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LAO's Report on Adult Education Shines Light on Urgent Problem: Some Recommendations Hit the Mark, While Others Miss It

The Legislative Analyst's Office recently released a new paper, "Restructuring California's Adult Education System," which calls out the urgent need to re-think this state's adult education program. The subject could not be more important or timely, particularly as funding for the program continues to erode.

Adult education has historically funded numbers of activities but two are most central to its mission: basic skills education (basic English, math, and English as a Second language training, including supporting individuals to acquire a high school diploma or GED) and short-term vocational education. As the LAO's report suggests, both functions are in need of re-examination, however this brief focuses only on basic skills education.

Why? Because weak basic skills may be *the* primary barrier preventing many Californians from accessing and succeeding in any form of high quality post-high school education and training. There is also evidence that, as it is currently organized, California's "system" of basic skills education is failing most students. That system includes the adult schools, non-credit programs in the community colleges, and for-credit "developmental" community college programs.

The failure of California's basic skills system is particularly tragic given mounting evidence about what works. First and foremost, what works is reducing the time students have to spend in remediation and providing them the supports they need to succeed. Principles of an effective program include:

- *Integration:* The Adult Education program, community college noncredit basic skills programs, and community college credit basic skills programs must be tightly integrated so students are not forced to take duplicative, disconnected courses.
- *Opportunity:* Basic skills courses should link students to career technical and academic pathways that provide them the opportunity to continue their education.
- *Flexibility:* Rigidly defining students by "levels" slows progress and wastes time and money; instead interventions should be flexibly tailored to the needs of students.
- *Student support:* Basic skills students are much more likely to be successful if they receive adequate counseling, peer group support, and financial aid.

When viewed through this lens, many of the LAO's recommendations appear to be right on the mark while others might erect new barriers to student success:

- *The single most important recommendation in the report is the call to maintain a dedicated state-funding stream for basic skills education.* Most other states make this investment; California has historically been a leader in this regard. Thousands of Californians will be unable to access good training and good jobs without basic skills education.
- The LAO's recommendation for a linked data system with common student identifiers would also be a significant step toward an integrated basic skills system with real accountability for its outcomes.
- Conversely, the LAO's suggestion that a clear line be established between adult education and collegiate education could be a step backward, undermining some of the most successful programs that blend basic skills and collegiate content (allowing, for example, students to learn English and math in the context of acquiring vocational skills). Rather than erecting barriers, California's goal should be to integrate adult education and community college programs, creating a seamless system that supports individuals to achieve their educational and career goals as quickly as possible.

Overall, however, the LAO should be congratulated for shining light on an issue of such importance for so many Californians and challenging us to take up the discussion of how to reform basic skills education.