

Living with It: Federal Policy Implementation in Adult Basic Education

The Cases of the Workforce Investment Act and Welfare Reform

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Key Findings

- At the state level, agencies responded to policy changes in different ways, based on variances in their preparedness for the changes, the quality of their professional development infrastructure, and a range of other contextual factors.
- At the program level, size, infrastructure, staffing, philosophy, and mission, along with the will and capacity of key staff, affected how policy was implemented, but within the context set by the state agency.
- At the classroom level, programs' responses to policy change tended to cause shifts away from traditional academics toward increased emphases on preemployment and job retention skills.

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Two federal laws with broad impact on adult basic education (ABE) have compelled the ABE system to contend with significant shifts in policy. Enacted in 1998, the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) integrated ABE into the federal workforce development system. Historically, ABE had been funded through education-oriented legislation. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (welfare reform), which shares WIA's workforce development emphasis, has also significantly affected ABE. WIA and welfare reform therefore provide two excellent cases for research examining the ways in which policy changes mandated at the highest level—that of federal law—affect ABE practice at the program and classroom level.

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Rather than evaluating the extent to which policy changes prompted by WIA and welfare reform have been implemented, our study sought to learn about the ways the broader context (i.e., the state agency, the learner population, etc.) inform and affect policy implementation at the local level; the range of responses to federal policy change that have been adopted by states and programs; and the ways in which policy embodied by federal-level statutes actually alter classroom practice. We conducted interviews of state-level and program staff in six states, totaling six state staff (of whom four were the state’s ABE director; the other two were upper-level staff), and 78 practitioners who represented 24 programs. The six selected states were chosen to make up a sample of convenience. However, the characteristics of the states were quite diverse, achieving for our study a sample of diversity.

Findings

Federal policy implementation is largely a one-way, top-down process that begins at the level of the abstract (when statutes are first enacted) and moves toward the concrete (when programs and instructors act on the policy). Yet, each level of the ABE system acts somewhat (though not entirely) autonomously. Accordingly, we found that neither states, programs, nor practitioners merely received new policy. Rather, as policy change traveled from the federal level to the classroom, variation was introduced at every level: states, programs, and instructors each responded to and reshaped the policy based on their particular context.

The state agencies we studied responded to the policy changes brought about by WIA and welfare reform in different ways. These differences reflected variations in

the degree to which the agencies anticipated the changes, the way they understood their support role vis-à-vis the programs, the quality of their professional development infrastructure, and a range of other contextual factors. The responses of state agencies were also shaped by the state’s political context and by state agencies’ capacity and will regarding the policies. These factors, as well as the nature of the relationships between state agency staff and local programs, and the specific decisions made by state agencies, set the stage for programs to respond.

At the program level, responses to the WIA and welfare reform policy changes were affected by the programs’ size, infrastructure, staffing, philosophy, and mission, as well as the will and capacity of key staff. But, as noted above, the responses of the programs were made within the context set by the state agency. Programs implemented changes relating to operations and structures, assessment and documentation, and access to resources. Based on the nature and extent of the changes they adopted, programs were categorized as refiners (58%), reinventors (8%), or resisters (17%), with the remaining (17%) exhibiting both refiner and reinventor characteristics.

At the classroom level, we found that the context (e.g., the purpose of the class, profiles of learners, on-site or off-site location of classes, and the employment status, experiences, and training of the teacher) affected responses to the WIA and welfare reform policy changes. In addition to classroom factors, teachers’ practice was shaped by the ways in which the broad policy context (i.e., decisions made by state agencies and programs, and the attitudes, capacity, and resources that informed those decisions) traveled to their classrooms.

Instructionally, owing to the “work first” emphasis of WIA and welfare reform, responses to policy change by programs tended to cause curricular shifts away from traditional academics toward increased emphasis on preemployment and job retention skills. Because WIA mandates that programs systematically track and measure learner outcomes, programs also had to place greater emphasis on testing and documentation, and goal setting. As part of this shift, and its concern with accountability, expectations regarding teacher performance were raised. But instead of resulting in the replacement or recasting of preexisting classroom processes, these changes often created additional burdens on over-taxed instructors.

Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

As noted previously, this study is focused on examining the impact of policy change, specifically the impact of WIA and welfare reform on the ABE system. Consequently, a concern about policy development informs the implications of our findings for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers.

Policymakers

Policymakers should clarify the connection between policy change and the ultimate goals and purposes of ABE; identify a clear unit of change and make it the focus of implementation efforts; and consider and plan for the ways in which overlapping policies like WIA and welfare reform complement or obstruct each other in the effort to attain desired outcomes. Our study’s findings also suggest that policy development should include efforts to improve the professional climate within which practitioners work, and to address other factors that bear on their performance before expectations regarding accountability are raised. The relationship between professional development and the ability of practitioners to respond positively to policy changes should be acknowledged by supporting the state agency’s capacity to respond adequately to practitioners’ needs. Ways to understand and plan for the variation in state agencies’ capacity to implement change should be sought, and states

should be helped to respond to the differences in capacity among their funded programs.

Practitioners

Regardless of whether policy change is viewed as constructive or distracting, practitioners and programs must adapt to it, increasing demands on resources at

Implications for Policy

- *The connection between policy change and the ultimate goals and purposes of ABE should be clarified.*
- *Practitioners’ professional climate should be improved and other factors that bear on their performance should be addressed before expectations regarding accountability are raised.*
- *State agencies’ capacity to respond adequately to practitioners’ needs should be supported.*

Implications for Practice

- *Policy change should not be put in place without appropriate supports also being made available to practitioners and programs.*
- *In order to have more input into policy development, practitioners should educate themselves about the policy process.*

Implications for Research

- *Ways in which increased emphases on accountability drive, shape, and/or change ABE instruction need to be studied.*
- *Further research about the impact of states’ and programs’ varying responses to policy change on service provision and learning is needed.*
- *Ways to distinguish the effects of policy change on learner outcomes from those exerted by differences in program formats, sizes, resources, instructional approaches, etc., need to be explored.*

the local level. Thus, one implication for practice is that policy changes should not be put in place without appropriate supports also being made available to practitioners and programs. Absent such support, as we found, practitioners may be distracted from their focus on ABE goals or even be forced to abandon it in the face of obligations imposed by the WIA and welfare reform policy shifts.

Another implication concerns the need for practitioners to be involved in policy development. Previous research has shown that when a federal policy change is implemented, the process tends to favor external authority over the expertise of practitioners, who are often relegated to passive roles. In order to have a more direct impact, practitioners need to educate themselves about the processes involved in policy change. By being so informed, they can take advantage of the opportunities presented in any policy change process to bring about improvements. We found that those practitioners interviewed for our study who had been involved (in devising state-level WIA policy implementation procedures) did contribute to the process. These practitioners were well-positioned to use their connections and knowledge to support appropriate program change.

Researchers

Future research should examine the relationship between implementation of policy changes and improved learner outcomes. We also need to

discover the ways in which increased emphases on accountability drive, shape, and/or change ABE instruction. In light of the diversity that characterized state agencies' and programs' responses to policy change, research should seek to understand the impact that those differences make on service provision and learning. We will then better understand the opportunities and barriers that variability might present. It would also be fruitful to explore ways to distinguish the effects of policy change on learner outcomes from those exerted by differences in program formats, sizes, resources, instructional approaches, and other factors.

Overall, policy development should seek to improve mechanisms for communication across the ABE system, and achieve greater coordination among mission, philosophy, goals, and intended outcomes. Such a closer alignment would improve accountability mechanisms, instructional materials, and professional development. Policy development should also acknowledge the complexity of preparing a highly skilled workforce, and that such work requires a focus on developing higher-order thinking and conceptual skills. Instructors should be helped to integrate new practices with old ones in meaningful and practical ways.

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