On June 19 and 20, 1998, a NCSALL-sponsored conference entitled “The Impact of Welfare Reform on Adult Literacy Education” was held at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, New Jersey. The program for June 19 featured three commissioned papers followed by small group discussion sessions. The papers were authored and presented by Deborah D’Amico, Alec Levenson et al., and Connie White et al. On June 20, small groups discussed the implications of welfare reform for adult literacy practice, research and policy. A recorder charged with preparing ‘minutes’ was assigned to each of the small groups. Below are summaries of the three commissioned papers, as well as themes from the small group sessions and recommendations of the conference.

POLITICS, POLICY, PRACTICE AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY: ADULT EDUCATION IN AN ERA OF WELFARE REFORM
by Deborah D’Amico

In this paper, D’Amico challenges the prevailing discourse of policy with respect to literacy, poverty, work and welfare reform. She points out the underlying assumptions of welfare reform: one, that poverty and joblessness are caused by a failure of will, by the behavior of
individuals, as influenced by their cultural beliefs; and two, that some individuals are unemployed because they lack the literacy and skills necessary for available jobs. D’Amico provides an overview of research that debunks such theories and assumptions of welfare reform. Such research shows that factors beyond the literacy level of applicants such as the local labor market, racial and gender segmentation, and access to social networks that can provide entry to employment are involved in the transition from public assistance to employment. However, the prevailing discourse of policy implies that because literacy level is clearly related to employment, the proper role for adult educators vis-a-vis learners on public assistance is to deliver them job ready and to place them in jobs as well. D’Amico believes that both practitioners and students need to understand not only how education affects work, but also how racism, sexism, and the social capital that comes with class status determine which jobs are available to whom.

She suggests that practitioners can take action in several ways: first, that practitioners have a responsibility to create forums where students can articulate their stories, and a responsibility to tell students’ stories themselves in places to which learners do not yet have entry. Second, it is necessary to understand the class, race, and gender context of welfare reform and what it means for adult literacy practice. Third, adult literacy proponents need to decide on policies that will more effectively represent the needs of learners and of educators and connect with allies who are likely to share similar interests.

To do so, D’Amico believes people working in the adult literacy field must join forces with other advocates and with activists among public assistance recipients. The voices of adult literacy advocates would be stronger if they were raised in support of adequate child care, transportation, wages, and health care with proponents of these issues that are so wedded to literacy and to the needs of adult learners. In this way, the passage of the Personal Responsibility Act can be a catalyst for forming coalitions and partnerships that benefit the work being done in adult literacy, and adult education can be part of a broad social movement that seeks to increase access to self sufficiency and opportunity along lines of class, gender and race. At the same time, D’Amico cautions, it is necessary to concentrate on providing the best educational support possible, within Workforce Investment funding guidelines, to TANF recipients fighting the five-year clock. If learners on public assistance can resolutely continue to seek education, even as they face issues of homelessness and survival for themselves and their children, then people working in adult education can speak to both learners’ imminent practical concerns and their long-term development and political empowerment.

WELFARE, JOBS AND BASIC SKILLS: THE EMPLOYMENT PROSPECTS OF WELFARE RECIPIENTS IN THE MOST POPULOUS U.S. COUNTIES
by Alec R. Levenson, Elaine Reardon and Stefanie R. Schmidt

In August 1996, President Clinton fulfilled a campaign pledge to “end welfare as we know it” by signing into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. This law changed the fundamental nature of the welfare system, imposing time limits on the receipt of cash assistance to families with children. The name of the program was changed from Aid to
Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) to Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). With some exceptions, adults must be employed or be in an activity that will soon lead to work after receiving two years of TANF benefits.

This article evaluates the basic skills and employment prospects of current adult TANF recipients. The authors perform an analysis for the U.S. as a whole, as well as separate analyses for nearly all of the 75 most populous U.S. counties plus the District of Columbia. These counties contain 43 percent of the nation’s welfare caseload.

The authors base their analyses on a measure of basic skills from the National Adult Literacy Survey. Individuals at the lowest level of literacy, level 1, are able to do very simple tasks, such as locating the expiration date on a driver’s license, totaling a bank deposit slip, or signing their names. They are unable to do level 2 tasks, such as locating an intersection on a street map, understanding an appliance warranty, filling out a government benefits application, or totaling the costs from an order. Individuals at literacy level 2 can perform these tasks, but cannot perform higher-order tasks such as writing a letter explaining an error on a credit card bill, using a bus schedule, or using a calculator to determine a 10 percent discount.

The results for the U.S. as a whole show that typical TANF recipients have extremely low basic skills: 35 percent are at level 1 and 41 percent are at level 2. Because of their low basic skills, the vast majority of jobs are not open to TANF mothers. The nation’s economy would need to create 6 percent more jobs with very low basic skills to fully employ all welfare mothers. Separate analyses by county show that the impact of welfare reform will vary greatly across the country. In some counties only 1 percent more jobs with very low basic skills are needed; in other counties, the number of jobs with very low basic skills will have to increase by more than 20 percent. This means that some counties will witness fierce competition for unskilled jobs because of their large TANF caseloads and the particularly low basic skills of TANF recipients.

Five of the twelve counties that will potentially have the greatest difficulty moving their welfare recipients into jobs are in California, including those containing the cities of Los Angeles and San Diego. The seven other counties that will be the hardest hit by welfare reform are those containing Washington, D.C.; Newark, New Jersey; Detroit, Michigan; Baltimore, Maryland; Chicago, Illinois; New York City; and Miami, Florida. The calculations assumed that each county will exempt 20 percent of its welfare caseload from the work requirements, the maximum percent allowable under the federal law. Further, not all of the jobs with low basic skills would need to be created immediately; TANF recipients will reach their time limits over the course of the next few years.

The need for improved basic skills among most current and former welfare recipients is acute, regardless of whether they are still on the welfare rolls. Even if one optimistically assumes that all former TANF recipients could find full-time jobs, both earlier and ongoing research predict that many former recipients would still earn less than the income required to provide a subsistence living for their families because of their low basic skills. In counties where the need for additional low-skill jobs is high, adults with low basic skills will have the greatest difficulty finding work. Current welfare recipients may need literacy training in order to find a private sector job in those counties. In counties where the need for additional low-skill jobs is small,
adults with low basic skills have the greatest likelihood of being employed. Because welfare reform emphasizes a “work first” philosophy, recipients are encouraged to find a job, any job, no matter how little it pays. State welfare policies place little importance on learning new math and reading skills, so recipients may not get the education and training necessary to move into higher paying jobs that lift their families out of poverty. The challenge will be to help working parents acquire the skills they need to find better paying work while juggling the demands of work and family.

FAMILIES FIRST: IMPLICATIONS OF WELFARE REFORM FOR TENNESSEE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION
by Connie White, Mary Ziegler, and Beth Bingman

Tennessee’s welfare reform program diverged from national trends by actively encouraging adult basic education. In many ways the Families First program, as welfare reform is called in Tennessee, parallels the national law. But for participants who score below 8.9 on the TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education) the clock does not start ticking. In order to continue receiving benefits, they are not required to immediately look for work and instead must spend twenty hours a week in adult basic education classes until their TABE score reaches 8.9.

The Center for Literacy Studies (CLS), a not-for-profit organization, has been involved in Families First in several ways. CLS staff worked with local community organizations to develop educational materials about the Families First program. They worked with the Tennessee Department of Adult and Community Education to train Families First teachers. They continue to support these teachers in a variety of ways.

This paper describes the Tennessee experience with Families First, from policy to program implementation, with particular focus on the impact of policies and practice on adult basic education. The authors talked to policy makers involved in developing Families First. Interviews were conducted with key players in 1998 and quotes from those interviews are presented throughout the paper. The authors drew on ongoing work with 200 Families First teachers, and had informal conversations with students in Families First classes. In this paper, they present the program design, the legislative process, and the implementation of Families First as described by those involved in this ongoing policy experiment. They discuss the impacts of Families First on adult basic education practitioners, and they share the observations of students in Families First classes.

Overall, the authors conclude that the Families First program has encouraged a more collaborative and coherent approach to assistance for adults in need. They observe that relationships between people involved in the program, policy makers, program staff, teachers and learners are important in the programs’ implementation, and that teachers’ fears regarding changes in programs and classrooms faded as they got to know the Families’ First participants. They conclude that the program has strengthened the infrastructure of adult basic education by increasing funding and by providing a reliable, fairly consistent “market” for adult basic education services. Questions remain, and although the program continues to need
improvements, Families First has refused to be a punitive approach to welfare reform; instead, it has acknowledged the importance of basic skills education by making it a vital part of welfare reform efforts.

THEMES FROM THE SMALL GROUP SESSIONS
by Hal Beder

As part of “The Impact of Welfare Reform on Adult Literacy Education” conference, small group discussion sessions were conducted after each paper presentation contained in this publication. A facilitator and a recorder were assigned to each session; and after each session, a summary of the session was prepared. Based on these summaries, three main themes from the discussion sessions were identified: (1) issues and problems raised by the Personal Responsibility Act; (2) how adult literacy instruction should respond to welfare reform; and (3) how the adult literacy education system should respond to welfare reform.

Issues and problems raised by the Personal Responsibility Act: Nearly all conference participants were concerned whether the jobs acquired by TANF recipients would be low-paying, dead-end jobs or good jobs. For most, a good job was defined as a job with income sufficient to permit self-sufficiency, a job that could lead to career advancement, and a job that provided benefits. Several noted that these ingredients, adequate income, career advancement and benefits were job characteristics that many adult literacy education teachers did not enjoy.

Discussants were concerned with the skills gap for TANF recipients entering the workforce. Good jobs generally require skills and education that exceeds the education level and skills most TANF recipients possess. This is especially true for TANF recipients who are assigned to adult literacy before they are required to work. Where and how will TANF recipients acquire the advanced skills and education they need to qualify for good jobs and career advancement? Employers are reluctant to pay the costs, as are most state governments. Certainly, given the salaries of most TANF recipients, they themselves lack the capacity for investment.

Many conference participants lamented the fact that many learners enrolled in JOBS-sponsored adult literacy programs had been forced to terminate enrollment because of the work requirements of the new legislation. If previous learners are now employed, it makes sense to bring adult literacy to them through workplace education. However, few participants were hopeful that employers of TANF recipients would embrace the workplace education concept, let alone finance it.

The most commonly-expressed theme with respect to welfare reform was the need to prepare TANF recipients not only for employment, but also for self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency means a living wage and hope for the future. Many believed that the new legislation was inadequate in this respect and that welfare reform had merely increased the numbers of people condemned to the working poor.
How adult literacy education instruction should respond to welfare reform: Most conference attendees noted that while adult literacy education has traditionally responded to a wide range of learners’ individual needs, there is now a one-size-fits-all mentality that focuses on narrow employment goals. It is vital for adult literacy to continue to meet learners’ needs and to recognize differences in instruction. As one group noted, how can one treat a group of homeless, low-level TANF recipients the same as a group of learners who are almost ready to take the GED? Many were concerned that the legislation promoted a narrow vision of adult literacy that emphasized basic skills training rather than broad-based education. Welfare-sponsored adult literacy needs to do more than teach narrow skills if learners are to become employed in good jobs. At minimum, it must teach problem-solving skills and it must empower. There was concern that narrow adult literacy performance standards tied to employment would shape instruction in ways that prevented teachers from meeting a wide range of learners’ needs.

Many felt that in the atmosphere of reform, adult literacy teachers were confused regarding their roles. Were they to be responsible simply for narrow basic skill gain or were they also to be charged with changing attitudes, assisting in job acquisition and providing employment information? If the role of teacher were to change in response to welfare reform, who was going to provide the staff development necessary to help teachers make the change? Is the purpose of welfare-sponsored adult literacy to mainstream learners; that is, to equip them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes believed to be requisite for success in the dominant society? If so, should we not ask learners’ permission before we proceed with the makeover? Accepting the questionable assumption that we should strive for this kind of mainstreaming, is it possible?

How the adult literacy education system should respond to welfare reform: At the state level, the adult literacy education system typically involves, at minimum, the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services. At the local level, it includes a variety of stakeholders including public schools, community colleges, learners, employers and case workers. Most felt that in the past this system had been very poorly coordinated and that lack of coordination had created waste and had impeded the ability to address learners’ needs. Many conference participants noted that if adult literacy is to be successful with welfare recipients, it needs to be of sufficient intensity and duration. Under the JOBS program, most welfare recipients received at least 20 hours per week of instruction but, under the Personal Responsibility Act, many are now receiving far less. There was also the feeling that adult literacy had to provide for long-term as well as short-term needs, requiring better connections with providers of advanced vocational and higher education as well as the means for TANF recipients to pay for it. It will also require better connections with employers.

Finally, conference participants recognized that the needs of welfare recipients varied by state. Needs in rural states, for example, differ substantially from needs in urban areas. Although differences in state welfare programs often make the program seem chaotic, to some extent the differences are valid adaptations to differing state contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the final session of the ‘Impact of Welfare Reform on Adult Literacy Education’ conference, the participants developed draft recommendations for practice, policy and research. The draft
recommendations were subsequently sent to all participants for further comment. Based on comments received, the following recommendations resulted.

Practice:

- If welfare recipients are to become self-sufficient, adult education, both basic and advanced, must be equal in importance to job acquisition.
- The population served by adult literacy education should include the working poor as well as welfare recipients. Funds should be made available to enable this.
- The mission of adult literacy for welfare recipients should be to promote learners’ self-sufficiency. To this end, the goals of learners, their families and the community must be respected and addressed; learners’ goals and needs must guide instruction. In addition, instruction must be of sufficient intensity and duration.
- Support services must be funded and provided before and beyond initial employment. These include transportation, child care, health services, counseling and case management, and support for welfare recipients’ entrepreneurial activities.
- A high performance system for adult literacy education must be developed and implemented. This would include: (a) better collaboration and coordination among state agencies that serve welfare recipients, providers and other stakeholders, particularly employers; (b) an expanded system of staff development that meets teachers, professional learning needs substantially and in-depth; and (c) instruction of sufficient intensity and duration both for welfare recipients assigned to adult literacy and those who are employed.

Policy:

- Welfare policy formation should be an open process. Policy decisions at the national and state levels should meaningfully involve all stakeholders in welfare reform, including welfare recipients. Information regarding policies under consideration should be readily available to all stakeholders.

- Welfare policy should focus on promoting long-term self-sufficiency for welfare recipients rather than short-term employment gains. Welfare policy that merely adds to the number of working poor should be avoided.

Research

- Realistic and fair performance standards must be developed, and feasible methods of measuring performance must be implemented. Adult literacy education practitioners should be consulted in the process of developing standards.

- A longitudinal study should be implemented to measure the long-term benefits gained by welfare recipients who engage in adult literacy education.