Adult Education State Directors
Conference Remarks
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The Adult Education Act – An American Heritage

From Kennedy and Johnson to Nixon and Ford to Carter to Reagan to Bush I to Clinton to Bush II and President Obama

For those of you who have been in adult education since the early 1960’s or the 70’s, the next few minutes will be a story down memory lane.

For those who have served in adult education and literacy in the 1990’s and the last decade, the history I share with you will be narration of the education heritage that you are part of today.

The week of September 3rd was typical fall weather wise in Washington, D.C. The leaves on the tidal basin trees were in their full colors of gold, red, orange and soft browns.

It was the fall of 1963 at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue; the President had just ordered the federalization of the National Guard in Alabama to permit desegregation. Public schools in Louisiana and South Carolina were open to black students for the first time.

As a result of education issues in the South and reports by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (DHEW) together with literacy concerns of the U.S. Commissioner of Education, President Kennedy called a meeting of his advisors to address the investment in human resources.

In his book, “Let the Word Go Forth”, the writing of John F. Kenney, he indicated at the Industrial Conference Board in D.C., “I think it is obvious to those of us who have considered the problems of unemployment and literacy we need more of an investment in our human resource”. The President further said, “The first people unemployed are those with the least education, the last people to be hired are those adults with the least education.”
Throughout his 22 months President Kennedy both spoke and had written of his concerns for education.

In the September 1963 meeting at the White House, in the Roosevelt Room, those in attendance were the President, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, Francis Keppel, U.S. Commissioner of Education, Office of Education personnel; Derek Lunney (Chief of the Adult Education Branch) together with the Adult Education Bureau Administrator Jules Pagano.

Senator Jacob Javits (NY) was present as was the NEA President Mr. Alonso.

President Kennedy wanted to lay the ground work for immediate and priority actions relating to adult education.

The meeting lasted an hour.

Eighty one days later the events of Dallas occurred and President Kennedy died.

The guests in the White House adult education dialogue session did not let the ideas of that day fade away.

President Johnson channeled energy from the Nations grief into creating a living memorial to the slain leader. Johnson called this legacy the "Great Society".

Less than four months after his swearing into office, aboard Air Force One, the first adult basic education/literacy education was introduced in the Senate by Patrick McNamara of Michigan and 35 other Senators. That was March 16, 1964. It was titled the Economic Opportunity Act and our section of the law was Title II-B, Adult Basic Education Programs of the 88th Congress.

President Johnson signed the legislation on Thursday afternoon August 20, 1964, less than nine months after becoming President.

Thus the chronological record of the federal involvement in adult literacy education began.
The purpose of that first Federal Act focused on persons 18 years old and older whose inability to read or write the English language constituted a substantial impairment to their ability to obtain or retain employment.

State education agencies were primarily responsible for the supervision of the program in public elementary and secondary schools.

Grants were made to states by the Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity. The director of OEO was Sargent Shriver who was President Kennedy’s brother-in-law.

In order to be eligible for a state grant award the governor of the state together with the State Superintendent of Public Instruction had to sign a letter of compliance.... no state plan requirement until 1966 when P.L. 89-750 was passed and the program became a title in the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

Funding that first year under OEO was $18.6 million and in 1965, 38,000 adults were enrolled nationally in what became known as ABE – Adult Basic Education.

Highlights of the 1966 & 1967 legislation were special demonstration and pilot projects administered by the Bureau of Adult Education in the U.S. Commissioner of Education Office. There was not a Secretary of Education until 1979 and no division of adult education.

The Federal Adult Education program has been administered by 9 commissioners between 1965 and 1980 and 8 Secretaries of Education plus Arne Duncan who was appointed by President Obama on January 21st of last year.

That early legislation also included the establishment of the Presidential appointed National Advisory Council on Adult Education; provided a state grant base of $100,000 and added private non-profit as eligible local grant recipients.

In 1970 Congressman Perkins of Kentucky, a strong advocate for adult literacy together with Senator Javits of New York and Pennsylvania’s Dan Flood appropriated $38 million and the program served 500,000 adults.
Amendments between 1970 and 1980 included many new provisions:

- Emphasis on adult basic education
- Inclusion of adults age 16 and older
- Educational opportunities for adult Indians

The 1974 amendments, signed by President Ford expanded the program for:

- Community schools
- Institutionalized adults
- 20 percent cap on secondary adult education
- Provided bilingual adult education and special projects for the elderly

Special section in H.R. 15 (1978) signed by President Carter included:

- Broadening the state plan to include a variety of agencies
- Empowered the Secretary of Education (Shirley Hufstedler) to conduct far reaching research activities
- P.L. 95-561 required addressing Indochina refugees, immigrants and Cuban and Haitian adults.

In 1981, seven months after his inauguration, President Reagan signed the Adult Education Act (AEA) in August.

The act included:

- Discretionary support for ESL programs

Throughout his two terms President Reagan signed two long term continuing resolutions (1986 & 1987) enabling the program to continue.

He signed the Hawkins/Stafford ESEA school improvement amendments in April 1988 as one of his last education bills before the November election.
of the 41st President George Herbert Walker Bush.

P.L. 100-297 signed by President Reagan included:

Workforce literacy grants

English literacy grants

Increased program evaluation initiatives and strengthened evaluation requirements by the U.S. Office of Education.

Let me digress for a moment about the U.S. Department of Education.

In the early years of Regeanomics the President, in an effort to improve the economy, cut taxes, reduced federal spending, increased defense dollars and proposed a bill in congress to abolish the U.S. Department of Education and create the federal education assistance program by placing education aid in Labor, Commerce, Health and Human Services and in the Treasury.

At the same time as this ineptitude concept of abolishing the Department, an imperative for educational reform publication was released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Its title was "A Nation at Risk". The report addressed the 23 million American adults in 1983 that were functionally illiterate, youth illiteracy of 17 year olds and minority youth who are eligible for adult education services.

In short; Secretary of Education Ted Bell and the commissions report saved the Department of Education.

In the end Dr. Bell and the President, through the debate on education established a respectable record that would highlight the success of education and the need for a federal role.

History will show that Dr. Bell was a true leader of education, a supporter of adult literacy, an advocate for increased funding of adult education and throughout his career he had a passionate dedication for adult education.
Returning to the 1990's –

The National Literacy Act of 1991 was signed by President Bush in July after extensive Senate and House deliberations on H.R. 751. Rules and regulations were put into effort eleven months later.

The 1990’s saw the legislation from 102nd Congress to the 108th Congress that included:

- Establishment of the National Institute for Literacy
- State Literacy Resource Centers
- Creation of “indicators of program quality”
- Increased Section 353 grants
- Gateway grants to public housing and a cap on expenditures for secondary adult education and equivalency

In the 1990’s and until fairly recently our field had one of its strongest supporters.

Almost from the time President Bush married Barbara in January of 1945, she has been the cheerleader for adult education and family literacy. Family literacy was part of Title II in 1998 and for the first time family literacy was specified in federal law. Its stated purpose is to assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children.

At the beginning of President Clinton’s second term (1997) his education priorities included:

- The school-to-work program
- Head start increased funding
- P.L. 105-244 which was the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act

On August 7, 1998 after months of congressional debate, congress passes
P.L. 105-220, which you work with, titled the Workforce Investment Act.

The history of WIA indicates the congressional intent was to consolidate, coordinate and improve employment, training, adult literacy and vocational rehab programs.

As you are aware the two main titles are Title I - The Workforce Investment System and Title II - Adult Education and Literacy. Title II has 18 sections.

Congress cites the legislation as the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act.

The White House and Secretary of Education Richard Riley required a comprehensive performance and accountability system which they achieved in section 212.

Together with your approved and extended state plans the adult education literacy field has worked under provisions of WIA for eleven and a half years.

From 2001 to the inauguration of President Obama, President Bush supported the authorization of increased appropriations for Title II of WIA. When he took office the national funding was less than $395 million, today the Federal allocation is over a half billion dollars, enrolling two and a half million adult students.

Without a doubt, in the evolution of the federal role in adult education and literacy together with workforce investment activities the passage of WIA is one of the most significant Congressional and Presidential acts in the last four decades.

You have inherited and are now working in nearly a 50 year old program full of success stories that contribute today to America's economic recovery in bringing basic literacy and English skills to low-income adults. The challenges of tomorrow will be many but the field is full of significant accomplishments and dedicated with professionals to face those challenges.

In closing; adult education history is not just demographics, statistics and bill numbers – history is about the human elements of your work.
A final thought:

Unfortunately today, we often define success by the number of people we are helping.

That’s a mistake.

Success should be defined by the number of adults who no longer need our help.

I wish you well on your journey and I hope there will be a new chapter soon with the reauthorization of WIA.

Thank you