

Adult Education Block Grant Data and Accountability Committee

May 25, 2017 Meeting Notes

At the first meeting of the Adult Education Block Grant (AEBG) Data and Accountability Committee (DAC), the group began by reviewing the content of the white paper, “Legislative and Reporting Foundations for AEBG Data,” which summarizes the requirements, key descriptors, program areas, and target populations of the underlying legislation; provides a review of data collection efforts to date; and offers information on the alignment of AEBG with the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

Minimum Thresholds for Reporting

Having clarified the required measurements based on review of the white paper and subsequent discussion, committee members broke into three small groups to discuss which of these metrics should be tracked for each of the AEBG program areas, and if any additional measures would be important to include for statewide reporting.

Literacy & Basic Skills Measures

The legislation stipulates that the following measure be tracked: “improved literacy skills.”

The group felt that skills gain metrics should be tracked for participants in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a second language (ESL) programs, and that federal definitions for measurable skills gains would be appropriate, particularly given that there are several methodologies that are allowable. The group also suggested that skills gains could be measured differently based on the provider. For example, testing using federally-approved instruments might be most appropriate for K-12 providers and those who receive WIOA Title II federal funding, whereas non-WIOA Title II community colleges might choose to use Carnegie unit attainment.

The group felt that more exploration was needed regarding tracking skills gains for adults with disabilities. For example, they suggested that the state-approved POWER assessment be evaluated for use across AEBG providers. They also needed more information regarding how best to track gains in career and technical education (CTE) programs, particularly given that core skills vary by program and participant type.

The group noted that none of the federally-approved measures evaluate the attainment of life skills, which are important markers for participants’ ultimate success. However, they did not have a recommendation for how best to capture this information. In addition, they proposed that self-reported information could be gathered on skills gains for participants supporting children’s school success. While these two types of measures would not necessarily form the core of accountability reporting, the group felt that having adult education providers capture this information might support program improvement efforts.

Completion & Transition to Post Secondary

The legislation stipulates that the following measures be tracked: “completion of high school diplomas or their recognized equivalents,” “completion of post-secondary certificates, degrees, or training programs. “Transition to post-secondary” is implied throughout the legislation.

The group felt that completion measures should be based on student's goals. This is relatively straight forward for high school diploma/high school equivalency, for which there are specific credentials. However, the concept of completion becomes more complex for CTE. The group recommended that completion should only be counted for credentials that have been certified by a national, state, or industry body or for programs with proven employment outcomes. Given the prevalence of skills-builders in community college settings, the group recommended that more information be gathered on this non-completing CTE population. They also recommended that a rigorous process be required for approving adult education courses that would then be accepted by both K-12 and community college institutions.

Completion is also nuanced in the context of basic skills, where there are strong overlaps with measurable skills gains. For example, the group recommended that participants should be considered completers in ESL when they finish a level and advance to the next, which would be the same outcome that is used for skills gains. However, the group recommended that ABE and ASE participants only be marked as completers at the time that they transition to non-adult education community college courses. For these two programs, they felt that course completion should be viewed as a measurable skills gain, rather than as a completion.

Employment and Earnings

The legislation stipulates that the following measures be tracked: "placement into jobs" and "improved wages." WIOA requires that the following be tracked: "employed in the second quarter after exit," "employed in the fourth quarter after exit," and "median earnings in the second quarter after exit."

The group recommended that both the legislative and the WIOA metrics should be tracked, and that one additional measure should be added: attainment of the regional living wage, using definitions that align with the Strong Workforce Program. While there was interest in also including a metric on employment in field of study, it was deemed to be cost-prohibitive given that this information must be collected through surveys or interviews.

The employment and earnings measures should only be applied to the following programs: ABE, ASE, ESL, CTE, and adults with disabilities. However, the group noted that it would be important to differentiate outcomes for adults with disabilities embedded across various programs, as distinct from profoundly disabled people who are unlikely to secure gainful employment that are served in tailored programs.

The group also felt that it would be important to disaggregate data by student characteristics to better understand outcomes, which means that careful attention needs to be given to data elements such as stated goal or barriers to employment. Some of the groups that are important to evaluate include the formerly incarcerated, older adults, and the long-term employed.

Discussion on Reporting-Related Issues

Committee members noted several issues in the morning discussions:

- Confusion about which participants to track and the diversity of underlying data systems are hampering accountability efforts.
- In general, it appears that reporting is strongest for ABE, ASE, and ESL programs associated with WIOA Title II.

- Additional technical assistance will be needed regarding the parameters for tracking WIOA-aligned metrics, given their complexity.
- When it comes to forecasting outcomes, AEBG grantees should be allowed to choose which metrics are most appropriate for their population, similar to the policy used in the Alternative Schools Accountability Model, Institutional Effectiveness Partnership Initiative, and in the Strong Workforce Program. In a future DAC meeting, the group should examine how this process relates to baseline numbers, ideally by comparing the information to historical data that CASAS has.
- By reporting outcomes for all participants regardless of funding source, some institutions may appear to be more successful than others—for example, a K-12 adult school is only funded by AEBG may have smaller numbers than a community college that has numerous funding sources.
- Greater clarity is needed regarding the relationship of ABE/ASE/ESL skills levels in K-12/NRS rubrics compared to community college/CB21 rubrics, particularly when seeking to support for transition to post-secondary coursework. This issue may be further muddied by the application of multiple measures to determine whether students are need of remediation, although the competency maps developed for the Common Assessment Initiative may help.
- Given that the value of a credential may vary by region, it may be most important to focus on transition to post-secondary and employment/earnings data to determine the value of completing a specific ABE, ASE, ESL, or CTE program.
- The group was mixed on the impact of focusing on completion and employment, particularly for students who persist over long periods of time and make incremental gains. For example, it might help to focus on the goal that participants hope to gain within one year and to educate the legislature on why it can take so much time for students to complete programs—particularly for the ones who face the greatest barriers.

Aligning Reporting with Student Journeys

In the afternoon, the group mapped out the common trajectories of students in each of the AEBG program areas, with a focus on aspects that accelerate and constrain their progress, as well as what students tend to do when they complete a program. Then the group identified additional data points that would be useful for strengthening participant outcomes.

The mapping revealed the differences in the types of participants that each program attracts, the barriers that are faced within these groups, and the types of supports that adult schools provide to them. Key insights included:

- Given that school systems and life challenges create significant barriers to progress, it is important to track school climate, self-efficacy, and connections to outside social service agencies. This information could be paired with data points such as retention and persistence to get a better understanding of student progress. This information would not necessarily go to the legislature, but could inform future technical assistance.

- For many students, their journey is from one program area to the next, such as ESL to ABE. Therefore, it's important to track transitions between programs in addition to transition to post-secondary to assess progress.
- In this expanded definition of transition, it will be important to note time-to-transition, as it can be very different for various populations.
- It would be helpful to examine the percentage of students who attain various metrics (in addition to the count so as not to disadvantage small programs). Analysis of the top and bottom programs in the state could help to determine program characteristics that influence student outcomes.
- Particularly for students with disabilities, participation may be spread across numerous programs. Furthermore, specific types of life barriers may strongly influence outcomes. Therefore, it will be important to disaggregate and examine results by numerous student characteristics.
- Another way to quantify the impact of programs would be to examine return on investment by outcome, by student, to society. However, this should be constructed so that some populations (such as students with disabilities) are not flagged as too expensive to serve.
- Some assessment tools that are in use in some institutions, such as Civic Objectives and Additional Assessment Plans (immigrant integration), the Healthy Kids Survey (school climate), or the Hope Scale (self-efficacy) could be scaled across the state to support consistent evaluation of these data points.