



Adult Education: An Economic Catalyst Hiding in Plain Sight

By Sharon Bonney, CEO, Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE)

County leaders across America are confronting many of the same challenges: employers struggling to find skilled workers, families working to escape poverty, communities seeking stronger pathways to economic mobility, and correctional systems working to reduce the cycle of incarceration and reentry.

There is one resource already operating in communities across the country that touches every one of these challenges: adult education.

Too often, adult education is viewed narrowly as a place where someone goes to earn a high school equivalency credential or learn English. Those services are critically important, but today's adult education system is much more. Adult education is workforce development. It is economic development. It is a pathway out of poverty. It strengthens families and communities, and for justice-involved individuals, education can dramatically improve the likelihood of successful reentry. For counties looking for strategies that simultaneously strengthen their workforce and their communities, adult education is an economic catalyst hiding in plain sight.

Building the Local Talent Pipeline

Employers across the country consistently tell us they need workers who can communicate, solve problems, use technology, learn new skills, and adapt as jobs change. Yet millions of adults need additional literacy, numeracy, English language, digital, or foundational skills to fully participate in that economy.

Adult education helps close that gap.

Local programs help adults improve foundational skills, earn high school equivalency credentials, learn English, develop digital skills, prepare for occupational training, transition into postsecondary education, and connect with careers. Increasingly, adult education programs are also partnering directly with employers, workforce systems, community colleges, apprenticeship programs, and industry partners to build pathways into family-sustaining jobs.

At the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE), our national network represents more than 100,000 members and 2,384 local programs serving approximately 3.2 million adult learners.

We believe those learners represent one of America's most important untapped talent pipelines.

When a county invests in the skills of its residents, the benefits extend well beyond the classroom. Workers become better positioned to fill local jobs and advance in their careers. Employers gain access to talent. Families gain greater economic stability. Communities gain residents who are better equipped to participate in the local economy.

Adult education should therefore be considered not simply an education expenditure, but an **economic and workforce development strategy**.

Breaking an Intergenerational Cycle

The impact becomes even more powerful when we look beyond a single learner. When an adult improves literacy, earns a credential, enters postsecondary education, or moves into a family-sustaining career, the trajectory of an entire household can change.

A parent who improves their own literacy is better equipped to support a child's education. A parent who earns a credential demonstrates to children that educational achievement is possible. A worker who advances from a low-wage position into a career with greater earning potential brings additional stability and opportunity into the home.

This is why adult education is fundamentally an intergenerational investment. COABE's work with policymakers highlights this connection: adult education develops literacy and numeracy skills that can help adults move toward family-sustaining employment and postsecondary education while strengthening families and disrupting intergenerational cycles. ([COABE](#))

For county leaders concerned about persistent poverty, the question should not only be how we alleviate today's hardship. We should also ask: What investments can change the trajectory of the next generation?

Adult education is one of them.

Education Is Also a Public-Safety Strategy

Perhaps nowhere is the return on this investment more striking than in correctional education.

County governments know the human and financial costs associated with incarceration and recidivism. Education provides an opportunity to intervene in that cycle by preparing individuals for employment and successful reintegration into their communities.

A landmark RAND analysis found that incarcerated adults who participated in correctional education had **43 percent lower odds of recidivating** than those who did not participate. RAND's subsequent analysis continued to find a significant reduction in recidivism associated with correctional education. ([RAND Corporation](#))
That matters enormously to counties.

When an individual leaves incarceration with stronger literacy skills, a high school equivalency credential, occupational preparation, and a pathway to employment, we are addressing more than education. We are addressing workforce participation, family reunification, economic stability and public safety.

Every successful reentry also represents something difficult to quantify: a person returning to a family and community with a genuine opportunity to build a different future.

County Leaders Can Help Connect the Pieces

Counties occupy a uniquely powerful position because so many of the systems adult learners encounter intersect at the local level.

Economic development, workforce boards, community colleges, human services, libraries, employers, correctional facilities, reentry programs, community organizations, and adult education providers may all be serving the same residents—but they are not always working together.

County leaders can help change that.

Invite your adult education provider into workforce and economic-development conversations. Connect programs with local employers experiencing workforce shortages. Include adult education in reentry strategies. Explore how adult education can complement community college, apprenticeship, career and technical education, and workforce initiatives.

Most importantly, **visit a program.**

Meet the learners. Talk with instructors. Ask local employers how they could partner with the program. See firsthand what happens when adults who may have believed opportunity had passed them by discover another pathway forward.

A National Opportunity to Celebrate Adult Education

There is no better time to begin than this September.

National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week will be celebrated September 14–18, 2026, bringing together adult learners, educators, employers, community partners and leaders across the country to showcase the impact of adult education. COABE is providing programs with resources, events, success stories, promotional materials, and tools to help communities participate in the national celebration.
([COABE](#))

We invite county commissioners, executives, supervisors, legislators, workforce leaders, and other local officials to join us.

Connect with COABE to learn how your county can participate in Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, or reach out directly to your local adult education program. Ask about visiting a classroom, meeting learners, issuing a proclamation, recognizing local educators and graduates, or bringing employers and community partners together to discuss how adult education can strengthen your local talent pipeline.

[COABE's National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week resources](#)

Adult education does something remarkable: **one investment can generate returns across multiple county priorities.**

It can help an employer find the skilled worker they need. It can help a parent move from poverty toward a family-sustaining career. It can help a child grow up in a home where education and opportunity look attainable. It can help a person returning from incarceration build a new life rather than return to the system.

And collectively, those individual transformations become something larger: stronger families, stronger employers, stronger local economies, and stronger communities.

This Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, we invite county leaders across America to discover the adult education programs already transforming lives in their own backyards—and to make them an integral part of their communities' economic future.