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# ADULT EDUCATION COMES OF AGE

## NEW APPROACH BLENDS BASIC ACADEMICS AND JOB TRAINING

**THE CITY OF ROCHESTER** in southeastern Minnesota is home to just 120,000 residents, but it draws upwards of one million visitors a year. Most of them come to seek medical care at the Mayo Clinic, which employs 34,000 people and anchors the city's remarkably stable economy.

City leaders have a plan to double Rochester's population over the next two decades. Ground is being broken on hotels, condo developments, and upscale facilities designed to draw patients and new residents alike. Developers from Abu Dhabi have begun work on the centerpiece of this activity: a million-square-foot mixed-use complex that will open onto the serpentine banks of the Zumbro River.

This unusual level of prosperity is a boon for job seekers, especially those with specialized training, but one segment of Rochester's populace has been locked out of the economic boom: hundreds of adults who are immigrants or refugees, who didn't graduate from high school, or who for some other reason lack basic job skills.

The solution devised by local leaders? Transform the local

school district's adult basic education (ABE) program into a gateway to higher education and employment. Typically, ABE programs offer classes in English, basic academics and job skills, and preparation for taking the GED or U.S. citizenship exams. Often poorly staffed and wedged into makeshift facilities, the programs rarely bestow bragging rights on the institutions that run them.

But five years ago, educators in Rochester forged a partnership between Rochester Public Schools and the Rochester Community and Technical College (RCTC) that enables adults to simultaneously learn English, learn to read if they lack that ability, and acquire credentials for living-wage jobs. Dubbed Bridges to Careers, the free program keeps its students enrolled until they have mastered the community college's entry-level coursework and earned a first-rung job certification—usually as a certified nursing assistant, personal care assistant, or administrative clinical assistant. Participants have earned hundreds of industry certifications in health care and other fields.

The approach very quickly puts a financial floor under

by BETH HAWKINS

Forty-one percent of U.S. adults ages 25 and older have no more than a high school education, and 26.5 million people in that age bracket—12 percent of them—lack even that.

adults who are struggling to master high-school-level material—and who are often breadwinners. It has dramatically reduced the number of students who need expensive remedial classes in community colleges, which in turn has boosted the number of adult students who stay in college long enough to earn better job credentials.

In 2017, the Ash Center at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government chose the program, then known as Pathways to College and Careers, as a finalist for its Innovations in American Government award. The effort, the award judges said, provides a model for realizing the potential of ABE.

“[We] were deeply impressed by the rate that participants not only completed their training, but at how many were able to obtain related employment in the healthcare industry,” wrote Christina Marchand, a senior associate director at the Ash Center. “It is a real success story that we feel could be replicated by healthcare and hospital employers and adult education and community colleges across the country.”

## Broad Potential

Adult learners aren’t the only ones whose lack of preparation poses hurdles to decent jobs and higher education. Many recent high-school graduates enter community college only to find that they need to take one or more remedial courses—classes in basic subjects designed to equip students for college-level work. The proliferation of such compensatory courses—also known as developmental classes—has come under critical scrutiny of late, as community colleges have faced pressure to help more students earn post-secondary degrees.

Overall, the track record of two-year community colleges is less than stellar. Only about 25 percent of students in such programs graduate within three years, and that figure is far lower for the 50 percent of students who are required to take one or more remedial courses before they start earning credits. Many of these institutions are experimenting with eliminating remedial classes, instead enrolling under-prepared students in entry-level college classes—and pouring on support to help them succeed (see “Reforming Remediation,” *research*, Spring 2017).

On the K–12 level, some efforts are underway to reduce the number of students who are under-prepared when they enter community college. After a study by the Colorado Community College System found that less than 5 percent of students who started in remedial classes would complete

a college degree, the state pushed to have students take the tests that determine whether they will need remediation as early as 8th grade, while there was still time for them to acquire missing skills in high school.

In California, the state uses 11th graders’ results on its annual statewide assessments to provide students with a college-readiness index in math and English. Students whose scores indicate that they might need remedial work in college thus have a chance to improve their skills during their senior year of high school or the summer before starting college.

What sets the Rochester Bridges program apart are the cooperation and coordination between the local school district and the community college. In effect, the district has adopted the college’s standards, both for what is taught to ABE students and for who teaches it. And the program embraces the fact that while some students will meet those standards quickly, others may need time before something—persistence, lots of repetition, or perhaps a significant jump in English language proficiency—leads to mastery.

Rochester’s approach, which is known in the field as integrated education and training, is starting to take hold in other parts of the country. And state and federal governments alike are now trying to encourage this way of attacking an entrenched problem: the economic immobility of myriad U.S. residents who lack qualifications for in-demand jobs. Four years ago, as the Minnesota partnership was starting to see early successes, Congress passed the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, a major, bipartisan overhaul of the nation’s primary job-skills legislation. The law contains a number of provisions designed specifically to promote integrated approaches like Rochester’s, and to push education policymakers and workforce-development advocates to collect common data and use that information to achieve better results. As they wrestle with the challenges of ensuring students graduate ready for college or a 21st-century workplace, adult educators and K–12 leaders might do well to embrace this new model.

## Evolution of Adult Education

The notion that an educated citizenry is essential both to democracy and to a healthy economy is as old as the republic. At Valley Forge, General George Washington recruited chaplains to teach Continental troops to read. During the

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Civil War, the Union Army organized literacy instruction for thousands of freed slaves.

As early as the 1800s, some states offered publicly funded adult-education classes to help wave after wave of immigrants learn English and acquire basic skills, in hopes of further expanding the nation's economy. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Works Projects Administration and other training efforts were key to rebuilding economic strength.

But it wasn't until the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, a linchpin of President Lyndon B. Johnson's signature War on Poverty initiative, that the federal Adult Basic Education program was established and funds were directed to states to expand efforts to reach illiterate and unskilled adults as well as high school dropouts.

"For the one million young men and women who are out of school and who are out of work, this program will permit us to take them off the streets, put them into work training programs, to prepare them for productive lives, not wasted lives," Johnson said. "It will help those small businessmen who live on the borderline of poverty. It will help the unemployed heads of families maintain their skills and learn new skills."

Today, many ABE programs, like Rochester's, are run by the local K-12 school district, but academic courses and career training are frequently lumped together with offerings as disparate as driver's ed, recreational community-education classes, and preschool. Teachers are often part time, classrooms ad hoc, and data on outcomes rudimentary.

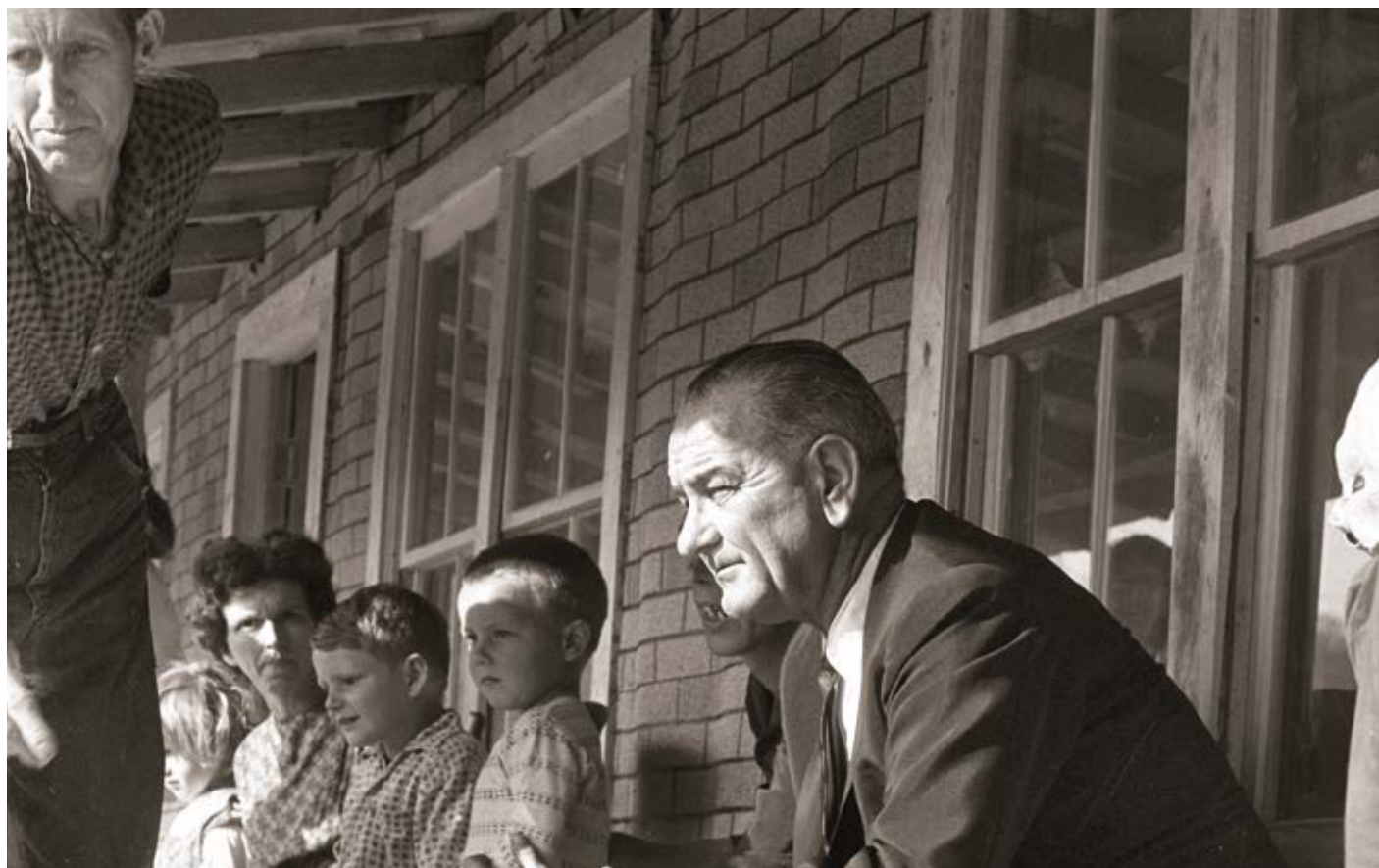
And, even more than K-12 and higher education, the workforce-preparation sector has historically involved an array of often-competing interest groups, including business, labor unions, nonprofit organizations, colleges and universities, and advocates for people with disabilities. Federal oversight has been divided between two departments—Education and Labor—without coordinated attention paid to outcomes.

In short, adult education hasn't grown up.

"Adult education in the '50s was about getting people to an 8th-grade level," says Judy Mortrude, a senior policy analyst at the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success, part of the nonprofit Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), based in the nation's capital. "But that was enough [then], and it's not enough anymore."

Even as the economy has shifted toward technology, health

*The federal Adult Basic Education program was established with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, a linchpin of President Lyndon B. Johnson's signature War on Poverty initiative.*



PHOTOGRAPH/LBJ LIBRARY, CECIL STOUGHTON

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care, and other sectors that demand workers with refined skills, the number of educationally under-prepared adults has burgeoned. According to 2017 census data, 27 percent of adults in the United States ages 25 and older have only a high school diploma. And 26.5 million adults in that age bracket—12 percent of them—lack even that (see Figure 1). Language barriers also pose huge obstacles. More than 12 million people commanded only rudimentary English skills, or none at all, in 2016.

More than half—57 percent—of low-skilled adults ages 16–65 are men. One third are white, but the majority are Hispanic (39 percent) or black (21 percent). Forty percent of these workers are

foreign-born, and nearly 60 percent earn less than \$16,000 a year, a startling statistic given that 77 percent of them are parents. In 2017, the median adult with a high school diploma earned about 33 percent more than the median adult without one (see Figure 2).

Yet in 2010, the most recent year for which both fiscal and enrollment data are available, only two million students enrolled in adult education. The states invested \$1.6 billion in the enterprise, with the federal government kicking in \$617 million (see Figure 3). U.S. Department of Education data show that few ABE students go on to college. Only about a third of those who say they intend to pursue post-secondary education actually do.

Much in the same way that shifts in the economy have driven policymakers to put pressure on the K–12 system to ensure that in particular disadvantaged students graduate from high school prepared for college or the workforce, ABE has come under scrutiny in recent years, albeit with far less attention from the public.

A 2013 survey by the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) showed that U.S. adult skill levels had remained stagnant for more than two decades. Among the working-age population, defined as ages 16 to 65, 14 percent have low literacy, 23 percent low numeracy and 62 percent poor digital problem-solving skills.

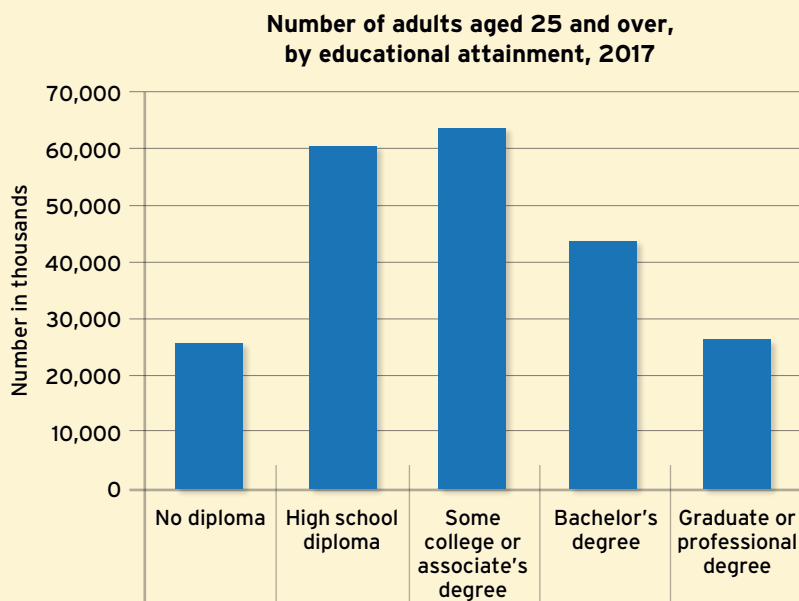
The following year, as noted above, Congress passed a streamlined overhaul of the nation's major employment law, renaming it the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. It was a largely overlooked bipartisan measure with ample support: only three senators and six House members dissented on the vote.

Title II of that law, dubbed the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and administered by the Department of Education, provides grants to states to support efforts to give adults the skills necessary for employment and post-secondary education. This portion of the law now requires the collection of national data on program outcomes, and it

### Many Adults Lack a High School Diploma

(Figure 1)

*In 2017, 26.5 million Americans aged 25 and older did not have a high school diploma. Those with no diploma made up about 12 percent of the population in that age range.*



NOTE: "High school diploma" includes high school equivalency.

SOURCE: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017 one-year estimates



*Democratic senator Patty Murray of Washington was one of the major backers of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, a streamlined overhaul of the nation's major employment law.*

offers incentives for states to fund programs that blend basic education and job-skills training.

A major backer of the legislative overhaul, Democratic senator Patty Murray of Washington, turned to evidence from a Washington State demonstration project to shape the federal act, which contains a number of levers to promote the integrated education and training approach.

In 2005, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges identified a career-ready tipping point: students who started in adult basic education or a GED program and acquired a year's worth of credits and a job credential earned an annual average of \$8,500 more than students who completed fewer than 10 college credits.

Unlike many other states, Washington provides ABE through its community colleges, where, at the time of the research, just 30 percent of adult basic education students went on to college-level courses and only 13 percent of students who started in English as a Second Language programs went on to earn any college credits. A mere 4 to 6 percent of either group earned at least a year's worth of college credits or received a certificate or degree within five years.

Motivated in part by an influx of non-English speakers, the state asked 10 community colleges to create teams of English as a Second Language, ABE, and vocational-skills teachers to work cooperatively in the same classrooms, simultaneously teaching language and job skills.

In a working paper released in 2010, researchers at the Community College Research Center of Columbia University's Teachers College found that students enrolled in a demonstration

project using the integrated approach in 2006–07 and 2007–08 were 7.5 percentage points more likely to earn a certificate within three years than those not exposed to the approach. More important, they were 10 percentage points more likely to earn some college credit.

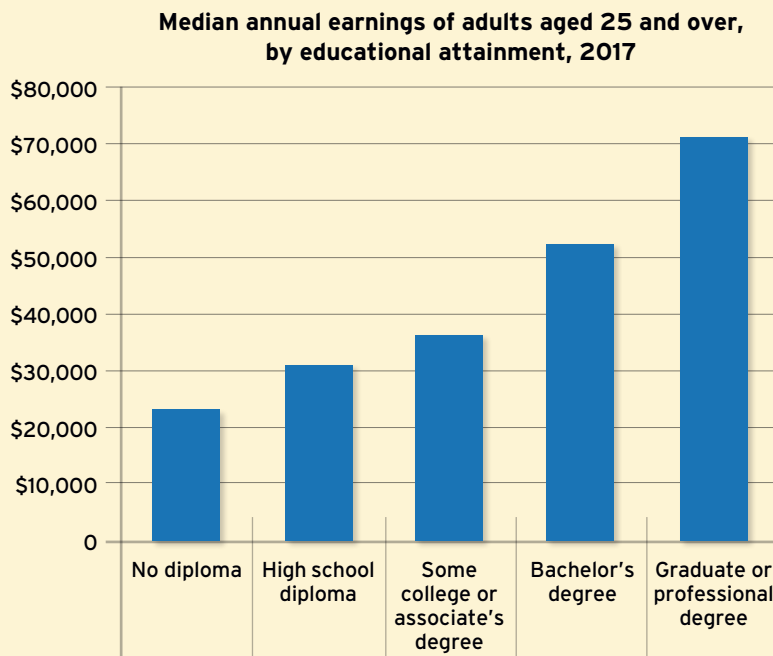
### The Rochester Story

In 2007, the Chicago-based Joyce Foundation launched Shifting Gears, an initiative to push for changes in policy related to education and job-skills training in six midwestern states, including Minnesota. The foundation invested \$17.2 million in creating “bridge” programs that paired ABE with a post-secondary job-skills program. As an offshoot of the program that Minnesota developed under Shifting Gears, in 2010 the Rochester Public Schools used a state grant to forge a partnership with a local community college to train adult students in several in-demand trades.

As discussions between the schools and the college

### Adults without a High School Diploma Earn Far Less (Figure 2)

*In 2017 the median adult without a high school diploma earned only \$23,031 per year. The median adult with a high school diploma earned \$30,624, over \$7,500 more.*



NOTE: “High school diploma” includes high school equivalency.

SOURCE: United States Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2017 one-year estimates

As of February 2017, the Bridges program was on track to equip nearly 300 previously underemployed adults for health-care jobs. **Eighty-six percent have found training-related jobs with benefits.**

unfolded, leaders of the school district’s ABE program were shocked to learn that when their students moved on to the community college, many needed to retake high-school-level classes in reading, writing, and math. It was humbling for the ABE administrators, but the shift in understanding enabled the frank discussion that needed to take place.

“Like everyone else, we thought if you have a high school diploma or GED, that’s enough, we wash our hands of you,” says Julie Nigon, who helped create the Bridges to Careers program and recently retired from her roles as head of the Rochester Public Schools Adult and Family Literacy Program

and program manager at the district’s ABE facility, the Hawthorne Education Center. “If you pat yourself on the back in June and you don’t know that in September it’s falling apart, you’re not succeeding.”

At a cost of almost \$800 each at the community college and carrying no credits, the remedial classes presented a particular barrier for adult students, who frequently have families and no ability to support them while getting a job certification.

For its part, the community college knew where its students were getting stuck. For example, the college considers freshman composition a “gateway” course into college-level academics that

is a strong predictor of whether a student will graduate. Only 31 percent of students who take three or more developmental reading and writing classes pass freshman composition.

Unpalatable truths on the table, administrators from both programs sat down to figure out how to bridge the chasm. One of the first things they agreed on was that ABE staff with the same credentials as RCTC faculty could teach “articulated” classes—courses that met both basic-education and community-college standards—to ABE students.

Students arrive in ABE with widely varying deficits, ranging from a language barrier to missing academic skills. Some may advance quickly, while others will need more intensive help.

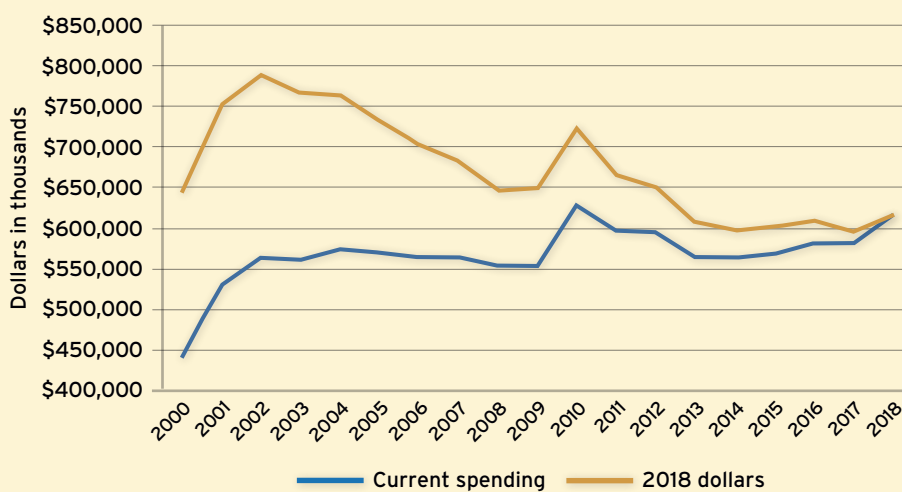
“If you are in developmental reading, you can be sitting next to someone who is also needing remediation but is at a whole different level or has a particular need like phonemic awareness or decoding,” says Nigon. “We’d much rather have people take it here [in ABE], for free, where it’s no big deal if it’s clear you need more time.”

### Federal Spending Lagging behind Inflation

(Figure 3)

*While real federal spending on adult basic education rose rapidly between 2000 and 2002, to a high of \$788 million, spending since then has generally not kept pace with inflation. In 2018, federal spending totaled just under \$617 million.*

**Federal spending on adult basic education, by year, in current spending and in 2018 dollars**



NOTE: Figure shows federal spending on the Basic Grants for States program.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Labor

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Virtually all ABE students have already experienced hardship, she continues. “We don’t need them to have another failure in their lives,” says Nigon. “I very quickly realized that telling people they are ready when they are not is a lie.”

The effect of Rochester’s Bridges program was immediate, according to Nigon. Of the integrated-program students who took the ABE developmental classes between May 2014 and August 2016, almost 94 percent completed two semesters in the Bridges program, finished job training, or continued on for more.

As the Rochester effort grew, the Mayo Clinic, which operates the Mayo Clinic School of Health Sciences, formally joined the effort with funding and guidance, as did the local United Way and the nonprofit Workforce Development, Inc., among others. Representatives of all of the groups meet monthly to troubleshoot and address new hurdles, as when they decided to hire a “career navigator” to help students address the struggles that can knock adult learners off track, such as daycare or transportation issues.

Even as students taste success, administrators must continue to defend their high standards from well-intended suggestions from people within the system. For instance, after some ABE staff saw the level of English-language literacy required to take Hawthorne’s certified nursing assistant classes, they pushed to have the courses taught in Spanish.

Because Mayo treats patients from all over the world, knowing Spanish is certainly an asset for those Bridges participants who are bilingual. But program leaders were firm, Nigon says, since graduates must be ready to work in English-speaking environments.

“If they’re working in a nursing home and not able to read and write in English, very quickly it’s going to catch up with them,” she says. “If you care for someone in a nursing home, you have to be able to communicate with them.”

Given the new federal law’s mandate to collect uniform, shareable data on program performance, Nigon and her colleagues have been working on quantifying their results, but they have had a hard time of it. To that end, the community college is building a website that will consolidate data going forward; to finance the effort, the college is using its share of the \$10,000 the partnership received as a Harvard innovation award finalist.

What program administrators already know about program outcomes is that since 2013, Mayo had hired 166 Bridges participants, 77 percent of them members of racial or ethnic minorities. Fifty-one other health-care or long-term-care providers had also hired participants. As of February 2017, the Bridges program was on track to equip nearly 300 previously underemployed adults for health-care jobs. Eighty-six percent have found training-related

jobs with benefits. Two thirds are low-income people of color.

Other skills pathways that Rochester’s ABE programs and RCTC have created together include training early-childhood educators, paraprofessionals to work in K–12 settings, and welders.

Data collection on program performance is complicated by the fact that Bridges participants often take advantage of multiple components of the ABE program. For instance, in 2018, 113 of Rochester’s nearly 2,000 adult students participated in



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Hawthorne’s healthcare training programs and 109 in a program that facilitates transitions to college. Twelve completed the new paraprofessional certification, 22 went on to enroll in a Mayo training program, and 66 transitioned to RCTC.

Since 2013, 228 Bridges participants have gone on to enroll in the community college, with 90 percent passing freshman composition and 58 percent earning one or more credentials. Fifty-three percent of the 97 Bridges participants who also were receiving state welfare-reform benefits were able to close their cases by moving into unsubsidized employment.

While Rochester has an outsize need for health-care workers, medical employees are in demand nearly everywhere, Nigon is quick to point out. Adult-training programs using the integrated education and training approach are responding: health-care tracks dominate integrated programs nationwide, with 51 percent of programs offering certified nursing assistant training,



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and most affording “stackable” credentials—industry-validated qualifications that allow workers to take a job and return to school later to build toward a higher credential.

The integrated approach isn’t cheap, but Nigon is hopeful that as data confirm that these programs are moving families into the middle class, their value will become clear. In the case of the Rochester Bridges partnership, the school system and RCTC each finance a portion, and the state also provides funding. In fact, state contributions toward all integrated education and training programs rose to \$18 million in 2018. But that still leaves the Rochester team on a continual hunt for grant funding.

“Employers are some of the first to jump onboard” with funding, says Liza McFadden, a nonprofit consultant who until recently was the CEO of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

As for Congress, it now seems inclined to put some financial clout behind its legislation. According to the National Skills Coalition, from federal FY 2010 to FY 2015, funding for adult basic education activities that fall under Title II of the 2014 act actually declined, from \$682 million to \$569 million. But in June 2018, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies passed a bipartisan funding bill for FY 2019 that would provide \$642 million in funding for Title II grants to states—just \$7 million shy of the 2014 law’s \$649 million target.

The National Skills Coalition wants Congress to invest an additional \$500 million to support career-pathways programs in the pending reauthorization of the Higher Education Act of 1965. Last overhauled in 2008, the legislation has been stalled for more than four years.

For fiscal year 2018, the Trump administration had requested a cut of \$1.3 billion, or 39 percent, to the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act’s funding. The proposal would have shifted even more responsibility for funding to states, localities, and employers. Congress rejected the proposition.

“There’s been tremendous agreement on both sides of the aisle that we are not doing enough about credentialing,” says McFadden.

### Pointing the Way

Will the availability of data help justify increased spending on integrated approaches in both the K–12 and ABE sectors? The

Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success’s Mortrude, who worked for the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development when Rochester got its initial seed grant, is optimistic.

She notes that the 2014 law requires states to track and report progress on five outcomes of ABE programs: employment in the second and fourth quarters after a student exits a program; median earnings the second quarter after exit; credential attainment; skills gains; and effectiveness in serving employers.

Florida and California are often cited as states that are already gathering good data on adult learners. With a population of 40 million people, 17 percent of whom don’t have a high school diploma, California is spending \$25 million in state funds to build a regional and state-level system that will synthesize uniform data on adult learners. Seventy-one regional consortia will use the information to develop and submit to the state three-year plans assessing the results of past adult-education efforts and identifying promising practices.

Because the performance indicators laid out in the new federal law are shared, institutions that haven’t collaborated in the past must begin talking, says Mortrude.

“Before, people only had wins after they left” an adult-education program, she says. “Now we have interim skills gains, so now we have ways of measuring whether people are making progress.”

In April 2017, the Center for Postsecondary and Economic Success published a survey that showed 42 percent of ABE providers had been engaged in integrated education and training for two or more years. Some 27 percent were just beginning to use the approach, 20 percent had not started, and 10 percent didn’t know.

“Adult education needs to change to keep up with the needs of the workforce,” says Sameer Gadkaree, senior program officer on the Joyce Foundation’s education and economic mobility team and the former associate vice chancellor for adult education with the City Colleges of Chicago. “What you see in Rochester is adult education making that shift.

“We’re nowhere close to done,” he continues. “It’s important for programs like those in Rochester to point the way.”

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