

Of policies and promises

The tenuous nature of adult literacy stands revealed at the end of 2001.

The year began with promise in Canada when the January Speech from the Throne identified adult literacy as a priority within a Skills and Learning Agenda. Groups in every province mobilized themselves to offer some possible direction. Eleven months later, after a flurry of consultation between the federal government and groups across the country, there has been no official policy statement indicating how this priority will be implemented. So, we wait with a mixture of hope and concern. We have heard some policy makers say that everything has changed since September 11. However, there has been no lessening of the need for learning; if anything, perhaps a greater urgency to ensure that all citizens can access and understand information that relates to their well-being and the preservation of a way of life.

Interestingly, in both the U.S. and the U.K., funds were not reduced for ABE after September 11, despite initial fears. The U.K. has moved ahead with its national strategy, implementing an awareness campaign and a curriculum and seeking a cadre of new teachers to reach the targeted 750,000 learners by 2004. While it is early to comment on the strategy, regular updates are posted on the web site of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

American providers have celebrated the maintenance of funding although some analysts have pointed out that holding the line translates into reduction in terms of real dollars. Still, one event in the U.S. bears attention.

Just before American Thanksgiving in late November, the Massachusetts Legislature cut state funding to adult basic education by \$13 million, or 44%. Funding would have run out in January or February for most publicly-funded programs.

On December 13, the Legislature passed a supplemental budget that restored \$12.5M. How did this happen? NLA Moderator David Rosen credits the “organization, collaboration, leadership, and a cultivated climate of advocacy at the grass roots level” of the Massachusetts Adult Education Community.

In a mid-December posting to the NLA listserv, Rosen described the history over the past decade of the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) and its predecessor, the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Literacy. Among their accomplishments, he cited encouraging practitioners to educate policy makers at state and federal levels about the importance of adult literacy /basic education (including ESOL). He noted relationships that programs have built with legislators through letters and post cards, phone calls, visits, invitations to attend graduation and more; and he highlighted the growth of adult learner involvement.

The Massachusetts coalition has a Public Policy Committee and regional committees on media, collaboration and legislative options, and multiple ways of reaching members rapidly. These tools allowed the adult education community to mobilize within two days of the budget cuts “to put together a press briefing at the State House with a panel of 12 major business, labor, foundation and adult learner leaders. Everyone spoke briefly and persuasively. They all urged restoration of funding. The State House hearing room was overflowing. At least six media outlets showed up, including a major TV station.” Business and union representatives included Verizon, IBM, Associated Industries of Massachusetts, The Massachusetts Business Roundtable, the Carpenters Union, SEIU, the AFL-CIO, and the Teamsters Union.

The restoration was celebrated as a victory for adult basic education. Rosen said it showed that with organization, leadership, and determination, adult literacy education can make gains at the state level -- and maintain them; he suggested that “advocacy must be seen as part of every practitioner's job: teacher, tutor, administrator, researcher, curriculum developer, librarian, and others,” and noted that “advocacy is an excellent way for students to learn about democracy in action.”* He underscored the impact of student voices on legislators.

To an outsider, the Massachusetts story is a cautionary tale. Despite being one of the best-supported and best organized providers of ABE in the U.S., the community was caught by surprise when the cut came without warning, the result of internal state politics (not September 11!)

The ABE infrastructure likely surprised the legislature in return. Still, a watcher can only wonder how secure any ABE agenda actually is if the strongest among them is subject to political whim. We are no strangers to political whim in Canada. The province of Ontario expended millions of dollars in the 1990s shifting adult literacy from the Education Ministry to its own Basic Skills Ministry and back, and radically narrowing the focus of basic skills provision within the LBS framework.

Still a lesson from Massachusetts for Canadians is that building coherent coalitions at the provincial level is one safeguard against whimsicality. Some of us are further ahead than others on that score.

In this issue

This issue of LACMF has a chronology of adult literacy policy in Canada from 1899 to 2001; an insert highlighting the 2001 Summer Institute on adult literacy and learning disabilities; an excerpt from a new Working Paper on cognitive tools and literacy acquisition; and reports on some innovative web-based ABE materials. There are the regular features of conference listing, local happenings, resources and reviews. These are our contribution to ongoing policy development. [LS]

Source: David Rosen,
Massachusetts Update,
nla@lists.literacytent.org, 12/14/2001.

***Following the Mass. funding cut/restoration, several teachers and curriculum developers created some lessons and materials to help students understand the processes of government which were directly affecting their lives. These, and other campaign-related materials can be found at <http://www.sabes.org/budget.htm>**