

# ProLiteracy Policy Update

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## Senate Panel Clears WIA Bill with Stronger Focus on Adult Literacy

A stronger focus would be maintained on adult literacy under a Workforce Investment Act reauthorization bill approved last week by a Senate committee, leading the adult education community to throw its support behind that version.

That emphasis, along with other provisions concerning funding and reporting, makes the Senate committee bill more favorable than the version approved in March by the full House, according to Garrett Murphy, policy consultant for the National Adult Education Professional Development Consortium and public policy chair of the National Coalition for Literacy.

“By and large, we do prefer the Senate version. There are some concerns we have, though they are not crucial,” Murphy told *RLP*. The Senate bill, S. 1021, cleared the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee May 18 by unanimous voice vote, with the key support of both Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) and Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), chairman and ranking minority member, respectively, of the panel.

Senate committee spokesman Craig Orfield told *RLP* the committee expects easy passage of the bill on the Senate floor, given the bipartisan support and lack of dissension in committee. Senate floor action has not yet been scheduled.

The adult literacy community “much prefers” the Senate language on the National Institute for Literacy, Murphy said. The Senate version is much closer to the original WIA, “which viewed NIFL as an adult education enterprise,” he said.

Both the Senate and House reauthorization bills refer to serving “children, youth and adults” throughout the NIFL section, but the Senate bill more clearly focuses on activities for adults than the House bill does, Murphy said.

“Lots of activities are of course also driven by what the [NIFL advisory] board decides to do,” he said, but the Senate bill “provides a lot of specific direction to looking at adult issues much more so than the House bill does.”

The Senate bill takes care of one thing the adult literacy community has sought for quite a while: restoring the 15 percent allowance for state leadership funds. The House bill maintains the 12.5 percent mark, which is what the funds were cut to when the Adult Education Act was renewed as WIA six years ago (*RLP*, March 17, p. 45).

Sentiment has built over the interceding years to restore that money to allow for capacity-building by adult education programs, Murphy said. The state leadership funds are used for professional development, both to improve instruction and administration.

While the adult literacy community generally favors the Senate bill, there are few places where the House bill is considered better.

For one thing, the Senate version would continue the incentive system whereby adult education, Labor Department and Perkins vocational education programs all have to contribute to an incentive fund, but incentive grants are awarded only to states where all three programs have exceeded their targets.

“Adult education people have been trying very hard to decouple adult education, because we have something like 22 states where we reached our targets, but the other programs have not, so we’re contributing to a fund but not realizing that much from it,” Murphy said.

The House bill would decouple the programs, ending a practice that has been in place since WIA began, he said.

### **Reporting Requirements**

Another problem in the Senate bill is a requirement that adult education programs report on the number of 16- to 18-year-olds out of school less than a year.

While Murphy said the rationale for that is understandable—trying to see if students are leaving school prematurely because of a “push-out effect” from the No Child Left Behind Act—finding that information would be burdensome.

It would be particularly burdensome, he said, in light of reduced administrative capacity that would result from provisions in both the Senate and House bills.

Both bills would require partner programs to contribute funds to support the One-Stop Career Centers, particularly the infrastructure of the One-Stops, which means states would lose some administrative money. “So with reduced administrative capacity, the notion that we can check all these schools and find out when students left them is very burdensome,” Murphy said.

The Senate bill is slightly more favorable in the One-Stop provision, allowing partners to negotiate on supporting the One-Stops, with the governor not getting involved unless an impasse is reached, at which time the governor would set the amount. The House version simply has states deciding how much each program will contribute and sets no limits. The Senate sets a limit of 1.5 percent of total program resources to contribute to One-Stop infrastructure.

One concern Murphy had with both bills is a requirement that adult education programs report earnings increases for program participants in an effort to prove program effectiveness. That would be difficult for states with privacy rules restricting use of this data and for those without unemployment insurance data, he said.

### **Faith-Based Hiring**

The Senate bill, S. 1021, does not contain the controversial provision in the House version allowing faith-based groups that run job training programs to hire people based on religion.

Murphy said the adult education field has had faith-based groups running programs for many years, but has not taken a position on whether religion should be an allowable criterion for hiring

decisions. “We’ve never had any problem dealing with faith-based programs,” Murphy said. “We just consider them another stripe of community-based service providers.”

Committee staffer Orfield said while there has been discussion about the provision, he does not expect anyone to try to add it on the Senate floor. That means it would become an issue for the House-Senate conference on the bills to resolve.

In other provisions, the Senate committee’s WIA bill calls for:

- putting more resources into out-of-school youth who need the most help;
- increasing aid for youth ages 16 to 21;
- improving access to job training services in rural and other under-served areas;
- expanding services to businesses, including small businesses, to make the workforce training system more responsive to their needs;
- strengthening links between One-Stop centers and the private sector, postsecondary education and training, social services and economic development systems; and
- ensuring access to workforce activities for people with disabilities.

*Contact:* Garrett Murphy, NCSDAE, (518) 339-6155; Senate HELP Committee, (202) 224-5375, <http://help.senate.gov>. See the Senate and House bills, S. 1021 and H.R. 27, at [www.congress.gov](http://www.congress.gov).

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