

Supporting Immigrant Integration via Adult Education and Workforce Development Programs

Recommendations for the Task Force on New Americans

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BY JACOB HOFSTETTER AND MARGIE MCHUGH

In late 2022, the Task Force on New Americans (TFNA) was launched pursuant to President Joe Biden's Executive Order 14012.¹ Led by the White House's Domestic Policy Council (DPC), the task force's mission is to strengthen and coordinate federal, state, and local efforts to support the integration and inclusion of immigrants and refugees. The Migration Policy Institute's National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy (NCIIP) has long argued for the need to create an office within the White House to analyze immigrant integration challenges and opportunities and identify ways the federal government can address them. The creation of the TFNA is a welcome development in this regard, and its efforts will hopefully model new and effective ways the federal government can build its capacities to understand and address integration issues that flow from the country's immigration policies.

Adult skills programs, which encompass programs managed primarily by the adult education and workforce development systems, provide many critical services that directly aid the integration of immigrants, including English courses, civic classes, and workforce preparation and training activities.

Drawing from NCIIP's extensive record of research, policy analysis, and technical assistance for government entities, this document describes pressing issues related to adult skills programs and offers recommendations for how the task force can address them. It is part of a broader set of recommendations for the TFNA that also covers topics such as K-12 education and language access and can be found at www.migrationpolicy.org/research/task-force-new-americans.

Adult skills programs, which encompass programs managed primarily by the adult education and workforce development systems, provide many critical services that directly aid the integration of immigrants, including English courses, civic classes, and workforce preparation and training activities. Despite their crucial role, persistent challenges limit the potential of these systems at the federal, state, and local levels to effectively support immigrants' integration and economic mobility. Addressing these challenges requires federal policymakers and agency leaders to both recognize the demographic transformation that has occurred in the

¹ White House, "Executive Order on Restoring Faith in Our Legal Immigration Systems and Strengthening Integration and Inclusion Efforts for New Americans" (executive order, February 2, 2021).

country's adult learner and worker populations in recent decades due to high rates of immigration and to strategically reorient policies governing these systems and their program designs to better reflect the needs of their intended users, a disproportionate share of whom are now immigrant adults.

The following recommendations are offered to support the task force's deliberations on how to address challenges in this critically important arena:

- ▶ **The TFNA should model improved federal governance approaches for adult skills and economic integration via its own structure, consultation processes, and record of deliberations and recommendations on these issues.** With knowledge and responsibility for adult skills and economic integration issues residing in multiple federal agencies, the TFNA's exploration of these issues should be organized to tap system experts in the Departments of Education (ED), Labor (DOL), and Health and Human Services (HHS)—and beyond, as feasible—and their key state and local partners. Given the lack of research regarding the effectiveness and relevance of federal program designs in meeting the skill development and broader economic integration needs of key subpopulations of immigrants, agency teams should systematically survey their state and local agency partners and other experts to collect information on challenges and opportunities experienced in meeting community needs and recommendations for building necessary system capacities. Compilation of a public report that provides results from these surveys and recommendations for federal agency efforts in response to issues raised should be a key task force deliverable by the end of 2023. In light of the overlapping goals and mission of agency efforts to implement Executive Order 13985 on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government, agency leads for those efforts should be consulted or directly participate in these TFNA efforts.²
- ▶ **The TFNA should produce policy and program recommendations reflecting concrete strategies to expand access to adult skills programs that support successful integration trajectories and address the needs of key subpopulations of adult learners and workers.** While modeling and conducting the type of inter- and intra-agency review processes necessary to fulfill the TFNA's charge, the task force should also consider a range of measures to strengthen federal policy and program designs in this arena, along with service access and reach. These include:
 - **Expanding resources for adult education programs that promote immigrant integration.** English language acquisition programs funded by Title II of the *Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act* (WIOA) and managed by adult education providers meet less than 5 percent of the need for adult English language learning in the country.³ With 95 percent of those with a learning need not served by existing programs, the TFNA—in collaboration with the Department of Education and the Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education (OCTAE)—should analyze and make recommendations on new approaches to meet the learning needs

2 White House, "Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government" (executive order, January 20, 2021).

3 Margie McHugh and Catrina Doxsee, *English Plus Integration: An Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

of a far larger share of the target service population. This should include proposals to increase investments in existing service models, including those that respond to specific integration or employment-focused needs. The president's annual budget, congressional appropriations, and any future reauthorization of WIOA should all be targets for such TFNA recommendations. Other approaches should also be considered: for example, programs that provide integration information, service planning, and system navigation support can provide an on-ramp into existing services and better prepare adult learners for successful skill-building trajectories. Expanding programs that support independent or semi-independent learning should also be considered—including zone models that can provide conversation groups, coaching sessions, and/or support in addressing integration challenges on a flexible basis to adults with diverse learning needs and interests.

- **Improving immigrants' access to workforce development system services.** Governed under WIOA Title I, local workforce development boards manage the delivery of workforce preparation and training activities across the country via one-stop American Job Centers and other programs. Immigrants and refugees often struggle to access these services due to a lack of awareness of their availability, prerequisites for participation (such as advanced proficiency in English), and a lack of language access to system services. These challenges persist despite WIOA designating individuals who have limited proficiency in English as a "priority of service" population. The TFNA should engage with the Labor Department to develop approaches that significantly reduce the barriers to workforce services that LEP individuals face and ensure fidelity in implementation of the law's service priority for basic skills deficient individuals. As part of such efforts, the Labor Department should develop and issue guidance and policies to support serving greater numbers of immigrants via WIOA Title I, including foreign-trained professionals affected by skill underutilization.
- **Leveraging demographic data reflecting key relevant characteristics of immigrant adult learners and workers to improve the design of adult skills programs.** Educational and workforce development programs aiming to support the integration of immigrant adults cannot employ a one-size-fits-all approach. For example, significant shares of immigrants have low levels of formal education and little to no proficiency in English, while others have graduate degrees or professional certifications from their countries of origin but can lack professional level English, specific coursework, or experience other barriers to obtaining professional licenses in the United States. Properly orienting and resourcing adult skills programs will require the use of publicly available data, such as Census data, to better understand the size of immigrant populations in different regions as well as their levels of formal education, English proficiency, and other relevant characteristics. To support this work, the task force and the Departments of Education and Labor should analyze and make recommendations for how available data can be better leveraged to estimate needs for educational and training services among local subpopulations, including those with basic skill deficiencies as defined under WIOA. The task force should also make recommendations for how these data can be better utilized in WIOA planning and review processes at the

federal and state levels to promote more equitable access to existing educational and training programs for key subpopulations of adult learners and workers.

- **Examining how education and training programs can better measure integration and how communities can build more effective integration-service ecosystems.** The primary outcomes the federal government uses to measure successful immigrant integration are gains in English proficiency (measured by standardized testing), employment, and naturalization. Strictly focusing on such measures overlooks many critical markers of social and economic integration and limits the government’s ability to understand other interventions that promote successful integration. As part of TFNA’s efforts, the Education Department should provide thought leadership and consult with field leaders, experts, and service providers to better understand policy and program interventions—such as the use of navigators or short-term integration programs—that may be particularly successful in promoting integration. Building off the Network for Integrating New Americans initiative sponsored by OCTAE several years ago, the task force should also examine how the federal government can encourage the development of state and local networks or “integration zones” among local systems and community organizations to better support immigrants’ integration.⁴
- **Drawing lessons from existing integration programs to guide the development of expanded or future efforts.** The Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) program, which was established under WIOA and is overseen by OCTAE, is the primary educational and training program funded by the federal government that is intended to directly support the combined economic, linguistic, and civic integration of immigrant adults. Due to its design and requirements under WIOA, the program has faced implementation and accessibility challenges, but it has also led to the development of many innovative models for integration programs. The lessons from IELCE have not been widely considered or diffused at a national level, despite their relevance to any efforts to develop new integration programs—and especially those intending to pair workforce development services with English and integration instruction. The task force should also seek to learn from IELCE’s successes by engaging with OCTAE’s Enhancing Access for Refugee and New Americans (EARN) project and innovative IELCE programs on the local level as models for how federal funds can support integration.
- **Examining weaknesses in data used to measure performance of adult education and skills programs and provide recommendations for improvement.** WIOA’s performance measures can provide a disincentive for adult education and workforce development programs to serve adults with multiple challenges—many of whom are immigrants who may have low levels of English proficiency or low or very low levels of formal education. Creating a fair basis for comparison of the performance of WIOA programs across states is intended to be supported via a Statistical Adjustment Model (SAM), which states should be able to use to renegotiate their performance targets based on the characteristics of who they are serving.

⁴ For more information on the Network for Integrating New Americans initiative, see the [announcement of the Network](#) from the White House, the project’s [theoretical framework](#), and [this repository of resources from the project](#) from World Education.

In theory, the SAM should allow WIOA programs to receive credit and relaxed performance measures for serving those most in need. However, the implementation of the SAM has been largely ineffective at even capturing—much less serving as a tool to ameliorate—the inequities that WIOA's performance measures can trigger. The TFNA, perhaps consulting with those tasked with implementing Executive Order 13985 at the Departments of Labor and Education, should place a special focus on examining the SAM's shortcomings and provide recommendations that would allow it to be more effective in promoting equity in WIOA programming. Concurrently, the TFNA and relevant leaders at the Departments of Education and Labor should explore new tools and mechanisms that can leverage population- and program-level data to improve the delivery of adult skill services to immigrants facing the greatest challenges to their economic mobility.

- **Ensuring equitable and effective adult education program designs for immigrant parents with young or elementary-school-age children.** WIOA's workforce-centered performance measures for adult education programs have led to a decline in parent-focused programs that previously played a major role in supporting the integration of immigrant parents and helped them prepare their children for kindergarten entry and future school success. Custodial parents not seeking to work outside the home can be extremely risky for federally funded programs to serve since four of the six performance measures mandated under WIOA measure program participants' employment-related outcomes, which parents who are fulltime caregivers and not employed cannot meet. Yet WIOA specifically includes parents as a key target for adult education services, making this an urgent disconnect for the task force to explore and develop solutions to correct. As the pandemic-induced shift to remote education demonstrated, the unmet learning needs of parents can have serious impacts on the academic success of their children. Immigrant parents are more likely to face these barriers than U.S.-born parents, making this an important equity issue that should be considered in collaboration with agency teams making recommendations under Executive Order 13985.⁵ The TFNA should explore and advance new program models to meet these needs as well as reforms to WIOA's design. With regard to the former, HHS should identify ways to expand two-generation program models that address the child development and kindergarten readiness concerns of immigrant parents through services for young children while also introducing the parents to local service ecosystems that can support their own education and skill attainment goals. Among other efforts, the Education Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education can better resource and consider expanding existing requirements for provision of parent-focused programming for parents who are LEP and/or have low levels of formal education. Regarding constraints imposed by WIOA's accountability measures, the TFNA should work with the Education Department's senior leadership, including at OCTAE, to promote reforms to WIOA's Title II, such as exempting custodial parents of young and elementary-school-age children enrolled in adult education programs from the law's employment-focused measures. The department should also require state WIOA plans to adopt stronger data-driven approaches to ensure parents who are LEP and/or have lower levels of formal education experience equitable access to adult education services. Federal

5 Jacob Hofstetter and Margie McHugh, *Immigrant and U.S.-Born Parents of Young and Elementary-School-Age Children: Key Sociodemographic Characteristics* (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2021).

approaches that make individuals with less than nine or five years of formal education, or with none at all, visible in program data and accountability measures should also be considered to improve equity in parent-focused programming.

- **Expanding assistance for immigrant and refugee youth to support their educational and career trajectories.** Young immigrants such as Dreamers and recently arrived youth often require educational and workforce development support to ensure they can integrate into American society and achieve economic mobility over the course of their careers. However, high schools, postsecondary institutions, workforce development providers, and adult education programs too often lack the capacities to address the specific needs of this population, particularly youth who have recently arrived in the United States and are of working age. The TFNA should analyze weaknesses across these system elements and provide recommendations to address them, while also considering strategies to build networks and support service ecosystems that can address the unique needs of this population.
- **Strengthening research and policies to assist foreign-trained professionals affected by skill underutilization.** Despite having advanced levels of education or professional skills obtained abroad, millions of immigrants continue to be underemployed in low-skilled jobs. This phenomenon, also known as brain waste, imposes significant economic costs on both foreign-trained professionals (in terms of forgone income) as well as the communities and states in which they live (in terms of both their economies' not benefitting from those immigrants' skills and lost tax revenues). The TFNA should examine research-informed policies and practices that can assist these immigrant professionals in moving into higher-skilled employment. As part of this work, the TFNA should engage with those at the Labor Department who are implementing the *Bridging the Gap for New Americans Act* and consider how to also make career pathways accessible to all immigrants.

Related Migration Policy Institute Resources

English Plus Integration: An Instructional Paradigm for Immigrant Adult Learners to Support Integration.

This policy brief outlines the negative impacts the implementation of WIOA has had on the ability of adult education programs to promote the integration of immigrants. The brief includes recommendations for a new programmatic approach—English Plus Integration—that the federal government along with states and localities could leverage to better support the integration trajectories of immigrants and their families.

The IELCE Program: Understanding Its Design and Challenges in Meeting Immigrant Learners' Needs.

This report describes the purpose and design of the IELCE program—the primary educational and training program supported by the federal government whose stated intention is to promote the civic, linguistic, and economic integration of immigrant adults. Although the IELCE program offers important models for promoting the economic integration of immigrants, its implementation also demonstrates the challenges related to accessibility, practicality, and relevance that can result from not ensuring flexibility and equity in integration programs' design.

This set of recommendations was prepared by Margie McHugh, Director of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) National Center on Immigrant Integration Policy (NCIIP), and by Jacob Hofstetter, an Associate Policy Analyst with NCIIP.

For more information on NCIIP's work, visit the MPI website at www.migrationpolicy.org/integration or contact MPI at info@migrationpolicy.org.

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