

Students at the Center of Adult Education



Results from the 2008 Student Voices Study

New York City Mayor's Office of Adult Education
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Executive Summary

The New York City Mayor's Office of Adult Education recently facilitated a large-scale strategic planning process to articulate a vision for the future of the City's adult education system.

In addition to involving program managers, teachers, government officials and key outside stakeholders, we also conducted participatory research with current adult education students and recent program graduates. The *Student Voices Study* engaged a wide range of learners to understand their goals, experiences and priorities for adult education.

We met with 141 adult learners in 13 focus groups from ESL and ABE programs across four boroughs. During the focus groups, students had the opportunity to voice their perspectives using participatory research methods such as listing and ranking, a stakeholder focused SWOT analysis, and to craft recommendations for improving the adult education system. Students, recent program graduates and literacy managers and teachers met with us to analyze the data together.

Key findings are:

- Overwhelmingly, adult education students are seeking quality education programs with strong academic outcomes where they can progress quickly toward specific goals.
- All learners reported having specific career and education goals in mind and the majority plan to eventually attend college or pursue career-related technical training.
- Students are motivated to succeed in their studies and want services tailored to help them achieve their specific goals.
- They want government to do more to increase funding and support job and career development partnerships.
- Students want government to assure better pay and benefits for teachers.
- Adult learners see themselves as assets and recognize an important role for themselves in efforts to improve the City's adult education system.

The *Student Voices Study* and its findings demonstrate that adult literacy and ESL students are capable of sophisticated analyses of the current conditions of adult education and have important recommendations for how to improve the system.

Participatory community research methods like those used in this study can give adults a meaningful voice in a wide range of policy debates and management decision-making. Participatory research can also foster civic literacy, critical thinking and advanced analytic skills of adult learners, making it a uniquely valuable tool for adult education programs.

Introduction

In October 2006, Mayor Bloomberg established the Mayor's Office of Adult Education to promote a state-of-the-art adult education system in New York City. Building off the considerable strengths of the current system and the important legacy of previous Mayors and their literacy directors, we were charged with bringing the community together to find ways to serve more learners with better results.

Throughout 2007, the Mayor's Office of Adult Education (MOAE) undertook a participatory Visioning Process meant to engage a wide range of adult education stakeholders - educators, government officials, and some adult learners - in assessing the health of the adult education system in New York City. Over the course of several retreats, more than 150 stakeholders envisioned what a strong adult education system would look like in the future and identified the priorities necessary to bring about these system-wide transformations.

Five issues were identified as core priorities in this reform process with "Keeping students at the center" seen as key amongst them.¹ The *Report of the Adult Education Visioning Retreat* and other related documents can be found on the MOEA website at www.nyc.gov/adult-ed.

The Student Voices Study (SVS) is a natural expansion of this visioning and evidence gathering process and recognizes the need to actively engage adult education students and alumni as partners in any system reform process.

The SVS was designed as a small, rapid study of current adult education students and alumni to better understand learners perceived needs, assets, and perspectives about the adult education system. The study was also meant to help develop more robust learner input and leadership in reforming adult education in New York City.

Between May and August of 2008, 141 learners participated in thirteen focus groups at seven different sites in four boroughs:

- 3 groups in the Bronx;
- 4 groups in Queens;
- 1 group in Brooklyn; and
- 5 groups in Manhattan.

Two groups included adults from across the city – one involving alumni and another involving ex-offenders enrolled in an education program. The mix of groups included:

- 7 ESOL classes (2 conducted in native language);
- 2 Pre-GED classes;
- 2 GED classes (1 conducted in Spanish);
- 1 ABE/Literacy class; and
- 1 mixed group of GED and ESOL alumni.

¹ Other priorities include: Effective instruction contextualized for students goals; Managing for continuous improvement of results; Enhancing professional skills and supporting a community of practice; Building pathways to higher education and job training.

Who Participated?

While this was not a scientific sample, it is generally representative of the adult education population in New York City. See the table below for a summary of the demographic characteristics of SVS participants.

Demographic Characteristics of Adult Education Students and Alumni Participating in the Student Voices Study (Total Respondents = 141)

Demographic Characteristic	Total
Total participants	141
Average Age	32
Age (min-max)	16-67
Gender: Male	36%
Female	64%
Borough of Residence: Bronx	23%
Brooklyn	20%
Manhattan	25%
Queens	29%
Other, including Staten Island	3%
Employment Status: FT	12%
PT*	21%
Unemployed	67%
Average Number of Children	1.6
Country of Origin (most common)	US (14%)
	Dom Rep (11%)
	Colombia (8%)
Average Length of US Residency (months)	76
Race or Ethnicity: Asian/Pacific Islander	12%
Black/African American/Afro-Caribbean	29%
Latino/Hispanic	40%
White/Caucasian	18%
Language Spoken at Home (most common)	Spanish (33%)
	English (27%)
Average Time in the Program (months)	11
Average Class Hours per Week	14
Average Commute Time	<1 hr
**Average Education Level	12th Grade

* Some surveys used yes/no format for employment. This analysis assumes "yes" as PT employment.

** Average includes GED alumni and ESOL with postsecondary education

Methodology

This was a mixed methods study and incorporated quantitative, qualitative and participatory research methods in order to meet the needs of learners at all levels of literacy. Focus groups used a combination of participatory methods – primarily listing and ranking -- followed by open discussion of specific questions meant to draw out learners thoughts and opinions on topics raised in the MOAE visioning process. Finally, learners were asked to analyze the adult education system using a modified SWOT/Stakeholder Analysis.²



Participatory Data Analysis

All data collected from the Student Voices Survey was analyzed using participatory methods. Before proceeding, any identifying information was removed from all qualitative and quantitative data files. Then, learners who had participated in the study were paired with SVS research team members to code (assign analysis categories) and tabulate all narrative (qualitative) data. Next, adult education practitioners -- including program managers and teachers from programs that had hosted SVS focus groups as well as practitioners from citywide adult education policy and program assistance agencies -- met to analyze all the data. Finally, adult education alumni analyzed all data related to student and alumni leadership and engagement.

² SWOT = Strengths/Weaknesses/Opportunities/Threats



The Student Voices Study

Students and alumni are eager to speak out about their experiences as adult learners and to offer their perspectives on the adult education system.

It was clear from this study that adult learners face many challenges but are determined strivers. Overwhelmingly, adult students are seeking quality education programs with strong academic outcomes where they can progress quickly toward specific goals. All learners reported having career and education goals in mind and the majority hope to eventually attend college or pursue career-related technical training. They are motivated to succeed and willing to sacrifice in order to achieve both short and long term goals and appreciate when services and assistance are aligned to help them achieve those goals.

Learners see themselves as assets in any system delivery and reform process and are many are eager to engage as experts and partners to strengthen adult education generally. They recognize that inadequate funding for programs and teachers hampers outcomes generally and repeatedly call for fair salaries, benefits and support including adequate space, supplies, and computers for programs, and professional development for adult education practitioners. Students and alumni are strong advocates for increased support from, and collaboration between government and business sectors to improve adult education and workforce development outcomes and opportunities.



Quality Education Matters – What Learners Want

Adult students are seeking quality education programs with strong academic outcomes where they can progress quickly toward specific goals. While learners were pleased with and grateful to their teachers and programs they also see the lack of adequate resource (financial, physical, human) as a hindrance system-wide.

All students want great programs and teachers equipped with the resources, tools and training they need

- In many different ways, learners stressed the importance of high quality, professional programs and teachers who had enough resources to do a good job and maintain their commitment and passion. Most students praised their programs and teachers. Several groups felt that their program lost excellent teachers because they had so little pay, no security and no health insurance.
 - Elements of “high quality programs” include (in order): Free; excellent teachers; adequate supplies and good/enough space for classes; accessible/good location; no wait list; convenient class times; enough funding; high standards and group settings.
- All students want good or great teachers. This came up in every group and specifics were offered by 83% of SVS participants. “Good or great” teachers are well trained and professional, understand working with adults, and can help with defining goals. The need for more teachers was often mentioned as was the importance of adequate pay and benefits.



Students want to progress quickly in classes contextualized for their goals

- In general, learners wanted to progress quickly in ESOL and ABE/GED in order to move on to the next step in their goals and called for concentrated and consistent learning opportunities. While acknowledging the significant challenges and constraints of time and money, every group called for ‘more’ in order to achieve this.
 - Intensity of instruction was raised in many different ways including (in order of frequency): more class time per week, expanded and flexible hours (evenings and

weekends) and classes that meet year round (summers). Many students reported that they would travel longer for a good program and, if childcare were available, would continue year round (though one group wanted to be sure that teachers also had a summer break). More homework and 'tougher' classes; more chances to converse (ESOL), more levels of classes (ESOL) and more tutoring – (GED) were also stressed.

- Overwhelmingly, adult learners are looking for classes that meet their needs. Several topics were prioritized in both ESOL and ABE/GED groups including (in order of emphasis) math and financial literacy, computer and internet training, more emphasis on reading and writing, and contextualized training focused on specific career pathways and education goals including GED and college.
 - In addition, ESOL students called for more classes and more levels of classes as well as structured opportunities (outside of class) to practice conversation, reading and writing. Programs that had “Conversation Groups” or in one case an “Action Group” were praised. Students with these opportunities reported more rapid mastery of spoken English as well as gains in confidence and in public speaking skills.



Students want an education and opportunities that prepare them for their next steps. Many worry that they are not adequately prepared.

- The majority of learners – both ESOL and GED -- worried they were not being well prepared to pursue their specific goals. Most often cited: they did not feel prepared to enter college. Next most often cited as inadequate were job specific skills -- for example reading and writing English at a certain level, math and basic computer skills. Also cited was the lack of work experience opportunities (both paid and unpaid) related to a desired career path.

- Many learners – both ESOL and ABE -- want opportunities to learn concrete work skills and gain work experience. Paid work was sought but other “hands on” opportunities were also emphasized including volunteer positions, internships, apprenticeships, stipend work, service learning and work study.
- Both ESOL and ABE students that had meaningful leadership or student engagement opportunities in their programs reported advancing more quickly toward their goals.

Students want services that support their success and are tailored to meet their goals

- Adult learners stressed the importance of good support services and appreciate when these services are aligned to help them meet their goals. Desired support services focused on education (admissions, financial aid, counseling, tutoring, book swaps) and job placement, career development (counseling, coaching).

Other supports mentioned include legal and immigration related services, housing services and help with transportation. Learners emphasized the need for “good” support services offered by people who are knowledgeable and well trained.



Stigma, problems related to testing, and lack of recognition frustrate adult learners

- Students repeatedly raised issues related to testing, awards and recognition including:
 - The stigma related to adult education was raised in every group. Many ABE/GED students felt that receiving a regular diploma and transcript would decrease stigma; some ESOL students also requested more formal recognition of their progress and achievements.
 - In general, learners expressed frustration with the tests and testing including the challenges in accessing and receiving results from the GED.
 - Students with degrees (secondary and postsecondary) from other countries were frustrated that these degrees were not recognized in the US. They saw this as unfair and discouraging. This came up repeatedly in ABE classes as well as ESOL classes. In one large ESOL program, students on average had 1-2 years of college. Many had left high end professional careers (architect, engineer, mathematician, etc) in their own countries and were seeking help to pursue these careers in New York City.

Knowledge about their options as adult learners is limited

- Knowledge and choices: 44% of adult learners in the survey said they were aware of other programs before choosing the one they were in and only 26% of learners reported choosing their program because it had a good or ‘the best’ reputation.



Quality of life matters to adult learners and drives their motives and goals

Adult learners are motivated to achieve well defined long and short term goals. Education and focused career skills training are their primary strategies.

- For all adult learners in every focus group, education, literacy and/or career training were seen as essential and necessary steps needed to achieve a better quality of life. Nearly all (94%) emphasized this was necessary so that they, and their families, could fully participate in and have access to society. This included the desire to “achieve the American dream” and “avoid discrimination”. At the same time, learners were realistic, noting determination and discipline as necessary elements of success in achieving their goals.
 - “Going to college” was mentioned specifically as a goal by 70% of all adult learners in this study (ESOL and ABE) with 30% of that group offering that they sought advanced degrees including Bachelors, Masters or PhD.
 - All ESOL groups saw fluency in English as key in achieving their goals. Most students wanted more, and more intense, opportunities to improve their spoken, and in many cases written, language fluency.
 - Getting a GED was seen as key goal for all ABE and many ESOL students.
 - The need for “additional training” related to needed job certificates and specific job skills was also mentioned frequently.
- Improving career opportunities and job development is a primary goal for 82% of these adult learners. The desire to get a job, get a better job or get promoted in a current job was emphasized in every focus group.

- 42% of learners mentioned specific career goals including (in order of emphasis): Medicine and Science (Nurse, Vet, Biologist, Doctor), Education (Teaching, School Admin, Daycare), Business, Architecture/Engineering, Law/Politics, Armed Services, Communications/Design and Arts/Entertainment.

For parents, children are a primary motivator. Childcare is their primary challenge.

- The majority of adult learners (62%) are also driven by motivations beyond themselves. There is a strong desire to be a model for their community and friends (21%) and for their own (and other) children (41%):
 - When speaking about children, the two most common motivations were “to help my children with school and homework” and to “be a model for the next generation”. At the same time the lack of good (trusted) childcare was cited over and over as one of the biggest challenges for parents and the primary reason they were not able to persist in their studies.

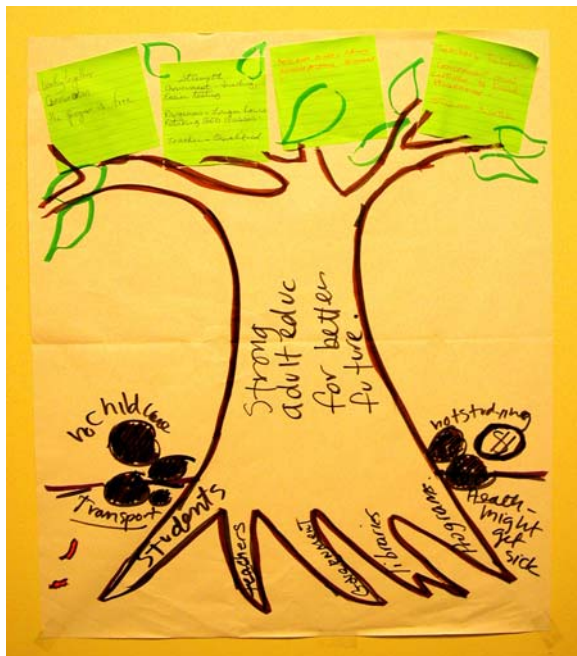
Full access to society is lacking

- Additional motivations and goals for pursuing education as an adult include (in order of frequency): Access to culture and society, “to become a citizen”, “for communication” and “to avoid discrimination”. Other motives include: “for general education”, health care access, to watch TV, to do “paperwork and pay bills” / taxes, to “learn technology”, to “make informed decisions”, travel, learn other languages and be able to use the library.



Adult Learners Analyze Adult Education

Every focus group was asked to analyze the adult education system using a modified SWOT / Stakeholder Analysis. Learners were asked to identify the key stakeholders needed for a strong adult education system (Who needs to be involved?) and then were asked to identify assets, challenges, opportunities and what help is needed, for each category of stakeholder. Depending on the group, this participatory analysis was constructed either as a matrix or as a more simplified and visual “solutions tree.” (see Appendix)



Learners are advocates for the entire adult education system

Overwhelmingly, students are pleased with their programs and very grateful to their teachers. They value the opportunity to learn and feel that their (free) program is the crucial stepping stone to achieving their education and career goals and improving the quality and security of their lives and those of their families.



Learners have great insight into the strengths and challenges facing adult educators and present themselves as advocates for all stakeholders in comprehensive system reform.

Every focus group identified teachers, program administrators, community, government and business or corporations as key stakeholders in strengthening the adult education system

Learners clearly see adult education as an under-resourced system and call for more support for, and collaboration amongst all stakeholders. They also identify an array of leadership and advocacy opportunities for all stakeholders. In most areas, the analysis of learners is consistent with the views of adult education professionals.

Key recommendations from learners stress collaboration and the need for more resources:

Students want government to assure better pay and benefits for teachers

Every focus group emphasized the need for increased funding to hire more dedicated, professional, well trained teachers who are paid better salaries that include benefits such as health insurance and paid time off.

Learners call on government to do more to increase funding to programs and support job and career development partnerships.

Learners stressed the need for government and corporations to collaborate with adult education programs in creating jobs and work experience opportunities. More funding for class space, for more classroom hours (intensity) and for transportation, books, etc., was a dominant theme.



Adult learners see themselves as assets and recognize an important role for themselves in efforts to improve the City's adult education system

Most adult learners surveyed saw themselves and especially alumni as untapped assets that could, in partnership with adult education programs and teachers, play an important role in strengthening adult education outcomes. Learners identify many leadership and advocacy opportunities for adult education students and alumni including support and motivation, peer mentors, counselors and tutors as well as expert advisors.

Learners offered stakeholder-specific analysis of challenges and opportunities:

Adult learners are advocates for other students and stakeholders. They propose creative action steps and see many networking and partnership opportunities.

- **Students and alumni:** Students see it as their responsibility to be dedicated in their studies. They see an opportunity to unite with and motivate other students even in the face of significant challenges (childcare, money, work, transportation, lack of books and teaching materials, language barriers, the need to be disciplined in studies, illegal status).

Many learners are interested in ‘giving back’ to other students and to adult education programs. Specific proposals included “encouraging other students in lower learning levels with our experience,” and “talking to city leaders like the Mayor.” They also offer practical classroom oriented suggestions including “more educational guides and lesson plans.”

- **Teachers** could benefit from networking for their own support and to better advocate on their own behalf; More “ongoing education” and professional development would benefit both teachers and students. Several ESL groups called for more bi-lingual teachers.
- **Programs** need more help from government and could benefit by “giving students more voice” and by increasing communication with students. Students call for more counseling/support from programs to meet career and education goals. A network of information between all adult education programs would improve service and help facilitate transitions to work and college.
- **Community** - Suggestions to strengthen community stakeholders emphasize support and the need to be unified and help each other. One group with many recent immigrants felt they needed protection from police harassment and that community members needed to unite to fight anti-Muslim bias.
- **Government** - Opportunities for government include: improving testing systems - better/simplified GED and ESOL tests and providing incentives to companies that partner with adult education programs for training, internships and employment.

Students stress the need to “be more organized to help programs and provide more funding.” Most focus groups recommended helping students with childcare and/or housing subsidies as important ways to increase access and retention in adult education programs.

Other government related initiatives seen as crucial in improving outcomes for adult learners include: the need to improve the immigration system, to increase support for business while also eliminating discrimination in employment (hiring/promotion), and the need to create a more fair tax structure (mentioned most by ESOL students).

- **Corporations, companies and banks** can create more internship and job development opportunities and hire graduates. Opportunities exist to partner with adult education programs as well as government to develop creative workforce training and development programs. Addressing discrimination in hiring and promotion is recommended. Improving outcomes for adult education students and alumni will in turn strengthen New York City's workforce.
- **Systemic efforts** will be needed to reduce the stigma connected with adult education (mentioned most by ABE/GED students). Many learners felt that visible student and alumni leadership could help to remove the stigma that exists about adult education and could be useful as they pursue next steps including career and education.



Students want more opportunities to share what they think

The learners in the Student Voices Study overwhelmingly valued the opportunity to think broadly about adult education, found the participatory research process interesting and engaging and would recommend it to other students and programs. They were pleased that their opinions were being sought and expected to be taken seriously.