



**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:

**The Office of Adult Education Initiatives**

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## Executive Summary

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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. In 2018-19, AELA grantees enrolled 825 adult learners with \$1 million investment. At the time of enrollment,

- 43 percent were employed,
- 32 percent were not employed, and
- 15 percent were not in the workforce.

Moreover, over half of the adult learners enrolled had less than 12 years of education (51 percent) and/or received their education outside of the U.S (56 percent). Thirty-nine percent had language, literacy, or cultural barriers and 28 percent identified as low income.

Although several postsecondary programs focus on workforce development and skills acquisition, the AELA programs serve a more vulnerable population that does not possess the requisite skills of literacy and numeracy that other workforce development programs assume. Investing in AELA programs allows a larger share of the state's eligible adult population to be served and ensures that more adults can obtain basic literacy and numeracy skills, leading to better employment outcomes that enable more low-income, low-literacy adults to ultimately achieve economic self-sufficiency and support their children's academic success.

Article 10 of the Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 22, was enacted to address the needs of these adult students through the active collaboration and coordination of a variety of state agencies and organizations that are involved in adult education and literacy, postsecondary education, training and credential attainment, workforce development, economic development, and human services. The AELA Grant Program at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) awards state funds for public and private nonprofit adult education and literacy programs. Adult education and literacy programs provide adults basic education in literacy and numeracy, secondary education leading to a high school equivalency credential, English language acquisition instruction, or integrated basic education and skills training. The awarded grant funds are used to support two primary goals:

- 1) To enable more low-income, low-literacy adults to achieve economic self-sufficiency through providing wraparound services and support throughout their English literacy and numeracy training and employment preparation; and
- 2) To foster partnerships to 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.

In 2017-18, the AELA Grant Program launched a new cycle of funding with 9 grantees. In 2018-19, 8 of the initial 9 grantees chose to continue with the program. In total, grantees enrolled 986 adult learners in year 1 and 825 in year 2. Participants had very diverse backgrounds and significant challenges in both years with nearly two-thirds of participants identifying as female and 41 percent identifying as Latinx in year 2.

Despite the short timeframe of a year, in 2018-19, 17 percent of participants entered the workforce, while another 20 percent attained a secondary or postsecondary education/training program credential. Grantee reports showed increased sophistication in program design and partnership development to ensure student readiness, retention, and success through targeted recruitment strategies, self-assessments, wraparound services, and navigation/advisement.



Some specifically credit the ability to hire “a Career Advisor to assist in eliminating barriers and provide job/career/postsecondary direction.”

Technical assistance by CDE’s Office of Adult Education Initiatives staff has resulted in programs developing strategies for continuous improvement that were meaningful and impactful. Some grantees noted how important flexibility and responsiveness to students’ interests and needs are, including changing schedules, locations, and requirements. It appears that the continuous improvement process has encouraged a more reflective practice that is more effectively eliminating barriers for these adult learners.

Through the use of common tools and processes developed by CDE, programs are finding an identity in the career pathways model and building sustainable programs that better serve adult students. Future technical assistance could support data alignment across partners.



## Introduction

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In an effort to meet workforce, educational attainment, and poverty-reduction goals, the state of Colorado is taking steps to address the need for adult education. Although several postsecondary programs focus on workforce development and skills acquisition, these programs typically assume that participants are or have been in the workforce in some capacity and have already attained a base level of literacy and numeracy. Adult education and literacy programs, however, are typically designed for adults who have been unable to enter the workforce in a meaningful capacity due to a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Investing in these programs enables adult education and literacy programs to serve a larger share of the state's eligible adult population and ensures that more adults can reach and complete the next level of education and training, leading to better employment outcomes that enable more low-income, low-literacy adults to ultimately achieve economic self-sufficiency. State investment in AELA programs also leverages federal funding for these programs through matching requirements.

In Colorado in 2013-17, 9 percent of people 25 years and older were without a high school diploma or equivalent, which is nearly 320,000 adult Coloradoans. Fifty-two percent of adult Coloradoans were without a completed postsecondary degree or certificate.<sup>i</sup> Research on opportunity youth (16-24 year-olds who are not in school nor working) shows significant social and financial burdens through lost output/wages and lost taxes, above average levels of criminal involvement, and high use of social services. Additionally, the long-term unemployed face a unique combination of social, emotional, and skill deficiencies caused by the duration of their unemployment. This requires intensive "wraparound" services to address these issues effectively while rapidly moving individuals to paid work experience and re-employment. Research also finds that average annual earnings increase and unemployment rates decrease with each successive level of education or training that a person achieves and that postsecondary education and credential attainment are increasingly central to a person's ability to earn family sustaining wages, participate more fully in Colorado's 21st century workforce, and contribute to the state's economic health and vitality.<sup>ii</sup>

Article 10 of the Colorado Revised Statutes, Title 22, was enacted in 2014 to address the needs of these adult students. This article authorized the Adult Education and Literacy Grant Act Program to refocus the mission of adult education and literacy programs through the active collaboration and coordination of a variety of state agencies and organizations that are involved in adult education and literacy, postsecondary education, training and credential attainment, workforce development, economic development, and human services.

### **The Unique Needs of Adult Learners with Career-Entry Barriers**

Millions of unemployed and underemployed Americans have severely limited career opportunities because they lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. From the industry perspective, the problem is not a shortage of people with bachelor's degrees because in many industries, associate degrees or technical certificates are sufficient credentials. However, for many adults, returning to school to gain any credentials presents formidable obstacles.

Adult students with career-entry barriers include:

- Students who did not finish high school;
- High school completers who did not pursue further education or training;
- College non-completers;
- Foreign-born U.S. residents;
- Veterans who entered military service immediately after high school;
- Criminal offenders who have completed their terms of incarceration; and
- Adults in need of retooling (i.e., those who are low-skilled or need to upgrade their skills to change careers, advance in careers, or re-enter the workforce).<sup>iii</sup>



Most of the people in the seven categories above are characterized by one or more (usually several) of the following characteristics:

- Range in age from 18 to 50's (average is late 20's);
- Support themselves and, in many cases, minor dependents, and cannot afford to be full-time students for 2-3 years;
- Have limited access to financial aid;
- May need childcare and/or transportation;
- Often require remediation in reading, math, communication, and basic computer skills;
- May lack proficiency in English;
- Have low self-esteem, confidence, and interest in academics;
- Lack study skills;
- Need employability or "essential skills;"
- Know about "the real world" and may have "survival skills," but do not know how to channel that knowledge into acquisition of marketable career skills;
- Are highly motivated to earn a decent wage;
- May be interested in careers but do not know how to pursue them;
- Have had no career guidance;
- Have average to above-average intelligence; and/or
- Know very little about what it takes to obtain and keep family-supporting jobs.

Meeting the needs of these adult learners with career-entry barriers presents significant challenges to our community colleges, our employers, and our society. Short-term strategies that meet this challenge are ineffective because they only produce short-term results.



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

Established in 2014, the Adult Education and Literacy Act (AELA) Grant Program at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) awards state funds for public and private nonprofit adult education and literacy programs. Adult education and literacy programs provide adult basic education, secondary education leading to a high school equivalency credential, English language acquisition instruction, or integrated basic education and skills training. The AELA Grant Program is managed through CDE's Office of Adult Education Initiatives and requires that the funded Adult Education and Literacy programs serve as lead agencies and fiscal agents for Adult Workforce Partnerships. At a minimum, a workforce development partnership includes a local education provider, at least one postsecondary education or training provider, and at least one workforce development provider.

The awarded grant funds are used to support two primary goals:

- 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.

### Application and Selection Process

Local Education Providers that operate as adult education programs were eligible to apply for these funding opportunities, which per C.R.S. 22-10-103, include:

- A secondary or postsecondary, public or private, nonprofit educational entity, including but not limited to a school district, charter school, board of cooperative services (BOCES), state institution of higher education, junior college, and area vocational school;
- A community-based, nonprofit agency or organization;
- A library;
- A literacy council or other literacy institute;
- A business or business association that provides adult education and literacy programs either on-site or off-site;
- A volunteer literacy organization;
- A work force board;
- A one-stop partner; and
- A consortium of entities listed above.

Local Education Providers were required to be members of an Adult Workforce Development Partnership to be eligible for this grant. In addition to the Adult Education Provider, a Workforce Development Partnership needed to include:

- 1) At least one Postsecondary Education or Training Provider. This includes, but is not limited to:
  - a. A state institution of higher education, junior college, or area vocational school;
  - b. An apprenticeship program;
  - c. An entity that provides accelerated education and skills training certificate programs;
  - d. An entity that operates programs through the manufacturing career pathway established by the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education;
  - e. A community-based workforce development program that is operated through the Colorado customized training program.

- 2) At least one Adult Workforce Development Provider including, but not limited to:
  - a. A work force development program described in the “Colorado Career Advancement Act,” Part 2 of Article 83 of Title 8, C.R.S.; and
  - b. A program that is supported by the state work force development council created in Article 46.3 of Title 24, C.R.S.

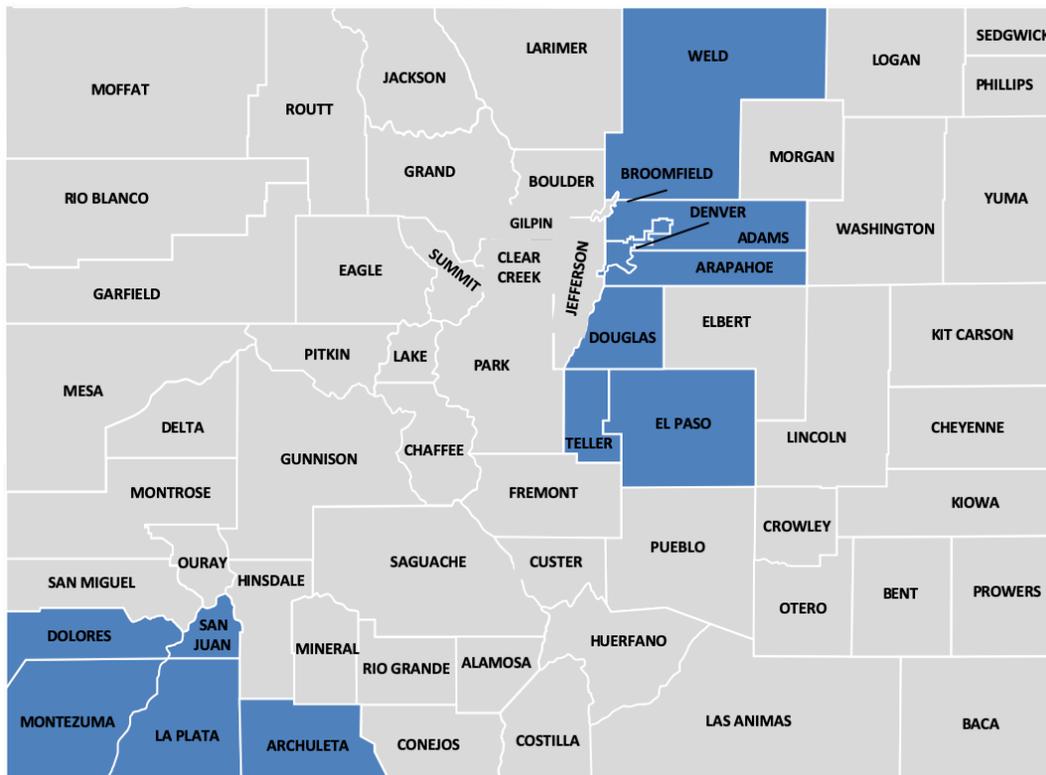
Applications were reviewed and scored by a panel of experienced professionals. These scores informed funding decisions. Other considerations included funding priorities designated in statute or identified by CDE program staff. Final awards were made upon approval of the Colorado State Board of Education.

### Grant Awards & Service Area

For the 2017-18 program year, the AELA grant program awarded \$832,067 to nine organizations across Colorado. In 2018-19, eight of the nine grantees continued with the program, who were awarded a total of \$790,412. Pine River Learning Center in Ignacio decided not to continue. (See Appendix for award distributions.)

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).

MAP: AELA Grantee Service Areas, 2018-19





## Evaluation Findings

### Goal 1: Adult Learner Participation

Grantees reported enrolling a total of 825 adult learners from July 1, 2018 – June 30, 2019, which was about 160 less than the initial year. However, with the exception of one grantee, each program exceeded their targeted number of participants for the year. Across a number of demographic variables explored, AELA grantees continued to serve a diverse group of students with various challenging circumstances. Nearly two-thirds of participants continued to identify as female and an even greater majority than last year identified as Latinx (41 compared to 31 percent). Table 1 below depicts year 2 enrollment and the arrows within the percent column indicate whether this was an increase or decrease in representation from year 1.

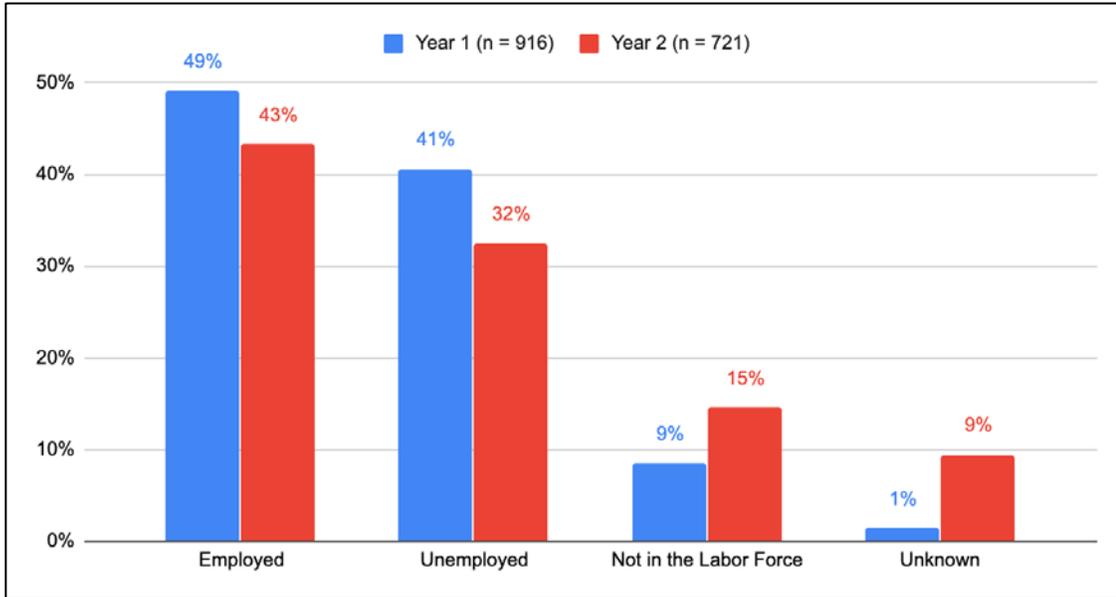
TABLE 1: Adult Learners Enrolled by Gender and Race/Ethnicity, Year 2

Race/Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total	Percent (↑↓ = Δ from year 1 to 2)
American Indian	*	*	20	2% ↓
Asian	58	109	167	20% ↑
Black	51	67	118	14% ↑
Latinx	117	216	333	41% ↑
Pacific Islander	*	*	*	<1%
White	53	86	139	17% ↓
Multi-Racial	16	24	33	4% ↑
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>301</b>	<b>517</b>	<b>818</b>	

\* indicates numbers too small to report

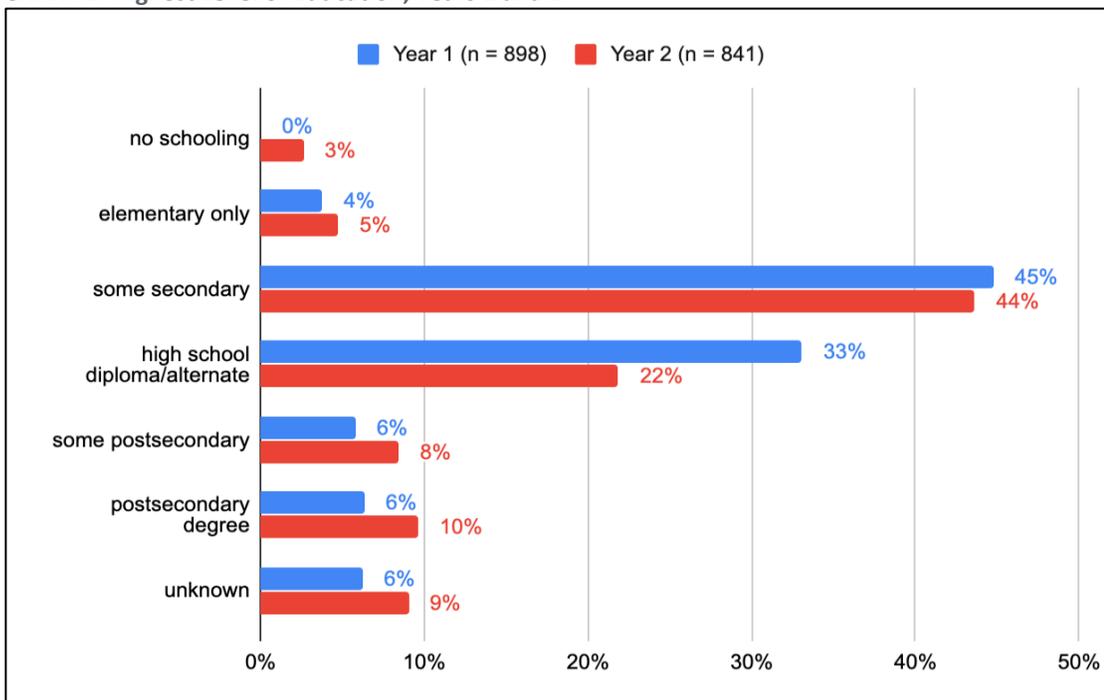
At the time of enrollment for year 2, 43 percent of the adult learners were employed, 32 percent were not employed, and 15 percent were not in the workforce. See Chart 1 for a comparison of participants' labor status from year 1 to year 2. Note that grantees are increasingly reaching adult learners who are most marginalized from the workforce with a 6 percentage point increase in those not in the labor force.

**CHART 1: Labor Force Status at Time of Enrollment, Years 1 and 2**



The majority of the learners enrolled had less than 12 years of education (51 percent, see Chart 2). Moreover, over half (56 percent) received their education outside of the U.S, 9 percent more than in the first year. This highlights the literacy and language barriers many participants faced that would prohibit their ability to participate in more advanced workforce and postsecondary programs.

**CHART 2: Highest Level of Education, Years 1 and 2**





The AELA program continues to serve adult learners with challenging circumstances, as intended, with

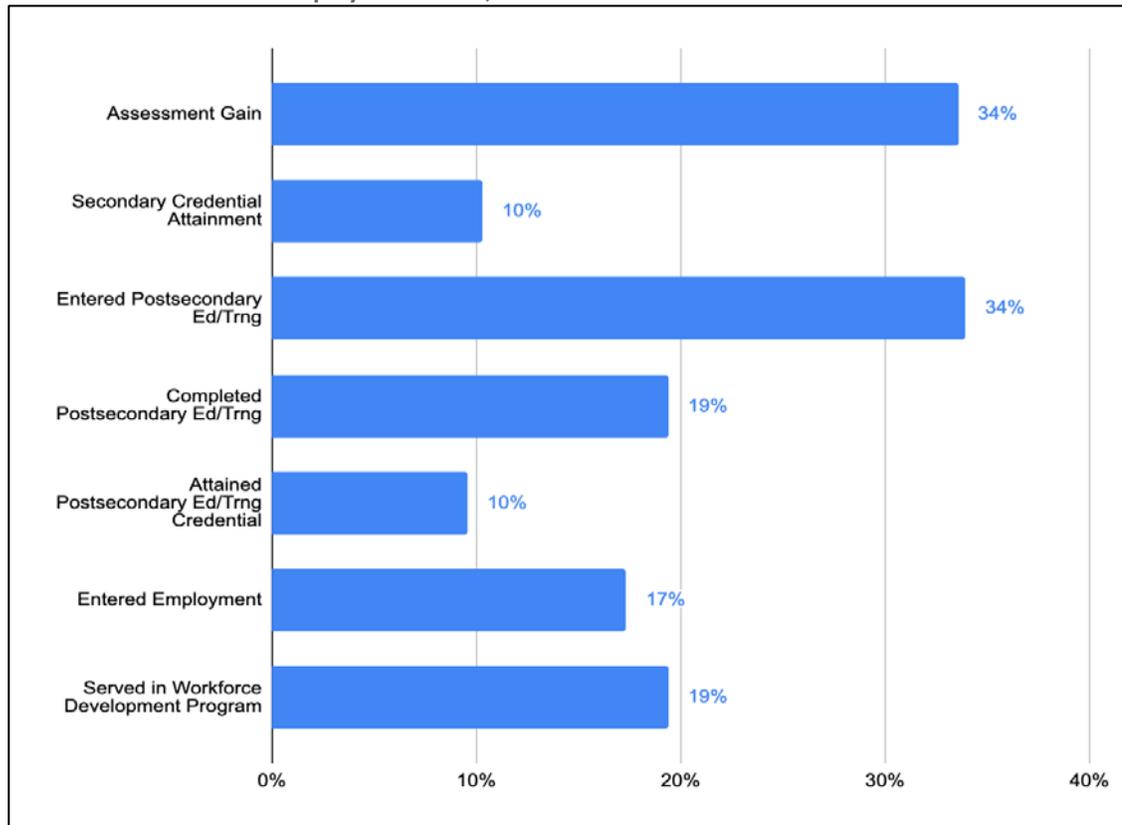
- 39 percent having language, literacy, or cultural barriers;
- 28 percent identifying as low income; and
- 9 percent being a single parent.

In fact, year 2 participants appear to have more challenges than year 1 participants as only 4 percent did not identify with any barriers whereas last year 8 percent did not.

### Goal 2: Education & Employment Gains

The data collection measures for this goal were significantly improved for the year 2 end-of-year report, which increased the quality of the data yet eliminated the ability to make comparisons across the two grant years. Grantees were asked to report gains their students made during the grant period as demonstrated by standardized tests, certifications, entering educational programs, advancing in employment, and serving in workforce development programs (see Chart 3). A total of 1184 gains were reported as participants could have experienced more than one gain, for example an assessment gain and a credential. Seventeen percent of participants entered the workforce during this grant year while another 20 percent attained a secondary or postsecondary education/training program credential.

CHART 3: Education and Employment Gains, Year 2



Additional reporting improvements included a number of qualitative sections guiding grantees to develop and monitor progress on SMART goals and to make mid-year course corrections to stay on track. This new format supports grantees' ability to utilize continuous improvement processes with their programs and to reflect on what works and what needs to change. An illuminating question about what advice they would give to other organizations attempting similar strategies.



Some of these suggestions included:

*“Actually walking students over to Recruiting and waiting with them while they made their appointment was more effective than just giving them the information about a program and how to get started.”*

*“It is vital to provide timely feedback on students’ writing so as to maintain student engagement. In addition, it is important to provide encouragement to learners because they are attempting something new to them. In providing feedback, teachers should focus first on what the student has done well and should draw attention to key issues rather than requiring students to fix all the errors. We recommend this approach because improvement in writing is a process that should be broken down into steps to make it more manageable, especially for adult English language learners.”*

*“A strong career readiness component is critical to a successful workforce development program.”*

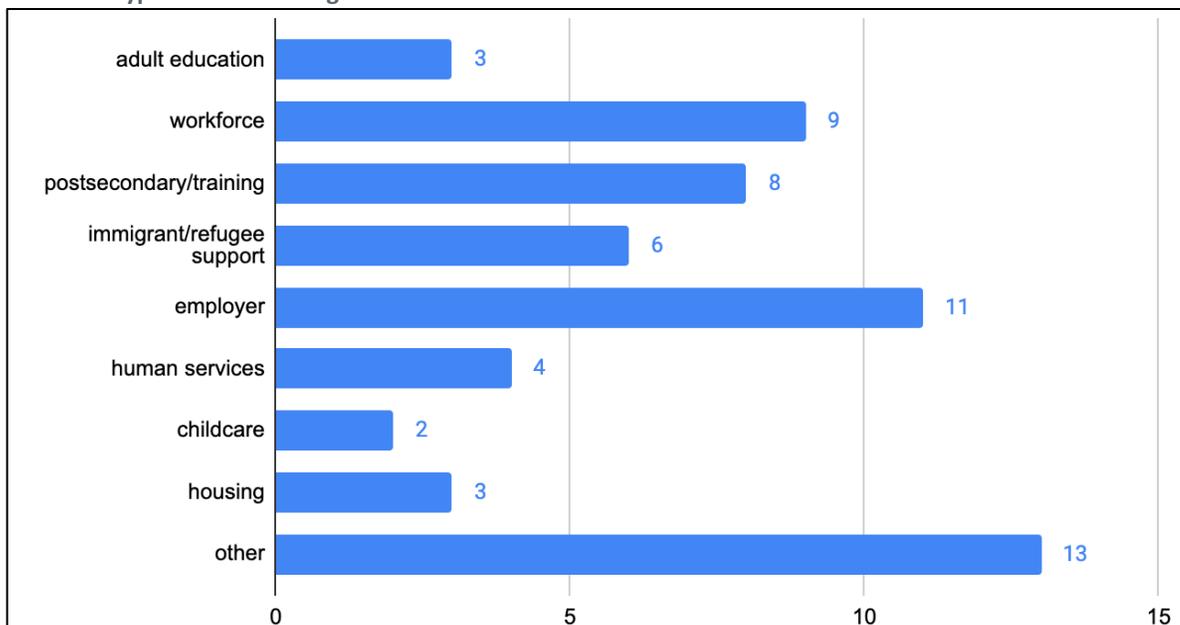
*“Stress to students career pathways and share information about postsecondary education and training and have a career and college navigator.”*

### Goal 3: Collaborative Partnerships

Funding eligibility included being a part of an Adult Workforce Development Partnership. The partnership must include a local education provider, a postsecondary education/training provider; and an adult workforce development provider. Grantees are encouraged to develop partnerships well beyond the requirements for the purposes of providing family-centered services to assist adult learners in attaining basic literacy and numeracy skills, postsecondary credentials, and employment, including community-based organizations, businesses, and agencies.

Over the course of the two years of funding, grantees have partnered with nearly 60 organizations of various types (see Chart 4 below). Some of the types of “other” organizations include a domestic violence center, school, corrections, and Indian resource center.

**CHART 4: Types of Partner Organizations**



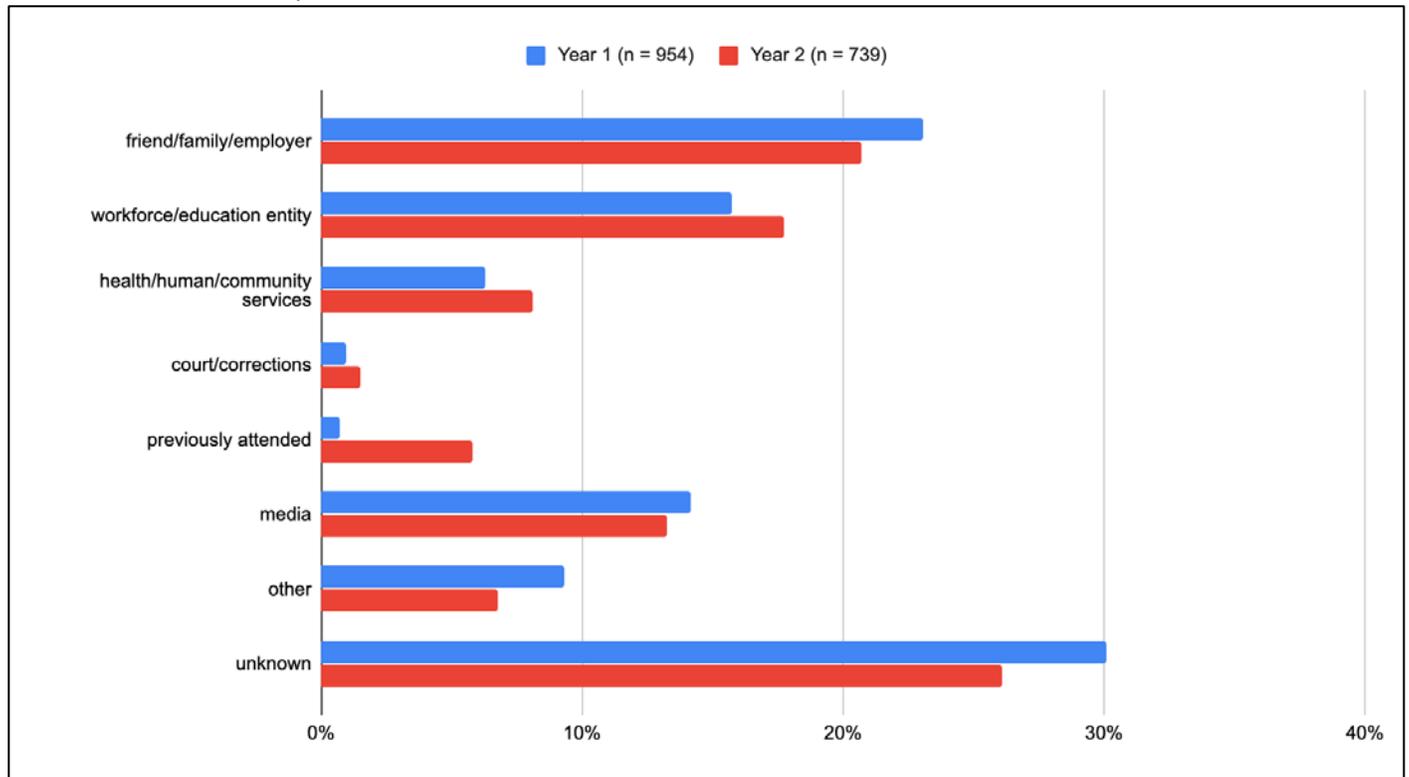


Grantees consistently reported specific benefits of these partnerships including, but not limited to:

- **Adult learner recruitment** - workforce centers, human services agencies, school districts, vocational rehabilitation centers, and community-based organizations provided referrals to the adult education program and the Department of Corrections provided introduction courses to adult learners in incarceration;
- **Funding sources** – workforce centers and community-based organizations provided access to funding sources, such as scholarships, childcare, and transportation reimbursement;
- **Learning supports** – community-based organizations provided English tutoring classes, individualized study skill sessions, and arranged for test preparation courses to be on-site to minimize transportation barriers;
- **Transition support strategies** - postsecondary institutions implemented postsecondary transition strategies, including identifying appropriate college coursework and certifications aligned to assessment for college credit;
- **Job entry skills training** - local workforce centers and other community-based organizations provided the learners with job entry skills training, such as resume and employment application writing and interview and computer skills;
- **Employment resources** – workforce centers provided access to job fairs, employment opportunities, materials and supplies for technical jobs, and information related to occupation outlook;
- **Workplace experiences** – industry partners provided opportunities for job shadowing, internships, and employment;
- **Life skills training** – community-based organizations provided additional training and workshops to reduce adult learners’ barriers to employment and self-sufficiency, such as financial literacy and refugee resettlement requirements; and
- **Job skills identification** - industry partners provided specific information related to their employment needs, skills requirements, and product/service design to inform the AELA programs’ curriculum.

Referral sources remained relatively constant over the two grant years with the most significant increase in previous attendees (from 1 to 6 percent), which demonstrates the value participants are experiencing with the programs in addition to the longer duration these education and employment goals take. Many grantees reported their partners effectively recruiting participants and enabling them to make their target goals, though the percent difference between years across the various types of partners appears minimal (see Chart 5).

CHART 5: Referral Sources, Years 1 and 2



## Conclusion

This report details the effectiveness of the AELA Grant Program in its second of a three-year cycle with 8 grantees during the 2018-19 fiscal year. In total, grantees enrolled 825 adult students with very diverse backgrounds and challenges. Nearly two-thirds of participants identified as female and an even greater majority than last year identified as Latinx (41 compared to 31 percent). At the time of their enrollment in the AELA program, 43 percent of the adult learners were employed, 32 percent were not employed, and 15 percent were not in the workforce at all. The majority of the learners enrolled had less than 12 years of education (51 percent) and over half (56 percent) received their education outside of the U.S, nine percent more than in the first year. With 39 percent identifying as having language, literacy, or cultural barriers and 28 percent identifying as low income, year 2 participants appear to have had more challenges than year one participants. Only four percent did not identify with any of these barriers whereas last year eight percent did not.

Seventeen percent of AELA participants entered the workforce while another 20 percent attained a secondary or postsecondary education/training program credential. Grantees shared increased sophistication in program design and partnership development to ensure student readiness, retention, and success through targeted recruitment strategies, self-assessments, wraparound services, and navigation/advisement. Some specifically credit the ability to hire “a Career Advisor to assist in eliminating barriers and provide job/career/postsecondary direction.”

Technical assistance by CDE’s Office of Adult Education Initiatives staff has resulted in programs developing strategies for continuous improvement that were meaningful and impactful. Some grantees noted how important flexibility and responsiveness to students’ interests and needs are, including changing schedules, locations, and requirements. It appears that the continuous improvement process has encouraged a more reflective practice that is more effectively eliminating barriers for these adult learners.



Through the use of common tools and processes developed by CDE, programs are finding an identity in the career pathways model and building sustainable programs that better serve adult students. Future technical assistance could support data alignment across partners.

## Methodology

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Each grantee was required to submit an annual progress report to CDE, which included the reporting and measurement of activities toward achieving the AELA Grant Program goals – serving adult students and partnership development. Each grantee was required to provide aggregate-level data on the students enrolled in the grant program from July 1, 2018– June 30, 2019, as well as provide data about partnerships and career pathways for their program. CDE staff checked for data quality and integrity. Currently, funding has not been allocated to support the use of an information management system, limiting CDE’s ability to analyze data at the student level. Thus, all the data for this report are from grantees’ end-of-year self-reports often containing missing data and/or duplications in their counts.

The authorizing legislation requires that an annual report on the AELA grants be submitted to the education committees of the state legislature annually. This report is intended to meet the statutory reporting requirements outlined in C.R.S. 22-10-105.



Appendix: AELA Distributions, 2017-18 and 2018-19

AELA Grantee	2017-18	2018-19
Aims Community College	\$94,000	\$94,553
Asian Pacific Development Center	\$120,000	\$120,706
Colorado Springs School District	\$111,847	\$112,505
Colorado Mountain College	\$120,000	\$120,706
Community College of Aurora	\$111,248	\$111,902
Community College of Denver	\$64,210	\$64,588
Durango Adult Education Center	\$106,485	\$107,111
Mile High Youth Corps	\$58,000	\$58,341
Pine River	\$46,277	\$0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$832,067</b>	<b>\$790,412</b>



## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> United States Census Bureau (2018). 2013-2017 ACS 5-Year Narrative Profile. <https://www.census.gov/acs/www/data/data-tables-and-tools/narrative-profiles/2017/report.php?geotype=state&state=08>

<sup>ii</sup> Colorado Workforce Development Council (2016). The Colorado Talent Pipeline Report. [https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/170109\\_2016\\_CO\\_Talent\\_Pipeline\\_Report\\_pdf](https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/170109_2016_CO_Talent_Pipeline_Report_pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Hinckley, R., Mills, D., & Cotner, H. (2011). Adult Career Pathways: Providing a Second Chance in Public Education. Waco, TX: CORD Communications