

# TEXAS HOLD'EM

## ENGAGING EMPLOYERS TO CLOSE THE SKILLS GAP

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### ABSTRACT

In 2014, the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) thrust adult educators into a dramatically new landscape of service expectations and partnership requirements to increase the ability of providers to meet the employment needs of students and employers. The coronavirus pandemic created an accelerating demand for adult education services that lead to reemployment for individuals who have been laid off. Employer engagement can have a tremendous impact on adult education's ability to lead to employment solutions. This article describes solutions Texas found as it successfully developed a market-driven adult education system to deliver employers, learners, and other system customers a new model for defining student success. After a brief discussion regarding the Texas business and economic climate; and factors that drove, in part, the Texas legislature to transfer the program into the state's labor department a year before WIOA; the article describes demonstrated methods and examples across five dimensions that tell Texas' story. These examples provide state and local leaders ways to meet the demands of WIOA and the expectations of students, employers, and system partners.

*Keywords:* employer, workforce, workplace, business, transformation, WIOA, AEFLA, skills gap, upskilling, immigrant, brain waste

### INTRODUCTION

In 2014, the passage of the federal Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) thrust adult educators into a dramatically new landscape of service expectations and partnership requirements. Within WIOA, Title II, or the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA), was redesigned to increase the ability of providers to meet the employment needs of adult learners and provide options far beyond a high school equivalency or increased English ability. States and local providers have worked diligently over the last six years to implement WIOA's various workforce-oriented requirements, from shared one-stop obligations and infrastructure cost-sharing to a transformed performance accountability system designed to measure innovative programs such as Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE). For many states, successes have been small and hard fought.

In 2013, acting on demands not unlike those by Congress, with unanimous support, the Texas legislature passed legislation to transfer the AEFLA program from the state's public education agency to the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), an agency that directs a wide variety of workforce and training programs.<sup>1</sup> This transfer signaled the need for deliberate and transformative change in the management, mission and delivery systems of the AEFLA

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1 On May 18, 2013, Governor Rick Perry signed into law Texas Senate Bill 307, 83rd Legislature, Regular Session (2013), which transferred responsibility for the AEFLA program to TWC from the Texas Education Agency. The bill can be found Texas Legislature Online. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://capitol.texas.gov/BillLookup/History.aspx?LegSess=83R&Bill=SB307>

program. We moved from a system focused primarily on general education, family literacy, life skills, and “the GED” to one more comprehensively positioned to also meet the diverse employment and training needs of adult learners.

This article describes solutions Texas found as it successfully developed a market-driven adult education system, designed to deliver to employers, learners, and other system customers a new model for defining student success. After briefly discussing the Texas business and economic climate—factors that drove, in part, the Texas legislature to transfer the program in 2013—the article provides demonstrated methods and examples across five dimensions that tell Texas’ story. These examples provide other state and local leaders with ways to meet the demands of WIOA and the expectations of students, employers, and system partners.

The demonstrated methods leaders can consider include the following:

- Take immediate, bold steps to support employer engagement and local workforce integration;
- Develop policy designed to drive change and workforce integration that is not tone deaf and blunt, but rather inclusive and respectful of historical system structures, in order to meet educational needs of *all* students, not just those in the workforce;
- Use grant requirements and curriculum standards to ensure instructors and classrooms provide the models and curriculum needed to expand traditional services and more directly support the employment needs of students;
- Ensure that strategic planning provides the system with a vision, goals, and measures that support transformation and build eagerness in the system; and
- Build performance accountability models that are also responsive and more precisely measure transformation as well as support rational, incremental system growth.

The article closes by describing existing constraints that have continued to impact the AEFLA system from reaching the full potential envisioned by Congress.

## WEATHERING THE STORM OF A DYNAMIC LABOR MARKET

### Business Climate and the Skills Gap

Businesses thrive when they can identify and hire skilled workers who have transferable skills that allow for career growth within their organization. Before the coronavirus pandemic, many adult learners in AEFLA programs were working, often in two or three jobs, to make ends meet. In Texas, for example, 73% of students at program entry identified last year that they were actively participating in the workforce and were employed.<sup>2</sup> Increasing the ability of workers who have maintained their jobs during the coronavirus pandemic to perform in more advanced jobs that require increased knowledge, skills, abilities, and workstyles can boost adult learners’ contributions to business sustainability and growth.

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<sup>2</sup> At program entry, students identify if they are either employed; not unemployed, but looking for work; or not participating in the workforce, such as those who are incarcerated, institutionalized, or full-time caregivers.

Similarly, adult education programs with strong connections to employers can play a vital role in reskilling workers who have lost jobs due to the pandemic into high-demand occupations or industries, helping adult learners to adapt to a rapidly transforming labor market and continue to support their families. Because so many students are juggling the demands of work and education, workplace literacy programs are an opportunity for adult educators to meet the needs of both employers and students to support businesses in industries that have been able to retain workers who know company culture, systems, are trusted, and desire career growth.

Alliances with businesses open doors to opportunities, new students, funding, partnerships, and reputations in the community that are impossible for educators alone to achieve. Business leaders who recognize the return on investment of adult education are invaluable champions who promote more effective education policies and models, which can often lead to greater public investment.

The labor market has dramatically changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, and the time could not be better for educators to initiate or expand employer engagement and workplace literacy programs. Since the early spring of 2020, the effects of the coronavirus pandemic have quickly transformed a very tight labor market, where employers needed every talented worker they could find and were seeking more creative strategies to find them, into a dynamic one with most sectors suffering skyrocketing unemployment but others rapidly scaling up operations and staffing to address newly emerging needs for workers in in-demand sectors like healthcare, food manufacturing, and transportation, distribution, and logistics.

While it is too soon to fully understand the long-term economic impact of the pandemic aside from the disruption of what had been an historically low unemployment level, adult education providers must now, more than ever, serve as a valuable resource to build the skills of retained workers, assist unemployed workers to identify and upskill into newly in-demand jobs, and be a well-prepared resource for job seekers when the overall labor market strengthens again. Adult education providers that have established good relationships with employers may be an employer's most familiar initial point of contact with the workforce development system of services during the economic upheaval resulting from the pandemic and will continue to be seen as a workforce solution to build their businesses when the economy recovers.

The future near-term labor market will be difficult to predict and, while higher-skilled workers may be available in the labor market, employers may be hesitant to hire them for entry level jobs fearing these workers will immediately leave once the economy recovers. Employers in industries where the long term option of hiring recently unemployed workers with higher skills may not be a prudent plan or immediately cost effective can turn to adult education providers as a low-cost resource. When the economy recovers, many employers will not be able to use wage competition to simply buy their way out of the skills gap and maintain competitive margins. While some who have weathered the economic downturn may turn to options such as outsourcing to temporary labor, increasing investments in automation, and recategorizing job descriptions to strengthen degree or credential requirements in order to obtain the highest skilled workers available to fill job vacancies, not all will. Some employers

who have struggled to find workers with the minimum qualifications and necessary work habits in the past may desire to bring laid off or furloughed employees back and develop their own talent internally by upskilling their returning or new frontline workers. While retraining workers and promoting from within are not new ideas, businesses now view upskilling as a promising source to fill vacancies and grow talent from within (The Perryman Group n.d.). Adult education can be a resource to train—at little or no cost to employers—new workers who know company culture, systems, are trusted, and desire career growth.

### **Immigration and the Transformation of the Texas Workforce**

Texas has enjoyed an amazing track record of business expansion in recent decades, despite having a workforce where basic skills gaps and limited English proficiency rates are high. While U.S.-born baby boomers are rapidly retiring, Texas, unlike some states, is fortunate to have a young and growing population, fueled largely by the migration of workers from outside the U.S. as well as from within the country. Thus, Texas has a large limited English workforce, and that workforce is growing faster than the portion of the workforce with stronger literacy and English skills (Orrenius et al., 2013). This growth is only anticipated to increase.

This limited English workforce is diverse. While many Texans with limited literacy and English skills have low rates of educational attainment from their home country, a portion of English language learners (ELL) are highly skilled and may just need English as a second language (ESL) services. For example, recent research on the Mexican skilled immigrant population in Texas found that over 18% of these individuals had college degrees, and overall, two thirds of them are naturalized U.S. citizens or legal permanent residents (Ruiz Soto & Selee, 2019). These internationally trained ELL professionals are often placed in general ESL classes and do not receive the targeted services they need to capitalize on their professional skill sets. A lack of appropriate services results in high rates of underemployment that impacts communities and local tax revenues through forgone earnings (Batalova & Bachmeier, 2017) These have skills that are untapped and in demand and are often ready and eager to contribute to the workforce.

### **Company Responses to Addressing the Skills Gap**

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Deloitte Development LLC (2018) noted that employers in many sectors were facing staffing challenges due to talent shortages. As the labor market continues to adjust to the pandemic, this landscape is changing to include both slackening demand for workers in some sectors, and growing demand for workers in other sectors, such as healthcare and transportation, distribution, and logistics. Shortages mean that employers must dig deeper into the available workforce to fill positions. Employers have had to loosen not only traditional drug screening requirements (Smith, 2019) but also use filters for high school completion and English literacy to fill positions. Once hired, employers often face challenges training and promoting these workers due to basic skills and high school credential attainment gaps that hinder advancement. Literacy and language deficiencies can have impacts on the ability of companies to maintain competitive production, meet customer service demands, and observe safety standards (Bergson-Shilcock, 2017).

Employers may also be missing out on workers who have limited English, but are highly skilled or have degrees or credentials from outside the U.S. Because of their bilingual and bicultural skills, these workers could be valuable assets to companies and deepen the pool of potential workers if workforce literacy was offered as a more routine part of company training.

In response to these pressures, adult education has become a critical component of human resource, training, and corporate social responsibility functions in many companies. Some companies have started company-managed adult education programs. Even Fortune 500 companies are developing nationwide strategies to address the basic education for their workers. Corporations like McDonalds,<sup>3</sup> Tyson Foods,<sup>4</sup> and UniFirst have implemented corporate-wide workplace literacy programs to address skill gaps in their workforces. For example, according to D. Davis (personal communication, December 4, 2019), Tyson's Upward Academy launched in 2016 in Springdale, Arkansas, to provide ESL, digital literacy, and high school equivalency preparation in 58 Tyson facilities across 17 states. Unlike some corporate solutions to employee upskilling, the Tyson model is conceived and carefully designed in collaboration with state AEFLA agencies and local providers. The company's strategy begins with the AEFLA state director and Tyson staff meeting to develop a local plan with plant managers, local adult education directors, and instructors to customize service delivery.

### **Adult Education as an Upskilling Solution**

Partnering with employers can bring tremendous opportunities to adult educators. Instructors aspire to have a direct impact on the educational and career goals of students, and employers can directly support this. Many providers desire to contribute more responsive services to the employers and partners in their community, and these providers understand they can gain powerful exposure from employers who are benefiting from their adult education services. State agencies also have a strong interest in supporting this engagement given their obligations to core partners in the integrated, employer-driven workforce development system established under WIOA. State AEFLA directors are faced with transforming service delivery around WIOA models like Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education that require full engagement with employers and new performance expectations under measures like Effectiveness in Serving Employers.

### **Untapped Potential Across the U.S.**

Despite the potential that workplace literacy partnerships with employers can bring adult educators, during the 2017-2018 program year, states showed very low enrollments in these programs and 22 states reported *no* students in workplace literacy. In that year, Texas bucked that trend and served 22% of the entire workplace literacy student population across the 50 states and U.S. territories.<sup>5</sup>

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3 Archways to Opportunity. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from [http://www.archwaystoopportunity.com/about\\_archways.html](http://www.archwaystoopportunity.com/about_archways.html)

4 Upward Academy. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://www.tysonustainability.com/community/investing-our-team-members>

5 Program year 2017-2018 is the last full year data are currently available. Federal AEFLA performance information is available as of March 3, 2020, at <https://wdcrobcolp01.ed.gov/CFAPPS/OVAE/NRS/login.cfm>

Texas stands out in its focus on workforce development. How did state leaders develop an adult education system that could deliver employers, job seekers, and local communities such strong results?

## **CORRALLING THE HERD TEXAS' TRANSFORMATION TO ADDRESS EMPLOYER DEMAND**

By enacting the 2013 transfer of the AEFLA program to TWC, the Texas legislature expressed the importance of adult education's role in employment and the integration of education and skills training.<sup>6</sup> Transfer of the program, prior to the passage of federal WIOA reauthorization, positioned Texas to become a national leader in the transformation of adult education as a full workforce development partner under the federal law.<sup>7</sup> As a workforce agency operating a wide variety of other workforce and education programs in addition to all the WIOA titles,<sup>8</sup> TWC was well positioned to ensure that Texas Adult Education and Literacy (Texas AEL) was a solution to the upskilling challenges faced by employers and a critical component to supporting the workforce and economic competitiveness of Texas employers.

The transfer of a multimillion-dollar state agency serving over 80,000 students is an enormous, complicated effort that takes time. When faced with such a dramatic system change, state agencies often take small, measured approaches and pilot models, before going big. Texas, however, promptly sent a strong message to employers and providers that it “meant business.” State leaders immediately promoted and supported the growth of new models and relationships with the business community after the program transfer.

In the first months of implementation, the TWC executive leadership, including the Commissioners, Executive Director, and newly-hired state adult education director, toured the large state in a series of town meetings to hear local concerns, needs, and hopes for a transformed adult education system. Upon return, TWC took decisive steps to support and fund strategic efforts designed to create linkages to employers, engage workforce training providers, and facilitate local strategy development between adult education providers and local workforce development boards (workforce boards). The goal was to quickly enhance system services and broaden options available to students through local, collaborative efforts.

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6 See the Texas Sunset Commission's review of the Texas Education Agency more information on legislative intent from the Texas Sunset Commission website. Retrieved on March 3, 2020, from [https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/files/reports/Education%20Agency%20Staff%20Report%202013%2083rd%20Leg\\_0.pdf](https://www.sunset.texas.gov/public/uploads/files/reports/Education%20Agency%20Staff%20Report%202013%2083rd%20Leg_0.pdf)

7 Texas is not alone in enacting an organizational realignment of adult education within state government. A half-dozen states have now passed legislation to transfer the AEFLA program to with labor or workforce agencies, five of them house adult education in Technical and Adult Education Workforce agencies, and 17 house them in state higher education agencies, often in workforce or economic development divisions. See a review of state adult education offices from the U.S. Department of Education website. Retrieved on March 3, 2020, from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/factsh/adult-education-basic-grant.pdf>

8 TWC is responsible for the delivery of 23 workforce programs and services including Titles I-IV of WIOA, the Senior Community Service Employment Program, the employment program for recipients of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families TANF, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training, Child Care, Trade Adjustment Assistance, Registered Apprenticeship programs and a variety of other state-funded workforce development programs.

## “GOING ALL IN” BOLD INITIAL STRATEGIC STEPS TO SUPPORT EMPLOYERS

During the first year of transition, Texas dedicated several million dollars of Workforce Investment Act (WIA) section 223 state leadership funding to support the following capacity building efforts. Each was designed to support employers, facilitate workforce system integration, and develop career pathways efforts.

### Accelerate Texas

Just four months after the transfer, TWC invested \$1 million in a partnership with the state’s higher education agency to expand Accelerate Texas, the state’s integrated education and training (IET) model. Accelerate Texas is implemented through the community college system and was designed prior to WIOA. The investment signaled the importance of IET as a Texas AEL hallmark and leveraged the expertise of Texas community colleges that had been piloting integrated models like I-BEST.<sup>9</sup>

### Workforce Integration Grants

To accelerate connectivity between employers and workforce boards, Texas funded over \$850,000 to its 28 local workforce boards to help them collaborate with local adult education providers in the development of integrated workforce system services, as well as to foster increased program visibility, and create linkages to employers needing adult education services. These funds sent a strong message to workforce boards that adult education was a full partner in the Texas workforce system. They also underscored the strategic start Texas leaders were making to shift local adult education service delivery toward increased *employer-driven* objectives. The goal was to not only encourage adult learners and jobseekers to co-enroll in adult education and workforce services but also to motivate workforce centers to add workplace literacy to their portfolio of options for businesses. Another objective was to leverage customized training opportunities for IET through programs such as Apprenticeship Texas<sup>10</sup> and the Texas Skills Development Fund.<sup>11</sup>

### Incentive Awards

To focus the state’s “eyes on the prize” of workforce integration, an incentive funding model was established to provide annual awards between \$20,000 and \$40,000<sup>12</sup> for outstanding employer partnerships. Beginning in 2014, awards have been given out at the state’s nationally recognized workforce conference, an event attended by over 1,800 people including many employers. The awards highlight new exciting provider collaborations with employers and serve as another tool in signaling the importance of employers in the Texas AEL system transformation.

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9 More information on the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training Program (I-BEST) see Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges website. Retrieved on March 3, 2020, from <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-best/>

10 More information on Apprenticeship Texas see the Texas Workforce Commission website. Retrieved on March 3, 2020, from <https://twc.texas.gov/programs/apprenticeship-program-overview>

11 More information on the Skills Development Fund Texas see the Texas Workforce Commission website. Retrieved on March 3, 2020, from <https://twc.texas.gov/partners/skills-development-fund>

12 The TWC Commissioners direct award amounts each year, and distributions have carried slightly over the years.

## Site-Based Workplace Literacy Projects

Texas knew that to truly deliver on employer expectations, significant investments had to be made in workplace literacy efforts. In 2014 Texas funded, through WIOA Section 223 funds, the \$3.3-million Site-Based Workplace Literacy Project grant program to augment local adult education grantees' ability to develop and implement workplace literacy programs in support of businesses and local economic competitiveness and to reach learners who could not attend traditional classes. Grantees were required to work with employers, employer organizations and their workforce board to identify demand and develop the model. In its first year, these projects served 1,381 working Texans and their employers.

“Going all in” paid off. Rather than waiting for local capacity to develop incrementally, quick action had multiplier effects that provided Texas AEL with a strategic start for program success. These initiatives positioned Texas AEL to support effective local employer engagement efforts and to begin building a robust career pathways network to support student success. These projects also sent an important message to providers, workforce boards, and local stakeholders that “true north” for Texas AEL was aimed at delivering on employer and student demand for employment and training results. It also built confidence in these partners and empowered providers to be full collaborators in the transformation. Soon these efforts would become critical elements for building a sustainable foundation after WIOA passed.

### ***Demonstrated Approaches***

Texas implemented several strategies that other state and local leaders can use to facilitate strong collaborations between employers and education providers:

**Deploy Programs Quickly.** Rather than spending considerable time “getting it right” or “playing around the edges,” Texas invested in well-planned employer and workforce development engagement projects to initiate and build awareness, excitement, knowledge, and examples.

**Initiate Multiple Strategies.** Texas used several diverse employer engagement efforts to immediately demonstrate to adult educators, businesses, and local workforce partners that the agency had a firm vision to support under-skilled workers, was committed, and was putting sufficient investments on the table to foster new partnerships for enhanced service delivery.

**Celebrate Achievement.** Incentives like awards provided an opportunity for providers, employers, and other stakeholders to celebrate and reflect on meaningful accomplishments. Social media promotion helped providers and employers take a moment to brag to their peers and communities, which had significant multiplier effects for the expansion of employer engagement efforts.

## **HOW THE WEST WAS WON POLICY TOOLS TO DRIVE WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT MODELS**

Leaders cannot drive dramatic transformation simply through well-placed special projects.

Sustained change management takes careful application of appropriate policy and program requirements. Whether it is local policy or state regulatory development, the rules matter!

Texas leaders used their initial rulemaking for Texas AEL in 2013–14 to listen well to stakeholders, set a vision outlining core system elements to establish a workforce-driven system, and signal the philosophical pivot that would be required to accomplish it.

In the rule-making public comment, Texas providers voiced two broad areas of concern: How quickly did TWC expect adult education to pivot toward delivering increased employer engagement? And how did Texas' tremendous low-skilled, English language learner population figure into a system that might drive requirements to “cream” for higher-skilled students to meet employment objectives? Texas leaders listened and addressed these and other concerns head on.

Leaders knew that transformation in a large system requires time and resources. So TWC used the preamble of the rules to signal a measured, multiyear strategic approach for change that would ease provider concerns that the state would throw the baby—that is, existing providers—out with the bathwater:

The Commission recognizes that the increase in career and higher education outcomes will occur gradually over multiple years through enhanced enrollment and performance criteria, incentives for innovative acceleration, integration and transition models, and related technical assistance and professional development to support expansion. (Texas Workforce Commission, 2014)

While providing a crucial signal as to how TWC intended to initiate change, Texas also addressed the importance of its existing, more traditional adult education services, such as family literacy and the current students in those programs. It was important to make connections between the rules and the provider's existing services and expertise with low-skill and English language learners.

As a workforce agency, leaders knew that employers were struggling to meet workforce demand and could benefit from adult education services. In fact, as far back as a decade, TWC worked with Texas employers, including those in-demand industries like manufacturing, who were having to make a transition to bilingual—Spanish and English—training models to ensure a sufficient production-available workforce in their communities.<sup>13</sup> Texas leaders also knew that low-skilled and English language learners needed training, but college training services often placed artificially high skill thresholds for entering training programs—such as high school completion or advanced English-language ability—even when employers didn't require these thresholds at the jobs for which the training programs were designed. These legacy models had to be reconsidered through integrated education and training service approaches.

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13 As far back as 2004, TWC initiated bilingual customized training and ESL services in advanced manufacturing for employers like Universal Forest Products, who is a major lumber supplier for Home Depot and has several plants in Texas. In 2007, TWC published a guide on these models to foster statewide expansion that, while over a decade old, still has relevance to workforce and adult education professionals. The guide was available as of March 3, 2020, from <https://twc.texas.gov/files/partners/lep-guide-workforce-professionals-twc.pdf>

Texas rules sought to address existing services for low-skilled students and to disrupt traditional restrictions to postsecondary education or training systems by underscoring a commitment to career pathways for *all adult learners*, not just those at the top of the skills continuum:

While there may be a correlation between students functioning at higher levels and work or career readiness, data indicates that many students functioning at lower levels are already working in low-wage, low-skill jobs and often enter AEL services to gain the skills or English fluency needed to advance in the workforce... The Commission strongly supports the use of innovative career pathway programs that provide opportunities for students at all levels to obtain incremental success, and ultimately to achieve their goals...regardless of functional level. (Texas Workforce Commission, 2014)

Through the initial rule-making and public comment process, Texas signaled a measured approach to system change as well as the importance of workforce development for all students who desired it, no matter their level. The goal was to meet employer-demand and create a comprehensive approach for services that would reach its largest student populations.

### **Demonstrated Approaches**

Texas constructed strategies that other state and local leaders may find useful to establishing policy and funding frameworks which will support increases in adult education's orientation towards workforce development and employer-focused services:

**Look to the Future.** When developing rules, be sure to not only establish a vision for a system designed to support employers and future workforce development but also incorporate critical elements of traditional practice.

**Directly Face Concerns.** Develop effective program requirements by listening well and tackling provider concerns head on. Providers, after all, are the delivery mechanism for change and cannot be alienated or disenfranchised if leaders want to accomplish their mission.

**Find Win-Wins.** Use win-wins to address primary concerns and possible constraints. Texas made connections between employers struggling to employ English language learners and the fact that this was the largest population that providers served. Rather than defaulting to the behaviors of some postsecondary education or training models, which established screening requirements for skills beyond those required by employers, Texas sent a message, and later made investments, in developing effective integrated education and training models that supported students across the skill spectrum, including English language learners.

**Stress Rational Urgency.** System transformation driven by a legislative mandate can lead to unrealistic expectations and timelines that can reduce, not build commitment from customers and stakeholders. Signal a firm but reasonable approach to timelines and innovation deployment when developing rules but also signal an understanding of needed capacity building while committing to a willingness to invest.

## NO LONE RANGERS SPEEDING COLLABORATIVE PARTNERSHIPS FOR INTEGRATED CAREER PATHWAYS THROUGH GRANT REQUIREMENTS

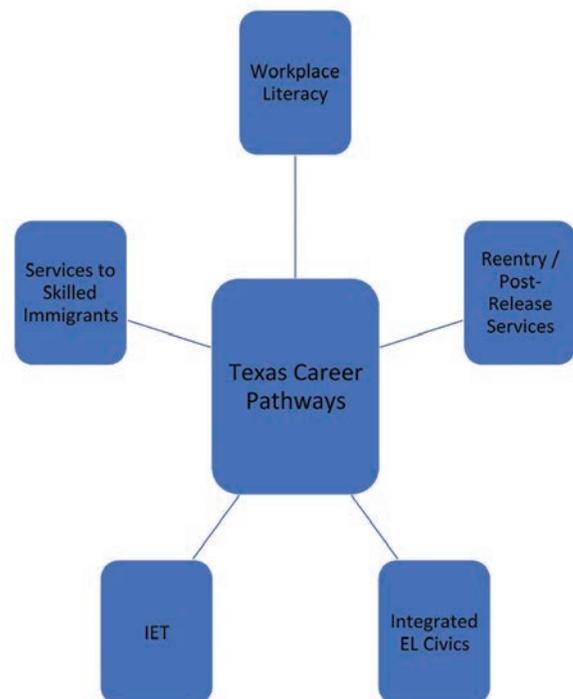
Strategic policy and state rules alone cannot drive a vision. Developing increased employer-focused adult education services requires states to facilitate and fund a careful interplay of operational grant requirements, funding, curriculum, capacity-building supports, and performance measures. These tools augment and complement the vision promoted in policy to build and support operational system capacity. While the Texas context is one of a state office, local leaders can establish a similar array of investments, requirements, and measures to drive enhancements that build employer engagement, increase the number of students entering training and those working or seeking employment.

### Excuses off the Table: Grant Requirements Drive Partnerships and Pathways

With state rules in place and the aforementioned foundational capacity building projects underway, Texas released its first AEL grant solicitation under TWC oversight in 2014. The grant solicitation underscored the state's commitment to developing a comprehensive, workforce-focused adult education system to meet employer demand and required elements, such as integrated career pathways services, of all grantees.

To ease statewide adoption, grants allowed for a flexible framework of programmatic choices within the overall strategy of career pathways to allow providers the tools and options needed to customize service delivery to best meet local student, community, and employer demand. Released prior to the passage of federal WIOA legislation, the framework included a pre-WIOA definition of career pathways<sup>14</sup> that allowed providers to select one or more options from three service types:

- integrated education and training based on a pre-WIOA definition;<sup>15</sup>
- workplace literacy in collaboration with employers; and
- services for internationally trained skilled immigrants.



<sup>14</sup> The definition was based on the Joint Dear Colleague letter released on April 4, 2012 by the U.S. Departments of Education, Health and Human Services and Labor. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from [https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/doe\\_hhs\\_and\\_dol\\_issue\\_joint\\_letter\\_promoting\\_the\\_use\\_of\\_career\\_pathways.pdf](https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/ofa/doe_hhs_and_dol_issue_joint_letter_promoting_the_use_of_career_pathways.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Defined in U.S. Department of Education Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education Program Memorandum FY 2010-02, (2010). Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultEd/aeffa-funds-for-iet.pdf>

After WIOA passed, Texas expanded these options to other employment-related AEFLA activities, such as Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (which Texas branded “Integrated EL Civics”), and reentry and post-release services for individuals in correctional settings. In addition, in 2015, Texas also began to require all grantees to implement integrated education and training, including within Integrated EL Civics, and allowed grant funds to be spent on the technical training component of the model.

By requiring career pathways services, but allowing some flexibility within this distributed model, Texas ensured providers could customize services to meet local employment demand in a large and geographically diverse state, as well as meet the career advancement needs of distinct populations in the workforce including incumbent workers, English language learners, justice-involved individuals, and skilled immigrants.

### **No Provider Left Behind**

By requiring grantees to implement career pathways to receive funding, TWC signaled that it meant business in meeting employer demand. But the agency also knew that initially many traditional adult education providers, such as those providing family literacy and a general life skills curriculum, would not be prepared to implement these models or may not see these workforce models as part of their organization’s mission. The threat of losing these valuable providers was real, especially since TWC’s objective was to augment, not replace, traditional services and services like family literacy were required by state law.

To respond to this potential hazard, Texas promoted partnerships and consortia grant models and fostered their development through the aforementioned workforce integration grants provided to the state’s 28 workforce boards. Allowable under both WIA and later WIOA, these consortia partnerships allow local communities to leverage the strength of historical service delivery models, such as stand-alone education and family literacy providers, while incorporating organizations that could provide employer connectivity and training, such as workforce boards and community colleges. This option proved to support local grant services that were multifaceted. This option also fostered alliances that did not ask traditional providers to initially stretch too far beyond their missions and capacity, but rather to leverage existing capacities and expertise within their communities to support students across a spectrum of services.

### **Curriculum Investments to Support Transformation**

Texas knew that to support and build the employer-focused, workforce development pathways envisioned in state rules and required as a condition for funding, it had to ensure this vision made it to the classroom. At the end of the day, teachers were the ones who would match what adult learners are taught in class with the skills needed by Texas businesses.

In 2016, Texas established a partnership between the business community and adult education experts to revise and align the adult education content standards—academic learning standards aligned to the Texas college and career standards—with the discrete skill requirements needed to succeed in jobs and careers. The task was to identify the skills employers required, document how these skills aligned with the basic skills students needed,

and, most importantly, ensure these competencies were adequately described to have relevance for instructors in the classroom.

Over 30 employers contributed to the effort. The business leadership team included a former oil and gas executive, a construction trades entrepreneur, a nationally recognized healthcare human resource leader, a manufacturing training manager, and a corporate distribution center manager. Many of these leaders had experience partnering with educators to help prepare students for work in their sectors. Several had on-site learning programs at their companies including English as a Second Language classes.

Business experts worked alongside providers, curriculum developers, and researchers to align the Texas's academic content standards to the detailed work activities required by business across four industry sectors key to the Texas economy: advanced manufacturing; construction and extraction; healthcare sciences; and transportation, distribution, and logistics. These sectors were selected because they had had documented growth, were well-represented across most regions of the state, and had well-defined pathways from entry-level jobs that were accessible to adult education students into middle- and higher-skilled occupations.

The industry experts provided specific work-related examples tied to positions and tasks in their sectors. Researchers conducted research about high-demand entry- and intermediate-level jobs in the federal O\*NET database to confirm these critical characteristics. Providers used their experience in the curriculum development, instruction, and the development and delivery of workplace literacy programs to align the work requirements to academic competencies and validate the information.

The resulting Texas AEL Content Standards 2.0<sup>16</sup> illustrate how academic standards can directly align to employment demands in entry and middle skills jobs while maintaining the competencies needed to prepare students for educational progress and transition to postsecondary education or training. Instructors in Texas now had a tool to develop curriculum and ensure learning activities that support students in better understanding how what they were learning applied to work.

Texas's work strategically designing its grant requirements related to workforce development objectives as well as the alignment of the content standards to work requirements allowed for the state to more rapidly expand services that would address the employment needs of both business and students.

### ***Demonstrated Approaches***

Texas used several promising approaches state and local leaders can replicate to leverage grant resources and support curriculum reform:

**Underscore That Employers, Not Just Students, Are Customers of Adult Education Services.** Employers are at the table to lend expertise, resources, and support. Most students,

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<sup>16</sup> The standards as well as videos of some members of the of the business leadership team are available at the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning website. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://tcall.tamu.edu/taesp.html>

after all, are seeking career advancement and state and local adult education leaders must take deliberate actions to deliver on that expectation.

**Drive a Vision.** Address more than just minimum federal requirements. Texas established distinct structures and curriculum designed to support employers, workforce development as well as adult education.

**Don't Support Go-It-Alone Models.** Avoid approaches that stretch too far beyond providers' individual missions or capacities but rather build comprehensive multifaceted service delivery systems that leverage the skills and expertise of diverse organizations who can “do what they do best.”

## MISSION ACCOMPLISHED A BOLD MILESTONE DROVE TRANSFORMATION

While organizations often believe they can bring about effective change through policy tools, grant requirements, and curriculum alone, these tools are limited in their ability to create the needed community support, awareness, and excitement to facilitate quick transformation and sustained change. Providers and local stakeholders need a plan and milestones to aim for.

Texas bolstered and promoted the vision outlined in state rule and had taken immediate steps to implement a new direction for adult education through grant requirements and significant capacity building investments. Having learned the new program and what system customers and stakeholders required and needed, Texas was sufficiently prepared to initiate a five-year strategic plan to set longer term objectives and established stretch goals and metrics for career pathways in the state, including measures for workplace literacy.<sup>17</sup>

For the plan, the state's Advisory Committee made up of employers, providers, and workforce board members suggested an enrollment milestone for career pathways to give the state a bold goal on which to focus. Like Tennessee's *Drive to 55* or Texas's own *60 x 30TX* state goals, which both focused on college enrollments, Texas adopted an *adult education enrollment milestone of 20,000 unduplicated students in career pathways<sup>18</sup> by 2020*.

The 20K x 2020 milestone, and related strategies and objectives, underscored the agency's commitment to providing under-skilled Texans with a response to their workforce development needs as well as the importance of services to employers:

**Objective 2:** Increase employer and business community roles in AEL.

- **Tactic 1:** Engage businesses, chambers of commerce, and the Texas Association of Business in developing strategies for increasing employer engagement in AEL.

<sup>17</sup> The strategic plan and related reports to the Texas Legislature can be found on the Texas Workforce Commission website. Retrieved March 3, 2020. from <https://tcall.tamu.edu/twcael/2015-2020StrategicPlan.htm>

<sup>18</sup> In the Strategic Plan for AEL 2015–2020, career pathways were defined as integrated education and training models, workplace and work-based AEL models with employers, and services to internationally trained English language learner professionals. Enrollments in Re-entry and Post release models were included after the implementation of WIOA.

- **Tactic 2:** Fund and support with technical assistance work-based projects with employers to support business expansion and build employers as AEL allies.
- **Tactic 3:** Engage employers and employer organizations and expand investments that have proven effective within the 28 Local Workforce Development Boards in efforts to align AEL levels to occupationally specific skills and work-readiness requirements, including industry-recognized certifications.

The strategic plan framed the technicalities of grant requirements into a broader context and vision for state leaders, local communities, and employers. TWC leaders continually promoted progress toward the 20K x 2020 milestone, and it became a positive rallying point that messaged to local providers that their demanding work was paying off within a larger, highly visible state context.

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### ***Texas providers exceeded the 20K x 2020 student career pathways goal two years early in 2018.***

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This visibility paid off. In 2018, Texas adult education providers *exceeded the 20,000 career pathways goal two years early with more than 22,000 students enrolled in career pathways.* By 2020, the state had surpassed 30,000 students in career pathways programs. Faster than expected, providers were supporting employers in preparing a considerable amount of workers for jobs.

Strategic plans often suffer common pitfalls including being too unwieldy to implement, missing or ignoring objectives of key stakeholders, or not being adequately promoted after development. Too often, plans are simply ignored after a tremendous effort or simply become compliance exercises to meet a requirement or grant deliverable. Texas avoided these common pitfalls by involving the right stakeholders in the process; addressing, not ignoring, the critical priorities; and considering the feasibility of implementation and costs when developing objectives and measures.

#### ***Demonstrated Approaches***

Texas used several approaches to strategic plans that state and local leaders can use to facilitate successful implementation plans as well as promote important objectives:

**Understand That Policy and Grant Requirements Alone Do Not Create a Vision.** Leaders must forecast well-considered objectives and measures and promote them confidently and broadly within and outside the adult education system.

**Authentically Engage Employers and Stakeholders.** Engage the employers and stakeholders in strategic planning efforts and develop employer engagement goals to focus providers.

**Identify Numeric Goals.** These goals should represent the synthesis of programmatic objectives.

**Wildly and Consistently Promote the Vision.** Keep the vision and milestones in front of the stakeholders, executive leadership, and the public.

## PUTTING MONEY WHERE YOUR MOUTH IS FUNDING AND PERFORMANCE TOOLS

To help foster strong and swift implementation of services to employers and development of career pathways, Texas applied several performance and funding tools to compliment grant requirements as well as recognize and invest in the work needed for expansion.

Unlike some states, Texas requires providers to meet specific enrollment targets to support the state in meeting an annual legislatively set adult education enrollment target.<sup>19</sup> For the 20K x 2020 career pathways milestone, Texas also applied specific career pathway targets to local providers. Customized models like workplace literacy and career pathway programs often yield smaller enrollments than traditional classes costs per student rise.<sup>20</sup> This can be perceived as resulting in a lower traditional return to the community. Texas found that it was positioned to ask providers to do more (career pathways) with the same cost-per as traditional

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***With limited funds, Texas leaders chose to invest in increased value that would benefit employers, workers, and the economy, rather than more traditional services at lower costs.***

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services. The initial approach to address this was to require providers to leverage other local funds or grants to make up the increased costs. Despite these constraints, many providers stepped up and identified local funds to cover the increased costs and there was progress on the 20K x 2020 milestone, but it was slow. Texas capitalized on this overall positive transformational environment with an equally transformative performance approach.

State leaders then developed a differentiated target setting and funding model to drive the state toward the 20K x 2020 career pathways goal and increase services that would benefit employers. The model established a cost per target for “basic services”— like ESL classes— and then cost premiums on top of the base amount for career pathways models making it easier for grantees to implement and expand efforts. Each year, grantees negotiated with TWC to set targets across three models, referred to as tiers:

- **Tier I:** Basic Services. (i.e., high school equivalency, ESL) at approximately \$700 per student<sup>21</sup>
- **Tier II:** Intensive Services. Grantees could select targets across three distinct types of services: workplace literacy with employers, services for internationally trained

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19 In the initial two years of implementation TWC established local grant targets with each provider primarily by dividing their grant allocation by an average cost which was calculated by dividing this allocation by the state target. In 2015, for example, Texas had a target of 101,000 students which resulted in an average cost of \$608.80 per participant. This cost per was applied to local providers who have specific enrollment targets.

20 Texas found the costs were up to four times as much per student when technical training and other costs, such as customization for employers and case management were factored in.

21 Average costs are described. Costs vary slightly each year due to variations in service tier mixed and allocations. These cost pers are used only in setting enrollment targets and are not a cap, meaning providers can do higher costs models, but must balance those with lower costs models as long as they meet with enrollment targets within their overall budget.

professionals, and transition to reentry and post release services at approximately \$1,200 per student (Tier I + \$500).

- **Tier III:** Integrated Education & Training. This included separate targets for IET and Integrated EL Civics with a required IET component at approximately \$2,500.00 (Tier I + \$1,800).

While the approach worked, there was still the same size pie to cut; state and federal funding had not increased. This meant agency leadership had to reduce the state enrollment target: Something that, just a couple of years prior would have been impossible due to program growth expectations. Leaders understood that while overall enrollment numbers would go down, *value*, in terms of services that would benefit employers, workers and the economy, would go up.

### **Demonstrated Approaches**

Texas identified important strategies state and local leaders can use to ensure that funding and performance adequately support and measure increases in workforce and employer-focused services.

**Use Performance Tools to Drive Goals.** However, this should be done in a rational, strategic way that eases the burden on providers so that they can focus and implement objectives.

**Make the Case With State Leaders.** Show them that, to realize workforce and training objectives to benefit employers, reasonable compromises must be made unless there is increased funding.

## **CIRCLE THE WAGONS**

### **Building Employment Solutions While Matching Employer Demand With AEFLA Performance**

So where does Texas go from here? The coronavirus pandemic has already created an accelerating demand for adult education services as individuals in our communities are laid off. Close relationships with employers are critically important now more than ever as adult educators have become, almost overnight, frontline responders to the urgent reemployment needs for individuals in their communities whose lives have been recently disrupted and no longer have the skills to be competitive from exiting jobs. The U.S. economy has been so strong for so long that many educators have never operated in an environment with higher unemployment. Employer engagement can have a tremendous impact on students' confidence that adult education can truly lead to new jobs for those recently displaced.

The state has found that the benefits of committing well-placed investments and placing deliberate attention to engaging employers and developing workforce models pays off. These steps facilitated the necessary philosophical transformation and capacity building needed to meet state legislative objectives and strongly position the state for WIOA. The next step is to develop a better understanding of whether these programs are meeting employer needs and to continue to refine WIOA performance accountability models for these services. After over five years of WIOA implementation, Texas, and adult education programs nationwide,

find challenges with implementing employer-focused services, like workplace literacy, due to federal performance accountability constraints.

WIOA places a strong emphasis on an employer-driven system and underscores this, perhaps most directly, through the inclusion of employers themselves as eligible recipients of AEFLA funds<sup>22</sup> and with performance measures such as Effectiveness in Serving Employers. Regrettably though, the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE) has elected to limit states' ability to use several of the available measurable skill gain indicators designed to measure progress toward a credential or employment. Some measures, such as the Progress Milestone<sup>23</sup> indicator, are intended to measure customized services to employers. OCTAE has elected to limit states largely to standardized tests. This restriction is not in statute nor in regulation but was executed through subregulatory guidance found in the National Reporting System (NRS) Technical Assistance Guide.<sup>24</sup>

Because employers may engage in workplace classes for very specific basic skill demands that can be accomplished over a short period, or are teaching very customized skills, students may be unlikely to show educational functioning level-gain progress on standardized tests. This makes the provision of workplace literacy classes much less attractive to states and local providers.

Prior to WIOA, OCTAE had recognized these constraints and developed a reporting option in previous versions of the NRS Guidelines. This option, called Work-Based Project Learner Activity (Work-Based Project), provided for performance measurement alternatives for short term customized employer-based programs. OCTAE removed this option during WIOA rule making and elected not to use the Skills Progression indicator, which was similar to the Work-Based Project provision.

In public comment, Texas encouraged the U.S. Department of Education to afford states local flexibility to meet employer needs and reinstate the option as well as implement all of the measurable skill gains authorized under the statute in order to accurately measure the outcomes of workplace models. In response to the comment, OCTAE stated the Work-Based Project option was removed as a reporting option because historically, very few states used the optional table, and it was not required by WIOA (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). As planning builds around WIOA reauthorization, removing the U.S. Department of Education's ability to regulate performance accountability requirements should be a top consideration.

Texas providers are doing work that has value to employers, but some of their biggest successes are invisible in national data because the current federal reporting framework prevents states from appropriately reporting certain outcomes for workplace literacy

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22 Employers are eligible recipients for AEFLA funds, in partnership with other eligible entities such as a local education agency, institution of higher education, or community-based organization.

23 In WIOA, the performance indicator is described as: Satisfactory or better progress report, towards established milestones, such as completion of on-the-job training or completion of one year of an apprenticeship program or similar milestones, from an employer or training provider who is providing training.

24 Available at the National Reporting System website. Retrieved March 3, 2020, from <https://www.nrsweb.org/policy-data/nrs-ta-guide>

programs, effectively hiding successful models that help learners to upskill with in-demand skills that employers value.<sup>25</sup> Inclusion of the Progress Milestone indicator would provide states and local providers with a WIOA measure similar to the Work-Based Project, and allow local providers, with employers, the flexibility needed to design workplace literacy and other services to employers and better address the intent of WIOA.

## CONCLUSION

The experience in Texas exemplifies how a state can offer policies, programs, and funding tools that can drive adult education services toward meeting the workforce development objectives in WIOA as well as support the expansion of workforce literacy programs. Establishing intentional, deeply rooted, employer partnerships can bring valuable benefits to states, local AEFLA systems, and, most importantly, students who aspire for educational and career development. These services support local providers who are seeking to find creative ways to offer more to the employers and partners in their community as well as gain the powerful benefits exposure through employers can bring. State AEFLA agencies, many of whom have struggled implementing WIOA and have obligations to their core system partners, can better deliver the requirements expected in a fully integrated, employer-driven workforce development system established under WIOA.

To meet the expectation for the adult education system envisioned by both the Texas legislature and Congress, Texas applied an interrelated combination of tools and strategies to transform an adult education system rooted in traditional, academic only services to one delivering increased employment-focused outcomes from students. Demonstrated efforts included quick and bold action to support employer engagement and local workforce integration; deliberate policy and grant requirements to drive change that will maintain valuable system elements; instructional supports and frameworks to reach classrooms and support instructors; and careful planning and performance management to support transformation and raise the profile of accomplishment.

State and local Texas leaders worked together to drive a change process that other leaders can use to implement enhancements to address local employer demand for skilled workers and the career aspirations of students while meeting WIOA demands. ⌘

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25 The limitation to standardized tests has also had impacts on all system performance during the pandemic as there are currently no approved tests that can be completed by students remotely.

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