

Special Essay

REFLECTIONS ON THE FORTIETH BIRTHDAY OF THE ADULT EDUCATION ACT OF 1966

Samuel Halperin
Senior Fellow & Founder
American Youth Policy Forum
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In November 1966, the United States took a small, but potentially momentous, legislative step to support a federally aided network of adult education providers under the Adult Education Act of 1966. (Technically, the Act is Title III of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), as amended).

Who would have guessed then that this relatively unheralded act would spur a national network providing education and literacy services to over 2.5 million adult learners annually, including one million 16-24 year-olds, about half of whom study English as a second language?

With hindsight, making sure that adults have a second chance to raise their literacy skills and continue their education beyond high school would seem to be clearly in the public interest. Yet, this obvious no-brainer required no less than a massive realignment of Congressional attitudes, a perceived serious threat to national security, and quite possibly a presidential assassination to turn a simple idea into legislative reality.

The legislative paths to enactment of the Adult Education Act merit reflection in this 40th anniversary year because they demonstrate how extremely malleable, porous, and often quirky is the process of making our laws, and also because it illuminates the many opportunities for advocates who perceive opportunities and know how to seize them to make progress in the public interest.

Here are brief personal memories of those early days, as viewed from my experience as an executive branch “lobbyist” for Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson.*

In the early 1960s, adult educators were barely a presence in the halls of Congress. “None of its advocates,” notes veteran educator Thomas Sticht, “was having much success getting adult education or adult literacy education implemented in federal legislation.”**

Ever since the demands of World War I had revealed how poorly prepared for military service were so many potential recruits — intellectually through very low literacy as well as physically, an Adult Basic Education bill (ABE) had been intermittently introduced in Congress beginning in 1918, and then promptly ignored.

In a Congress long dominated by southern conservatives, “adult basic education” became conflated with efforts by liberals and the growing civil rights movement to teach “Negroes” how to pass the literacy tests that southern states had erected as effective barriers to the exercise of voting rights. (Southerners also noted with suspicion that the U.S. Office of Education’s small adult education branch was headed, and almost exclusively staffed, by a *de facto* segregated staff of distinguished African American educators in a federal agency where Black senior executives were notable mostly by their absence.)

After the defeat of President Kennedy’s education proposals in 1961-62, his Administration devised an omnibus education bill, the National Education Improvement Act of 1963 (NEIA), consisting of 14 parts and incorporating everything from teacher salaries, vocational education, public libraries, student financial aid, higher education construction, and several long-languishing proposals, including adult basic education. Commissioner of Education Francis Keppel, leading the NEIA legislative effort, knew that the entire 14-part package would not survive the church-state hurdles that had doomed earlier Kennedy proposals, but hoped that it might reduce the internecine warfare then prevailing among Washington’s many diverse and fragmented education associations.

Through hard work by House and Senate education committees headed, respectively, by Rep. Adam Clayton Powell and Sen. Wayne Morse, major parts of NEIA advanced in early 1963. But progress soon stalled as House and Senate chairs and various education associations quarreled and checkmated each other.

It took the shock of President Kennedy’s assassination and Lyndon Johnson’s rise to vigorous leadership to open the legislative floodgates. By year’s end, major bills for vocational and higher education were signed into law. Indeed, by the end of 1964, 12 of the less controversial parts of the NEIA had become law.

During that period, too, several developments made it conceivable that adult education, with its anti-poverty focus, could at last get attention on Capitol Hill. In 1963, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Labor, was struck by the fact that among potential draftees under the Selective Service System at least one-third were found unfit for induction due to poor health or mental limitations, that is very low levels of literacy. (Analysts believed that if all 18 year-olds had been examined, fully one-half would be found unfit.). At the urging of Moynihan, Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Defense

Robert McNamara, and General Lewis Hershey of the Selective Service System, President Kennedy ordered a Task Force on Manpower Conservation to develop appropriate plans for federal action. The Task Force report, *One-Third of a Nation*, was delivered to President Johnson on January 1, 1964. The report did not call for immediate legislation, nor is there any evidence that it led to Congressional action. Nevertheless, the critical connections between low literacy, national security, and poverty were given new and high-level visibility in the Nation's Capital. A mood was fast developing that some kind of federal action was long overdue.

Then, in May 1964, President Johnson committed his administration to wage War on Poverty. He directed federal agencies to suggest what they could contribute to the development of what soon became the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and its new federal agency, the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

Assigned as the Department of Health, Education and Welfare's liaison to the OEO legislative task force headed by Adam Yarmolinsky, I argued there that several parts of the still-pending NEIA bill had relevance for any effort to combat poverty, and that such Administration proposals as adult basic education (ABE), libraries and college work study could be appropriately incorporated in the emerging OEO bill.

Future OEO director Sargent Shriver and Yarmolinsky, however, rejected any targeted earmarking of anti-poverty funds, preferring to wield the broadest possible blanket authority to wage war on poverty in all its forms. Moreover, OEO people wanted nothing to do with a state grant program like ABE that would, they argued, be administered by unsympathetic, possibly even racist, state and local officials. Knowing that passage of the OEO bill in the Congress depended on gaining the support of southerners, many of whom saw ABE as a wedge to undercut state literacy voting laws, ABE would have no place in the fast-developing OEO bill.

But legislative possibilities changed dramatically when Congress passed the historic Voting Rights Act of 1964. The power of state literacy tests to thwart voting by Blacks would sharply decline, if not entirely disappear. The mood and tactics among southern lawmakers shifted accordingly. As one leading southern senator said in closed caucus, "If we are going to *have* to let 'them' vote, we had better be sure they can at least read."

In the House of Representatives, responsibility for overseeing the contents of the draft Economic Opportunity bill was assigned to a subcommittee chaired by Carl Perkins, the ranking majority member on the House Education and Labor Committee, who represented an East Kentucky district characterized by high poverty and even higher illiteracy. During a meeting of Committee members and our HEW legislative staff to consider the provisions of the draft OEO bill, I raised with Mr. Perkins the relevance of including HEW's proposals for ABE and college work-study. Mr. Perkins immediately and enthusiastically embraced incorporating both provisions in the OEO bill when it was reported to the House of Representatives for its approval. Despite opposition from OEO to these inclusions, Perkins argued that the added provisions would strengthen support for the overall bill. Thus, when

President Johnson signed the Economic Opportunity Act on August 20, 1964 (Public Law 88-452), its Title IIB, the Adult Basic Education Act, authorized OEO to make grants to state education agencies to advance adult literacy. OEO promptly assigned administration of the two new programs to the U.S. Office of Education.

On March 1, 1966, ABE and the college work-study legislative authorizations were formally transferred from OEO to the Office of Education. These transfers were much less the result of adult educators' lobbying efforts than of OEO's desire to rid itself of an unwelcome burden and, more especially, of the energetic campaign of Edith Green of Oregon, subcommittee chairman for higher education issues on the House Committee on Education and Labor. Mrs. Green, a formidable education leader, was strongly critical of President Johnson's war on poverty and, particularly, of the powers and funds it conferred on the new OEO "super-czar agency" to intervene in the traditional operations of many levels of government, including schools. Amid mounting sharp criticism of OEO's initial ventures in community action and legal services, Mrs. Green met scant resistance to "returning" HEW's original proposals to the U.S. Office of Education.

Thus, forty years ago, the Adult Education Act was born, a small but durable foundation stone on which to build a much-needed adult learning system for the American people.

Today, however, research shows that 93 million Americans over age 16 lack the literacy and skill levels needed to function effectively in a globally competitive, economically challenging world, one characterized by massive in-migration of low-literacy workers. We must question whether a 40 year-old, generally under-funded adult education "system," staffed 80 percent by part-time instructors and often detached from the needs of cutting-edge economic developments, is even faintly adequate to meeting the challenges of the 21st Century.

This is clearly not America's moment to rest on the anniversary laurels of 1966. Rather, we must forge ahead to help our nation's children and adults become the most skilled, the most literate, and the most empowered generations in our national history.

* As Assistant U.S. Commissioner of Education for Legislation and Deputy Assistant Secretary for Legislation in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare during the years 1961-1969.

** Sticht, T. (2002). The Rise of the Adult Education and Literacy System of the United States: 1600-2000, in J. Comings, B. Garner and C. Smith (eds.) Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, vol. 3, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp.10-43.