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## Basic Skills Deficient Youth

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### Why Do Basic Skills Matter?

Performance measures under the Workforce Investment ACT (WIA) hold local areas accountable for improving basic skills deficiencies of youth participants. However, basic skills matter most because employers demand them, because postsecondary education and advanced training require them, and because life rewards them.

#### ***Because Employers Demand Them***

The inability to read, write, and compute is a red flag to employers. Of 2,133 companies surveyed, 43 percent test job applicants for basic skills; 85 percent do not hire applicants who are basic skills deficient. Only 5 percent of companies hire basic skills deficient applicants and provide remedial training. But about 38 percent of applicants did not have the reading, writing, and math skills needed for the jobs they sought. The greatest basic skills deficiencies were in wholesale/retail and manufacturing – 46.8 percent and 41.7 percent respectively.

#### ***Because Postsecondary Education and Advanced Training Require Them***

For decades, statistics have consistently shown that the more education people have, the higher their salary will be. But youth need higher-level basic skills for postsecondary education and advanced training. In 2000, 42 percent of entering community college freshmen were required to enroll in at least one remedial class. Remedial classes often do not count toward graduation, so many youth must complete remedial classes before taking regular classes that count toward graduation.

Even then, youth who took remedial classes were less likely to complete a certificate or degree, especially youth who needed remedial reading or math classes. In 2000, 69 percent of youth with no remedial classes completed their certificate or degree, compared to only:

- 30 percent of youth with ***any remedial reading class***
- 42 percent of youth with 2 or fewer remedial math classes
- 41 percent of youth with 2 or more remedial classes ***but not in reading***
- 56 percent with 1 remedial class ***in neither reading nor math***

#### ***Because Life Rewards Them***

Basic skills don't just matter in school and in getting that first job. They remain important throughout life. According to the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, administered to over 19,000 people ages 16 and older:

- Those with higher literacy levels were more likely to be employed full time.

- Those with lower literacy levels were less likely to be in the labor force. At least 50 percent of those with below-basic literacy were not in the labor force.
- Those with lower literacy levels earned lower salaries.
- Those with lower literacy levels were more likely to receive public assistance and receive public assistance for a longer period.

## What Does “Basic Skills Deficient” Mean?

“Basic Skills Deficient” means that the individual computes or solves problems, reads, writes, or speaks English at or below the eighth grade level or is unable to compute or solve problems, read, write, or speak English at a level necessary to function on the job, in the individual’s family, or in society (TEGL 17-05, Attachment B).

**Note:** Ohio interprets the 8th grade level to be 8.9 or below (Workforce 411, n.d.).

## What Can WIA Youth Programs Do?

Basic skills deficiency is one factor in WIA youth eligibility. It is critical to identify each youth’s basic skills deficiencies and enroll the youth in appropriate remedial activities as early as possible, preferably while the youth is still in high school. Likewise, it is especially important to help youth improve their reading and math skills, not only because those are addressed in WIA performance measures but also because they can have such a strong impact on completion of postsecondary certificates and degrees.

- Identify each youth’s basic skills deficiencies during objective assessment.
- Ensure that youth with basic skills deficiencies are aware of the importance of basic skills for further education, employment, and independent adult living.
- Set long-term basic skill improvement goals appropriate to the youth’s employment goals in the youth’s Individual Service Strategy (ISS); then, set achievable short-term goals so that youth can experiences success and progress toward long-term goals.
- Identify specific WIA youth program activities to achieve long-term and short-term basic skill improvement goals, for example:
  - Tutoring and study skills training
  - Summer employment opportunities linked to academic basic skills
  - Occupational skill training with contextualized basic skills instruction
  - Paid and unpaid work experience that demonstrates the use of basic skills on the job
- Ensure that basic skills remediation provided under the 10 required WIA youth program elements is effectively designed and conducted to meet the needs of each youth.
- Monitor the youth’s progress to ensure appropriate outcomes.

## Basic Skills Deficiencies and Performance

Local WIA youth programs are accountable under performance measures for improving the basic skills of youth participants who are basic skills deficient. Youths’ initial skill levels are established by pre-testing during objective assessment and improvements are identified through annual post-testing.

- The Younger Youth Skill Attainment Rate, under statutory Performance Measures, measures gains in basic skills, occupational skills, and work readiness skills by all in-school youth and by out-of-school youth assessed to be in need of those skills.
- Literacy/Numeracy Gains, under Common Measures, measures literacy/numeracy skill gains in educational functioning levels (EFLs) by out-of-school youth who are basic skills deficient. (See TEGL 17-05 for the specifics of performance accountability.)

### **Effective Basic Skills Remediation**

Effective basic skills remediation programs use strategies like these:

- Customize curricula to meet basic skill needs of local employers.
- Organize basic skills instruction around industry standards.
- Identify minimum basic skills levels needed for specific occupations.
- Set achievable short-term goals so that youth can experiences success and progress toward long-term goals.
- Divide youth’s time between classroom and work-based learning like externships, on-the-job training, work experience, and employment.
- Shorten length of classes.
- Teach basic skills in real-world employment and life contexts.
- Integrate curriculum to incorporate basic, academic, work readiness, and occupational skills.
- Ensure that occupational skills and basic skills instructors coordinate instruction.
- Provide co-training for basic skills and occupational skills teacher.

### **What Can Employers Do?**

By helping employees improve their basic skills, employers can benefit themselves at the same time.

- Strengthen training efforts. It is more cost-effective to train than replace employee.
- Establish onsite training. Keeping employees onsite for training saves time and money.
- Promote and reward education. Employees are more likely to participate in education and training if they understand its importance and if they are offered an incentive.
- Provide remedial basic skills training. It is more cost-effective to train an employee than to hire and train a new one. Employees with higher-level basic skills can not only perform better in their current position but also advance to a higher position.
- Tailor programs to meet employee’s specific needs. Employees are more likely to participate if programs provide the specific basic skills they need in a manner that suits their learning styles.

## **Conclusion**

In today’s world, basic skills are absolutely necessary – to get a job, to keep a job, to advance on the job. Youth need basic skills just to succeed in the further education required for high-skill, high-demand, high-paying occupations and careers. Not only educators but also WIA program staff, service providers, and employers can help youth get the lifetime payoff of good basic skills – higher income, lower unemployment, and better opportunities for advancement and independent adult living.

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