

AEBG Basic Skills Assessment Field Committee

June 6, 2017 Meeting Notes and Comments

At the first meeting of the Adult Education Block Grant (AEBG) Basic Skills Assessment Field Committee, the group began by reviewing:

- The white paper, “Measuring Student Progress in Basic Skills and ESL” which provided background on the AEBG target population(s) and scope, data and accountability requirements, and alignment with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) performance indicators;
- WIOA Title II and National Reporting System (NRS) requirements for assessment and reporting adult education students in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a second language (ESL);
- information about the community college system common assessment, multiple measures and other approaches for assessing and measuring student skills in ESL, English, and math.

Definition of Basic Skills Programs

Credit Community College Basic Skills Programs

Some of the college committee members expressed concerns about not including credit basic skills in future AEBG reporting. They noted that because colleges were reimbursed at a lower rate for noncredit courses until recently, some had created credit programs that meet the needs of the adult education population. While some programs may be converted to noncredit, other considerations may result in these courses staying on the credit side, such as local compensation agreements that pay faculty at a lower rate for noncredit courses or a philosophical belief that adult learners should begin in a credit context. But other committee members disagreed, so there was no consensus on this topic. For example, they noted that AEBG objectives and target populations do not include transferable credit courses, and that K12 adult schools are not able to provide courses that provide transferrable credit.

Overall, the group noted that there is a lack of clarity about how K12 adult education, noncredit, and credit programs align, and that many consortia are currently working to map overlaps and gaps. The group felt that it would be important to develop a crosswalk that uses NRS levels, the Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) college and career standards, the community colleges CB21 rubric defining levels below college level coursework, and/or grade-level equivalency so that program offerings can be more readily understood. Ideally, this crosswalk would build off of work already done, and would not supersede local articulation agreements, but could help to inform discussions about articulation between adult education and community college noncredit and credit offerings. Having this as a recognized resource came up more than once throughout the day.

Defining Post-Secondary

The group questioned what the official definition of post-secondary should be for the purpose of AEBG reporting. They noted that in community colleges, the lines between noncredit and credit can be blurry based on local curricular decisions, and that many consortia are currently trying to sort this issue out. In

K12 contexts, courses associated with high school diplomas are offered as credit classes, and noncredit CTE classes may be accredited as post-secondary.

This issue also came up when examining the allowable definitions for skills gains under WIOA. The concept of “12 credit hours” sparked the question of whether the federal wording specified that courses must be credit-bearing. They requested that the AEBG leadership provide guidance to the field on: 1) when units and transitions should reference noncredit courses as opposed to credit courses in the context of both basic skills and CTE, and 2) how Carnegie units should be applied in the context of adult education contact hours.

Placement into Programs

In both the K12 and community college contexts, committee members reported that adult education providers use a combination of the participant’s stated goal, transcript/prior educational attainment, testing (including CASAS, TABE, and local instruments), and disability status to determine whether to place them into ABE, ASE, or ESL and at what level.

In the K12 context, the dividing line between ABE and ASE is based on grade-level equivalency, with skills associated with grade 8 or below being ABE, and ASE addressing skills that are 9th-12th grade. Students who participate in ASE are primarily seeking to earn a high school diploma, GED, or high school equivalency, but may also be enrolled for enrichment purposes to develop skills for goals other than certification or credentials. Student scores on tests are key parts of the placement decision; for example, a CASAS score of 236 or higher in reading, mathematics and writing indicates that a student is prepared for ASE content.

In community colleges, ABE and ASE are generally grouped together, and colleges may or may not prepare students for a high school diploma, GED, or high school equivalency. College faculty generally do not use grade equivalencies to discern developmental levels. Instead, they use the CB21 rubric, which is based on skills required for transfer-level coursework. Even with this rubric, specific content varies from college to college.

Given the complexities of discerning the appropriate program designation, it will be very difficult to differentiate between ABE and ASE in the community college context. Future meetings should look more deeply into possible solutions.

Measurable Skills Gains

In both K12 and community college contexts, committee members noted that it is critical to measure all types of skills gains. Given the challenges faced by many adult learners, gains that might be seen as less consequential in other academic contexts may represent significant progress and should be celebrated in both local practice and statewide accountability.

K12 Adult Basic Education/ Adult Secondary Education

In K12 contexts, committee members reported relying on CASAS or other standardized assessments to track measurable skills gains in both ABE and ASE. K-12 providers noted that the way content is delivered varies by site, with some schools offering scaffolded courses between ABE and ASE and some combining ABE and ASE content, which is why using consistent tests and A-G curriculum standards across both ABE and ASE helps to establish equivalencies across institutions.

While gains in ASE students' educational functioning levels (EFL) are reported for Title II funding in the context of a student completing a high school diploma, GED, or high school equivalency, K12 adult education providers track skills gains for their ASE participants in multiple ways, including pre- and post-testing with standardized instruments, tracking student progression across grade levels based on course completion, and documenting scores on subject tests that are part of the GED and high school equivalency process.

Committee members recommended that K12 providers be allowed to report these additional measures of measurable skills gains for AEBG. Some participants also noted that they have experienced difficulties securing information on subject tests or even GED/high school equivalency attainment because tests are often administered by third party providers. Therefore, these K12 institution indicated that they only know about a participant's accomplishments if the information is self-reported or if they have negotiated a data sharing agreement with the provider.

Community College Adult Basic Education/ Adult Secondary Education

In community colleges, the method for measuring skills gains depends on whether they are receiving Title II funding. Title II colleges are required to use a federally-approved test, such as CASAS, just like their Title II K-12 partners. In the case of one Title II-funded college, however, faculty do not use the CASAS test to inform progression within the sequence, as it is not seen as sufficiently aligned with local curricula. The colleges that do not receive Title II funding reported that faculty were not receptive to layering standardized testing over the assessments that were already embedded into their curriculum.

Outside of Title II, community colleges focus on progression within a sequence of courses to measure skills gains. For example, some colleges use grades and "satisfactory progress" designations to indicate a successful course completion (which may be benchmarked to student level outcomes that are embedded within curricula), others use the CB21 rubric, and on some occasions colleges use a local sequence of courses associated with a program of study. College practitioners noted that transition from noncredit to credit is another important benchmark of skills gains.

English as a Second Language

Both K-12 and community college providers reported that they use several types of assessments to determine whether students should progress within a sequence of courses, including CASAS scores, local tests, and teacher observations of a student's non-cognitive skills. One driver for using multiple assessments is the difficulty in examining students' speaking and writing skills with the CASAS test. Another is the desire to track students' mastery of workplace skills. Some practitioners reported that they needed to use other means to evaluate students' proficiency in academic language. One K-12 provider noted that when students test out of ESL in CASAS, there are CDE-approved academic ESL courses within ABE and ASE, and these skills can be measured using CASAS. However, providers reiterated that skills other than reading and writing were embedded into their curriculum, such as the college and career readiness standards, and that mastery was essential for participants to attain their academic and career goals.

The group recommended that guidance be given to norm the process of assessing noncognitive, workplace, and academic skills, to support transition across institutions. One possibility would be to examine the ESL competency maps developed for the Common Assessment Initiative, which included

listening, speaking, and mastery of academic vocabulary, and compare them with the skills that are measured in CASAS across ABE, ASE, and ESL.

In the context of college credit courses, measurable skills gains take the form of a successful course completion as noted in a grade. However, gains in noncredit ESL are not normed across the community college system. For example, some colleges give grades, others note “satisfactory progress,” and many only track contact hours. One college reported using a locally-designed test and student interviews with faculty to determine when they are ready to move up to the next level.

After discussing the emerging practice of “mirroring” in colleges—where the same content is taught in both credit and noncredit contexts (and sometimes in the same classroom) the group requested that the Chancellor’s Office provide guidance about what is allowable for this type of co-mingling, given the complexity of balancing issues such as enrollment levels, course repetition, levels of preparation, expectations for student workload, pressures to “water down” curriculum, access for undocumented students, and articulating noncredit participation with credit pathways.

Both K12 and community college providers indicated that ESL students are often co-enrolled in other program areas, particularly CTE. This might be through a formal integrated education and training (IET) program, or students may elect to participate in multiple programs at the same time to meet their goals. Often, the skills learned in different program areas complement each other and position the student to be more successful in both tracks. Therefore, the group suggested that IET programs be tracked, to make it easier to identify which programs are intentionally blending content across program areas. However, the group did not know if this was best tracked at the student level (such as using the IET flag that is built into TOPSpro Enterprise) or at the program level (by flagging courses that are part of IET programs).

The group also recommended that, in addition to EFLs measured through CASAS, adult education providers should be allowed to track course completion or progression from one program area to another (such as transition from ESL to ABE, ASE, or CTE) as measurable skills gains for AEBG.

Completion

In the context of programs that prepare students for a secondary credential, completion is easily defined (attainment of high school equivalency, a GED, or a high school diploma), but some practitioners face difficulties in documenting these outcomes, particularly when testing is done by a third party. It will be important for the AEBG leadership to ensure that all adult schools have access to data matches from these providers to ensure that all secondary completions are captured.

In other ABE, ASE, and ESL contexts, the definition of completion is shaped by a participant’s goal and the content of the program. Given the strict requirements for developing programs in both K12 and college contexts, committee members recommended that AEBG recognize all certificates of completion that are given by K12 adult education providers and by college programs with career development and college preparation (CDCP) status. Some participants further recommended that a student should be considered a completer if they successfully transition from ESL to ABE or ASE in a K12 institution, or if they complete a degree-applicable English or math course after taking a noncredit ESL, English, or math course in a community college.

The group would like to weigh in further about how transition to post-secondary gets measured, but first needs to know whether noncredit coursework is considered to be post-secondary. They noted that in cases where there is a gap between competencies taught at the adult school and requirements for college credit courses, noncredit coursework would represent an important interim step on a student's journey toward post-secondary education.

The community college representatives also recommended that a new flag be added to the Chancellor's Office MIS system that would indicate students who are eligible for certificates, and that these students should be counted as having completed whether or not they actually receive a college award.

Committee members recommended this change because some students could lose their financial aid if they accepted an award (even if they had not attained their ultimate academic goal). Also, given that students have to petition to receive a certificate or degree, and may not know or not choose to do so, the attainment of the requisite skills would be included in AEBG numbers.