



**COLORADO**  
Department of Education

# Adult Education and Literacy Grant Program Evaluation Report

Submitted to:

Office of the Governor  
Colorado State Board of Education  
Colorado House Education Committee  
Colorado Senate Education Committee  
The Joint Budget Committee of the Colorado General Assembly  
Colorado Senate Business, Labor, and Technology Committee  
Colorado House Business, Labor, Economic, and Workforce Development Committee

By:

Danielle Ongart  
Director of Adult Education  
[Ongart\\_D@cde.state.co.us](mailto:Ongart_D@cde.state.co.us)

Amanda Brewer  
Data Coordinator  
[Brewer\\_A@cde.state.co.us](mailto:Brewer_A@cde.state.co.us)

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Office of Adult Education Initiatives  
201 E. Colfax Ave., Denver, CO 80203  
303-866-6635



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## Executive Summary

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### Purpose

In an effort to meet workforce, educational attainment, and poverty-reduction goals, the state of Colorado authorized the Adult Education and Literacy (AELA) Grant Act Program in 2014. Adult learners targeted through adult education and literacy programs lack basic English literacy and numeracy skills, a high school diploma, and, therefore, job opportunities that allow for their self-sufficiency. Grantees are adult education providers, which may include school districts, community-based nonprofit agencies, state institutions of higher education, libraries and Indian tribes. The Adult Education Initiatives Office at the Colorado Department of Education oversees this grant.

### Learners Served

In the 2019-2020 program year, the AELA grant program served awarded 708 adults 17 and older that were not enrolled in a public or private secondary school and: lacked a high school diploma or its equivalent; or was in need of English language instruction; or lacked sufficient mastery of the basic literacy and numeracy skills necessary to enable the person to function effectively in the workplace. Grant recipients served areas along the front range and in the southwest corner of the state.

### Outcomes

It is notable that despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 254 learners achieved a post-secondary outcome, 224 achieved a test-based outcome, and 251 achieved employment or accessed Workforce Development services. The total outcomes achieved, 729, when compared to the funds expended for the year, \$714,201.68, returns a per outcome cost of \$979.70. This investment is much less than the per pupil cost typically associated with other partners in the P-22 system.

### Conclusion

Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees were still able to serve 85% of number of adults served in the prior program year. As a result of participation in grantee programs, adult learners achieved various positive outcomes, including attaining a high school equivalency diploma, entering post-secondary education or training and obtaining employment. In consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Adult Education Initiatives will work with grantees to increase their emphasis on digital literacy and inclusion to ensure that equitable access is provided to adult learners, regardless of the circumstances, in the coming program year. The office will also consider changes to future grant applications that would promote broader geographic distribution of grantees into currently underserved areas, as well as changes to the data collection that would allow disaggregated data reporting.

## The Adult Education and Literacy Act (AELA) Grant Program

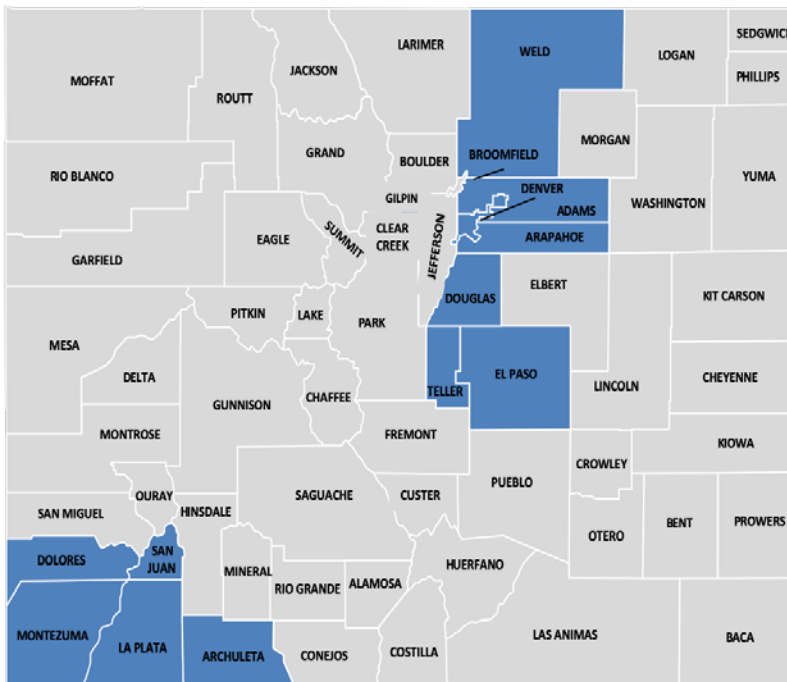
The Adult Education and Literacy Act program Article 10 of the Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 22, was enacted in 2014. The Act established the Adult Education and Literacy Act (AELA) Grant Program that awards state funds for public and private nonprofit adult education and literacy programs that serve as lead agencies and fiscal agents for Adult Workforce Partnerships that must consist of at least one local education provider, one postsecondary education or training provider and one adult workforce development partner.

### Program Implementation

For the 2019-2020 program year, the AELA grant program awarded \$790,409 to the same eight organizations funded in the previous year. The eight grantees represent four community colleges, one school district, and three community-based organizations serving Adams, Arapahoe/Douglas, Denver, El Paso, Teller, and Weld Local Workforce Development Areas in addition to the Rural Resort and Southwest Sub-Areas within the Colorado Rural Workforce Consortium (see the map below for the counties served).

Grant recipients in the current funding cycle are largely clustered along the front range and in the southwest corner of the state. Increasing access to services in more rural communities across the state where adult numeracy and literacy outcomes are low is a strategy worth exploring in future funding cycles. The awarded grant funds were used to support two primary goals:

**AELA Grantee Service Areas, 2018-20**



1. To enable more low-income, low-literacy adults to ultimately achieve economic self-sufficiency (supporting a family without public or private assistance) through providing services and support throughout the steps of their training and employment preparation; and
2. To foster partnerships and leverage resources between state, regional, and local agencies and industry leaders that assist adults in attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills leading to additional skill acquisition, postsecondary credentials, and employment.

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically changed the way partnerships were maintained and services were delivered to adult learners in the 2019-2020 program year. Classes were primarily delivered in-person in brick-and-mortar locations until early March 2020 when mitigation efforts to curtail the spread of the virus were put in place. Some grantees had a week or more notice before in-person services were suspended while others had



only a few days. Regardless, all grantees faced the challenge of transitioning to distance learning head on. Challenges faced fell into three main categories:

- Access to affordable, high-speed internet
- Access to affordable, web-enabled technology
- Access to relevant, high-quality, and effective training and support for digital skill development

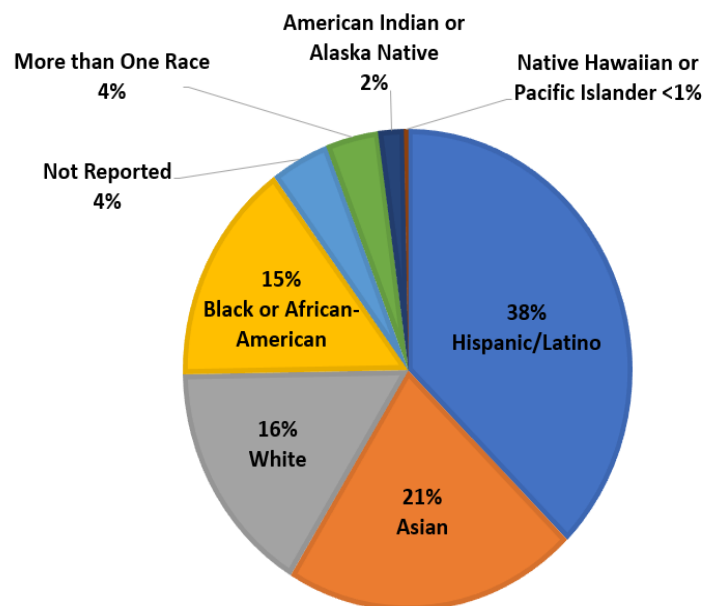
Lessons learned from the rapid transition made more apparent the digital inequities Colorado’s adult learners, as well as instructors and counselors within the adult education field, experience. Addressing these inequities will improve the quality of instruction and services available under the grant program, improve the ability of grantees to address any future disruptions to in-person learning, increase access to and flexibility of program delivery, and better support adult learners to stay relevant and qualified in the digital economy.

### Adult Learner Demographics

708 adults were served in AELA-funded programs in 2019-20 which is a 14% decrease from the previous year. The same 8 grantees were funded in 2019-20 as in the prior year, and this decrease is due to program closures between March and June 2020 related to COVID-19 restrictions and mitigation efforts.

The majority of adult learners, 58%, had never participated in adult education in prior years indicating that programs were successful in expanding access to new learners not previously served under the grant. 54% were enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes which offer instruction to read, write, and speak in English. 40% were enrolled in Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes which focus on instruction below the High School Level; and 6% were enrolled in Adult Secondary Education (ASE) classes which focus on instruction at the High School level as well as transitioning to post-secondary education or training and employment.

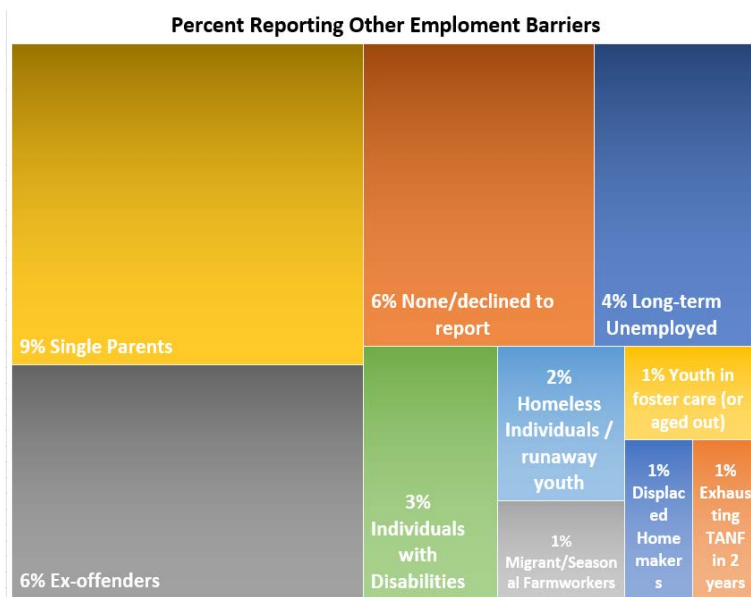
RACE AND ETHNICITY REPORTED



Race and ethnicity data reported at entry show that participants are largely Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) which positions the grant program as key partner within Colorado’s Talent Development System for closing racial disparities through increased access to career navigation, training programs in high-demand career pathways, and industry-recognized and post-secondary credential attainment.

Other demographics characteristics show that the majority of adult learners served, 54%, were between the age of 25-44, followed by 21% age 17-24, 12% age 45-54, and the remainder above the age of 54 or with no age reported. More participation was seen by females (44%) than males (30%) with 4% declining to report a gender.

The majority of learners, 47%, were already employed while participating in classes, an 8% increase from the previous year. 31% were unemployed and the remaining 22% were not looking for work or declined to report an employment status when starting classes. Because employment status is collected when learners start classes, no data was available to measure the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the employment status of adults participating in the programs.



Learners in the program reported facing significant barriers to employment. 71% reported that limited English, cultural barriers, or low literacy and numeracy skills were barriers to becoming employed or improving their employment (full-time work, promotions, wage increases, better hours, less seasonal variation, etc.).

Nearly a quarter, 23%, reported having a low income as a significant barrier to employment. Smaller percentages reported other employment barriers. These also help to demonstrate the important role the grant program plays engaging underserved adults in Colorado.

These demographics suggest that the AELA grant program is a promising place to target resources for building career pathways to transition adult learners with low-wage jobs with large concentrations of immigrants and people of color into higher wage jobs, less vulnerable jobs.

### Evaluation Methodology

Prior to the start of each program year in the grant cycle, grantees submit enrollment and performance target projections to the Adult Education Initiatives (AEI) Office for review and approval. At the mid-year point, grantees report on progress toward these targets for the first six months of the program year (July – December). Grantees again report on final progress (July – June) for the full year annually between July and August of the following program year. For each mid-year and annual report, grantees submit aggregate counts of learners served by various demographic criteria and aggregate counts of learners who achieved any of the following 7 outcomes:

- Pre- and post-assessment gain (equivalent of advancing 2 traditional grade levels)
- High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma attainment
- Post-secondary education or training entrance
- Post-secondary education or training completion
- Post-secondary education or training credential attainment
- Obtaining employment
- Participation in a Workforce Development Program



Mid and end of year reports also include a series of narrative questions about program implementation and progress which may change over time depending on each grantee’s focus for the year or external circumstances that impact the grant. For the 2019-2020 program year, the end of year reports were accompanied by a phone conversation between each grantee and AEI staff to talk through the impacts the COVID-19 pandemic had on programming. Overwhelmingly grantees reported that the closures due to COVID-19, as well as fears learners and staff felt when returning for limited in-person services prevented grantees from making significant progress toward their goals.

Typically, grantees are asked to use their end of year progress when setting targets for subsequent years of the grant; however, due to the extreme challenges grantees faced during the year, three decisions were made to support grantees, and their adult learners, in addressing those challenges:

1. The AEI Office allowed grantees to carry over unspent 2019-2020 funds through June of 2021.
2. The AELA grant, typically run on a 3-year cycle, was extended for a fourth year with funding distributed based on the same allocation methodology from the prior year.
3. Grantees were not required to submit a full continuation application for funds, and were allowed to keep their 2019-2020 enrollments and performance targets for the fourth year of the grant cycle.

This additional flexibility is necessary to support grantees in re-envisioning and re-building the grant program throughout 2020-2021. The AEI Office will check in with grantees quarterly throughout the fourth year in the grant cycle to check on progress and continued challenges faced as the state prevents the spread of the COVID-19 virus and heads more fully into recovery.

### Performance Results

Grantees set aggressive targets at the beginning of the 2019-2020 program year, projecting that just under 1,250 outcomes would be achieved by the end of the year, a 5% increase from the number of outcomes achieved in the prior year. Due to the pandemic, which closed in-person classes and services for 4 months of the year, just 58% of the statewide total outcomes target was achieved.

Performance Outcome Type	Statewide Total Achieved	Percent of Statewide Projected Target Achieved	Change From Previous Year
Pre- and post-assessment gain (equivalent of advancing 2 traditional grade levels)	171	57%	↓ 10%
High School Equivalency (HSE) Diploma attainment	53	41%	↓ 3%
Post-secondary education or training entrance	157	69%	↓ 12%
Post-secondary education or training completion	54	47%	NA
Post-secondary education or training credential attainment	43	37%	↓ 13%
Obtaining employment	98	64%	↓ 3%
Participation in a Workforce Development Program	153	74%	↑ 3%

Post-secondary outcomes appear to have been the most affected by the pandemic. Pre- and post-assessment gains and HSE Diploma attainment both dropped from the prior year as well. Both required in-person test administration, and online-only versions of the tests were not made available, for security reasons, until the very end of the program year. Obtaining employment also dropped, but less significantly than the other outcomes. Participation in Workforce Development Programs increased from the prior year which may be indicative of



adult learners accessing the workforce system more to seek unemployment insurance and employment services during the pandemic.

Across the 8 grantees funded in 2019-2020, most were only able to achieve 60% or less of their projected target due to the pandemic. The table below shows the percent of each target each grantee reported as achieved for 2019-2020. Cells marked as “NA” represent an outcome which the grantee did not select to pursue.

Grantee	Test gain	HSE Diploma	Post-secondary entrance	Post-secondary completion	Post-secondary credential attainment	Employment	Served in a Workforce Development Program
Aims Community College	60%	45%	175%	NA	NA	70%	195%
Asian Pacific Development Center	52%	20%	17%	0%	0%	54%	20%
Community College of Aurora	81%	22%	87%	80%	80%	138%	0%
Community College of Denver	52%	69%	156%	21%	14%	0%	71%
Colorado Mountain College	107%	75%	80%	NA	160%	170%	170%
Durango Adult Education Center	17%	67%	13%	0%	NA	18%	0%
Mile High Youth Corps	0%	21%	0%	47%	47%	107%	51%
Adult and Family Literacy at School District 11	32%	20%	46%	51%	24%	21%	52%

It is notable that despite the pandemic 254 learners achieved a post-secondary outcome, 224 achieved a test-based outcome, and 251 achieved employment or accessed Workforce Development services. The total outcomes achieved, 729, when compared to the funds expended for the year, \$714,201.68, returns a per outcome cost of \$979.70. This investment is much less than the per pupil cost typically associated with other partners in the P-22 system.

Unfortunately, because of the way the data is collected, it is not possible to say how many individual learners achieved an outcome nor is it possible to disaggregate the data by the learner demographics described earlier in this report. In future years of the grant considerations could be made to collect disaggregated data to better demonstrate to key role AELA grant programs play in closing known equity gaps and providing language and literacy programs that assist job seekers and underemployed workers to be better qualified for jobs that have higher levels of compensation and benefits.

## Conclusion & Recommendations

The Adult Education and Literacy Act grant program’s purpose is to assist adults in gaining the necessary skills and credentials to be more successful in the workplace. Grantees served adults with significant barriers to employment; over 71% of adults reported that limited English, cultural barriers, or low literacy and numeracy skills as barriers. Despite the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, grantees were still able to serve 729 adults, which was 85% of the 825 adults served in 2018-2019. As a result of participation in grantee programs, adult learners achieved various positive outcomes, including attaining a high school equivalency diploma, entering post-secondary education or training and obtaining employment. The total outcomes achieved returns a very low per outcome cost of \$979.70.





This next 2020-2021 program year will be the last year of this current grant cycle. In consideration of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the Office of Adult Education Initiatives will work with grantees to increase their emphasis on digital literacy and inclusion to ensure that equitable access is provided to adult learners, regardless of the circumstances.

In the next grant application cycle, the Adult Education Initiatives Office may consider ways to have more geographic distribution of the grantees so there could be expansion into underserved counties, as well as opportunities for outcomes-based grantee funding. The office also plans to modify the grant data collection requirements and methods, so data can be easily disaggregated and use to demonstrate progress achieved in collaboration with workforce partners.