studies and reduce the currently high rates of attrition in adult literacy programs.

Technologies for learning. Finding effective ways to use technology for literacy development is important for several reasons. Technologies can free busy adults from needing to be in a specific learning location. Technologies can also enable instruction to be implemented consistently across settings that may be geographically distant but serve similar populations, and across instructors who have uneven preparation to teach literacy. Although technology does not by itself produce learning, it can amplify and extend effective instructional strategies.

Specific literacy skills needed in today's society. The skills needed to reach educational or career milestones must be identified, including the skills associated with collaborative work and modern communications media. This information would allow learners' progress to be assessed based on the abilities adults need rather than using traditional measures, which have assessed skills too narrowly, based on research with young children.

Characteristics of adult literacy learners. Research is needed to better understand the capabilities, needs, and characteristics (cognitive, language, neurological, cultural, and social) of the widely varying subgroups of adults with low literacy skills. Such research would provide a stronger basis for designing instructional approaches and materials to meet the needs of different subgroups.

> Higher literacy levels are required of the U.S. population in the 21st century for economic security and all other aspects of daily life: education, health, parenting, social interaction, personal growth, and civic participation.

Influences on literacy throughout the lifespan. A better understanding is needed of the ways in which various forces – cognitive, linguistic, social, cultural, instructional, and systemic – affect typical and atypical literacy development from childhood through adulthood. This knowledge could be used to develop approaches that better target the specific challenges that face adult learners.

Assessment of learners and instructional environments. A valid, comprehensive system of assessment is needed to evaluate the progress of adult learners. The information generated should be useful for learners, instructors, program administrators, and policymakers.

Research in all of these areas will require training and

Developing Instructional Approaches and Materials

Research priorities include:

- developing a coherent system of learning activities, teaching practices, texts, and tools that are linked to the particular needs of adult learners;
- discovering how to build literacy instruction that connects with the personal interests of adult learners and delivers the content knowledge they need; and
- examining the extent to which reading, writing, and spoken language skills can be developed as part of fostering skills in demand in 21st century social, work, and educational contexts.

Motivating Adults to Persist

Research priorities include:

- identifying the most effective strategies for supporting persistence depending on the factors affecting the learner's engagement, which may include issues related to work, family, health, age, and culture;
- evaluating how the texts and tasks learners encounter affect their motivation to persist;
- identifying practices and technologies that could improve motivation and the best ways to introduce them and support their use; and
- understanding the circumstances and incentives that affect decisions to enroll and persist in literacy courses.

Identifying Effective Uses of Technologies

Research priorities include:

- identifying instructional practices that could be enhanced by technology. Many specific uses of technology have been shown to be effective in small, controlled studies and now need to be evaluated in larger populations and diverse settings;
- testing new and evolving technologies; and
- clarifying which subpopulations could benefit from particular technologies.

Supporting Adults Learning English as a Second Language

Research priorities include:

- identifying effective practices for different groups of these learners, who vary in first-language skills, education levels, and reasons for learning English;
- examining the relationship between an adult's skill in his or her first language and the development of spoken and written English skills, and opportunities for transferring skills; and
- determining the relative emphasis to place on grammatical instruction and the use of language to communicate for specific purposes, depending on the assessed needs of the learner.

ongoing support for instructors as approaches are developed and evaluated. To ensure that investments are made on the right scale, this research should be undertaken in a sequence: exploration and innovation, followed by testing for efficacy, and then scaling up. Assessments should be developed on an ongoing basis.

UNDERSTANDING WHETHER U.S. LITERACY IS IMPROVING

Policymakers need better information to improve adult literacy in the U.S. and to know which investments are resulting in a more literate society – information not provided by the accountability tools currently used at the federal level. Approaches to measurement should be modified to better track learners' progress in the components of reading and writing and their ability to perform the literacy tasks required and valued in work and community life.

Information should also be gathered on current instructional practices and materials in order to help policymakers better track existing practices, plan appropriate professional development for instructors, and better match instruction to the literacy skills adults need for work, education, health, and functioning in society. It is also important to collect data on how well adults are meeting their personal literacy goals. Data in these areas should be gathered and analyzed on a continuing, long-term basis.

LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP

Substantial national leadership will be needed from the U.S. departments of Education and Labor, as well as other sponsoring research agencies, to implement this research agenda and to sustain investment and strategic direction through periods of uncertainty in the U.S. economy. The nature of the work to be done will require partnerships among researchers, curriculum developers, and administrators across the systems that serve adult learners. Enlisting business leaders and community groups is also important.

COMMITTEE ON LEARNING SCIENCES: FOUNDATIONS AND APPLICATIONS TO ADOLESCENT AND ADULT LITERACY

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