



COLORADO
Department of Education

Adult Education and Literacy Grant Program Evaluation Report

Submitted to:

**Office of the Governor
Colorado State Board of Education
Colorado House Education Committee
Colorado Senate Education Committee
The Joint Budget Committee of the Colorado General Assembly
Colorado Senate Business, Labor, and Technology Committee
Colorado House Business, Labor, Economic, and Workforce Development Committee**

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Executive Summary

Purpose

In an effort to meet workforce, educational attainment, and poverty-reduction goals, the state of Colorado authorized the Adult Education and Literacy (AELA) Grant Act Program in 2014. Adult learners targeted through adult education and literacy programs lack basic English literacy and numeracy skills, a high school diploma, and, therefore, job opportunities that allow for their self-sufficiency. Grantees are adult education providers, which may include school districts, community-based nonprofit agencies, state institutions of higher education, libraries and Indian tribes. The Adult Education Initiatives Office at the Colorado Department of Education oversees this grant.

Learners Served

In the 2020-2021 program year, the AELA grant program served 1,302 adults 17 and older that were not enrolled in a public or private secondary school and: lacked a high school diploma or its equivalent; or were in need of English language instruction; or lacked sufficient mastery of the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary to enable the person to function effectively in the workplace. Grant recipients served areas along the front range and in the southwest corner of the state.

Outcomes

It is notable that despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 291 learners achieved a post-secondary outcome, 137 achieved a secondary credential or its equivalent, 260 achieved a test-based outcome, and 200 achieved employment or accessed Workforce Development services. Because some learners achieved multiple outcomes, the total outcomes achieved, 935, when compared to the funds expended for the year, \$695,095, returns a per outcome cost of \$743.41. Per learner funding equated to a state average of \$533.86. This investment is less than the per pupil cost typically associated with other partners in the K-12 system.

Conclusion

Despite the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees were able to serve 180% of the number of adults served in the prior program year. As a result of participation in grantee programs, adult learners achieved various positive outcomes, including attaining a high school equivalency diploma, entering post-secondary education or training and obtaining employment. In consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Adult Education Initiatives will continue to work with grantees to continue their emphasis on digital literacy and inclusion to ensure that equitable access is provided to adult learners, regardless of the circumstances, in the coming program year. The office will also consider changes to future grant applications that promote broader geographic distribution of grantees into currently underserved areas, as well as changes to the data collection that would allow disaggregated data reporting.



The Adult Education and Literacy Act (AELA) Grant Program

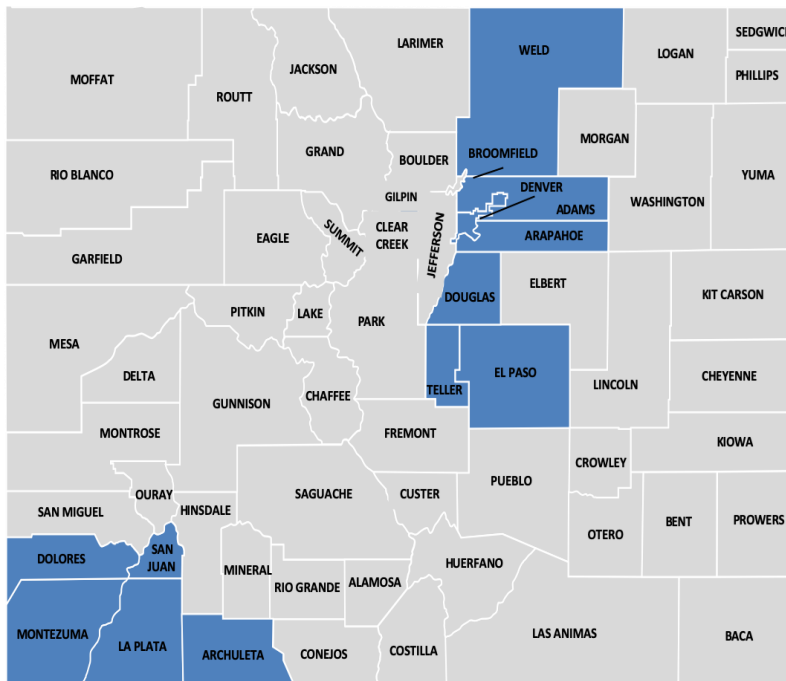
The Adult Education and Literacy Act program Article 10 of the Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 22, was enacted in 2014. The Act established the Adult Education and Literacy Act (AELA) Grant Program that awards state funds for public and private nonprofit adult education and literacy programs that serve as lead agencies and fiscal agents for Adult Workforce Partnerships that must consist of at least one local education provider, one postsecondary education or training provider and one adult workforce development partner.

Program Implementation

For the 2020-2021 program year, the AELA grant program awarded \$840,811 to the same eight organizations funded in the previous year. The eight grantees represent four community colleges, one school district, and three community-based organizations serving Adams, Arapahoe/Douglas, Denver, El Paso, Teller, and Weld Local Workforce Development Areas in addition to the Rural Resort and Southwest Sub-Areas within the Colorado Rural Workforce Consortium (see the map below for the counties served).

Grant recipients in the 20-21 funding cycle were largely clustered along the front range and in the southwest corner of the state. Increasing access to services in more rural communities across the state where adult numeracy and literacy outcomes are low is a strategy worth exploring in future funding cycles. The awarded grant funds were used to support two primary goals:

AELA Grantee Service Areas, 2018-21



1. To enable more low-income, low-literacy adults to ultimately achieve economic self-sufficiency (supporting a family without public or private assistance) through providing services and support throughout the steps of their training and employment preparation; and
2. To foster partnerships and leverage resources between state, regional, and local agencies and industry leaders that assist adults in attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills leading to additional skill acquisition, postsecondary credentials, and employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the way partnerships were maintained and services were delivered to adult learners in the 2020-2021 program year. Classes were primarily delivered in-person in brick-and-mortar locations, though grantees continued to offer distance learning and hybrid options and kept contingency plans in place in the case that classes would need to be moved entirely online. The challenges of distance learning fell into three main categories:



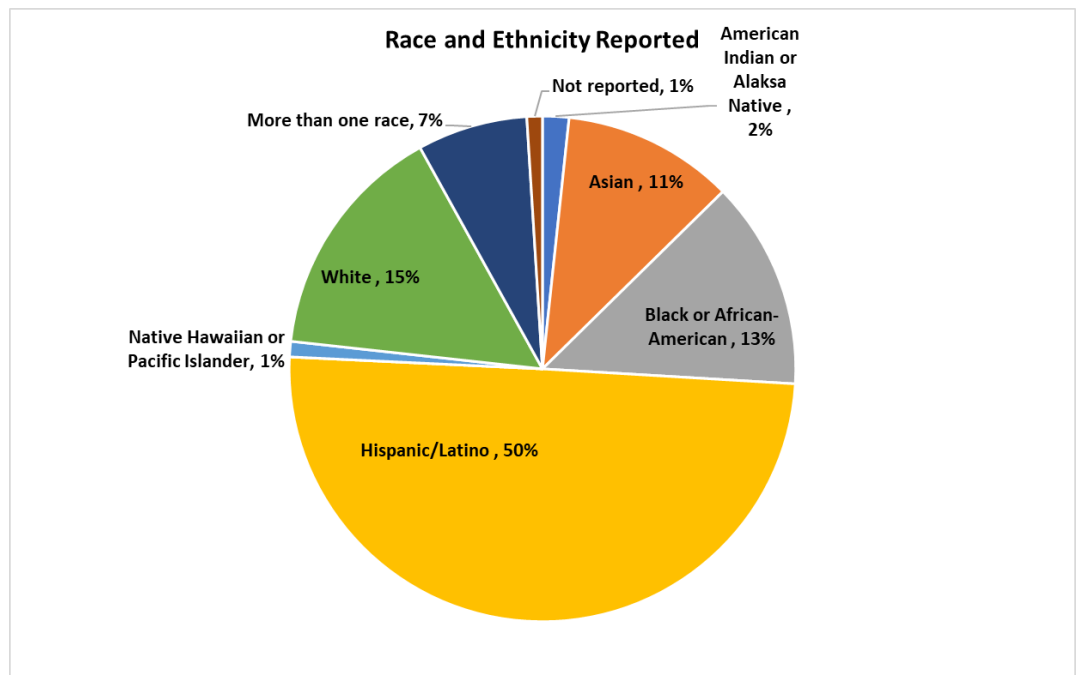
Lessons learned from the rapid transition in the 19-20 program year made more apparent the digital inequities Colorado’s adult learners, as well as instructors and counselors within the adult education field, experienced.

Adult Learner Demographics

One-thousand, three-hundred and two adults were served in AELA-funded programs in 2020-21 which is a 79% increase from the previous year. The same 8 grantees were funded in 2020-21 as in the prior year.

The majority of adult learners, 54%, had never participated in adult education in prior years indicating that programs were successful in expanding access to new learners not previously served under the grant. Forty-nine percent were enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, which offer instruction to read, write, and speak in English. Thirty-three percent were enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes which focused on instruction below the High School Level; and 18% were enrolled in Adult Secondary Education (ASE) classes which focus on instruction at the High School level as well as transitioning to post-secondary education or training and employment.

Race and ethnicity data reported at entry, show that participants identified largely as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) which positions the grant program as a key partner within Colorado’s Talent Development System for closing racial disparities through increased access to career navigation, training programs in high-demand career pathways, and industry-recognized and post-secondary credential attainment.

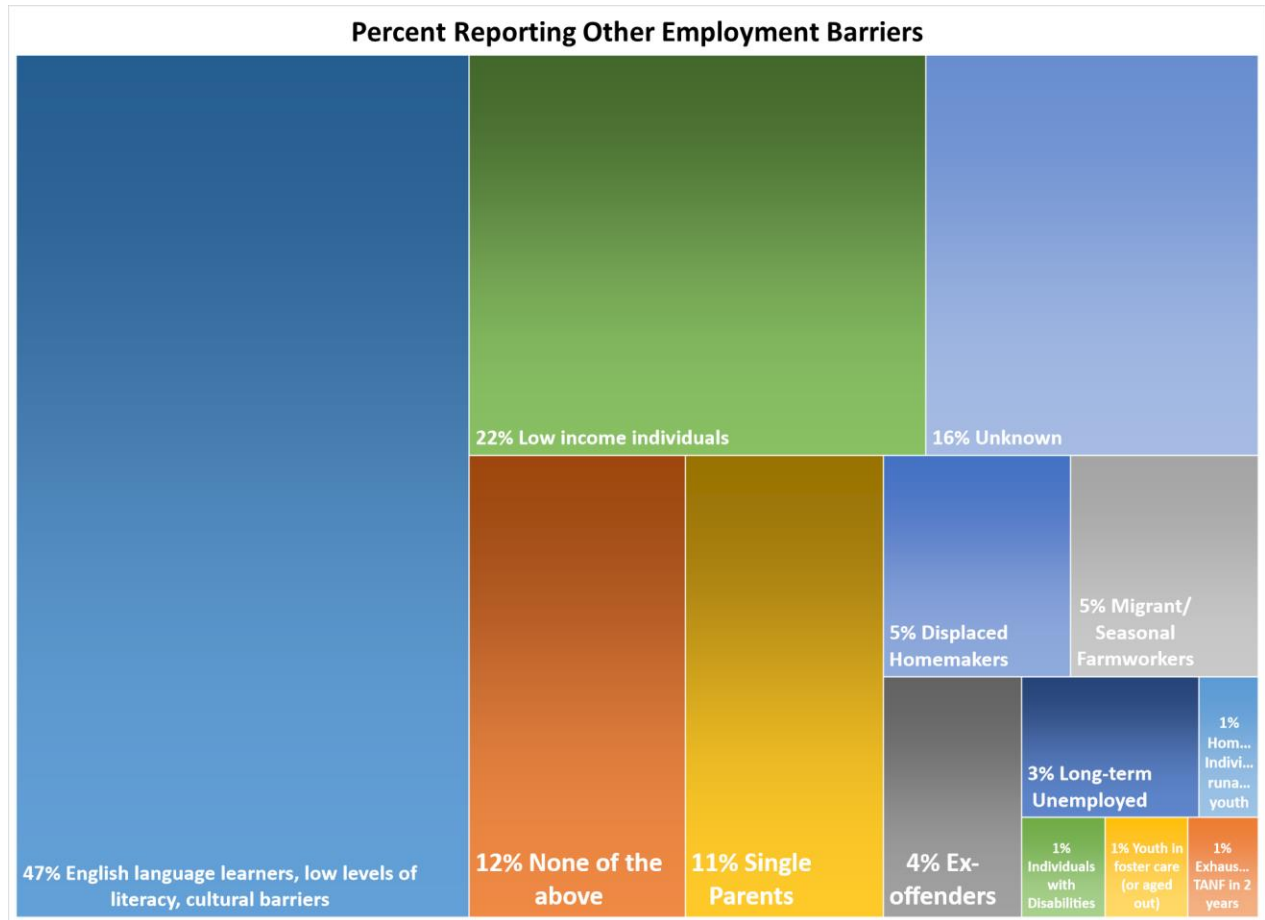


Other demographics characteristics showed that most adult learners served, 61% were between the ages of 25-44, followed by 22% age 17-24, 11% age 45-54, and the remainder above the age of 54 or with no age reported. Those who identified as females (72%) participated in services when compared to those who identified as males (27%). Less than 1% of learners declined to report gender.



The majority of learners, 38%, were already employed while participating in classes. Thirty percent were unemployed and the remaining 32% were not looking for work or declined to report an employment status when starting classes. Because employment status is collected when learners start classes, no data was available to measure the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the employment status of adults participating in the programs.

Learners in the program reported facing significant barriers to employment. Forty-seven percent reported that limited English, cultural barriers, or low literacy and numeracy skills were barriers to becoming employed or improving their employment (full-time work, promotions, wage



increases, better hours, less seasonal variation, etc.). Twenty-two percent reported having a low income as a significant barrier to employment. Smaller percentages reported other employment barriers.

The demographic data suggested that the AELA grant program is a promising place to target resources for building career pathways to transition adult learners with low-wage jobs with large concentrations of immigrants and people of color into higher wage and less vulnerable jobs.

Evaluation Methodology

Prior to the start of each program year in the grant cycle, grantees submit enrollment and performance target projections to the Adult Education Initiatives (AEI) Office for review and approval. At the mid-year point, grantees report on progress toward these targets for the first six months of the program year (July – December). Grantees again report on final progress (July – June) for the full year annually between July and August of the following program year. For each mid-year and annual report, grantees submit aggregate counts of learners served by various demographic criteria and aggregate counts of learners who achieved any of the following 7 outcomes:



- Pre- and post-assessment gain (equivalent of advancing 2 traditional grade levels)
- High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma attainment
- Post-secondary education or training entrance
- Post-secondary education or training completion
- Post-secondary education or training credential attainment
- Obtaining employment
- Participation in a Workforce Development Program

Mid and end of year reports also include a series of narrative questions about program implementation and progress which may change over time depending on each grantee’s focus for the year or external circumstances that impact the grant. For the 2020-2021 program year, the end of year reports was accompanied by a phone conversation between each grantee and AEI staff to talk through the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on programming. Overwhelmingly grantees reported that the closures due to COVID-19, as well as fears learners and staff felt when returning for limited in-person services prevented grantees from making significant progress toward their goals.

Typically, grantees are asked to use their end of year progress evaluation to help set targets for subsequent years of the grant; however, due to the extreme challenges grantees faced during the year, three decisions were made to support grantees, and their adult learners, in addressing those challenges:

1. The AEI Office allowed grantees to carry over unspent 2019-2020 funds through June of 2021.
2. The AELA grant, typically run on a 3-year cycle, was extended for a fourth year with funding distributed based on the same allocation methodology from the prior year.
3. Grantees were not required to submit a full continuation application for funds, and were allowed to keep their 2019-2020 enrollments and performance targets for the fourth year of the grant cycle. T

Performance Results

Grantees set aggressive targets at the beginning of the 2020-2021 program year, projecting that 982 outcomes would be achieved by the end of the year, a 38% increase from the number of outcomes achieved in the prior year. Ninety-Five percent of the statewide total outcomes target was achieved.

Performance Outcome Type	Statewide Total Achieved	Percent of Statewide Projected Target Achieved	Change From Previous Year
Pre- and post-assessment gain (equivalent of advancing 2 traditional grade levels)	307	113%	↑ 80%
High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma attainment	137	129%	↑ 158%
Post-secondary education or training entrance	165	104%	↑ 5%
Post-secondary education or training completion	79	82%	↑ 46%
Post-secondary education or training credential attainment	47	54%	↑ 9%
Obtaining employment	115	85%	↑ 17%
Participation in a Workforce Development Program	85	52%	↓ 44%

The year 2020-21 saw a great increase in pre- and post-assessment gains, as well as high school equivalency diploma attainment and post-secondary training entrance. Post-secondary education or training completion outcomes were also successful, increasing by 46% from the prior year. Post-secondary education or training credential attainment showed a slight increase, while employment outcomes showed a moderate increase.



There were fewer instances of participation in a workforce development program, with outcomes decreasing by 44%.

Across the 8 grantees funded in 2020-2021, most were able to achieve at least 60% of their projected target due to the pandemic. The table below shows the percent of each target each grantee reported as achieved for 2020-2021. Cells marked as “NA” represent an outcome which the grantee did not select to pursue.

Grantee	Test gain	HSE Diploma	Post-secondary entrance	Post-secondary completion	Post-secondary credential attainment	Employment	Served in a Workforce Development Program
Aims Community College	67%	72%	45%	NA	NA	30%	4%
Asian Pacific Development Center	124%	0%	100%	NA	NA	39%	57%
Community College of Aurora	NA*	40%	169%	0%	0%	19%	0%
Community College of Denver	136%	0%	90%	0%	0%	NA	NA
Colorado Mountain College	100%	486%	264%	271%	143%	300%	208%
Durango Adult Education Center	55%	29%	33%	0%	NA	400%	0%
Mile High Youth Corps	36%	17%	100%	65%	65%	62%	66%
Adult and Family Literacy at School District 11	29%	50%	45%	55%	47%	17%	11%

*While Community College of Aurora did not set a target for test gains in the 20-21 program year, they were able to achieve 65 test gains.

It is notable that despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, 291 learners achieved a post-secondary outcome, 137 achieved a secondary credential or its equivalent, 260 achieved a test-based outcome, and 200 achieved employment or accessed Workforce Development services. Because some learners achieved multiple outcomes, the total outcomes achieved (935) when compared to the funds expended for the year, \$695,095, returns a per outcome cost of \$743.41. Per learner funding equated to a state average of \$533.86. This investment is less than the per pupil cost typically associated with other partners in the K-12 system.

Due to the way the data is collected, it is not possible to say how many individual learners achieved an outcome nor is it possible to disaggregate the data by the learner demographics described earlier in this report. In future years of the grant, considerations could be made to collect disaggregated data to better demonstrate the key role AELA grant programs play in closing known equity gaps and providing language and literacy programs that assist job seekers and underemployed workers to be better qualified for jobs that have higher levels of compensation and benefits.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The Adult Education and Literacy Act grant program’s purpose is to assist adults in gaining the necessary skills and credentials to be more successful in the workplace. Grantees served adults with significant barriers to employment; over 47% of adults reported that limited English, cultural barriers, or low literacy and numeracy skills as barriers. Despite the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees were still able to serve 1,302 adults, which was 179% of the 724 adults served in 2019-2020. As a result of participation in grantee programs, adult learners achieved various positive outcomes, including attaining a high school equivalency



diploma, entering post-secondary education, or training and obtaining employment. The total outcomes achieved returns a very low per outcome cost of \$743.41.

The 2021-2022 program year will begin a new grant cycle. In consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Adult Education Initiatives will work with grantees to increase their emphasis on digital literacy and inclusion to ensure that equitable access is provided to adult learners, regardless of the circumstances.

In the next grant application cycle, the Adult Education Initiatives Office may consider ways to have more geographic distribution of the grantees so there could be expansion into underserved counties, as well as opportunities for outcomes-based grantee funding. The office also plans to modify the grant data collection requirements and methods, so data can be easily disaggregated and used to demonstrate progress achieved in collaboration with workforce partners.