

# National Coalition for Literacy

## 2024 Year in Review

Literacy *matters* because it brings students into a life-long community of learning that links people across borders. Literacy matters because it engage citizens in meaningful ways to participate in building a society and government of their choosing. Literacy matters because in a world with a widening gap between connected and unconnected, reading and writing and its partner, critical thinking, allow young and old to engage on equal footing.

Carrie Lewis  
*Senior Technical Advisor*  
EDC

These words provide a powerful statement of the perspective that has motivated the National Coalition for Literacy since its founding in 1983. As an alliance of the leading national and regional organizations dedicated to advancing adult literacy, numeracy, and digital skills throughout the United States, NCL works to identify, track, and address the effects of educational inequity on members of underserved and marginalized communities and to promote adults' access to and successful engagement in education, workforce participation, and community life.

Through its advocacy and awareness building activities, NCL serves as an authoritative resource on the need for and value of adult education and ensures that policymakers and legislators make informed decisions about policies, regulations, and funding that will secure NCL's vision of a nation in which all adults are able to fulfill their potential and meet their goals through access to high quality adult education provided by an integrated system.

NCL's approach to advocacy and awareness building recognizes that adult literacy is a pivotal factor in the larger set of conditions that present obstacles to many adults' full participation as individuals, family members, and contributors to the larger community. For this reason, NCL takes a collaborative stance that connects it with organizations within the field of adult education and across the wider spectrum of agencies that address the needs of underserved populations.

Here are some highlights of NCL's collaborative advocacy and awareness activities in 2024.

### **National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week**

This annual observance in the third week of September each year allows adult education programs, libraries, and regional and national organizations to elevate adult education and family literacy nationwide with policymakers, the media, and the community. NCL's 2024 sponsorship of AEFL Week began with securing resolutions in the Senate and the House that recognized September 15-21 as AEFL Week 2024. NCL also provided advocacy resources to the field through its website; participated in a COABE advocacy podcast with host Jeffrey Abramowitz on September 20; and collaborated with other members of the ALL IN Coordinating Council to provide information on the outcomes of ALL IN's research on employer and policy maker awareness of adult literacy issues through social media. In 2025, National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week will be observed from September 14 to September 20.

### **Federal Appropriations for Adult Education and Family Literacy**

In May 2024, as Congress was considering action on the federal budget for 2025, NCL submitted public witness testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, and the House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, urging robust funding in the FY 2025 budget for the activities carried out under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II of WIOA). NCL's testimony stated in part:

The adult education programs that federal AEFLA funding supports are critical elements of the overall federal investment in workforce and life skills development for U.S. adults, contributing to the strength and resilience of every community. These programs give participating adults opportunities to develop the literacy, numeracy, digital, English language, and employability skills they need to obtain and retain employment, ensure the health and financial security of their families, pursue further training and career opportunities, and contribute in positive ways to the life of their community. Support for adult education is an investment that returns far more than it costs.

The full public witness testimony as submitted to each committee is available at <https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/research/ncl-communications-and-comments/>.

### **Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**

Both the House Committee on Education and the Workforce and the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) made progress on WIOA reauthorization in 2024. In the House, the bipartisan **A Stronger Workforce for America Act** (H.R. 6655), introduced by Chair Virginia Foxx (R-NC-05) and Ranking Member Bobby Scott (D-VA-03), was passed on April 9, 2024. Staff from House Ed-Workforce and Senate HELP then worked through the summer and early fall to reconcile that bill with the one circulating in the Senate.

Throughout this process, as it had in 2023, NCL provided suggestions to committee staff on potential revisions to the text of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act WIOA Title II). In late June Senate HELP Committee staff released a draft of proposed amendments to the legislation with a request for feedback. NCL submitted its feedback in the first week of July. The full document with NCL's input is available at <https://nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org/research/ncl-communications-and-comments/>

NCL's input reiterated key points that NCL and its member organizations have made consistently over time regarding ways to increase the effectiveness of the AEFLA legislation:

- Recognize the centrality of adult basic education to the success of workforce training and economic mobility efforts
- Amend deficit-based language that leads to deficit-based programming
- Include digital skills along with literacy and numeracy in the legislation's list of basic skill types
- Reorient adult basic education accountability and outcomes reporting toward a competency-based approach
- Provide support for remote instruction models and the use of technology in adult education

Thanks to the advocacy efforts of NCL and its colleague organizations, each of these recommendations was included in the reconciled version of H.R. 6655 that emerged in late fall.

In an attempt to achieve passage of the reconciled bill in 2024, Congressional staff attached it to the must-pass legislation for a continuing resolution (CR) that Congress acted upon just before the December recess. However, along with several other bills that were not directly related to the overall annual federal budget, H.R. 6655 was removed just before passage of the CR on December 20, 2024, so it was not passed.

Congressional staff have informed NCL that they plan to work toward reintroduction and passage of the A Stronger Workforce for America Act early in the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress.

### **Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE)**

Along with COABE and the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education (NASDAE), NCL participated in a series of invitation-only quarterly information-gathering sessions with Assistant Secretary Amy Loyd and senior OCTAE staff during the year. Each of these interactions allowed NCL and its colleague organizations to update OCTAE on developments and activities in the field and maintain strong collaborative relationships with our federal partners.

In addition, Dr. Loyd and OCTAE senior staff participated in the spring and fall NCL members meetings. They provided updates on current and planned OCTAE activities and an analysis of National Reporting System (NRS) data for WIOA Program Year 7 (2022-2023, the most recent data available). The analysis showed both an increase in program participants served to 1.1 million in PY 2022-23 and substantial increases in measurable skill gains (MSG) outcomes. The

percentage showing MSG growth in PY 2022-23 nearly matched the level in PY 2018-19, before the substantial dip that took place during the pandemic years.

### **Digital Equity Champions for All Learners**

In 2023, in anticipation of the release of the Digital Equity Competitive Grant Program by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in mid-2024, NCL became a participant in a collaborative effort focused on preparing adult education leaders to take advantage of this opportunity. Led by the Education Department's Office of Educational Technology, the **Digital Equity & Adult Education** group developed a series of two webinars designed and coordinated by World Education. The webinars took place in January-February 2024, followed by a free pre-conference workshop at the 2024 COABE National Conference in March. NCL continued to participate in meetings of the Digital Equity & Adult Education group until the group was disbanded in April 2024. The Digital Equity grants will fund the implementation of collaborative digital equity projects for the next five years.

### **Ability to Benefit (ATB)**

In the late spring of 2023, the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) within the Department of Education issued proposed rules on several aspects of postsecondary education, including Ability to Benefit. Through AtB, Title IV of the Higher Education Act provides a way for adults who are participating in an eligible career pathway program (ECPP) but do not have a high school diploma or recognized equivalent to receive Pell grant funding administered by the Office of Federal Student Aid (FSA). NCL submitted comments on the proposed rules in 2023.

In January 2024 NCL and colleague organizations received an informal request for input on the technical assistance needs associated with the new regulations. The request specifically mentioned "the issues are that are common in colleges and states using or wanting to begin to use AtB." In its response, NCL noted a new requirement for approval of Eligible Career Pathway Programs in the new regulations, and stated:

The most common challenge that NCL has heard has to do with coordination among the partners involved. In some cases the issue is a disconnect within institutions of higher education, where eligible career pathway options are available, but financial aid officers do not understand that AtB makes those options accessible to learners who do not have a high school diploma or recognized equivalent. In other cases, career technical education departments have certificate programs that could qualify as eligible career pathway programs, but do not have effective ways of coordinating with local adult education providers to provide the access to high school equivalency options that would open those certificate programs to AtB-eligible learners... NCL is concerned that the new requirement...will exacerbate [these disconnects] by making implementation of AtB seem more cumbersome than it actually is.

NCL provided suggestions for ways that guidance on the new regulations could mitigate this potential problem.

## Civil and Human Rights

Throughout the year, NCL continued its collaboration with the **Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights** as the Hub for adult education, providing perspectives on the ways that limited literacy, numeracy, and digital skills relate to civil and human rights.

- In May, NCL signed on to a letter developed by the Leadership Conference outlining opposition to H.R. 7109, the Equal Representation Act, which would require the Census to ask about citizenship status, and then would exclude all noncitizens from the apportionment base (census state population totals). NCL concurs with the Leadership Conference's position that the proposed law would contradict the requirement of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment that apportionment be based on a count of "persons."
- NCL worked with the Conference-led **Census Coalition** on early planning for the 2025 American Community Survey (ACS) and the 2030 Decennial Census. NCL's input included observations on the roles of reading proficiency and digital access in survey understanding and completion, and stressed the efficacy of working with adult education partners to reach the hard-to-reach populations whose participation levels challenge the Census Bureau at each Census iteration. NCL also signed on to two Census Coalition letters: one advocating full funding for the Census Bureau in fiscal 2024, and the other opposing the Bureau's plan to change the ACS question about disabilities in a way that could dramatically reduce the count of persons with disabilities. In the latter case, NCL drew on its understanding of the roles of dyslexia and other text-processing challenges in limiting adults' reading proficiency.
- Through the Leadership Conference, NCL connected with **NDD United** and signed on to two letters to Congressional leaders (January and June) encouraging Congress to align with the non-defense discretionary (NDD) spending level set in the Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2023 as it moves forward with the appropriations processes for fiscal 2024 and 2025.

## Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN)

ALL IN is a national collective impact initiative focused on promoting strategies and initiatives that will give all adults the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills required for full access to individual and collective empowerment. As a member of the ALL IN Coordinating Council, during 2024 NCL played a key role in ongoing planning for ALL IN's Priority 1: Awareness Campaign. This activity included participating in a summer-long initiative to share the results of recent ALL IN-sponsored research on adult literacy perspectives with policy makers and employers (<https://allinliteracy.org/reports/>). Through this structured campaign, NCL and several of its colleague organizations posted visuals and key messages to social media outlets on a coordinated schedule. As part of its participation, NCL established a new page on LinkedIn ([linkedin.com/nationalcoalitionforliteracy](https://www.linkedin.com/company/nationalcoalitionforliteracy)) as well as using its existing Facebook presence to disseminate the visuals and related content.

## PIAAC

On December 10, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) released the results of the 2023 data collection for the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), also known as the Survey of Adult Skills. The results for the U.S. population ages 16 through 65 showed substantial increases in the percentage of persons with literacy and numeracy skills at lower levels since the previous data collection in 2017.

In anticipation of the data release, NCL and ProLiteracy collaborated to produce a press release on the Survey of Adult Skills and the new data, describing literacy skills at the various levels and promoting the potential of adult foundational education to change the skills trajectory. The goal of the release was to address the data outcomes directly and affirm the power and importance of adult foundational education. The press release went out on December 11.

A copy of the press release is attached at the end of this document. For more information about the new PIAAC survey data, visit [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/2023/national\\_results.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/2023/national_results.asp).

## **Leadership Change**

As of September 30, 2024, Deborah Kennedy stepped down as NCL executive director and Jeffrey Fantine stepped up.

Fantine is well known in the fields of adult education, workforce development, and higher education as a provider of professional development and technical assistance to states and local programs. His consulting work focuses on the development and implementation of career pathways that improve college and career readiness, and he is also Associate Professor of Adult Education at The Ohio State University. He served previously as State Director of Adult Education for the Maine Department of Education and as Director of the Center for the Study and Development of Literacy and Language at Ohio University.

“We are delighted to welcome Jeff to NCL,” said Eric Nesheim, President of the NCL Board. “His experience and knowledge, combined with his passion for adult education and his ability to ensure operational excellence, will be instrumental in guiding the organization toward continued success and expansion of its advocacy work.”

“I am honored to be chosen by the NCL Board for this pivotal role,” Fantine stated. “I have been interested in expanding my work in the area of advocacy for some time, so this opportunity comes at just the right point in my career. I’m committed to continuing the collaborative and inclusive approach that characterizes NCL as a membership organization, and I look forward to deepening my relationships with the member representatives that I know and developing effective partnerships with those I’ll be meeting soon.”

## **Plans for 2025**

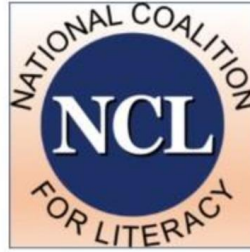
In 2025 NCL will continue its active pursuit of opportunities to promote adult education in policy-related matters. Our work will include the following:

- Acting as a key influencer with policy makers and stakeholders nationwide to broaden adult education’s visibility and messaging about its purpose and contributions to the U.S. education system

- Increasing public awareness of the pivotal role of adult education in ensuring digital access and resilience, promoting inclusive economic growth, and upholding social justice initiatives
- Supporting the development of valid, reliable, and sustainable options for accountability in adult education through interaction with National Reporting System staff at OCTAE and collaboration with colleague organizations with expertise in psychometrics
- Providing a series of activities designed to enhance advocacy efforts, such as using data from results of the 2023 PIAAC and the National Reporting System PY 2023-2024.
- Solidifying organizational sustainability through strategic planning, membership growth, and increased external funding

As always, we will conduct ongoing national public policy advocacy with Congress and keep our members connected with developments on Capitol Hill. NCL member organizations and individual friends will have opportunities to be involved in the national conversation on public policy through NCL's semi-annual meetings, monthly public policy calls, conference panel discussions, and task groups.

For more information on NCL's purpose and activities, visit our website at [www.nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org](http://www.nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org) or email us at [ncl@nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org](mailto:ncl@nationalcoalitionforliteracy.org).



## US Adults Need Stronger Skills to Thrive in a Changing World

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SYRACUSE, N.Y., Dec. 11, 2024 (GLOBE NEWSWIRE) -- Data on adult reading, numeracy, and problem-solving skills in the US and around the world, released Dec. 10, indicates that more US adults have skills at the lowest level than seven years ago. The US could take much better advantage of the adult education opportunities that enable adults to achieve their full potential. When realized, this will lead to a stronger economy, healthier citizens, and thriving educational systems.

The Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) organizes the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), known as the Survey of Adult Skills, roughly every 10 years. Cycle 2 of the survey, conducted in 2022–2023, gauged the literacy, numeracy, and adaptive problem-solving skills of all adults in the US and 30 other countries. Individuals were measured on their ability to apply reading and mathematical knowledge to everyday situations as well as navigate and solve problems requiring multiple steps. The last survey, Cycle 1, was completed in two parts in 2012–2013 and 2017.

The survey evaluates each skill on a scale from Below Level 1 proficiency, representing the lowest skills level, to Level 5, the most advanced level. Proficiency levels reflect the skills a person has for participating in daily life, including careers, health, finances, family well-being, and more.

The PIAAC 2022–23 data show that a greater percentage of American adults (aged 16–65) have skills at Level 1 and below for both literacy and numeracy than in 2017, putting the US further behind the international average than it was seven years ago. The total number of American adults with skills at a Level 1 proficiency or below stands at 28% or 60 million for literacy, up from 19% or 48 million in 2017. For numeracy, 34% or 72 million have skills at Level 1 or below,

up from 29% or 59 million in 2017. Adaptive problem-solving, which was previously not assessed, includes 68 million American adults with skills at Level 1 or below. The US now ranks 16<sup>th</sup> in literacy skills and 25<sup>th</sup> in numeracy skills out of 31 nations.

Individuals with proficiency at these lower levels do not have the same opportunities for full participation in society as those whose proficiency levels are higher. Through adult education programs, adults advance their skill levels. Outcomes data from these programs show that adults improve their employment and life skills.

"People who have literacy and numeracy skills at lower levels often must develop alternative strategies for obtaining and acting on the information they need. When they take advantage of adult education to improve their skills, their self-efficacy increases because they are able to handle such tasks independently," said Jeff Fantine, executive director of the National Coalition for Literacy. "But often these adults are not aware of educational opportunities that are available to them, so we must increase awareness of, expand access to, and build capacity for adult education."

Creating opportunities for those at the lowest proficiency levels to develop their skills to Level 2 would allow them, for example, to find contact information on a company's website, use information from a chart on a medicine bottle to determine the proper dose to give their child, or decide the best way to manage when an unexpected rent increase exceeds their monthly income.

With stronger skills, adults could advance into jobs with higher wages or more confidently participate in elections. They could more easily explain their children's symptoms to a doctor or understand their utility bill and make changes to lower it. Providing such opportunities for individuals would lead to stronger, healthier communities—both economically and physically. And increasing skills would give participating adults a strengthened sense of self-efficacy and confidence.

Yet programs are serving less than 10% of adults who, with literacy services, could more fully realize their potential. Expanding access to adult education opportunities will improve the course our country is on. To expand access, we need to think in new ways about what adult literacy and education mean. Literacy, traditionally thought of as the ability to read, has broadened to mean the ability to use written information to navigate daily activities and live a fulfilling life.

People are not defined or bound by their proficiency level; every person has the ability to grow and learn. Providing opportunities to advance skills for the millions of US adults with skills at the lowest levels would lead to a more skilled workforce. Adults would have greater life satisfaction, better health, and would transition from earning hourly wages in frontline jobs to earning family-sustaining salaries in more advanced knowledge-based positions.

“The economic mobility that comes with higher levels of literacy and numeracy skills is life-changing,” said Mark Vineis, president and CEO of ProLiteracy. “I cannot think of anything more transformative. As a nation, it should be our focus to ensure every American has the same access to quality education, regardless of where they live. This means directing more resources where they're needed most—our poorest communities, often stuck in cycles of low literacy.”

To achieve this goal, we as a country need to expand and fund our current adult education programming and increase access to digital resources adults can use remotely. Employers have a big role to play in expanding learning opportunities in the workplace. And we need to build community partnerships to provide contextualized training at community centers or through social service providers, for example.

When adults have access to educational opportunity, there's a ripple effect of progress that leads from the individual to those around them, to their communities, and to our nation as a whole. We just need to make it happen.