



Strategic Plan for Adult Education and Literacy Progress Report 2020

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Background

In the seven years that the Texas Workforce Commission has administered the Adult Education and Literacy (AEL) program, formerly housed under the Texas Education Agency (TEA), adult learners, employers, communities, and families have benefited from the integrated workforce services provided by more than 98 AEL providers across the state.

When the AEL program was transferred from TEA to TWC during the 83rd Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2013), the legislature required TWC to create a statewide AEL strategic plan and to provide progress reports of the goals and objectives outlined in the plan every even-numbered year.¹ In 2014, shortly after the transfer of AEL to TWC, revised federal regulations that authorize funding for AEL programs became final. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) expanded the purpose of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, adding that AEL must support adult learners in attaining secondary school diplomas and transitioning to postsecondary education through career pathways models. WIOA further highlighted the need for workforce core programs, such as those funded by Title I and Title IV of WIOA (administered by TWC in Texas through Local Workforce Development Boards (Boards) and Vocational Rehabilitation offices), to work as an integrated system to better serve individuals with barriers to employment.

This final progress report of the Strategic Plan for Adult Education and Literacy for the Fiscal Year of 2015 – 2020 (strategic plan) affirms that the move of the AEL program to TWC has resulted in successful outcomes for adult learners preparing to enter the workforce or postsecondary education, supporting the federal purpose of the AEL program under WIOA.

Executive Summary

TWC has created a statewide network of colleges, independent school districts, education service centers, nonprofit organizations, and Boards in order to provide literacy, employment, and workforce training support to AEL customers. TWC annually serves approximately 80,000 AEL students who lack a high school diploma, are basic skills deficient, or are English language learners to attain skills needed, as stated in WIOA, “... become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and economic self-sufficiency.” AEL’s placement in the workforce system has enabled the program, while keeping a sharp focus on building literacy and numeracy skills, to work closely with adults who wish to pursue education, training, and employment opportunities. To further underscore the AEL program’s commitment to building basic skills, nearly 87 percent of AEL students assessed last year were reported as showing a successful gain in English or math.²



As stated in the 2018 progress report, “AEL is not your typical one-dimensional, brick-and-mortar educational solution.” The program’s flexibility became evident when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted face-to-face service delivery across the workforce system and changed the way AEL administrators and instructors engaged with former, current, and future AEL customers. Because TWC recognized the benefits and value of distance learning after inheriting AEL in 2013 and made investments in technology options early on, the AEL program has remained open for business.

An Overview of Progress

This report dispels the myth of what AEL is and what it can deliver. It is more than a literacy program and more than a workforce program. AEL has created careers and supported families in the next stages of self-sufficiency, resulting in a stronger Texas workforce. Below are just a few highlights of the TWC AEL program and its value to Texas.

- AEL has served 35,500 unduplicated students in career pathways to date.
- AEL has made significant increases in distance learning, with nearly 30 percent of all AEL participants engaged in distance learning.³
- AEL has engaged with more than 50 employers to provide workplace literacy programs statewide.
- Since December 2018, AEL has trained 1,731 administrators, instructors, and staff members on implementing distance learning.
- AEL has continued to integrate workforce systems partners and community-based organizations through Accelerate Texas, Literacy Texas, and other special initiatives.
- AEL has invested \$12 million in the Accelerate Texas program for upskilling and training of 3,500 individuals.
- Eighty-seven percent of students have shown a successful gain in literacy or math skills.⁴
- AEL leads in alternatives to school debt programs, such as Ability-to-Benefit, serving nearly 2,500 participants in 2020.
- Almost 70 percent of AEL programs, a total of 25 across the state, provide services in correctional facilities.
- AEL programs have served approximately 2,138 justice-involved individuals in correctional facilities.

Milestone Report

The 2015 strategic plan provided the vision and mission that focused AEL efforts on achieving its goal for AEL customers.

- Vision: To deliver education, workforce, and postsecondary education and training transition outcomes for students through innovative service delivery and partnerships that result in efficiencies, alignments, and accountability
- Mission: To promote and support a responsive and accountable system that creates value and supports local solutions to addressing the educational and workforce development needs of AEL customers, businesses, and community stakeholders
- Goal: To support increases in employment, postsecondary education and training transition, skill gains, and secondary completion through demonstrated approaches that integrate system services and leverage community partnerships
- To determine AEL's effectiveness in carrying out this mission, AEL created a bold milestone for 2020.
- Milestone: By 2020, at least 20,000 adult learners will enroll in career pathways programs through partnerships between Texas employers, community and technical colleges, AEL providers, and Workforce Boards, which will positively impact student employment and employer workforce needs.

As reported in the 2018 progress report for the strategic plan, AEL met its goal—two years early—with more than 22,000 students enrolled in career pathways. Additionally, AEL continued to reach new milestones, and to date 35,500 students have been served in career pathways programs.

The following are the primary measures associated with meeting this milestone.



Utilization Measures

Utilization Measures	Performance
Career pathways students for State Fiscal Year 2020 (SFY'20)*	11,318
Unduplicated career pathways students from 2015 to 2020*	35,500
Number of employers participating in employer-based career pathways programs**	57

- * Career pathways includes programs that have workforce training components and those that do not such as workplace literacy, services for internationally trained professionals, and reentry and corrections services.
- ** The number of employers is for AEL PY'19-'20 and is reporting data captured by TWC as part of TWC's annual reporting requirement to the US Department of Labor on the agency's effectiveness in serving employers.

Capacity Measures

Capacity Measures	Performance
Number of career pathways programs with workforce training*	306
Number of career pathways programs classes without workforce training	1,785
Number of providers with career pathways programs**	85

- * Career pathways programs with workforce training includes programs that have a workforce training component. This number represents workforce training career pathways programs by Classification of Instructional Programs code per county across the state.
- ** Career pathways programs includes those that have a workforce training component and those that do not.

Post-program Employment Measures

These measures have been modified from the employment measures outlined in the [Strategic Plan for Adult Education and Literacy for Fiscal Year of 2015–2020](#) to align with the outcome performance measures required under the Texas Legislature’s General Appropriations Act. TWC met both of these measures for SFY’20.⁵

Post-program Employment Measures	Performance
Employed/Enrolled in the 2nd Quarter after Exit (exiters July 2018–June 2019)	34.51%
Employed/Enrolled in the 2nd–4th Quarter after Exit (exiters January 2018–December 2018)	84.41%

Report on Strategies

The strategic plan includes four strategies to support AEL performance and enhancements toward increased innovation:

- **Strategy 1:** Increase workforce, secondary, and postsecondary education and training outcomes—support increases in education and work-related outcomes through enhanced delivery and service integration
- **Strategy 2:** Address demand—implement strategies that address projected demand for AEL in Texas
- **Strategy 3:** Increase system coordination and integration—support and facilitate increased coordination and collaboration between state and local system stakeholders
- **Strategy 4:** Improve performance excellence—support increased performance excellence; communicate impact; and ensure program accountability, fiscal integrity, and program effectiveness

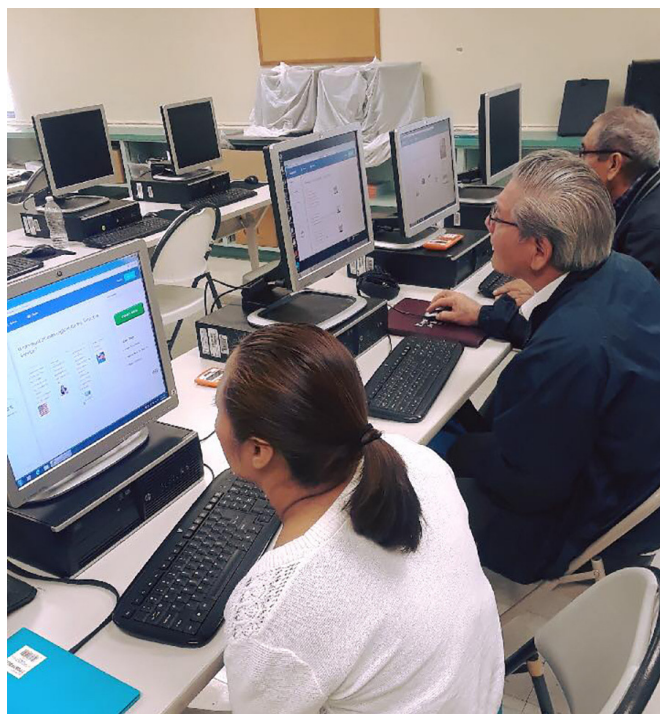
This progress report outlines how Texas AEL has continued to support these strategies in serving workforce customers in the years it has been administered under TWC.

Strategy 1: Increase Workforce, Secondary, and Postsecondary Education and Training Outcomes

AEL's focused efforts to integrate with workforce system partners such as employers, Boards, and community college systems have better aligned AEL customers' goals with local workforce needs. Since 2013, AEL programs have worked to improve both the literacy and occupational training skills of approximately 35,500 customers in career pathways programs.

Investments in Technology and Distance Learning

Previous progress reports provided highlights of TWC's early investments in remote and distant learning instruction, such as the Distance Learning Mentor Initiative, Distance Learning Call Center, and online professional development offered through the contractor for statewide AEL professional development and the Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy and Learning at Texas A&M (TCALL). Additionally, TWC required all AEL programs to staff a lead for distance learning under statewide grants to lead distance learning trainings, efforts, and advancement in the AEL program. TWC has continued to expand on these initiatives to support alternative instructional and learning delivery methods from traditional in-person services.



Distance Learning Call Center: In 2016, TWC funded the Distance Learning Call Center, in which AEL program math tutors provided just-in-time math support to AEL participants through telephone conversations, screen-sharing, and the use of a virtual whiteboard. This three-year grant, which ended in June 2019, was designed to provide 20- to 30-minute tutoring sessions on specific math questions. During the center's implementation, TWC found that on average the sessions last more than an hour, with many participants requesting additional sessions and 96 percent of participant callers reporting a better understanding of math concepts after a call. In April 2020, to expand service delivery options in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, TWC's three-member Commission (Commission) funded a second iteration of this project, the Math Assistance Call Center (MACC), which launched in October 2020. Math tutoring services through the MACC are provided in several languages, seven days a week, and a live video chat supports this timely math tutoring for AEL participants preparing for a Texas Certificate of High School Equivalency (TxCHSE) test in math.

Ongoing Distance Learning Professional Development: Before COVID-19, through its contractor, TCALL, TWC AEL provided accessible learning platforms and online trainings for program administrators and instructors—both novice and more advanced—in distance learning best practices. TCALL's application of professional development tools, resources, and techniques in

distance learning and remote instruction laid the foundation for a seamless statewide transition to remote service delivery in the spring and summer of 2020. Ongoing distance learning efforts include the following:

- **Distance Learning & Technology Integration Institute:** This online resource enhances the development and implementation of technology applications and supports distance learning through the expansion of the Texas AEL statewide learning management system (PD Portal) to provide online professional development for staff training. AEL programs may easily locate information and resources to create a distance learning plan—a contractual requirement for all AEL programs—and access the latest approved list of Texas distance learning curricula to use in programs.
- **Distance Learning Symposium:** In the spring of 2019 and 2020, TCALL’s Technology and Distance Learning Symposium presented workshops from AEL programs, libraries, digital curriculum publishers, and other technology education experts on implementing technology in the adult learner classroom. Most notably, the 5th Annual 2020 Symposium was held virtually for the first time. This statewide event garnered more than 600 attendees in the online Texas AEL PD Portal.
- **Distance Learning Academy:** The Distance Learning Academy is a set of learning modules required for AEL programs incorporating distance learning for the first time. Since December 2018, 1,731 administrators, instructors, and AEL staff members have completed the modules on the PD Portal. Modules may be taken independently through the PD Portal, or face-to-face training may be scheduled.
- **Distance Learning Convenings:** At least once a year, TWC hosts discussions with all the leads for distance learning, which typically include approximately 200 participants.

Distance Learning Capacity Building: In 2018 TWC funded the Distance Learning Capacity Building Initiative, which awarded grants to three AEL providers. The goal of the initiative was to pool sharing resources and create a network to find ways to reduce, mitigate, or eliminate AEL participation obstacles with simple digital solutions. All three grantees have shown significant increases in measurable skills gains (MSGs) for their hybrid distance learning students.

Alternative Models for Students

In order to support workforce and economic outcomes for AEL students, TWC continued to make strides in integrating AEL with workforce system partners—specifically, with Workforce Solutions Offices, community colleges, correctional facilities, employers, and community-based organizations (CBOs)—to find innovations in recruiting underskilled and/or English language learners into AEL programs. Programs developed with community colleges focused on ways to decrease student debt and provide additional support for students to succeed in a postsecondary education setting.



Coalition of Community-Based Organizations: Literacy Texas, an initiative funded by TWC to provide professional development to instructors, tutors, and program staff serving adult learners in the nonprofit space, continued to serve the statewide literacy

networks after the pandemic posed challenges to face-to-face training environments. In the summer of 2020, Literacy Texas hosted four symposiums in which more than 100 literacy participant organizations were represented statewide. Nearly 300 participants attended the annual virtual conference, which showcased expertise in engagement with adult learners during COVID-19. To gauge the impact that COVID-19 has had and will continue to have on adult learners accessing resources through CBOs and nonprofit organizations, Literacy Texas is collaborating with Baylor University to conduct a statewide survey of religiously affiliated and nonprofit literacy organizations to gauge the amount of volunteer time needed to operate such programs and how to assist CBOs in their mission to provide instructional service to low-literacy adults.

Accelerated Models: Accelerate Texas is an integrated education and training (IET) model in which AEL participants are concurrently enrolled in workforce training and AEL services. This model is designed to accelerate completion and placement into in-demand and targeted occupations. Since 2014 TWC has invested in the Accelerate Texas model—inspired and modeled on the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board’s (THECB) 60x30TX grants—through AEL grants to community colleges and community-based and nonprofit organizations outside the core AEL statewide service network. Accelerate Texas allows individuals who would otherwise fall below college admission requirements to be admitted into training programs that provide both AEL and workforce training services. After five rounds of grants (for a total of 28 grants awarded), TWC has invested more than \$12 million in the Accelerate Texas program and has supported the training of over 3,500 individuals.

AEL SPOTLIGHT: AEL Pandemic Resource Page

On the same day that Governor Abbott declared COVID-19 a statewide disaster, AEL launched an AEL pandemic resource web page to assist AEL providers and students during the transition, including pandemic resource websites, frequently asked questions and answers, information on serving students at a distance, remote testing information, a distance learning help desk, distance learning curriculum providers, and free internet provider options. With TWC’s direction, in the six weeks following pandemic declaration TCALL hosted and facilitated 28 webinars on serving students at a distance, and in the following summer months more than 5,000 individual AEL stakeholders attended webinars on these topics



AEL SPOTLIGHT: Lee College's Corrections Program

In January 2019, Lee College, based in Baytown, Texas, was awarded the Accelerate Texas grant in the fourth round of grants funded by TWC, and the college has provided IET services to 204 participants in area correctional facilities in the following occupational trainings: Commercial Truck Driving; Horticulture; Computer and Information Sciences; Heating, Air Conditioning, and Refrigeration Maintenance; Welding; and Carpentry. At the 2020 AEL Statewide (Virtual) Fall Institute, the director of Lee College's Adult Education program shared best practices on how best to serve AEL customers in a correctional education setting and encouraged fellow AEL program administrators to look to their community correctional facilities for untapped student learners who could prepare for re-entering their communities and workforce with financial and family support skills, as well as those skills needed to start or continue a career.

Ability-to-Benefit—an Alternative to Debt: After the US Department of Education released guidance on the newly reinstated Ability-to-Benefit alternatives in 2015, TWC released an Ability-to-Benefit grant to support alternative pathways for students without a high school diploma or its equivalent to enter into postsecondary education and training. In summer 2019, AEL hosted the first statewide convention on ways to leverage Ability-to-Benefit and Perkins V funding to provide a platform for AEL stakeholders to learn from AEL programs implementing Ability-to-Benefit models. Ability-to-Benefit supports the strategy of decreasing student debt by offering ways to fund students' successful completion of postsecondary education programs.

In early 2019, the second round of Ability-to-Benefit grants were awarded to three community colleges to continue building alternative entries for students to enter into postsecondary education while becoming eligible for financial aid. Grant funds pay for costs associated with case management, workforce training, and basic skills enhancement, such as literacy and numeracy provided in the “real world” application of the occupational training.

An overall estimated 2,000 participants are expected to have been served in Accelerate Texas and Ability-to-Benefit programs by the end of 2020, even with the impact of COVID-19 on facility closures.

Statewide College Engagement: Furthering engagement with educational institutions includes AEL's engagement with the Texas Success Center at the Texas Association of Community Colleges and TWC's Texas Peer Mentor Network, which provides colleges with a substantial professional development approach that supports career pathways and program enhancement from the classroom to college organizational leadership. In 2019, this initiative held four regional summits focused on the adult education and community college partnerships, and the first statewide meeting focused on Ability-to-Benefit and Perkins V funding. The four regional summits, called “Making Connections,” convened community college representatives and adult education partners to discuss integration efforts at the local level, in order to help Texas reach 60x30TX goals.

Employer Engagement and Partnerships

As noted in previous strategic plan progress reports, AEL's collaborations with employers have proven to be integral in closing the skills gap in Texas.

One of several AEL career pathways models, referred to as Workplace Literacy, allows AEL programs to establish AEL classes for a private employer's employees to enhance their English language acquisition, improve math or other skill areas, and sharpen soft skills (work communication etiquette, workplace digital literacy, and more) needed to function successfully in the workplace. In AEL PY'19-'20, Texas AEL programs established workplace literacy programs at more than 50 different employers, with representation from food processing plants, hospitality, nonprofits, and more.

AEL SPOTLIGHT: Serving Those at Risk during a Pandemic

Houston Community College and WorkTexas partnered together to provide the Houston community with a new adult trade school during COVID-19, which has impacted the high-risk population in the inner city. The new school at the iconic Gallery Furniture store houses a 12,000 square foot classroom space where students may learn through the HCC Career4U Academy. Career4U Academy offers Level 1 certificates in one of five trade areas: Information Technology, Construction Management, Health Care, Transportation, or Business. Additionally, adult students may receive on-site job coaching, testing, financial coaching, mental health, health care, child care, food, and legal services. Employer partners were critical to the successful launch of the trade school, and construction partners (such as S&B Construction, Linbeck Construction, and MOC Central) assisted with the opening. Combined, more than 10 employers have helped make the adult trade school a reality. This fully integrated partnership will host its first graduation in December 2020.

A Quality Curriculum to Support Work-Readiness and Literacy

TWC requires that all AEL programs develop coursework that aligns with the statewide AEL academic content standards, which provide AEL instructors a clear foundation for the rigor required in the academic areas of mathematics, English language arts, and English as a second language for adult learners in the 21st century. In 2017, as reported in the last plan progress report, TWC funded an initiative to align the Texas AEL content standards (Standards 2.0) to four industry clusters: Advanced Manufacturing, Construction and Extraction, Health Care Sciences, and Transportation/Distribution/Logistics. In 2018 and 2019, TWC, in coordination with TRAIN PD and the American Institutes for Research, implemented a Standards 2.0 training. From January to May 2019, Standards 2.0 trainings were provided to AEL administrators and instructors via webinars, face-to-face trainings, and regional training events. In order to promote these enhanced standards and provide real-world insight into their importance, TWC developed four promotional videos that highlighted each of the skills needed in the four industry clusters from respective Texas industry leaders.

In fall 2020, TWC began planning the next phase of content standards enhancement, the Standards 3.0 project, which adds Family Literacy and Civics Education benchmarks to Standards 2.0. TWC will develop training around implementing these benchmarks in the adult education classroom and, through TRAIN PD, will hold virtual or face-to-face regional training events in late spring 2021.

Strategy 2: Address Demand

Increased integration efforts among college partners, Workforce Solution Offices, employers, and CBOs have allowed for efficient referrals to and from adult education programs, both providing options for the adult learner customer and keeping up with the demand for skilled workers in Texas. Adult learners require flexible educational models that consider the competing demands on their time and resources, such as scheduling, jobs, transportation, and child care. For this reason, TWC has supported AEL models that fall outside the “cookie-cutter” mold, and as Texas’ unemployment claims reached a historic high in the spring of 2020, AEL programs were ready to serve underskilled adults preparing to reenter the workforce.



Leveraging Resources to Increase Opportunities

Program models designed to leverage local resources and funding provide creative opportunities for AEL programs and stakeholders to find local solutions that address current and future workforce demands.

AEL Advisory Committee Recommendations: In December 2019, the Texas AEL Advisory Committee, composed of representatives from AEL programs, a Board, employers, apprenticeship programs, and colleges, presented to the Commission recommendations related to AEL integration and promotional efforts at a statewide level. The Committee’s annual report included the following three recommendations, each supported by strategies to achieve each objective:

1. To build a statewide brand to promote Texas AEL
2. To increase employer engagement and workforce opportunities through apprenticeships, internships, and workplace literacy
3. To enhance AEL service delivery to special populations

Strategies for recommendations 2 and 3 stressed the importance of multiagency coordination and collaboration needed through existing community partners to find efficiencies in referral systems and to eliminate duplicative efforts.

The 2020 AEL Advisory Committee expanded on these recommendations during their quarterly meeting discussions. Presentations from members provided insights on ways to leverage employer partner resources to build internship programs and to improve integration to create streamlined referral systems across workforce partners, as well as how special populations—such as opportunity youth, internationally trained professionals, and individuals with justice involvement—are better served when systems coordinate and communicate regularly and efficiently. Texas AEL programs have echoed the need for leveraging partner resources through the various professional development webinars and conferences hosted by TWC.



AEL SPOTLIGHT: Leveraging Community Resources

Region 5 Education Service Center’s AEL program has set an example on the Texas workforce stage for how natural and essential collaborations among AEL, Boards, and employers are in providing upskilling solutions that are innovative and customer-focused, with both the AEL student’s and the employer’s goals in mind. As noted in the 2018 progress report, Region 5’s work in building the first Jobs for America’s Graduates program in Texas, with employer partner Entergy and Workforce Solutions Southeast Texas (Southeast Texas), created successful student outcomes with the design of a paid work experience model involving 27 employers and benefiting 35 students. In 2019, through the guidance of Southeast Texas, Region 5 continued expanding partnerships with area employers and began a three-year project with S&B Engineers and Constructors, Ltd. Partnership (S&B), Southeast Texas, and Wells Fargo to provide an “earn while you learn” apprenticeship training program. In PY’19–’20, two cohorts were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic, resulting in 19 individuals earning NCCER certifications and gaining full-time employment with benefits with S&B.

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in Texas, AEL programs continued to reach out to community partners to redesign programs to immediately serve newly unemployed and underskilled Texans.

AEL SPOTLIGHT: Laredo CARES

The website for Laredo College’s adult education program, Laredo CARES, proudly and simply states that “Laredo College and the City of Laredo have joined forces to address the need for workforce training in our community.” Laredo CARES offers 18 short-term training programs in high-demand occupations in which adult students may attain a credential within six months of enrollment. After identifying ways to leverage funds from various federal grants and other funding streams, with strong support from Workforce Solutions for South Texas, Laredo College reset the design for its integrated and education training programs and was able to serve its community by offering free workforce training. The message to workforce customers was clear: If you were laid-off, furloughed, or underemployed due to COVID-19, look no further than this program. In fall 2020, even with the service delivery challenges presented by COVID-19, Laredo College, also an ATX grantee, was still able help two cohorts of ATX students complete coursework, and the college began recruitment for Level 1 certificate classes.

FREE WORKFORCE TRAINING Choose from 18 short-term programs	You could qualify, if you were:	- Laid-off		
		- Furloughed		
		- Underemployed		
		Due to COVID-19		

Year-Round Services to Meet Year-Round Demand

To meet the needs of adult learners—whether it is to improve English language skills, gain literacy, attain a TxCHSE, or enter into postsecondary education or training—TWC contractually requires AEL grantees to provide year-round service delivery. Within the first few years of administering AEL in Texas, TWC observed stronger enrollment in the fall and spring.

To further cultivate programs designed for year-round enrollment, in 2019 TWC implemented two incentives for AEL programs. The first relates to performance-based funding in which AEL grantees were required to enroll a higher percentage of students through the end of the calendar year, motivating ongoing enrollment efforts within their programs. The second relates to a new program of quality awards, modeled after TEA's Blue Ribbon recognition, called the Best in Class Awards. These data-driven awards recognize six AEL grantees that have, as the numbers reflect, a holistic and quality program measured by enrollments, credentials attained, and measurable skills gains achieved by students.

Closing the Gaps

Every year, TWC through its contractor, TCALL, analyzes the professional development needs of adult education programs through survey analysis of AEL program staff and students, AEL performance data, and AEL continuous improvement plan reports. TCALL offers recommendations to the field on how to address the needs that were discovered. This enables TWC to better respond and adapt to changes in the field, improve performance outcomes, and address gaps in AEL services. The 2020–2021 continuous improvement plan recommendations noted gaps identified by program administrators and instructors related to the impact of COVID-19, including a call for mental health and wellness support and remote and distance learning needs. TWC must also stay on course with offering distance learning models, with the report reminding readers that AEL students participating in distance learning have more successful outcomes than AEL students who do not. A final recommendation is that AEL programs build a student-alumni mentor program to help retain AEL students that might need additional support and case management.

Strategy 3: Increase System Coordination and Integration

Over the last seven years, TWC's efforts to increase coordination among workforce system partners and various educational stakeholders has remained focused on the AEL customer. The behind-the-scenes work of AEL programs and workforce partners continues to elevate the customer service experience for thousands of learners trying to navigate large and sometimes complex systems, such as college systems, support service networks, and more.

Referral Pipelines

Previous plan reports have noted TWC's work on building stronger referral systems, leveraging the statewide networks of nonprofits and libraries to create a wider net for AEL customer referrals, and aligning with other agencies' goals to better serve AEL customers. TWC has continued its engagement with college partners, supporting referrals between workforce programs and other agencies to further streamline career pathways models.



Workforce Integration Initiative

In December 2019, the Commission approved \$2 million to AEL grantees to build greater capacity for referrals to Boards and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services, supporting both a referral pipeline to and from TWC programs and follow-up with former AEL participants to track the outcomes of enrollment in TWC programs. This initiative, called the Workforce Integration Initiative, required AEL programs to support participant registrations in the new WorkInTexas.com job-seeker website, develop data-sharing agreements with postsecondary education and training institutions, and create referral pipelines with Boards, VR, and community workforce stakeholders. With these funds, AEL grantees could pay for staff time dedicated to the intensive case management often necessary to track participants after they have left the AEL program.

As a response to AEL program needs to provide efficient services during COVID-19, the Commission broadened the scope of these initiative funds in April 2020, allowing for programs to use funds for distance learning licenses and computer hardware and related costs to ensure that AEL students and instructors were well-equipped as they transitioned to remote learning. TWC has conducted ongoing surveys among AEL programs to assess the costs of this initiative for COVID-19 related expenses. In September 2020, more than 80 percent of AEL programs that responded to this survey reported that they were administering AEL tests face-to-face, and over 74 percent reported remote test administration. More than 37 percent of AEL programs also reported that their programs would conduct 16 to 50 remote classes.⁶

Integration through Peer-Sharing

Professional development has been key in expanding the reach of a coordinated workforce system to potential customers. TWC's innovative approach to professional development and best-practice sharing has helped to redefine college pathways for students.



Career Pathways Expansion Project

In 2017, TWC awarded the first grant for the Career Pathways Expansion, a college mentor-mentee professional development initiative with the goal of expanding career pathways programs at community colleges. Mentor colleges provided on-site technical assistance to other participating colleges and providers looking to build IET models in their organizations.

In 2019 TWC funded a fourth iteration of this initiative, called the Texas Peer Mentor Network (TX-PM), expanding the community college network of AEL provider mentees and mentors as well as education service centers. Led by Amarillo College, TX-PM, which now has 17 participating AEL programs, has placed an emphasis on improving outcomes for adult education programs based on 10 tenets of practice considered essential for building career pathways. These 10 tenets include the following:

1. Leadership and culture
2. Structural change
3. Curriculum
4. Instruction
5. Faculty engagement
6. Professional learning
7. Student services
8. Data integration
9. Workforce board development
10. Financial effectiveness

Over the last two years, TX-PM providers have worked to strengthen the best-practice application in providing career pathways aligned with Ability-to-Benefit and THECB's 60x30TX accelerated training models.

AEL SPOTLIGHT: Texas Peer Mentor Network Testimony

An evaluation of TX-PM gained the following insight from a participating AEL program administrator: “[The Texas Peer Mentor Network has] been tremendous. We’ve had an opportunity to be involved in trainings that we don’t get at a local level; we’ve been involved in conversations that we don’t have at a local level. Those conversations are statewide conversations, so I think that has benefited us so much because it’s exposed us to things that we otherwise wouldn’t get exposed to.”⁷

This evaluation noted several key best practices on how institutions—as evidenced by TX-PM program participants—may succeed in building streamlined career pathways for students in community colleges. These include gaining support from institutional leadership on building and expanding IET programs, supporting a collaborative environment among administrators and instructors, and coordinating between adult education staff and academic advising departments.

Integration to Serve Opportunity Youth

In spring 2019, TWC distributed \$2.75 million to eight Boards to offer youth with barriers to employment and education the support they need for obtaining a diploma or TxCHSE and preparing for postsecondary education and training. Although Boards were the recipients of this funding, TWC presented an opportunity for leveraging these services with those offered by AEL and convened all eight boards and their local AEL programs to kick-off this initiative at a meeting in Austin, Texas. Board staff members in attendance gained an understanding about AEL participant eligibility in order to leverage these funds and federal WIOA Title I funds when designing career pathways with stakeholders in their communities. Presentations shared in this convening also included a look at the “Opportunity Youth” customer and the distinct challenges and support needed to carry such a customer to successful outcomes.

Coordination with Texas Education Agency

The 86th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2019), passed HB 3, a financial and accountability bill for the Texas public school K–12 system. This bill promoted several strategies for increasing student outcomes, and one aspect focused specifically on career and work readiness. HB 3 required TEA to enter into a memorandum of understanding with TWC to implement a high school equivalency (HSE) subsidy program. Through this program, TWC, using funds from TEA, may subsidize an HSE exam to a Texas resident age 21 and older. For AEL students, this subsidy removes the financial barrier for obtaining an HSE, which provides more opportunities for job placement, admission into postsecondary education and training, and access to financial aid.

Funding for this subsidy program is available through the end of Fiscal Year 2021, and TWC has collaborated with TEA and TEA-approved HSE exam vendors to ensure that this subsidy program benefits the greatest number of customers seeking to obtain their TxCHSE.



Strategy 4: Improve Performance Excellence

When TWC inherited the AEL program from TEA, it also inherited the Texas AEL data management system that housed AEL student performance and instructional staff data. Since that time, TWC has enhanced this customized data system, called the Texas Educating Adults Management System (TEAMS), to both align with federal performance reporting measures and assist AEL programs in efficient ways of measuring student outcomes.

The foundation for AEL's quality model is data, and through data policies and procedures, TWC has ensured that the data captured and reported on AEL performance is accurate, valid, and transparent. Data has been key in identifying statewide and local performance trends and provides TWC with the information needed to develop and drive effective program models and technical assistance for programs.

Comprehensive Intake

Starting in 2019, TWC participated in a national evaluation project, the Evaluation Learning Community, overseen by the National Reporting System (NRS) for Adult Education and the American Institutes for Research. This national evaluation study gave participating states selected by the NRS the freedom to elect a research analysis topic (which could vary depending on the state's needs or interests) based on the state's AEL data and logic models. At the end of the yearlong study, states would present their findings and recommendations on best practices based on the analysis.

TWC's Division of Operational Insight, with input from AEL staff, chose to research comprehensive intake services and determine whether certain services provided during intake (the process when a student first enrolls in an AEL program during orientation and/or within the first three weeks of instruction) impact a student's success in the AEL program. Activities during intake include, but are not limited to, student and instructor introductory meetings, meeting with former students, student goal setting, and interviews with students on their previous education and learning styles. Findings suggest that intake services that are transparent in communicating to students what to expect from the program by using past student experience to engage students will improve the student's outcomes. On average, students who received intensive, holistic intake services achieved a successful gain within 58 days of starting the program versus those students who received moderate intake services, who took 121 days to attain a successful gain.



AEL SPOTLIGHT: Socorro ISD Intake

After the first few years of providing IET programs, AEL administrators with Socorro Independent School District (ISD) shifted the vetting process for AEL participants enrolling in these programs, observing that some program graduates were not using their obtained credentials in the local workforce economy. Socorro ISD's AEL program introduced a more intensive and comprehensive screening process for IET programs to focus on quality enrollments. Initially, Socorro ISD added an entrance interview and career awareness session to fully inform potential students of the programs they were committing to and to reiterate the employment focus of these IET programs. While this new comprehensive intake approach limited the number of students entering the IET programs, the program has seen an increase in credential and employment rates as a result. Program administrators continue to assess and refine this intake process every semester. For example, in fall 2019, a Microsoft Word test was included for the office administration IET program so that potential enrollees had the basic skills to be successful in this program.



AEL SPOTLIGHT: Blinn College Stepping into Leadership

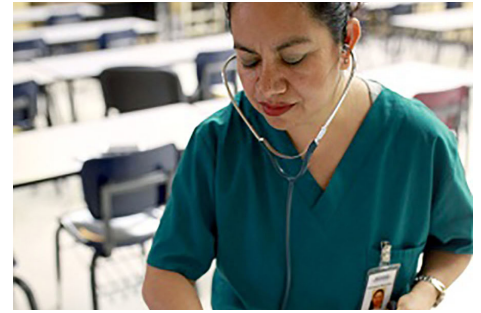
Blinn College is on a path of upscaling services being provided to students and creating unique and sustainable programs focused on student retention and tailored investment. A product of this initiative is the eight-week Stepping into Leadership course, which offers participants the opportunity to self-study and introduces them to leadership through content such as self-discovery, goal-setting, critical thinking, team building, communication, and community engagement. The development of the course and content was a collaborative effort among Blinn College staff, the Brazos Valley Workforce Development Board (grant recipient), and TWC, which made for a richer student experience where learning was made applicable and tied to career and educational aspirations. Additionally, this course serves as a stepping stone for students to participate in the Blinn College Ambassador Program. This program provides students with opportunities to practice leadership by being an advocate for AEL services, being a member of student government and/or council, acting as a mentor to new AEL students, and participating in community engagement activities. The Ambassador Program is modeled on the national ambassador training offered by the Coalition on Adult Basic Education.

Ensuring Data Security

Data security remains a priority for TWC, and up-to-date policies and training in this area are made available to AEL grantees. TWC recently revised the policy for AEL programs accessing TEAMS data and streamlined the training process for new AEL program staff to be compliant with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act. A new training module also became available on TWC Cybersecurity Awareness, which all AEL program staff accessing TEAMS data are required to complete annually.

Data Integrity and Transparency

TWC’s continuous technical assistance to AEL programs ensures that data reported by AEL programs are reliable and accurate and provides transparency with AEL programs seeking to identify performance gaps and student progress. Each month, TWC staff reviews data reports from the data management system for each AEL grantee and specifically analyzes the number of AEL participants being reported, measurable skill gains achieved by program, and students who may be ready to take a posttest to monitor whether they have improved their literacy or math skills, among other performance-related and quality checks. Continued data monitoring allows TWC staff to identify performance trends, such as significant increases or decreases in enrollment from the previous month and any trends in student retention to assist AEL programs in reaching out to students to continue program participation.



As part of TWC’s commitment to transparency and data-driven performance, AEL staff worked with the Division of Operational Insight to design a data visualization dashboard that would provide just-in-time enrollment and performance reports for AEL programs. TWC staff anticipates that this dashboard will become available to AEL grantees in early 2021 and will assist programs in monitoring student progress.

A Data-Driven Program

An external evaluation of the AEL program conducted in the fall of 2020 by Gibson Consulting Group found that AEL is a data-driven program. This evaluation was required under the 86th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2019), General Appropriations Act and evaluated TWC’s AEL grant competition and program management processes. The report notes, “There are several indicators that the TWC as a whole and the AEL in particular are focused on continuous improvement.” Specifically, the report references the data dashboard as how TWC continues to improve its internal processes. Additionally, the report commends TWC staff’s continued improvements in AEL performance excellence.

AEL SPOTLIGHT: Data Drives Performance Excellence

From the Gibson Consulting Group’s evaluation:

“The AEL program is a data-driven program. The Title II federal grant requires the tracking of performance measures by grantees and the state as a whole, and this drives several of the grantee data requirements. The AEL program monitors these measures, other program measures, and related data monthly and applies additional data analysis to communicate problem areas and opportunities to its grantees. AEL program staff provided the review team with an example of a data analysis presentation developed for a school district grantee. This presentation included the identification of performance shortfalls, as well as possible causes for them... This level of analysis by the AEL unit at TWC provides helpful information to grantees, which enables them to identify issues and implement solutions to improve program performance.”

Quality Enhancement Initiative

WIOA accountability and AEL performance measures require long-term intensive technical assistance and training from TWC AEL staff to providers. This continued support is vital, given that new grantees may enter the system and immediately must learn and execute a complicated performance accountability and quality assurance model, train program staff and teachers on these models, and learn how to accurately use TEAMS. Similar onboarding challenges exist when new directors and performance accountability staff join AEL programs and must quickly learn these models. Because of the required face-to-face and on-site assistance that has been provided by TWC AEL staff to AEL programs in order to obtain a holistic understanding of performance accountability, this work is different from traditional professional development training and AEL technical assistance.

In July 2020, the Commission approved \$750,000 for a Quality Enhancement Initiative to support AEL grantees in research-based long-term intensive assistance to improve student success. This initiative will provide professional development for grantees and stakeholders to navigate the complicated performance accountability metrics under WIOA and is expected to launch in the spring of 2021.

Conclusion

This final progress report of the 2015–2020 AEL Strategic Plan is a testament to how TWC has met its goal to drive innovative, customer-focused AEL service models amongst workforce system partners:

To support increases in employment, postsecondary education and training transition, skill gain, and secondary completion through demonstrated approaches that integrate system services and leverage community partnership.

TWC’s investments in innovation continue to remind AEL customers and workforce stakeholders that AEL will continue to adapt to workforce customer needs beyond traditional “one-dimensional, brick-and-mortar educational” solutions. The future for AEL will undoubtedly uncover more creative and integrated service delivery options for workforce customers.



Endnotes

- 1 Rider 33, Senate Bill (SB) 1, GAA, 83rd Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2013); Rider 32, House Bill (HB) 1, GAA, 84th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2015); Rider 32, SB 1, GAA, 85th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2013); and Rider 30, HB 1, GAA, 86th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2019) have all required a statewide strategic plan for adult basic education.
- 2 As reported in the National Reporting System, Table 4A, for AEL Program Year 2019–2020 (PY’19–’20).
- 3 In AEL PY’19–’20, 29.7 percent of participants used distance learning, up from 20.7 percent in the previous program year.
- 4 As reported to the US Department of Education’s Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education.
- 5 General Appropriations Act, 86th Texas Legislature, Regular Session (2019), page VII-34 outlines TWC’s performance measure targets for the AEL program at [https://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/GAA/General Appropriations Act 2020 2021.pdf](https://www.lbb.state.tx.us/Documents/GAA/General_Appropriations_Act_2020_2021.pdf).
- 6 This survey is part of the Workforce Integration Initiative reporting deliverables.
- 7 From Gibson Consulting Group’s evaluation of TX-PM, “AEL College Integration Pathways Grant Evaluation: 2020–21.”

