



CALIFORNIA BUDGET PROJECT

AT A CROSSROADS

# BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION IN CALIFORNIA

---

October 2009

A Publication of the California Budget Project

# Acknowledgments

Vicky Lovell and Barbara Baran prepared this report. Funding for *At a Crossroads* was provided by grants from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Walter and Elise Haas Fund.

# California Budget Project

The CBP was founded in 1994 to provide Californians with a source of timely, objective, and accessible expertise on state fiscal and economic policy issues. The CBP engages in independent fiscal and policy analysis and public education with the goal of improving public policies affecting the economic and social well-being of low- and middle-income Californians. Support for the CBP comes from foundation grants, publications, and individual contributions. Please visit the CBP's website at [www.cbp.org](http://www.cbp.org).

California Budget Project  
1107 9th Street, Suite 310  
Sacramento, CA 95814  
P: (916) 444-0500 F: (916) 444-0172  
[cbp@cbp.org](mailto:cbp@cbp.org)  
[www.cbp.org](http://www.cbp.org)

# Table of Contents

Introduction

3

What Is Basic Skills Education?

4

What Is the Need for Basic Skills Programs?

4

Local Adult Schools and Community Colleges  
Offer Basic Skills Courses

5

Financing Basic Skills Education

6

Who Does California's Basic Skills  
Education System Serve?

8

How Well Are California's Basic  
Skills Students Served?

11

Conclusion

12

Endnotes

13



## INTRODUCTION

There is growing concern that the next generation of California's workers will have lower levels of educational attainment than the generation that preceded it.<sup>1</sup> At a time of increasing global competition, the implications of a decline in the skills of the workforce could be serious, both for the state's economic future and for the economic well-being of its residents. And with the retirement of the baby boom generation, California will need to replace a number of "middle-skilled" workers – workers with sophisticated vocational skills, though not necessarily a college degree. However, many of the state's high school graduates, as well as thousands of high school dropouts and adults already in the workforce, lack the basic English and math skills necessary to enter and succeed in either academic or vocational education that leads to high-quality jobs.

### Two Sets of Educational Institutions Provide Basic Skills

Two sets of educational institutions share the primary responsibility for addressing the state's basic skills needs: the Adult Education Program (AEP) and the California community colleges.<sup>2</sup> In the AEP, local school districts offer basic skills courses, with funds administered through the California Department of Education (CDE).<sup>3</sup> Community colleges also design basic skills programs to meet local needs.<sup>4</sup> Together, the AEP and the community colleges serve more than 1.5 million basic skills students a year at a cost of more than \$1.0 billion.<sup>5</sup> While the federal government provides some basic skills funding through the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), the vast majority of dollars – approximately 94 percent – are from state sources. Yet partly because responsibility for basic skills instruction is divided between two sets of institutions and partly because each school district and community college chooses its own course offerings, basic skills programs are seldom considered as a single system for which the state sets clear and measurable goals.

Both the AEP and community colleges collect some data on their basic skills students and outcomes, but neither institution's data system is designed to answer key questions about how successful students are in reaching their educational goals. The existing data suggest that students face significant challenges. Few students persevere long enough to make meaningful educational gains. Those who do may be required to take additional remedial classes if they attend a California State University or a regular community college

program because requirements for academic and vocational courses are not clearly tied to success in basic skills courses. In the end, a small share of those who enter basic skills courses earn a college degree or vocational certificate.

### While Policymakers Consider Ways To Strengthen Basic Skills Education, Funding Is Being Cut

Legislators, the CDE, and the community colleges have recently acted on these concerns. For example, with support from the Legislature, the community colleges began implementing a Basic Skills Initiative in 2006 that is intended to improve student outcomes, and per-student funding was increased for community college basic skills courses. The CDE established an Adult Basic Education Initiative for Student Success in December 2008 and launched a review of adult education policy in January 2009 that asks fundamental questions about the purpose and structure of adult education. These efforts have typically focused on the AEP and community college programs separately, rather than as two parts that should work together as a single system. Policymakers have not established goals for moving students from basic skills courses into academic and vocational education, as has been mandated in some other states. Thus, there is no clear guidance at the system level that encourages longer-term student achievement. Finally, California also has not developed the kind of data-tracking systems that would allow the state to implement reforms based on concrete evidence about what works.

The state's ongoing budget crisis has endangered funding for basic skills education. The February 2009 budget agreement reduced funding for the AEP by 15.8 percent relative to its 2007-08 funding level.<sup>6</sup> Lawmakers also authorized local school districts to shift funds from some categorical programs, including the AEP, to other education purposes in recognition of the deep cuts made to education funding overall.<sup>7</sup> Thus, basic skills funding may be reduced even further as local school districts seek to preserve support for their core educational programs. Community colleges have experienced similar reductions. Overall funding for community colleges in 2009-10 is 7.2 percent lower than in 2007-08, and funding for the community colleges' Basic Skills Initiative was reduced by 32 percent.<sup>8</sup>

Because schools and community colleges are locally governed, the scope and impact of state funding cuts will vary across the state. Some school districts have reduced or eliminated AEP programs, and some have increased fees or imposed new fees. Some community colleges have reduced course offerings, even where demand is increasing because of the state's high unemployment.

While California cut funding for basic skills, President Obama announced a new \$12 billion federal plan to modernize community colleges and boost graduation rates. The American Graduation Initiative highlights the importance of basic skills education in improving students' educational and employment outcomes.<sup>9</sup> In a report released just before the President outlined the new community college initiative, the President's Council of Economic Advisers noted that basic skills programs are "critical" to the country's development of a strong workforce.<sup>10</sup> A recent report from the Public Policy Institute of California on the projected gap between employers' need for college-educated workers and the number of Californians with a college degree suggests that the state faces significant challenges, as well.<sup>11</sup>

## The *At a Crossroads* Series Will Explore California's Basic Skills Programs

To examine the challenges faced by California's basic skills educational "system," the California Budget Project embarked on an ambitious research project that will culminate in a series of briefing papers. *At a Crossroads* explores the need for basic skills education in California, the nature and complexity of current basic skills programs, the strengths and weaknesses of current programs, and options for change through a series of briefing papers and in-depth analysis of available data. The series is designed to contribute to discussions of how this segment of the state's education system may evolve, given the level of need and continuing budget pressures. It will examine what services are provided by the basic skills system, how the system is funded and organized, what outcomes it achieves, and key issues and challenges affecting its success. It will also review initiatives in other states that could serve as models for California's programs.

This first paper of the series provides an overview of basic skills education in California.

## WHAT IS BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION?

Basic skills education has three core content areas: reading and writing, mathematics, and English as a Second Language (ESL).<sup>12</sup> In the AEP and noncredit community college courses, these content areas are organized into two basic types of programs: Adult Basic Education (ABE)/Adult Secondary Education (ASE) and ESL. Each track is divided into skill levels, from beginning to advanced.<sup>13</sup> In general, students

can advance as far as completing high school or passing the GED exam. Higher-level basic skills courses offered through the community colleges' credit programs prepare students for college-level coursework.<sup>14</sup>

ESL is not remedial in the same sense as reading and math – one can have high-level professional skills without being fluent in English – but it is considered a basic skill since English literacy is essential for success in postsecondary education and employment.<sup>15</sup> However, many English language learners also have low literacy and math skills. ESL constitutes three-fifths (61 percent) of basic skills education enrollment in the AEP and more than one-third (36 percent) of basic skills education enrollment in the community colleges.<sup>16</sup>

## WHAT IS THE NEED FOR BASIC SKILLS PROGRAMS?

There is no solid estimate of the number of Californians who could benefit from basic skills education. Even among students already enrolled in the community colleges and the California State University (CSU) and University of California (UC) systems, there is no universal assessment system that produces an official count of those who lack basic skills. Several measures suggest that hundreds of thousands of postsecondary students have inadequate basic skills. For example, more than four out of five students entering California community colleges lack the basic skills necessary to successfully complete college-level coursework (Table 1).<sup>17</sup> More than half of CSU students are also deficient in basic skills.<sup>18</sup> Other indicators of the need for better basic skills among community college students include:

- **Referral of community college students to placement testing.** More than half of students taking community college credit courses are referred to optional placement testing because counselors believe they may not be ready for community-college-level coursework – nearly 855,000 students in the fall of 2008.<sup>19</sup>
- **Basic skills course-taking.** Enrollment in basic skills courses is an indication of students' sense of the need for these programs, although many who would benefit from these courses do not take them. More than one-quarter of community college students were enrolled in at least one basic skills course in 2006-07.<sup>20</sup>
- **Success in basic skills courses.** Two out of five students who enroll in basic skills courses do not successfully complete them.<sup>21</sup>

Table 1: Measures of the Need for Basic Skills Education in California

Share of Entering Students Who Lack College-Level Math and/or Literacy Skills	
Community Colleges*	83.8%
California State University, Fall 2007	56.3%
Measures of Community College Students' Need for Better Basic Skills	
Share of All Credit Students Who Are Referred to Placement Testing, Fall 2008	54.5%
Number of Credit Students Who Are Referred to Placement Testing, Fall 2008	854,805
Share of Students Who Take at Least One Basic Skills Course, 2006-07	27.4%
Share of Basic Skills Courses That Students Fail, Fall 2008	43.3%
Other Measures of the Need for Basic Skills Education	
High School Dropout Rate, 2007-08	31.7%
California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) Passage Rate, 2007-08	90.2%
Number of Californians Age 25 or Older Without a High School Degree, 2007	4,610,311
Share of Californians Age 16 or Older Who Cannot Read a Newspaper, 2003	23.1%
Number of Students Taking Basic Skills Courses, 2006-07	1,524,344
Community Colleges	719,482
Adult Education Program	804,862

\* Data were collected in April through June 2009 from a small sample of community colleges, refer to math skills, and may include some individuals who were not new to community college.

Source: Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, Cabrillo College, California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, California Department of Education, California State University, CASAS, National Center for Education Statistics, and US Census Bureau

It is even more difficult to estimate the number of those outside the educational system who lack the basic skills necessary for education, training, and/or employment in a higher-paid job. However, some general measures can provide a sense of the need for these programs:

- **Students who do not complete high school.** Individuals who do not complete high school are unlikely to be prepared for college-level coursework or entry-level employment. Nearly one out of three California ninth-graders fails to complete high school.<sup>22</sup>
- **High school students who do not pass the California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE).** One out of 10 high school seniors fails this exam.<sup>23</sup>

- **Adults who lack a high school education.** More than 4.6 million Californians age 25 or older have not completed high school.<sup>24</sup>
- **Californians who lack basic literacy skills.** Nearly one out of four California adults cannot read and understand a newspaper.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, total enrollment in AEP and community college basic skills courses – more than 1.5 million students took a basic skills course from the AEP or community colleges in 2006-07 – demonstrates significant demand for these programs.<sup>26</sup>

## LOCAL ADULT SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES OFFER BASIC SKILLS COURSES

Schools and community colleges design their basic skills programs to respond to local community needs.

### The AEP Offers Basic Skills Courses Through Many Types of Providers

Local AEP programs are operated by school districts and county offices of education, mostly through adult schools, but in several other settings as well, including some community colleges. Along with basic skills courses, the AEP offers career technical education, programs for older adults and adults with disabilities, citizenship preparation, and courses in health and safety, home economics, and parenting. More than 525 organizations offer adult education courses; of these, more than 350 provide basic skills education.<sup>27</sup> The majority of AEP students in adult schools (62.3 percent) are enrolled in basic skills programs.

Many adult schools, as well as other types of AEP providers, receive funding under the WIA to provide basic skills education.<sup>28</sup> More than 855,000 students took basic skills courses from these WIA-funded providers in 2007-08.<sup>29</sup> Among AEP providers that receive WIA funding, 173 adult schools enroll the majority of basic skills students: more than three-quarters of WIA-funded AEP students in 2007-08 (Table 2).<sup>30</sup> Jails, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and the Department of Developmental Services together enrolled one out of 10 WIA-funded AEP students, and 17 community college districts served another one out of 10 WIA-funded AEP students. Smaller adult education programs

**Table 2: WIA-Funded AEP Basic Skills Enrollment by Type of Provider, 2007-08**

Type of Provider	Enrollment	Share of Total Enrollment
Adult Schools	666,935	78.0%
Jails, California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and Department of Developmental Services	89,399	10.5%
Community Colleges	82,841	9.7%
Other	15,846	1.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>855,021</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Note: Comparable data are not available for adult schools that do not receive WIA funding. Percentages do not sum to 100 due to rounding. Source: CASAS

were offered by 38 community-based organizations, 10 libraries, and seven county offices of education.<sup>31</sup>

## Community Colleges Offer Both Noncredit and Credit Basic Skills Courses

The core mission of the community colleges is credit course offerings that can lead to two-year degrees, other recognized credentials, and transfer to a four-year college or university.<sup>32</sup> Within that mission, community colleges offer remedial English, math, and ESL – basic skills – for students who are not yet ready for college-level work. Students usually receive credit for these courses, but often that credit cannot be applied to degrees, credentials, or transfer.<sup>33</sup> All 110 California community colleges offer basic skills courses for this type of credit. However, the range of course offerings varies widely among the community colleges.

In addition to credit coursework, most community colleges offer noncredit programs, which are usually operated as separate programs from credit courses and may include basic skills courses. In some cases, the noncredit divisions of a community college are substantial programs, serving thousands of students. These noncredit programs may be offered on the main college campus, on a separate noncredit campus, in sites scattered throughout the community, or in all of these settings. In general, however, noncredit instruction is a very small part of what most community colleges do, and a few community colleges have no noncredit offerings. Some noncredit divisions of community colleges are the designated adult education provider in a community.<sup>34</sup>

In 2006-07, 719,482 students enrolled in community college basic skills courses (Table 3). More than one-quarter of all community college enrollment was for basic skills coursework: 15 percent in noncredit courses and more than 12 percent in credit courses.

**Table 3: Community College Enrollment by Type of Program, 2006-07**

Type of Program	Enrollment	Share of Total Enrollment
Basic Skills	719,482	27.4%
Noncredit Basic Skills	393,004	15.0%
Credit Basic Skills	326,478	12.5%
Non-Basic Skills	1,901,963	72.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,621,445</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Source: Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges

## AEP and Community College Basic Skills Programs Have Different Goals

AEP and community college basic skills programs have different goals and serve somewhat different populations. AEP basic skills courses emphasize primary and secondary education and ESL for adults of all ages. The AEP focuses on making incremental improvements in students' language and other basic skills, as measured by specific learning gains. This goal is reflected in the WIA's pay-for-performance system. AEP providers earn payments when learners achieve specific increases in skill attainment over the course of a year. The AEP does not presume that most of its learners will or should go on to postsecondary education and training.

Community college noncredit basic skills courses are equivalent to AEP basic skills courses in terms of content level: They provide instruction through the high-school level, without necessarily expecting that students will continue into postsecondary education. Community college basic skills credit programs, on the other hand, have an explicit goal of preparing individuals for postsecondary education. The purpose of these programs is to move students into academic degree, transfer, and career training programs.

## FINANCING BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION

California spends a significant amount on basic skills education – \$1.0 billion in 2007-08 (Table 4). State and local funding for the AEP is allocated to adult schools based on attendance. The state spent \$487.8 million on AEP basic skills programs in 2007-08. The AEP also received \$56.2 million in federal dollars for basic skills programs from the WIA in 2007-08, for total funding of \$544.0 million.

# California's Basic Skills "System"

## Level of Education

**Adult Basic Education**  
Roughly equivalent to grades 1 through 8

**Adult Secondary Education**  
Roughly equivalent to grades 9 through 12

**Preparation for high school diploma or GED**

**Preparation for postsecondary education**

**Postsecondary education**

## The Adult Education Program (AEP)

**Adult Education Program**  
"Provides adults with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively as citizens."  
  
Courses are provided through adult schools and other organizations. In some communities, community colleges are the Adult Education provider.

Some Adult Education providers offer vocational certificate programs and/or clearly defined pathways to postsecondary education.

Content is equivalent at these levels.  
↔

## California Community Colleges

**Noncredit basic skills program**  
"Provides adults with the knowledge and skills necessary to participate effectively as citizens."  
  
Most California community colleges offer some noncredit basic skills courses. Often these are separate divisions within the community college – sometimes in a separate location.  
  
In some communities, community colleges are the Adult Education provider.

Pathways from noncredit to credit programs are poorly developed or nonexistent.

**Credit basic skills program**  
"Prepares students to succeed in college-level work."  
  
All California community colleges offer some credit basic skills courses.

Some individual community colleges have created pathways from credit basic skills to academic and vocational programs; others have not.

**Academic and vocational courses**  
Include certificate and associate's degree programs and preparation for transfer to four-year institutions.

Note: ESL is offered by both the AEP and the community colleges at all levels of instruction, from beginning through advanced. ESL and courses for students with disabilities do not fit precisely into the categories shown here.

Table 4: Basic Skills Funding, 2007-08 (Dollars in Millions)

	State and Local Funding	Federal WIA Funding	Total
Adult Education Program	\$487.8	\$56.2	\$544.0
Community Colleges	\$515.6	\$9.8	\$525.4
Total	\$1,003.4	\$66.0	\$1,069.4

Note: WIA funding that community colleges receive through the AEP is shown as community college funding.

Source: California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, California Department of Education, and Legislative Analyst's Office

The community colleges' basic skills programs are also primarily funded based on attendance. In 2007-08, the community colleges received \$482.5 million in state and local funding for basic skills education based on enrollment. The community colleges also received \$33.1 million in categorical funding for the Basic Skills Initiative, for total state and local funding of \$515.6 million. In addition, the community colleges received \$9.8 million in federal WIA funding for courses provided as part of the AEP, for a total of \$525.4 million.

State and local funds comprise by far the majority of total spending on basic skills in California: 94 percent.<sup>35</sup> When WIA funding is considered, the AEP and the community colleges received a total of \$1.1 billion in basic skills funding in 2007-08, with similar amounts going to both: The AEP received 51 percent of the total and the community colleges, 49 percent.

## WHO DOES CALIFORNIA'S BASIC SKILLS EDUCATION SYSTEM SERVE?

The AEP and community colleges serve more than 1.5 million basic skills students a year – roughly equivalent to one out of 10 Californians between the ages of 18 and 45. There are some differences between AEP and community college basic skills students and between basic skills students and other groups of Californians.

## Latinos Are a Larger Share of AEP Basic Skills Enrollment Compared to Latino Enrollment in Community Colleges and K-12 Education

In the AEP, including community college providers, more than two-thirds of basic skills students are Latino (68.5 percent; Table 5).<sup>36</sup> Approximately three-quarters of AEP ESL students (76.4 percent) and approximately half of AEP ABE and ASE/GED students (49.4 percent and 48.6 percent, respectively) are Latino. Roughly one out of seven AEP basic skills students is Asian (14.9 percent). A slightly higher percentage of AEP ESL students is Asian (18.0 percent). Approximately one out of 10 basic skills students is white (10.7 percent), but only 4.8 percent of ESL students are. Blacks are disproportionately represented in AEP basic literacy and math programs, making up 21.3 percent of ABE course enrollment and 13.9 percent of ASE/GED students. However, few blacks are enrolled in ESL courses (0.8 percent).

Of community college basic skills students who provide data on race and ethnicity, 44.9 percent are Latino – a much lower share than in AEP programs – and 24.5 percent are white – more than twice their share of AEP programs.<sup>37</sup> Approximately one out of eight community college basic skills students is black (12.2 percent), and more than one out of six is Asian (18.4 percent).

Nonwhite students account for a disproportionate share of the basic skills student population. Whites account for a smaller share of both AEP and community college basic skills students than of community college students as a whole. Whites also account for a smaller share of basic skills students than of Californians ages 18 to 45 and the state's K-12 students. While the community college basic skills population is disproportionately Latino compared to the total community college student body, it has a roughly similar share of Latinos as the state's residents ages 18 to 45 and the state's K-12 student body. Asians account for a slightly larger share of both community college basic skills students and the overall community college student population than of AEP basic skills students, the state's population ages 18

Table 5: Comparison of Race and Ethnicity of Basic Skills Students and Other Californians, 2006-07

Population	White	Latino	Asian	Black	Total
<b>Basic Skills Students</b>					
WIA-Funded AEP Students	10.7%	68.5%	14.9%	5.9%	100.0%
Adult Basic Education	22.7%	49.4%	6.6%	21.3%	100.0%
Adult Secondary Education/GED	29.3%	48.6%	8.2%	13.9%	100.0%
ESL	4.8%	76.4%	18.0%	0.8%	100.0%
Community College Students	24.5%	44.9%	18.4%	12.2%	100.0%
<b>Other Groups</b>					
All Community College Students	40.2%	32.7%	18.6%	8.5%	100.0%
Californians Ages 18 to 45	38.0%	41.4%	13.9%	6.7%	100.0%
California's K-12 Students	30.5%	49.9%	11.8%	7.9%	100.0%

Note: Individuals whose race/ethnicity is unknown or is reported as “other, nonwhite” or American Indian/Alaska Native are excluded from totals. Data for Californians ages 18 to 45 are for 2007. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, California Department of Education, CASAS, and Department of Finance

to 45, and the state’s K-12 students. In general, blacks are slightly underrepresented among AEP basic skills students and somewhat overrepresented in community college basic skills programs.

## Community College Basic Skills Students Tend To Be Younger Than AEP Basic Skills Students

The community colleges and the AEP use slightly different age categories in describing their students, but some general comparisons can be drawn from the existing data. Basic skills community college students are typically young; three out of five (59.3 percent) are age 25 or younger. In contrast, fewer than one-third (30.0 percent) of AEP basic skills students are age 24 or younger (Table 6). The three kinds of AEP basic skills courses – ABE, ASE/GED, and ESL – serve very different populations, however. ASE/GED students are very young, with 55.3 percent under the age of 25 (27.1 percent are between 16 and 18); only 9.2 percent are 45 or older. As a group, ESL

students are older; just 23.5 percent are under age 25, and 23.2 percent are 45 or older.

## Los Angeles County Has a Higher Share of AEP Basic Skills Students Compared to Its Share of the State’s Population

Geographically, AEP WIA-funded programs, including non-basic skills courses, are disproportionately concentrated in Los Angeles County. Two out of five students (39.6 percent) are enrolled in Los Angeles County, which has 27.5 percent of the state’s population (Table 7).<sup>38</sup> Conversely, 14.9 percent of AEP students are enrolled in the counties surrounding Los Angeles County, which have 21.5 percent of the state’s population.<sup>39</sup> AEP programs in the Bay Area, the Central Valley, and the San Diego region more closely reflect their shares of the state’s total population. Smaller counties that are not included in one of these regions, referred to as “balance of state” in Table 7, are underrepresented in the AEP.

Table 6: Age Distribution of WIA-Funded AEP Basic Skills Students, 2006-07

	Age				
	16 to 18	19 to 24	25 to 44	45 to 59	60 or older
<b>WIA-Funded Adult Education Program</b>					
Adult Basic Education	8.5%	21.5%	49.6%	15.1%	5.2%
Adult Secondary Education/GED	15.9%	24.2%	43.9%	13.7%	2.4%
ESL	27.1%	28.2%	35.4%	7.8%	1.4%
	3.7%	19.8%	53.3%	16.7%	6.5%

Note: Includes students in AEP programs offered by community colleges. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: CASAS

**Table 7: Regional Distribution of WIA-Funded AEP Students, 2007-08, and the State's Population, 2007**

Region	Share of Enrollment	Share of State Population
Bay Area	14.4%	15.9%
Central Valley	5.1%	6.5%
Counties Surrounding Los Angeles County	14.9%	21.5%
Los Angeles County	39.6%	27.5%
San Diego	5.9%	8.3%
State Agencies	7.7%	*
Balance of State	12.3%	20.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%

\* Not applicable.

Note: Excludes Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Inyo, Mariposa, Plumas, San Benito, Sierra, Siskiyou, Trinity, Tuolumne, and Yuba counties, which have a total of 1.0 percent of the state's population. "State Agencies" refers to individuals in institutions of the Department of Developmental Services and the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: CASAS and Department of Finance

## Basic Skills Students Have Low Levels of Educational Attainment

Basic skills students served by AEP programs typically have low levels of educational attainment. Those in ABE and ASE/

GED programs average 10.7 years of school, while ESL students have an average of 9.7 years of school.<sup>40</sup> Students typically also have low levels of basic skills achievement (Table 8). In ABE courses, almost half (47.7 percent) of students are at beginning or intermediate-low levels of functioning – roughly, fifth grade or lower. Among ASE students, two-thirds (66.3 percent) function at a low level – roughly equivalent to ninth or tenth grade. One out of six ESL students (16.2 percent) is enrolled in a beginning-level course and can at most speak and read only certain phrases or words in English. Another half of these students (51.2 percent) are at an intermediate skill level and can only engage in simple English-language conversation or read simple text on familiar topics in English.

Among students in WIA-funded AEP basic skills courses, noncredit community college students have a somewhat higher skill level than the students of other providers. Approximately 12 percent of AEP students enrolled in community colleges entered at the two lowest levels of ABE in 2001-02, but approximately 25 percent of ABE students of other providers entered at these lower levels.<sup>41</sup> In ESL, just over 28 percent of AEP community college students entered at the two lowest levels compared to approximately 39 percent in the rest of the AEP. The community college credit programs serve students at even higher entering basic skills levels.

**Table 8: Entering Skill Level of WIA-Funded AEP Students, 2007-08**

Educational Functioning Level	Approximate Grade or Skill Level	Share of Participants at This Level
Adult Basic Education		
Beginning	Grade level 0 to 3	25.3%
Intermediate Low	Grade level 4 to 5	22.4%
Intermediate High	Grade level 6 to 8	52.2%
Adult Secondary Education		
Low	Grade level 9 to 10	66.3%
High	Grade level 11 to 12	33.7%
ESL		
Beginning	Ranges from no reading or speaking ability to the ability to speak in phrases and read some words	16.2%
Intermediate	Can read simple text on familiar topics and engage in simple conversations	51.2%
Advanced	Some conversational fluency; can read and write simple narratives	32.6%

Note: Grade-level equivalents for Entering Functional Levels are provided by the US Department of Labor's Employment and Training Administration and are used here to give a general sense of skill development for each Educational Functioning Level. CASAS, which analyzed the data on Educational Functioning Level that are presented here, discusses limitations of grade-level comparisons for Educational Functioning Levels in *Why CASAS Scale Scores Are Better Than Grade Level Equivalents* (n.d.), available from [www.casas.org](http://www.casas.org). Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Source: CASAS and US Department of Labor

## HOW WELL ARE CALIFORNIA'S BASIC SKILLS STUDENTS SERVED?

Both the CDE and the community colleges collect some data on basic skills students' success over the course of a year. The community colleges report that barely half (51.1 percent) of students enrolled in credit basic skills courses pass with a grade of C or higher.<sup>42</sup> Half of those taking credit basic skills courses in one year leave the community college system before the next year.<sup>43</sup> A community college study that followed students' progress over three years found that many students with low skills do not take enough courses to experience a significant improvement in their skills.<sup>44</sup> The study focused on students who needed to complete two or more basic skills courses to be ready for college-level courses. Only half (50.0 percent) of English literacy and math students who passed one credit basic skills course continued on to complete a higher-level course in the same discipline within three years. Fewer than half (44.7 percent) of ESL students who started at least two levels below college-level ESL achieved this level of improvement. These data indicate that many students do not continue in the community colleges' basic skills program long enough to become college-ready.

The CDE tracks basic skills students over the course of a year to evaluate how many successfully complete a skill level and are prepared to move up to the next level. In 2007-08, success rates on this measure ranged from 16.9 percent for students starting at the lower level of ASE to 43.3 percent for students who began the year in intermediate ESL (Table 9). ESL students are the most likely to complete a skill level – nearly two out of five do so. ASE students are the least likely to succeed over the course of a year – only one out of five does.

The CDE also verifies the number of students who obtain a GED or high school diploma over the course of a year. Among students who reported this as a goal in 2007-08, 36.0 percent were successful.<sup>45</sup>

Neither system reports regularly on longer-term success measures, such as the number of students in the AEP who eventually move into postsecondary education or the number of basic skills students in the community colleges who ultimately receive a degree or credential. One recent community college analysis followed students who were enrolled in basic skills courses in 2001-02 over the next five years. The researchers found that approximately 60 percent of these students successfully completed ESL, basic literacy, and/or basic math coursework each year. Over the six-year period that students were studied, 12.2 percent attained an associate's degree, 3.0 percent received a vocational education certificate, and 13.8 percent transferred to a four-year college or university.<sup>46</sup>

Table 9: Enrollment in WIA-Funded AEP Basic Skills Courses and Completion, by Entering Educational Functioning Level, 2007-08

Level of Educational Functioning at Beginning of Year	Number of Students	Share of all Students	Share Completing Their Starting Level
Adult Basic Education	122,601	20.3%	29.8%
Beginning	31,057	5.2%	33.6%
Intermediate Low	27,498	4.6%	35.3%
Intermediate High	64,046	10.6%	25.6%
Adult Secondary Education	71,579	11.9%	19.7%
Low	47,442	7.9%	16.9%
High	24,137	4.0%	25.2%
ESL	408,657	67.8%	38.8%
Beginning	141,654	23.5%	41.2%
Intermediate	200,782	33.3%	43.3%
Advanced	66,221	11.0%	19.8%
Total	602,837	100.0%	34.7%

Source: CASAS

## CONCLUSION

Several conclusions can be drawn from this preliminary review of basic skills education in California. The first is that the basic skills “system” is both large and increasingly important. Demand is likely much greater than the 1.5 million individuals being served. This demand reflects the fact that tens of thousands more Californians need stronger basic skills if they are to access vocational skills training or higher education. While many basic skills students do not have a goal of continuing their education beyond high school, more advanced educational attainment is critical both for students’ economic well-being and for the state’s economic prosperity.

Second, basic skills programs are needed for individuals with very different entering skills, from those at extremely low levels of proficiency in math, English, or both to those who are almost college-ready. Currently, AEP providers and the community colleges tend to serve somewhat different segments of the basic skills population, but there is considerable overlap as well.

Third, there is little attention in California to ensuring an easy transition from basic skills education to postsecondary education or skills training. The available evidence seems to suggest that most basic skills students fail to make that transition. Students leaving the AEP may find that they are

not prepared to enter a vocational or academic course at a community college or CSU. Students who have just completed a GED, for example, may be advised to take more basic skills courses at a community college. Whether a student is deemed “college-ready” depends on which community college and/or what program the student enters. Within community colleges, there is little or no connection between lower-level noncredit and higher-level credit basic skills courses.

Fourth, funding for adult education is almost certain to be more constrained in the foreseeable future than in the past. Although federal monies for adult education may be growing, state funds comprise more than 90 percent of basic skills spending in California. This funding may be sharply cut in many school and community college districts in the coming years.

Finally, California is mostly unable to track either long-term outcomes for the basic skills “system” as a whole or meaningful educational attainment for individuals. The data that are available suggest that many basic skills students do not achieve significant educational or vocational goals.

Subsequent policy briefs in the *At a Crossroads* series will explore these observations in greater detail, beginning with a closer look at how basic skills education is funded in California and how the current funding crisis is likely to affect future services. The series will also examine the educational outcomes that students achieve in both the AEP and community college systems in detail and review other states’ model programs for providing basic skills education.

# ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> California is one of 16 states in which a smaller share of adults between the ages of 25 and 34 have an associate's or higher degree than adults between the ages of 35 and 64. See Gordon K. Davies, *Setting a Public Agenda for Higher Education in the States: Lessons Learned from the National Collaborative for Higher Education Policy* (The Education Commission of the States, The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems: December 2006).
- <sup>2</sup> Both the California State University and the University of California systems also offer some non-degree-applicable basic skills courses.
- <sup>3</sup> Some county offices of education also provide basic skills courses through the AEP. In addition, the CDE administers grants under the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 to other providers, including community-based organizations, libraries, the California Conservation Corps, and state institutions, that offer basic skills courses as part of the state's AEP.
- <sup>4</sup> The Legislature and governing bodies such as the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges establish guidelines for basic skills programs.
- <sup>5</sup> Enrollment data are for 2006-07 and are the most recent data available.
- <sup>6</sup> Personal communication with the Legislative Analyst's Office (September 21, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> Historically, categorical programs have received specially designated funding in order to serve a specific purpose. This funding is allocated separately from school districts' general funding.
- <sup>8</sup> The majority of funding for community college basic skills programs comes from community colleges' state and local funding. The July 2009 budget agreement allowed community colleges to divert funding from some categorical programs, but not from the Basic Skills Initiative.
- <sup>9</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, *Below Are Excerpts of the President's Remarks in Warren, Michigan Today and a Fact Sheet on the American Graduation Initiative* (July 14, 2009), downloaded from <http://www.itcc.edu/data/ResourcePDF/pioTHE WHITE HOUSE.pdf> on August 26, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Council of Economic Advisers, *Preparing the Workers of Today for the Jobs of Tomorrow* (July 2009), p. 14.
- <sup>11</sup> Hans Johnson, *Educating California: Choices for the Future* (Public Policy Institute of California: June 2009).
- <sup>12</sup> Basic skills programs can also encompass a range of other subjects and skills, including preparation for a high school degree or the GED exam, study skills, and reasoning.
- <sup>13</sup> The definition and number of instructional levels varies by provider. While one program may offer two courses below college level, another may have seven. See Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, *The State of Basic Skills Instruction in California Community Colleges* (April 2000).
- <sup>14</sup> California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, *Noncredit at a Glance* (September 21, 2006), p. 13. In the community colleges, basic skills courses are often referred to as "developmental education" courses.
- <sup>15</sup> Barbara Illofsky, "The California Basic Skills Initiative," *New Directions for Community Colleges* (2008), pp. 83-91.
- <sup>16</sup> CASAS, *End-of-Year Progress Report to the California Legislature 2007-08: Implementation and Impact of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act* (prepared for the California Department of Education: February 2009) and California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart, <http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx>.
- <sup>17</sup> More than three out of five students entering community colleges require basic skills coursework in order to meet community college standards. See Craig Hayward, *Placement Level Analysis of the California Community College System* (Cabrillo College: June 2009).
- <sup>18</sup> California State University, CSU Freshmen Proficiency Rates, *Fall 2007 Final Regularly Admitted First-time Freshmen Proficiency Systemwide*, downloaded from <http://www.asd.calstate.edu/performance/proficiency.shtml> on April 1, 2009.
- <sup>19</sup> California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart, <http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx>. Each community college sets its own procedures for referring students to assessment, selecting assessment instruments, and determining the test scores needed to be placed in a given course level. One out of 10 students "directed" to undertake assessment does not comply. Noncredit students are typically not expected to participate in placement testing. See Consultation Council Task Force on Assessment, *Report to the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges* (January 2008); Richard S. Brown and David N. Niemi, *Investigating the Alignment of High School and Community College Assessments in California* (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education: June 2007); and Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, *Issues in Basic Skills Assessment and Placement in the California Community Colleges* (September 22, 2004 draft).
- <sup>20</sup> Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, *Report on the System's Current Programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Skills* (January 2008), p. 5.
- <sup>21</sup> California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart, <http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx>.
- <sup>22</sup> California Department of Education DataQuest, <http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/>.
- <sup>23</sup> California Department of Education, *Schools Chief Jack O'Connell Announces California High School Exit Exam Results for 2007-08* (September 9, 2008). This failure rate suggests greater success than young Californians actually achieve. Students who drop out of school when they fail the CAHSEE exam are not included in the failure rate for high school seniors. See Sean F. Reardon, et al., *Effects of the California High School Exit Exam on Student Persistence, Achievement, and Graduation* (Stanford University Institute for Research on Education Policy and Practice: April 21, 2009).
- <sup>24</sup> US Census Bureau, 2007 American Community Survey.
- <sup>25</sup> US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy.
- <sup>26</sup> Personal communication with CASAS (August 31, 2009) and Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, *Report on the System's Current Programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Skills* (January 2008), p. 5. More recent data on basic skills enrollment are not available.
- <sup>27</sup> Personal communication with the CDE (June 11, 2009).
- <sup>28</sup> Approximately 95 percent of AEP basic skills enrollment is in these WIA-funded programs.
- <sup>29</sup> This total includes students who took AEP courses through community colleges. It is not comparable to the basic skills enrollment shown in Table 1, where AEP community college students are counted as community college students.
- <sup>30</sup> The Legislature requires certain reporting on WIA-funded adult education, but comparable data are not available for enrollment in adult schools that do not receive WIA funding.
- <sup>31</sup> CASAS, *End-of-Year Progress Report to the California Legislature 2007-08: Implementation and Impact of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act* (prepared for the California Department of Education: February 2009).
- <sup>32</sup> More than three-quarters of public postsecondary enrollment in California is in the community colleges. See EdSource, *California Postsecondary Institutions* (October 2008).
- <sup>33</sup> Credit community college basic skills courses may be eligible for financial aid. See Legislative Analyst's Office, *Back to Basics: Improving College Readiness of Community College Students* (June 2008).
- <sup>34</sup> Seventeen community college districts were the designated adult education provider in 2007-08. See CASAS, *End-of-Year Progress Report to the California Legislature 2007-08: Implementation and Impact of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) Title II Adult Education and Family Literacy Act* (prepared for the California Department of Education: February 2009).

- <sup>35</sup> State and local funding for the AEP and the community colleges comes primarily from the General Fund and local property taxes and is apportioned among local districts by the CDE and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, respectively.
- <sup>36</sup> The data discussed below for AEP students' racial, ethnic, and age characteristics are for those in WIA-funded programs only.
- <sup>37</sup> These data are not strictly comparable to the racial/ethnic data for AEP basic skills courses discussed above, because a large share of community college students either choose not to report a racial/ethnic identity or select a category other than white, Latino, Asian, or black. Data are not available on the racial and ethnic composition of individual community college basic skills programs, such as ESL.
- <sup>38</sup> These data are for enrollment in WIA-funded programs only; data for programs that do not receive WIA funding are not available.
- <sup>39</sup> Counties surrounding Los Angeles County include Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and Ventura counties.
- <sup>40</sup> Data are for 2006-07. See CASAS, *California Adult Education: Student Progress and Goal Attainment Report: Adult School Programs in California* (prepared for the California Department of Education, Adult Education Office: n.d.).
- <sup>41</sup> CASAS, *Adult Basic Education and Community Colleges in Five States* (September 2003).
- <sup>42</sup> This rate includes students who received a grade of credit or pass. The success rate for non-basic-skills students is 66.5 percent. Data are for Fall 2007 and are from the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office Data Mart, <http://www.cccco.edu/SystemOffice/Divisions/TechResearchInfo/MIS/DataMartandReports/tabid/282/Default.aspx>.
- <sup>43</sup> Legislative Analyst's Office, *Back to Basics: Improving College Readiness of Community College Students* (June 2008).
- <sup>44</sup> California Community Colleges System Office, *Focus on Results: Accountability Reporting for the Community Colleges* (March 31, 2008).
- <sup>45</sup> The CDE also reports that in 2007-08, 56.9 percent of students taking classes in order to get a job were successful in achieving that goal, 92.9 percent of those enrolling so they would retain their job were successful, and 42.4 percent of students who took basic skills courses to prepare for postsecondary education or training did enter such a program. These outcome reports are based on student surveys with response rates of 16 percent, 18 percent, and 18 percent, respectively. Data on receipt of GEDs and high school diplomas are verified against administrative records and reflect the experiences of 97 percent of students with these stated goals. See CASAS, *California Annual Performance Report: Federally Funded Workforce Investment Act Title II Programs, Program Year 2008, July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008* (prepared for the California Department of Education, Adult Education Office: n.d.).
- <sup>46</sup> Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges, *Report on the System's Current Programs in English as a Second Language (ESL) and Basic Skills* (January 2008).