



## The COVID-19 Pandemic and Adult Education in Massachusetts

Recent surveys<sup>1</sup> of the adult education field have revealed common themes describing how the COVID-19 pandemic is affecting adult basic education (ABE) programs, staff, and students. In July 2020, the Massachusetts Coalition for Adult Education (MCAE) surveyed ABE program directors – including those at programs based in schools, community-based organizations, community colleges, and correctional facilities – to find out how those themes resonated here in the Commonwealth. We received responses from 20 program directors from all corners of the state including Western Massachusetts, Metrowest, Lowell, Boston, the North and South Shores, and the Cape and Islands, sharing their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities brought on the COVID-19 pandemic for programs, students, and teachers, and how they are responding and continuing to carry out their work as we enter the fall learning season.

### Summary of findings

- Students rely on ABE programs for so much more than academics, especially during a health care crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, putting more strain on already stretched resources.
- ABE programs demonstrated great resourcefulness and resiliency, pivoting to remote instruction despite many technological, resource and life change barriers.
- Remote learning provided some unexpected benefits by removing some barriers to instruction such as scheduling, childcare and transportation, allowing some programs to serve more people.
- More state investment is needed to enable programs to acquire and distribute technology to programs and students, for staff training and professional development and to adhere to state and local public health guidelines and restrictions.

### How are Massachusetts ABE students affected by the pandemic?

Students here in the Commonwealth are experiencing the same challenges as programs nationwide, especially reduced or total loss of income. Adult learners also have on their plates supporting their children’s schooling, caring for family members, managing immigration issues, navigating access to healthcare. The ripple effects of job loss are hitting students hard, leading to food insecurity and difficulty paying rent and other living expenses. Even worse, some ABE students are not eligible for unemployment or federal stimulus money and have meager savings to rely on until jobs come back. Students who do not own a computer or have internet have difficulty connecting to resources: a challenge exacerbated by low literacy skills. Programs reported working nonstop with students on making referrals to find housing, fill out paperwork for unemployment or applications for jobs, and connect to COVID testing and health care.

*“Our students rely on us for so much more than academics.”*

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<sup>1</sup> The MCAE survey primarily draws on themes raised in the paper: Belzer, A., Leon, T., Patterson, M. et al, (July 2020). [“COVID-19 Rapid Response Report from the Field.”](#) Published by the E-BAES Task Force, ProLiteracy and the Edtech Center at World Education.



*“One student expressed that she had lost her job, had food insecurity, and could not pay her rent. Staff worked tirelessly to assist her with all these needs, sometimes using their own resources. She was one of many to ask for help.”*

*“In our city, so many of our learners have been sick themselves, have taken care of sick family members, have struggled with job loss. etc. Our learners were already facing huge challenges when we were face-to-face, and everything in their lives has gotten immeasurably more difficult.”*

Even those students who have retained jobs as essential workers face different kinds of stress. Serving on the front lines of manufacturing, health care, and essential retail increases the anxiety and stress that many of us feel as they put themselves and their families at greater risk of exposure.

*“Always flexible and resilient, adult education programs provided a bit of normalcy and community in learners' lives.”*

*“Many of our students work in the frontline during this epidemic and have gotten COVID because of it. They are being hit the hardest.”*

*“I have some [students] struggling with mental health issues directly related to COVID-19...We work with a lot of hospitals and are seeing the stress of [students] being essential workers.”*

In the early days of the pandemic, it was immediately apparent that students had critical basic needs to address before they could get back to learning. Teacher roles merged with advisors and programs became the first line of referral for students to get the services they needed – food, diapers, funds – and students appreciated the communal support.

### **What adaptations are ABE programs in Massachusetts making to facilitate remote learning and maintain a sense of community?**

Massachusetts programs report quickly diving into using tools such as Zoom, WhatsApp and Google Classroom to launch remote learning. Staff are connecting with students through multiple channels including email, text, Google Meet, and phone calls at all hours of the day; and even physically mailing reading materials to learners. Directors report a willingness to try different platforms and use whatever worked for students. Helping students adapt to online learning takes time but has been worth the effort for students to see and hear one another virtually. Many students need one-on-one support to get comfortable with new platforms. Some programs were able to pivot quickly to remote learning in the spring, others worked over the summer to introduce a remote or hybrid model for fall 2020.

*“When the pandemic hit and we had to switch our gears to total remote learning, our teachers and staff rallied to continue in our mission of educating our students. We used ... many different platforms and online programs that would benefit our students.”*



*“The transition to online literacy and ESOL instruction is well done by teachers but the adoption by the ELL and low literacy students is lagging. They prefer face-to-face classroom and textbooks. They need to trust their teacher to make a commitment to learning.”*

Even basic technology can be a significant barrier. At the start of the pandemic, programs found that many of English-learners and immigrant families lacked laptops, Chromebooks or tablets to access online resources; and in some cases, they didn’t have internet access at home. Many students were initially trying to stay connected with just a cell phone. Programs had to scramble for funding to purchase Zoom licenses and distribute Chromebooks, to provide support for device setup and to help families find connections to free or low-cost Internet, portable hubs, and hotspots. As with all things, low literacy or limited English-language skills make these transitions even more difficult when they cannot take place face-to-face. Even as teachers and students are getting more comfortable using these new platforms to teach and learn, programs are spending many hours providing guidance and support just to get students connected.

*“We formed a task force of teachers who have met over the summer to create an online curriculum program-wide for our teachers. We are in the process of setting up workshops for all of the staff to ensure all classes will operate remotely in September with ease and uniformity.”*

*“[in the spring the staff agreed] that we need face-to-face time with students to get them comfortable and confident with online access, tools, and expectations. As a result, a major challenge for fall will be safety in starting out with a blended approach: conducting in-person orientation to get ... students comfortable with technology so that we can then go remote and know that they'll be ok.”*

*“Some of our students have very poor technology skills which is further complicated by the need to address the issues remotely and the limited language skills. For example, we asked people to type in a username and password but they do not understand what an “underscore” or an “@ sign” mean.”*

Of course, students are just one half of the learning environment. Directors report that teachers, tutors, and staff members have risen to the challenge but are still struggling with comfort and the nuances of teaching via programs like Zoom and Google Classroom. The amount of planning and preparation undertaken this summer by program directors (some who are not full-time employees) cannot be overstated. Programs devoted much of their summer to think, plan, revise, research, test, and make decisions about the shift to remote and hybrid programming and which technology platform had the tools and features that would best meet their needs long term. These major changes meant teachers needed much more time to process and adapt to these new platforms and processes.

*“I needed to revise our opening meeting from one meeting to four meetings, each lasting two to three hours to review what we're doing, why we're doing it a certain way, how we document, collaborate, report, and to review all the various details... It's a lot to process.”*



*“Teachers are muddling through updating their course outlines and materials for an online world. This is a challenge.”*

Teachers provided ongoing support for one another for ideas on adapting instruction effectively online; Importantly, directors report that the state’s adult education professional development system, SABES, and other organizations have provided some excellent webinars for instructors to improve their comfort with technology, and programs are doing their own internal workshops and peer mentoring to address the professional development needs of staff, advisors, and program administrators. However, directors report that some teachers will not return if learning continues in a fully remote environment, while other teachers will choose not to put themselves and their families at risk to teach in-person. Staffing will remain an ongoing challenge as the pandemic persists.

*“This [spring and summer] allowed us to test the waters in the virtual learning space. We have learned a lot from this pilot program and are motivated to continue working in an e-learning setting.”*

*“Teachers are typically on their own in a class which is a lot to manage well at the numbers we are expected to enroll... I’d like to pair up a couple teachers because one is nervous about the technology, but it’s a different model and takes more time to prepare, collaborate, and plan well.”*

### **What benefits and opportunities are you seeing arise from the shift to remote learning?**

Despite the many challenges, the new normal has created some unexpected benefits for ABE programs and students. Foremost, remote or hybrid models of learning allow exponentially more people to participate by removing barriers such as family and child-care needs, work schedule conflicts, and transportation issues. One program working with a hospital system found that remote lessons removed the geographic barrier of having classes at just one physical location, and now can serve employees at any of the hospital’s satellite locations.

*“[Having several students return who had previously dropped out] shows us that we needed to build in some flexibility to accommodate more learners. It felt great to be able to reach out to them and welcome them back.”*

Remote learning has forced both teachers and students to improve their digital literacy and technology proficiency. Programs report that students are gaining confidence in using technology. Using online tools has even encouraged family learning opportunities at home, with some parents relying on their children to help with

## A UNIQUE CHALLENGE

Massachusetts is somewhat unique in having several adult education programs operating in correctional facilities, which do not have internet access or remote learning capabilities. Since these programs are prohibited from using online platforms, they report offering face-to-face instruction in a smaller capacity to allow for social distancing. Programs can also use a small number of tech-based learning tools that have been "white listed" but have all external links disabled. In general, programs for incarcerated students just cannot pivot as easily to provide classes in a new way. As one director reports: *“Nothing ever happens quickly in a correctional facility. It requires layers of approval to make the smallest changes in the education program we offer... We are months away from being able to teach remotely.”*



using the devices, and all families having to find ways to support each other in learning online. Importantly, by limiting in-person learning for public safety reasons, the pandemic environment increases the urgency for communities to find a way to get technology and internet access into the homes that don't have it already.

For teachers and staff, this new way of teaching has pushed many out of their comfort zone, challenged them to rethink the traditional ways of doing things, and learn new methods of lesson delivery. Programs have offered in-house tech support, and many staff members took advantage of SABES workshops and other trainings created for the field over the past few months. Some teachers are embracing new lessons and materials; some plan to continue using video clips and assigning digital homework assignments even after programs return to in-person classes.

*“Students ... are becoming more proficient in technology since it has been thrust upon them. The computer skills they are using will be beneficial for them in succeeding in our current world that is so dependent on technology.”*

Technology is not a solution for all learners, however. While online learning has also created opportunities for teachers and advisors to spend more one-on-one time with lower-level students, these students are the hardest to reach through remote means, and programs confirm that in-person intake and basic lessons are still the most effective.

Directors also report that some staff are having a difficult time adapting to online teaching and may not ever return to programs. Some directors also had to navigate staff union contracts while trying to maintain relationships and educational continuity in the summer program, especially as numbers of students were abnormal this summer, and new systems were being developed and launched.

### What challenges do ABE programs face for re-opening in-person classrooms?

As a new school year gets underway, programs have many questions and concerns about how to safely bring students and teachers back to in-person learning, as well as navigating the rules and regulations issued by the state and local communities. Directors report that while some students are not comfortable with the risk of in-person learning, others prefer the face-to-face learning and won't return to classes until that is possible. Programs are left unsure about how their enrollment numbers will ultimately be affected, and many fear that overall they will lose students without at least some in-person classes.

Foremost, programs want to make sure they are being responsible. Directors acknowledge there is still much unknown about the virus, and great risk of spreading infection within the community, among students and teachers, and to families. It is important to remember that our students, as well as our teachers, are adults who

## MORE THAN EDUCATION

Challenges faced by students prior to the pandemic are exacerbated during these times.

*“We observe this every day as ELL and low literacy residents struggle get access to health care, immigration services and housing.”*

Many students struggle to find child care when they are at work or school. Their children need their own support with remote learning. Digital skill gaps and lack of access to technology devices and internet persist. Learners may have dependent family members who are sick or need support. And limited literacy hinders access to health, immigration, and other social services. These challenges are not new but are felt even more acutely as the crisis persists.

*“It is hard to address education issues when these issues are so prevalent.”*



are more at risk than school-age children of contracting the virus. Many programs have staff and volunteers who are older, retired teachers who fall into higher risk categories.

*“There are a lot of concerns. A majority of our tutors are in the 60+ age range so we don't want to put them at risk. Our students are also at risk because they don't have consistent healthcare and are more likely to have health conditions that put them at higher risk. We need to take care of our students and volunteers and make sure they stay healthy. They are already struggling in so many other ways.”*

Because ABE classes are offered in many different school, workplace and community settings, different programs have to follow different guidelines and are feeling different levels of risk. Cleaning protocols, reduced class sizes and the ability to keep adequate spacing between people, the availability of personal protective equipment, contact tracing, and the use of old and poorly ventilated buildings are all factors that program directors must take into account.

*“The pandemic has changed everything; we need to learn to change with it.”*

***From a program offered in a public school:***

*“At this time, we do not have sufficient PPE available to ensure everyone's safety. Our school windows do not open, our offices and faculty rooms have no windows, and we would need air purifiers. Social distancing will be a challenge, disinfecting desks nightly will be a challenge, collaborating with peers will have to be limited, people wearing masks, staying 6 ft. apart, disinfecting hands, etc. will all be challenging.”*

***From a program in a workplace setting:***

*“Because we teach in worksites which all have strict COVID protocol, I feel relatively comfortable about sending instructors to those locations and having employees participate. I think the hospital partners have some of the best COVID precautions and actually seem quite safe, especially since our classes are held far from patient areas.”*

For many programs, transportation remains a significant barrier to getting students to classrooms, even more so now than before the pandemic. Instructors and students alike are concerned about the safety of public transit as it relates to COVID-19, not all students have access to a car, and parking is prohibitively expensive in Downtown Boston and some other areas where programs are concentrated.

For English-language instruction, the need to wear masks hinders pronunciation and communication instruction, as students cannot see how teachers speak new words.

*“We have already opened for face-to-face instruction. It is challenging with all students and teachers in masks and required to maintain social distancing. We are at less than half of our “funded seats” and have a plan that we will implement with two cohorts of students alternating with face-to-face one week and homework packets for self-instruction the following week. It is the only solution right now to serve as many students as possible.”*





## Recommendations

Despite these many challenges and difficult decisions faced by program leaders, their staff, and their students, the overwhelming success has been “the resilience, resourcefulness, compassion and dedication of this field!”

*“[There has been] zero hesitation in coming together and making things work, and in continuing to come up with solutions to challenging situations. However, it has been exhausting on many. I am humbled by what I see staff selflessly doing for their students while juggling their own family challenges.”*

How does the field recommend that Massachusetts leadership support adult education in this pandemic era?

- **Invest in the transition.** More state investment in acquisition and distribution of the technology and affordable internet is needed for online learning, creation and dissemination of new learning resources, and training for staff and teachers to be successful with online instruction.
- **Identify quality resources.** More specific recommendations and vetting of resources. While programs appreciate the flexibility to do what works best for their specific circumstances, instructors and staff would also appreciate being given a few options designed by experts in the field for programs to consider, so the burden of vetting for quality is taken off individual programs.
- **Offer flexibility.** Currently state funding is tied to the number of student seats filled. As students and teachers evaluate their personal risk in returning to in-person classes, programs work with their host institutions to create safe learning spaces, and shifts are made to online options, funding based on student slots must accommodate this adjustment period until new patterns of normalcy are established.
- **Accommodate program variations.** Ensure that solutions are also developed for correctional-based programs and others that face a very different set of challenges from programs in community-based settings. The diversity of programs in Massachusetts is an asset that must be nurtured, rather than only addressing the needs of any single type.
- **Address high-needs students.** Ensure that programs have the flexibility needed to support even the highest need students. In particular, low-level literacy and new English-language learners require different types of intervention and support in order to enter and persist in their studies. Programs must be able to adapt to the needs of every type of student who comes to their doors.
- **Maintain steady funding for this vital educational service.** ABE programs teach students the technology, literacy, and communication skills they will need to be part of a reinvented global economy. Adult literacy and English-language instruction cannot be seen as a luxury. Every participant in an ABE program improves their skills and leaves better prepared to succeed in the workplace. ABE is an investment that pays dividends many times over in reversing the economic slowdown and keeping our Commonwealth prospering.



## Conclusion

Massachusetts adult basic education, literacy, English-language, secondary education, and workforce readiness programs are resilient. We can be proud of how directors, staff, and students are taking on these challenges head on.

- Programs are going above and beyond to ensure that students and teachers feel safe, supported, and able to meet their basic needs, while also preparing to return to the classroom.
- Programs are utilizing every possible available technology to reach students, while also putting in place safety protocols and plans for in-person learning.
- Programs are supporting teachers in adapting to online and hybrid learning strategies, and embracing the benefits that will come with having a greater variety of learning experiences and options for students.
- Programs will need steady yet flexible funding, more professional development, and high-quality curriculum resources adapted for remote instruction to fully and successfully implement new ways of teaching and learning.

*“Switching to remote learning is no easy task. It requires lots of planning and collaboration on all ends, both teachers and students. I am fortunate to have teachers and staff, dedicated to the program and our students, who are willing to put in the extra effort.”*

*“We found work-arounds for many of our challenges. We extended class beyond the designated end of school and launched right into summer school to maintain momentum. Some staff have even continued with their summer school students on their own time. We feel well prepared for the fall while recognizing that many aspects of 'normal' programming will be challenging.”*

As we move forward, MCAE is leading the charge for the vital investment and support from the Commonwealth that has kept ABE programs strong for many years. Together with the field, Massachusetts must ensure these programs are able to respond effectively and efficiently to changing conditions, and to offer new ways of teaching and learning during the pandemic and beyond. The innovations developed today will strengthen these programs and help more students succeed in the years to come.