



Building Skills, Building Futures:

Supporting Literacy and Numeracy Skills to Improve TANF Employment Outcomes

About This Resource

This tip sheet provides TANF leaders with practical guidance on why and how to use TANF resources to support basic skills development to improve employment outcomes. By investing in foundational skills, TANF agencies can promote long-term self-sufficiency and reduced dependence on government benefits.

HIGHER LITERACY AND NUMERACY LEAD TO HIGHER EARNINGS

- **Low literacy and numeracy are widespread challenges in the United States.** Over half of U.S. adults lack proficient literacy skills, and one in three struggles with basic math tasks such as interpreting percentages or doing simple calculations.ⁱ
- **These challenges are even more prevalent among TANF participants**, and can be barriers to pursuing education, job training, and employment.ⁱⁱ Lacking literacy and numeracy skills can have intergenerational effects, too: children of parents with low literacy are more likely to have lower literacy themselves, perpetuating cycles of poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Improving literacy and numeracy may improve employment outcomes.** Adults with higher literacy levels tend to earn more and experience greater job stability.ⁱⁱⁱ
- **Investing in literacy and numeracy skills aligns with TANF's second statutory purpose: reducing dependency on government benefits.** By supporting participants' basic skills, TANF programs may promote job readiness, increase employment rates, and reduce benefit churn. These benefits extend to entire households, improving outcomes for both adults and children.

WHAT TANF PROGRAMS CAN DO

TANF funds can be used to support a range of literacy and numeracy initiatives. Below are frequently asked questions to help TANF leaders understand what's possible.

Can my TANF program...

...Use TANF funds to assess literacy and numeracy levels?

Yes. Assessments that help determine a TANF participant's educational needs or readiness for employment are allowable and can inform individualized employment plans. States may choose to target such assessments to participants who are more likely to benefit from them, such as individuals without a high school diploma. (See [45 CFR 261.11](#))

...Offer basic literacy or math classes for TANF participants?

Yes. TANF funds can be used to provide or refer participants to Adult Basic Education (ABE), including reading, writing, and math instruction, especially when these services are part of a strategy to improve employability. (See [45 CFR 261.30](#))



...Offer digital literacy or financial literacy programs for TANF participants?

Yes. These programs can be considered job readiness or life skills training, especially when tied to employment goals. (See [45 CFR 261.30](#))

...Count participation in ABE toward work participation requirements?

Yes, with conditions. Under federal TANF rules, ABE can count as part of vocational educational training (up to 12 months) or job skills training directly related to employment. For individuals without a high school diploma, ABE may count under education directly related to employment or satisfactory attendance in secondary school. (See [45 CFR 286.100](#))

...Partner with adult education providers or community colleges?

Yes. TANF agencies can contract with or refer participants to adult education providers, community colleges, or nonprofit literacy organizations. These partnerships can expand access to high-quality instruction and support services. (See [45 CFR 260.34](#))

Note: For specific questions about what is allowable under federal regulations, contact your [OFA Regional Office](#).

GETTING STARTED: APPROACHES TO CONSIDER

Here are three approaches TANF programs can adopt to support literacy and numeracy.



Partner With the Community College System

Community colleges are well-positioned to deliver high-quality, contextualized adult education that aligns with local labor market needs. They often offer integrated education and training programs that combine literacy/numeracy with workforce preparation, which can be ideal for TANF participants seeking both foundational skills and a pathway to employment. Plus, they can offer TANF participants exposure to career options and help them identify and pursue career pathways of interest. (Learn more about career pathways [here](#).)

How to start:

- 1. Find local colleges with adult education or workforce development programs**, and meet with them to understand their capacity, curriculum, and experience with TANF populations (see Partnership Tips box).
- 2. Work together to align TANF goals with college offerings** and co-create a plan for how you will coordinate to serve TANF participants. Establish a referral process and communication loop between TANF case managers and college staff and ensure TANF participants can access supportive services (like transportation or childcare) to attend classes.
- 3. Develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or a partnership contract** that outlines each partner's role, how funding will work, and processes for making referrals, ongoing coordination, and data sharing.
- 4. Continue to check-in regularly** to ensure that the partnership is meeting your shared goals.



Partner with Local Adult Education Providers

Local adult education providers, including literacy councils, school districts, and nonprofits, are often deeply embedded in communities and experienced in serving adults with low literacy and numeracy skills. These providers can offer expert instruction tailored to TANF participants' needs.

Partnering with adult education providers can be more complicated than partnering with community colleges. Community colleges are part of a network with standard offerings over a dispersed coverage area, while individual adult education providers may offer a patchwork of services in localized areas. TANF agencies may need to negotiate multiple MOUs and manage multiple contracts with adult education providers, which could add to administrative burden. However, because adult education providers may be more local and specific in their service offerings, they may be able to provide supports tailored to TANF participants' needs.

The process for pursuing partnerships with adult education providers is similar to the process for pursuing community college partnerships described above.

How to start:

1. **Find local providers** by using your state's adult education directory, contacting your state ABE office, or searching [national literacy directories](#).
2. **Meet with providers** to understand their capacity, curriculum, and experience with TANF populations (see box).
3. **If their goals and experience match your program's needs, work together to develop shared goals and co-create a plan for how you will coordinate to serve TANF participants.** Establish a referral process and communication loop between TANF case managers and provider staff and ensure TANF participants can access supportive services to attend classes. You might also explore co-funding opportunities using TANF and WIOA Title II funds.
4. **Develop an MOU or a partnership contract** that outlines each partner's role, how funding will work, and processes for making referrals, ongoing coordination, and data sharing.
5. **Continue to check-in regularly** to ensure that the partnership is meeting your shared goals.

Partnership Tips



Getting to Know Potential Partners

Here are a few questions that might be helpful to ask of potential partners, like community colleges or other providers:

- What subjects do your adult education programs cover (reading, writing, math, digital literacy)?
- Do you have experience co-funding programs with TANF or WIOA Title II funds?
- How do you assess participants' starting skill levels and track progress?
- Have you worked with TANF participants before?
- Do you have flexible class schedules (evenings, weekends, online) to accommodate TANF participants?
- How do you address barriers that students might experience, like childcare, transportation, or limited technology access?

Building a Partnership

- Start by defining your shared goals. Why do you want to collaborate to serve TANF participants? What are you hoping to achieve?
- Get very concrete about how you will partner. You might cocreate a journey map for how you will serve participants that defines when, how, and by whom participants will be referred, how enrollment and follow-up will work, and how you'll check in to make sure the partnership is operating as planned.
- Develop a MOU that covers each party's responsibilities, funding details, and key processes, including reporting or sharing data.

Maintaining a Partnership

- Make sure that you set up regular checkpoints to coordinate on how services are going and troubleshoot any emerging issues.



Embed Literacy/Numeracy in Existing Job Readiness Programs

Embedding literacy and numeracy into job readiness programs allows participants to build these skills in a practical, employment-focused context.

How to start:

1. **Identify TANF-funded job readiness or work experience programs you already offer that could better integrate basic skills instruction.** Think about your participants' unmet needs and where there might be opportunities to adjust or realign current programming to incorporate more basic skills learning activities. This exercise may be especially valuable to do when updating or competing contracts with providers.
2. **Bring in expert adult educators or instructional designers to co-develop or adapt curricula** to be relevant to TANF participants' needs and goals. You don't need to reinvent the wheel: you can find research-based curricula and tools that already exist and work with adult educators to think through how you might integrate curriculum materials into your existing programming. Places to check include the [What Works Clearinghouse](#) and the [ERIC database](#). Working with an experienced educator or instructor to adapt "off-the-shelf" curricula or tools to your program context can help ensure that the literacy and numeracy content is relevant to and meets the needs of TANF participants and embedded in logical, efficient ways in the job readiness program. Programs can identify instructors they might work with to adapt curricula through universities, professional organizations, and freelance platforms.
3. **Test out your adaptations to see how they work in practice and make refinements.** Support staff with the training and tools they need and then start implementing with a small group of staff and participants. Gather feedback through simple surveys or informal focus groups and adjust your approach based on what you hear. This [Learn, Innovate, Improve Practice Guide](#) offers guidance on testing and refining strategies.

WHAT STATES ARE DOING



California's [CalWORKs TANF program](#) is embedded in every community college in the state, offering academic counseling, skills training, work-study and job placement, and childcare and transportation assistance.



Kentucky offers free adult education programs across all 120 counties to support TANF participants. These programs, often part of the [Kentucky Adult Education system](#), aim to help TANF participants gain skills and education to increase their self-sufficiency and move towards employment.



Minnesota delivers ABE through [school districts and community-based organizations](#) and is often coordinated with TANF services to support participants in meeting work participation requirements while building foundational skills.



Oregon integrates TANF with ABE programs offered through community colleges. These programs focus on college and career readiness, sector-specific literacy and numeracy, and short-term certificates that may include credit and non-credit courses. [Research from Oregon State University](#) highlights how reducing administrative barriers helped TANF participants engage more fully in education and expand their career aspirations.



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End Notes

- ⁱ National Center for Education Statistics. "Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC): Highlights of the 2023 U.S. PIAAC Results." Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2023. https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/2023/national_results.asp.
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