

FACING THE FACTS: A LITERACY FORECAST FOR TEXAS *

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FACTS AT-A-GLANCE

Remaining competitive in regional, national, and global marketplaces is a top priority for Texas businesses. Texas' attractive business and economic climate rests largely on the availability of a workforce that is young, growing, and well educated. In the last decade though, the Texas workforce has radically changed as workers with limited English proficiency (LEP) have become the fastest-growing segment of the workforce. If Texas is to continue to support business competitiveness and expansion, the state must find ways to ensure that education and training efforts for these workers can quickly respond to business demand.

The Current and Future Workforce

- In 2005, Texas joined Hawaii, New Mexico, and California as majority-minority states. The fastest growing key segment of the population is Hispanics (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).
- Between 2000 and 2005, the number of foreign-born LEP individuals in Texas age five and older increased over 29 percent to 2,197,648 (Migration Policy Institute, n.d.).
- Between 2010 and 2030, first- and second-generation immigrants together are projected to account for all U.S. labor force growth (Lowell, B., Gelatt, J., Batalova, J., 2006).

The LEP Pipeline in Public Schools

- In 2005–2006, almost half of the Texas public school population was Hispanic. Over 34 percent of these students were LEP (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).
- Hispanic students account for over 50 percent of high school students lost to attrition. In 2005–2006, Hispanic attrition rates increased by 4 percent (Johnson, 2006).
- In 2006, only 12 percent of LEP students in the twelfth grade passed the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test and only 8 percent of tenth graders passed all TAKS standards (Scharer, 2007).
- Texas has slipped from 45th to last among states ranked by percent for citizens in 2005—age 25 and older—who have a high school diploma or GED (Murdock, 2007).

Current Readiness to Meet Business and LEP Customer Employment Needs

- In Texas, 57 percent of workforce boards do not have local training providers that offer LEP-accessible training programs (e.g., Spanish-language or bilingual training programs).
- Less than 6 percent of Texas employers have worked with adult education providers for English language or workplace literacy services (Texas Workforce Investment Council, 2006).
- Since 2001, there has been a 75 percent *decrease* in adult education students, including LEP students, who have the goal of transitioning to postsecondary training (Legislative Budget Board, 2007).

* Adapted from: Texas Workforce Commission (2007). LEP Guide for Workforce Professionals, Introduction.

SUPPORTING BUSINESS COMPETITIVENESS THROUGH LEP WORKER TRAINING

We “cannot afford to leave any workers behind and the Texas workforce system must direct resources and training investments to ensure that no worker is left behind.”

Texas Workforce Commission, 2005

In the last 10 years, Texas’ population has grown, become more diverse, and less educated. However, a good sign for Texas’ future workforce is that its population is also becoming younger, unlike some states with shrinking populations and, therefore, an older population average. New Hispanic, Spanish-speaking residents have fueled this population growth, challenging education and training systems—from preschool to higher education—to redesign and rethink legacy educational paradigms in order to meet the needs of this current and future workforce.

Losing Ground Educating LEP Workers

The education and training systems for Texas’ LEP adult workforce need significant enhancements. To be competitive in the job market, LEP workers benefit from having higher levels of English literacy, yet few LEP workers with employment or employment advancement goals appear to access Texas’ adult education system for English as a Second Language (ESL) services. According to the Texas Education Agency, only 1,445 of over 108,000 adult education students, including ESL students, had the goal of entering employment in 2005–2006. Of those, just 655 students reported finding jobs (National Reporting System, n.d.).

The numbers of all adult education students continuing their education through the postsecondary education level or into training are equally low. While some postsecondary education or training is required for almost all jobs today (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007), in 2005–2006, just 602 of over 108,000 adult education students in Texas reported a goal of transitioning into college or occupational training. Of those, just 172 students statewide reported accomplishing this goal (National Reporting System, n.d.).

In 2007, the Texas Legislative Budget Board identified that rather than increasing the transition to postsecondary training for students, there has been a 75 percent *decrease* in adult education students with a goal of transitioning to postsecondary training over the last few years. Fortunately, the State is working to stem this trend through legislation passed by the 80th Texas Legislature.*

While data may not tell the whole story, and surely more adult education students have employment and higher education goals, significant work must be done to ensure these students see adult education programs as a means to transitioning into occupational training or other postsecondary education and career-building jobs.

The transition to postsecondary training is particularly challenging for LEP workers. Research shows that even if these workers have training goals, 57 percent of the workforce areas in Texas *do not have* local training providers that offer LEP-accessible training programs such as Spanish-language or bilingual occupational training programs. Many training providers still establish minimum reading standards (e.g.,

* House Bill 1, 80th Texas Legislature, Regular Session, includes a rider that addresses the alignment of adult education and postsecondary education services. The rider is listed as Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board Rider 50 and Texas Education Agency Rider 77.

sixth- or ninth-grade reading level) for enrollment in occupational training. Often, these literacy requirements are higher than those actually required for performing on the job (Spruck-Wrigley, Richer, Martinson, Kubo, and Strawn et al., 2003).

Developing Workforce Solutions for LEP Workers

Current education and training trends are of little benefit to employers trying to fill critical labor shortages with skilled workers. Texas employers must continue to compete in the global marketplace and maintaining a skilled workforce is one of their prime concerns. Supporting the employment and training goals of the LEP workforce is clearly a core mission for Workforce Boards, training providers, and adult education programs.

Since first- and second-generation immigrants together are projected to account for all workforce growth in the coming decades, LEP workers will become a standard customer to the Texas workforce system, not just a special population. Workforce boards, training providers, adult education programs, and other community partners must form effective partnerships that have a shared goal of increasing the employment success of the LEP workforce and developing new workforce solutions for Texas businesses.

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