

Essay

Dispensing with Age as the Determinant of Public Education

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Despite being a country that fundamentally values education, the United States has never attempted to create an accessible system of lifelong learning for any adult regardless of age, income, skill level, or employment status. It's not that we've tried and failed. It's not even that we think people don't have something to learn once they're past traditional school age. We just don't think it's the government's job to make that happen.

Instead, the public's responsibility for education is generally seen as stopping at the age of private responsibility. Once you're old enough to drink (legally) or hold down a full-time job, education becomes a private endeavor. Hence, lifelong learning is usually pursued by people who either have the resources to go back to school or who work for a company inclined to invest in the human capital of at least some of its (usually higher-paid) employees. But if you lack access to personal resources or an employer's tuition reimbursement plan, chances are you'll find limited public support for your education once you've left high school or college.

Age, then, is the basic determinant of our public education priorities. To wit, the government spends almost \$604 billion each year on K-12 education, or

about \$11,000 per student; nearly \$61 billion of that total comes from Washington. Yet to teach some of the same literacy and math skills to adults past high school age, the feds spend less than \$570 million a year (that's with an "m"), or less than one one-thousandth of the federal K-12 outlay. That buys about 2 million U.S. adults (out of a workforce of more than 155 million) less than \$300 of instruction.

Similarly, the federal government spends nearly \$29 billion a year on Pell Grants and another \$21 billion on subsidized loans, mostly to send young people to college half or full time. By comparison, we usually spend less than \$2 billion out of our federal workforce programs on postsecondary training for workers who cannot quit their jobs and go to school full time, or for retraining unemployed workers who are in need of new skills to reenter the labor market.

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Such age-driven education priorities are not new. They're rooted in decades-old policies dating back to when today's older Americans were themselves of school or college age. Yet the economy encountered today by these education policies is very different from that of the 1950s and 1960s. Its rapidly escalating skill demands and restructuring industries have left even highly experienced workers vulnerable, contributing to the sustained levels of long-term unemployment we continue to see since the recession. Yet there has been no groundswell among these impacted workers to compel policy makers to broaden their access to education. Why is that?

One possible explanation could lie in the very concept of "lifelong learning," at least as Americans typically discuss it. Not to put too much emphasis on the framing power of a term, but the very phrase "lifelong learning" has the sound of personal enrichment or a hobby, consistent with our views of continuing education as a private pursuit. This is very different from how lifelong learning is discussed in international contexts, where it is included as an element in national education policies, not held distinct from them as it is in the United States.

No surprise, then, that many of those countries have surpassed the United States in the comparative skills of their adult workforces, as recently documented in a 23-country [survey](#) by the international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). That study showed, in glaring terms, that the U.S. adult workforce on average is now woefully behind its international competitors in literacy, numeracy, and digital problem-solving skills.

Which brings us back to why American adults aren't up in arms about the fact that their nation's education policies are literally leaving them behind. Perhaps some of this political inertia rests in U.S. workers' self-perceptions, particularly those of the generation that for decades was told it was part of "the most educated workforce in the world." For it is true, as the OECD documents, that while the average skills of U.S. adults lag the globe, older Americans aged 55–65 still rank within their cohort at or near the top of the world for both literacy and digital problem-solving, and are at least average on numeracy skills.

But a scary reality lies beneath that comparative ranking. Digging into the OECD's findings, we find that 21 percent of U.S. workers aged 55–65 have weak literacy skills (compared with 18 percent of all U.S. adults), 33 percent of older workers have weak numeracy skills (compared with 30 percent nationally), and 72 percent of older workers have

limited skills in digital problem-solving (compared with 61 percent of the U.S. adult population). In other words, while older U.S. workers may be better off than their international contemporaries, they are even more vulnerable as a group to the skill pressures of a 21st century economy than is the U.S. as a whole. And because these older U.S. workers live in a country that decided decades ago not to establish a public education system for them once they left high school, they are arguably more at risk than some of their foreign counterparts who have an adult education system to fall back on.

Think about the type of grassroots pressure that has been needed to expand access to education in this country. It's easy to imagine a placard in the hand of an 18-year-old demanding, "I want to go to college!" It's easy to envision that 18-year-old's parents and grandparents rallying beside her to advocate for the same on her behalf. But will we ever see the day when a worker in his fifties carries a sign at a political gathering saying, "I want to upgrade my math skills!" or "Give me a chance to code!" That may seem far-fetched. It's asking our most-experienced workers to acknowledge not only that they might have something to learn, but that they cannot always be expected to make that happen on their own. But until Americans young and old call for a public education system that is accessible for all those in need of skills—across all ages—our country's older workers will remain more vulnerable than they need be.

The views expressed by the author are meant to encourage debate and discussion; they do not necessarily represent official policies of AARP.

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