

Taking Limited English Proficient Adults into Account in the Federal Adult Education Funding Formula

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Introduction

Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998¹ is the main federal funding source for adult education, literacy, and English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction in the United States. As part of the long-expected reauthorization of the legislation, Congress is considering changes to the formula for distributing funding across the states. Currently, the funding formula is based only on the number of individuals in a state with less than a high school degree or its equivalent. Thus, even though all adults with limited English proficiency (LEP)² are eligible for WIA Title II programs, the funding formula does not include LEP adults with a high school degree or more. The formula also does not provide a weight for the more intensive instruction that less-educated LEP adults may require.

To better inform the policy debate about how the funding formula for WIA Title II should be determined, this paper addresses the following questions:

- How large is the LEP adult population in the United States, and how does it compare with the size of the population without a high school education?
- How many LEP adults in the United States are omitted from the current funding formula because they have at least a high school education?
- How many LEP adults in the United States might be *underweighted* in the current formula because they need both ESL and basic education services?
- What level of English proficiency do better-educated LEP adults have, and how might their level of proficiency affect the type of ESL instruction they should receive?
- How are better-educated LEP adults distributed across the states, and how should their distribution be incorporated into the formula for allocating WIA Title II funding to the states?

Background on WIA Title II Purposes, Eligibility, and Funding

LEP adults are one of the key service populations of WIA Title II programs, whose goals are to:

- increase the basic reading, writing, speaking, and math skills necessary for adults to obtain employment and self-sufficiency and to successfully advance in the workforce;
- assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education (or its equivalent) and the transition to a postsecondary educational institution;
- increase the basic reading, writing, speaking, and math skills of parents to enable them to support the educational development of their children and make informed choices regarding their children's education; and

¹ Pub. L. 105-200. Title II is also referred to as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act.

² Using the conventional Census Bureau definition, Limited English Proficient adults are those who speak a language other than English at home and who do not speak English very well.

- assist immigrants who are not proficient in English in improving their reading, writing, speaking, and math skills and acquiring an understanding of the American free enterprise system, individual freedom, and the responsibilities of citizenship.³

Adults age 16 and older who are not enrolled in secondary school are eligible for WIA Title II programs if they:

- lack the basic reading, writing, speaking, or math skills necessary to function in society;
- do not have a high school degree or its recognized equivalent; or
- are unable to read, write, or speak English.⁴

As mentioned, the distribution formula for Title II funding is based only on the number of adults in a state who have less than a high school education — omitting from the formula the 11.2 million LEP adults age 16 and older with at least a high school education despite the fact that they are eligible for Title II programs. Additionally, the formula appears to underweight less-educated LEP adults, who may cost more to serve because they require both basic education and ESL services. Congress appropriated \$554 million for WIA Title II adult education services annually in fiscal years 2008 and 2009.⁵

It appears that at least in some of the largest states, LEP adults with at least a high school education constitute a significant share of WIA enrollees. In fact, nearly one-third (31 percent) of WIA Title II enrollees in California in 2002-2003, the most recent period for which data are publicly available, had a high school or more education.⁶ Moreover, there is substantial unmet demand for ESL services across the country. Most ESL programs have waiting lists with thousands of LEP adults in major cities like New York, Boston, and Chicago.⁷

Approach

MPI's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy examined pooled samples of the American Community Survey Public Use Microdata Samples (ACS PUMS) from 2005 to 2007. Together these three years of ACS PUMS represent a 3 percent sample of the US population.

In the tables below, we array data for adults age 16 and older by their:

- Educational attainment (high school or more versus less than high school),
- English proficiency, and
- State of residence.

³ Pub. L. 105-200, Title II, Sec. 202. "Purpose."

⁴ Pub. L. 105-200, Title II, Sec. 203. "Definitions."

⁵ US Department of Education, Department Of Education Fiscal Year 2010 President's Request. Available at: <http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget10/summary/appendix4.pdf>.

⁶ Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems (CASAS), *DynaReports*, Total California WIA Title II Enrollment by Highest Degree Earned and Provider Type, 2002-2003. Available at: <https://www.casas.org/dynareps/index.cfm?fuseaction=reports.home>.

⁷ James Thomas Tucker, *The ESL Logjam: Waiting Times for Adult ESL Classes and the Impact on English Learners* (Los Angeles: National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund, 2006).

The ACS educational attainment measure is based on self-reported years of schooling completed. ACS does not record whether schooling was obtained in the United States or another country.

Following US Census Bureau conventions, English proficient adults are those who reported speaking English as their primary language at home, or who spoke another language at home but also spoke English “very well.” LEP adults are those who reported speaking another language at home and spoke English “well,” “not well,” or “not at all.”

Key Findings

The English proficiency and educational attainment of US adults. In 2005-2007, there were 21.6 million LEP adults and 43.8 million adults without a high school education in the United States.

The educational attainment of LEP adults. In 2005-2007, just over half (52 percent) of LEP adults age 16 and older had at least a high school education. There were 11.2 million LEP adults with at least a high school education⁸ and 10.3 million with less than a high school education.

On the other hand, LEP adults represented a much larger share of the total adult population with less than a high school degree than of the total adult population with a high school degree or higher: 24 percent versus only 6 percent. This means that there remains a significant overlap between Title II’s two main service populations: LEP adults and those without a high school education.

Variation in English proficiency levels of LEP adults by educational attainment. LEP adults with at least a high school education report higher levels of English proficiency than those with less than a high school education. In 2005-2007, just over a quarter (28 percent) of LEP adults age 16 and older with less than a high school education spoke English “well” versus over half (56 percent) of LEP adults with at least a high school education. (The remainder spoke English “not well” or “not at all.”) These findings suggest that better-educated LEP adults may need less instruction to achieve English proficiency than LEP adults without a high school education.

Distribution of LEP adults across the states. When we look at the distribution of LEP adults across the 10 states with the largest LEP populations, there are more LEP adults with a high school education than without in most large states (see Table 1. Totals for all states can be found in the Appendix.).

⁸ This number includes adults who received their high school degrees in the United States, as well as those who received them in other countries. It is difficult to estimate accurately the number of LEP adults who are immigrants and received their degrees abroad, but our best estimate is that in 2005-07 about 7.7 million LEP adults (or 69 percent) received their high school degrees abroad, based on the fact that they were immigrants, had high school degrees, and had entered the United States after age 20.

Table 1. Ten States with Largest Populations of LEP Adults Age 16 and Older by Educational Attainment, 2005-2007 Averaged (in thousands)

Top ten states	Total number of LEP adults	LEP adults with high school or more education	LEP adults without a high school education	Percent of LEP adults with high school or more
California	6,021	2,855	3,166	47
Texas	2,717	1,062	1,655	39
New York	2,143	1,259	884	59
Florida	1,826	1,123	703	62
Illinois	1,046	592	454	57
New Jersey	877	552	325	63
Arizona	605	264	341	44
Massachusetts	445	294	194	66
Georgia	488	241	204	49
Washington	408	233	175	57

Source: MPI analysis of American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Samples, 2005-2007 (pooled).

There is a regional pattern to the educational attainment of LEP adults, with those who are less educated being more heavily concentrated in the Southwest, notably California, Texas, and Arizona. Those with at least a high school education are more concentrated in the Northeast (New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts), Florida, Illinois, and Washington state (see Appendix for all states). This regional pattern is likely attributable to the fact that the Southwestern states tend to have relatively large shares of immigrants from Mexico and Central America with low educational attainment. In order to assess the potential impact of taking these patterns into consideration in the Title II funding formula, we display the distributions of LEP adults with and without a high school education for the largest states in Table 2 and for all states in the Appendix.

Table 2. Shares of All LEP Adults Age 16 and Older in the Ten States with Largest LEP Populations by Educational Attainment, 2005-2007 Averaged

Top ten states	State share of LEP adults With high school or more	State share of LEP adults without high school
California	25.4	30.7
New York	11.2	8.6
Florida	10.0	6.8
Texas	9.5	16.0
Illinois	5.3	4.4
New Jersey	4.9	3.2
Massachusetts	2.6	1.9
Arizona	2.3	3.3
Georgia	2.1	2.0
Washington	2.1	1.7

Note: We present the share of LEP adults that is **lower** — whether it is those with high school or more, or those without high school — in bolded italics.

Source: MPI analysis of American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Samples, 2005-2007 (pooled).

Policy Implications

WIA Title II is the main federal funding source for adult ESL programs, and it is important that these programs — which help large numbers of individuals to succeed in their roles as parents, workers, and community members — receive funding that reflects the size, distribution, and needs of their service populations. Currently, LEP individuals both with and without a high school education are eligible for services under WIA Title II. Yet, the current funding formula is driven only by the number of adults in each state with less than a high school education. The current formula may be adequate for English proficient adults who need only basic education services, but may underweight LEP adults who need more intensive, and presumably more costly, instruction in *both* English language and basic education courses. At the same time, LEP adults with at least a high school education are not counted in the formula at all. Thus states with large LEP populations — whether well-educated or not — may be shortchanged by the current formula.⁹

Many LEP adults have low levels of English proficiency and limited formal schooling. In order for less-educated LEP adults and their children to integrate successfully into the US economic and social mainstream, these adults will need to develop not only their English language skills (skills that their US-born counterparts already possess), but also basic reading and writing skills along with the background knowledge normally acquired through schooling. Without these basic skills they will have a difficult time making the transition to college, GED classes, or vocational programs. Many LEP adults need additional classes or hours of instruction beyond those typically offered in conventional ESL programs.¹⁰ Meeting these needs may increase the work of Title II programs that

⁹ We should note that the current formula also does not take into account low literate adults with a high school degree. However, this group cannot be measured using the ACS or other Census data at the state level making it difficult to include them in the formula.

¹⁰ The Centre for Literacy of Quebec, *ESL and Literacy: Finding Common Ground, Serving Learners' Needs* (Montreal: The Centre for Literacy of Quebec, 2008); Margie McHugh, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Fix, *Adult English Language Instruction in the United States: Determining Need and Investing Wisely* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2007); and Heide Spruck Wrigley, “Beyond the Life Boat: Improving Language, Citizenship, and Training Services for Immigrants and Refugees” in *Toward Defining and Improving Quality in Adult Basic Education*, ed. Alisa Belzer (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007).

serve less-educated LEP students, leading to greater cost for states with large numbers of adults in this group.

In the case of highly skilled immigrants, the provision of ESL instruction is not just of academic concern, as bettering their English skills could increase their productivity, incomes, and contributions to the US economy. In fact, many highly skilled immigrants are underemployed and their talents underutilized in the US workforce. In 2005, more than 1.3 million college-educated immigrants (or one out of every five) were unemployed or working in unskilled jobs such as dishwashers, security guards, and taxi drivers.¹¹ Almost half (44 percent) of recent Latin American immigrants with a college degree or higher worked in unskilled jobs; even a third (35 percent) of longer-term Latin American immigrants who were highly skilled were similarly underemployed.¹² Limited English language skills were a major contributing factor to their underemployment.

The numbers arrayed here provide the basis for calculating the impact that changing WIA's Title II formula would have if it weighted more heavily the 10.3 million LEP adults with less than a high school education and included the 11.2 million LEP adults with at least a high school education.

If the state funding formula were changed to give additional weight to less-educated LEP adults who need both basic education and ESL services, a determination would need to be made of the extent to which basic education needs of all LEP students or those with particular educational profiles are met through their ESL classes. Changing the formula to recognize the dual nature of this population's needs — especially in the absence of additional funding — would raise important issues in the reauthorization debate. These include whether or not states should be held harmless at their current levels of Title II funding and whether they should be required to maintain their current levels of effort through state funding matches.

If LEP adults with a high school degree or higher were to be factored into the formula, a similar set of issues would need to be addressed. For example, if they were to be simply added to the base number of individuals that drives the WIA Title II formula, our analysis presents an apparent tradeoff — between allowing the formula to continue to concentrate funding on the least-educated LEP adults (in the Southwest) versus better compensating states (e.g. those in the Northeast) that disproportionately serve better-educated LEP adults.

One argument for increasing funding for LEP adults with more formal schooling is the comparatively high return on investment of providing language instruction to better-educated learners. If instruction were properly differentiated, helping better-educated adults learn English should be relatively less expensive since they start at higher levels of literacy and often of English proficiency as well.¹³ However, precisely because providers may find it more attractive to work with better-educated populations, appropriate provisions should be made to ensure that the ESL and basic education needs of less-educated LEP students are also met.

Finally, changes in the WIA Title II funding formula — and presumably level — that take into account the instructional needs of less-educated LEP adults and/or the number of better-educated LEP adults should be leveraged for substantial gains in the scale, quality, and appropriateness of

¹¹ Jeanne Batalova and Michael Fix, *Uneven Progress: The Employment Pathways of Skilled Immigrants in the United States* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2008).

¹² “Recent immigrants” were defined by the study as those who had been in the US for less than ten years.

¹³ Heide Spruck Wrigley, Elise Richer, Karin Martinson, Hitomi Kubo, and Julie Strawn, *Expanding Employment Prospects for Adults with Limited English Skills* (Washington, DC: Center on Law and Social Policy, 2003).

instruction available to LEP adults. Strategies to address current weaknesses in the service system — such as long waiting lists for classes, the lack of integrated language and job skills instruction, inconsistent teacher and curriculum quality, the lack of differentiated instruction geared to students' educational backgrounds, and the limited use of distance and other learning technologies — could be targets of incentives and accountability measures implemented under a revised formula.¹⁴ The reauthorization of WIA represents an opportunity to revisit both the funding formula and some of these other issues during a time of economic downturn, when federal support for workforce preparation is more critical than ever.

¹⁴ Forrest P. Chisman and JoAnn Crandall, *Passing the Torch: Strategies for Innovation in Community College ESL* (New York: Council for the Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2007); McHugh, Gelatt, and Fix 2007; National Commission on Adult Literacy, *Dare to Dream* (New York: Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2007); Tucker 2006; and Wrigley et al, 2003.

Appendix

Table 3. Educational Attainment of LEP Adults Age 16 and Older, 2005-2007

	Total number of LEP adults	LEP adults with high school or more	LEP adults without high school	Percent of LEP adults with high school or more	State share of LEP adults with high school or more	State share of LEP adults without high school
United States	21,551	11,235	10,316	52	100.0	100.0
Alabama	70	40	30	57	0.4	0.3
Alaska	30	19	11	63	0.2	0.1
Arizona	605	264	341	44	2.3	3.3
Arkansas	69	31	38	45	0.3	0.4
California	6,021	2,855	3,166	47	25.4	30.7
Colorado	295	141	154	48	1.3	1.5
Connecticut	234	145	89	62	1.3	0.9
Delaware	31	16	15	52	0.1	0.1
District of Columbia	27	15	12	56	0.1	0.1
Florida	1,826	1,123	703	62	10.0	6.8
Georgia	445	241	204	54	2.1	2.0
Hawaii	124	82	42	66	0.7	0.4
Idaho	49	19	30	39	0.2	0.3
Illinois	1,046	592	454	57	5.3	4.4
Indiana	153	81	72	53	0.7	0.7
Iowa	64	32	32	50	0.3	0.3
Kansas	97	47	50	48	0.4	0.5
Kentucky	59	36	23	61	0.3	0.2
Louisiana	96	56	40	58	0.5	0.4
Maine	20	12	8	60	0.1	0.1
Maryland	281	183	98	65	1.6	0.9
Massachusetts	488	294	194	60	2.6	1.9
Michigan	287	171	116	60	1.5	1.1
Minnesota	166	93	73	56	0.8	0.7
Mississippi	35	18	17	51	0.2	0.2
Missouri	99	60	39	61	0.5	0.4
Montana*	6	4	2	67	0.0	0.0
Nebraska	64	28	36	44	0.2	0.3
Nevada	261	126	135	48	1.1	1.3
New Hampshire	27	19	8	70	0.2	0.1
New Jersey	877	552	325	63	4.9	3.2
New Mexico	168	70	98	42	0.6	0.9
New York	2,143	1,259	884	59	11.2	8.6
North Carolina	333	156	177	47	1.4	1.7
North Dakota	8	5	3	63	0.0	0.0
Ohio	200	128	72	64	1.1	0.7
Oklahoma	110	55	55	50	0.5	0.5
Oregon	202	97	105	48	0.9	1.0
Pennsylvania	365	220	145	60	2.0	1.4
Rhode Island	82	40	42	49	0.4	0.4
South Carolina	99	55	44	56	0.5	0.4
South Dakota	13	6	7	46	0.1	0.1
Tennessee	121	67	54	55	0.6	0.5
Texas	2,717	1,062	1,655	39	9.5	16.0
Utah	121	69	52	57	0.6	0.5
Vermont*	6	4	2	67	0.0	0.0
Virginia	352	231	121	66	2.1	1.2
Washington	408	233	175	57	2.1	1.7
West Virginia	10	8	2	80	0.1	0.0
Wisconsin	137	73	64	53	0.6	0.6
Wyoming	7	4	3	57	0.0	0.0

Source: MPI analysis of American Community Survey, Public Use Microdata Samples, 2005-2007 (pooled).

*Results for Montana and Vermont are not valid due to inadequate sample sizes.

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