

TRANSFORMATION OF ADULT EDUCATION

Media Ready: Adult Education Toolkit

Purpose:

To help adult education professionals confidently share their message with media outlets and the public by preparing strong messaging, human-centered stories, and a professional media presence. This toolkit is for *anyone* in adult education—program staff, teachers, state association leaders, volunteers, and adult learners—who might talk to the media or the public about our work.

Why This Matters:

Adult education is often misunderstood or overlooked despite its profound impact on individuals, families, and communities. Media interactions are powerful opportunities to raise awareness, influence public opinion, and advocate for more support and funding. This toolkit equips you with the tools and confidence to represent adult education clearly, compellingly, and accurately.

Who Should Use This:

No matter your role or experience level, if you speak about adult education publicly or to the media, this toolkit is for you. New to media? Start with the basics here. Experienced? Use this as a reference or training resource.



1. Core Messaging

Key Messages

Use these talking points consistently:

- **Adult education changes lives.** It opens pathways to jobs, citizenship, parenting support, and community engagement.
- Adult learners are resilient. Many juggle work, family, and education—despite systemic barriers.
- **Investing in adult education benefits everyone.** Stronger workforce, healthier communities, and reduced intergenerational poverty.
- **Programs are underfunded and under-recognized.** Adult education is a smart investment with proven outcomes.

Message Triangle Template

Talking to the media can feel overwhelming—especially if you're new to it. It's easy to feel like you have to say everything about adult education in one breath. That's where the Message Triangle comes in.

This simple tool helps you focus on just one powerful idea at a time, backed by a solid fact and a real-life example. It keeps you grounded and clear—so you can speak confidently, even if you're nervous or caught off guard.



Think of it like this:

- Your Core Message is the main idea you want people to remember.
- Your Supporting Point gives that idea credibility—it's a fact or key insight.
- Your Real Example brings it to life—ideally something personal, local, or emotionally resonant.

Here's a sample triangle built around three common themes in adult education:

Core Message	Supporting Point	Real Example
Adult education transforms lives	Many adult learners achieve GEDs, new careers, or citizenship	"Maria, a single mother, earned her high school equivalency at age 35 and now works in healthcare."
It's essential to our workforce	54% of U.S. adults read below a 6th-grade level	"We're closing skills gaps that employers are desperate to fill."
It deserves more attention and funding	Funding is still below pre-2008 levels	"Our programs have waiting lists—not due to lack of interest, but lack of resources."

Pro Tip: You don't have to memorize a script. Just remember your triangle and speak from the heart. That's what resonates with listeners most.

A **blank triangle template** is available in the Appendix so you can customize your own messages. This can be especially helpful if:

- You're preparing for a specific interview or event,
- You want to highlight a local story or stat,
- Or you're working with a learner or colleague to co-tell a story.





2. Interview Preparation

Media interviews don't have to be intimidating—even if it's your first time. With just a little preparation, you can share your message clearly and confidently. Whether you're on the phone with a reporter or speaking on camera, these do's and don'ts will help you stay focused, professional, and true to your story.

Remember: You don't need to be a polished speaker—just a passionate one. The goal is to inform, inspire, and represent adult education with heart and honesty.

Do:

- Know your 2–3 key points.
- Lead with impact—why should this matter to the public?
- Use human stories and concrete examples.
- Speak in plain language.
- Bring printed stats and learner quotes if allowed.
- Pause and think before answering.
- Smile and use open body language (for TV/video).
- Ask who else will be interviewed and if it's live or recorded.
- Practice out loud! Even five minutes helps.



Don't:

- Get pulled off-message.
- Use jargon (e.g., "WIOA Title II") unless you explain it.
- Criticize individuals—focus on systems and solutions.
- Guess the facts—say "Let me get back to you with the correct number."
- Don't feel pressured to answer everything. It's okay to say 'That's outside my area, but I can connect you with someone.'

You were invited to speak because your voice matters. You're not expected to know everything—you're here to tell the truth about your work and your learners. With practice and preparation, you'll not only feel more confident, you'll make a stronger impact every time you speak.





3. Storytelling Guidance

Stories are the heart of any message—and adult education has some of the most powerful stories to tell. Whether it's a learner achieving a dream or a program overcoming barriers to serve more people, storytelling helps the public understand the *real-world impact* of adult education.

You don't need to be a professional writer to share a compelling story. Just follow this simple structure to bring your message to life in a way that resonates:

The Anatomy of a Strong Learner Story:

- 1. Challenge: "Before I enrolled, I couldn't help my kids with homework."
- 2. Turning Point: "I found a local adult learning center and signed up."
- 3. Transformation: "Now I have my GED and a job as a pharmacy tech."
- 4. **Why It Matters:** "Adult education gave me confidence and stability. I have a job that supports my family and the skills to help my children in their educational journey."

Use stories with permission. Ask learners for quotes or let them co-tell their story when possible. Consider pairing a staff member and learner together for joint interviews—this often makes both feel more confident.

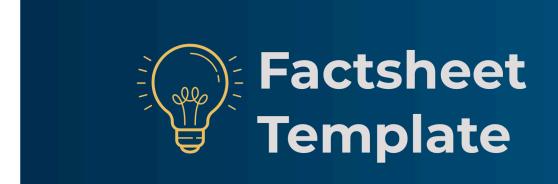


COABE has a collection of adult learner stories available on our 6-time award-winning campaign website <u>Educate & Elevate</u> and <u>Faces of Adult Education</u>.

Beyond Learner Success

While learner stories are powerful, they're not the only stories worth telling. You might want to share how your program adapted during a crisis, launched a new partnership, or helped someone move from student to volunteer or staff. If it demonstrates resilience, growth, or community impact—it's a story worth telling.





4. Fact Sheet Template

Sometimes the most powerful tool you can leave behind is a one-page snapshot of the facts. A well-designed fact sheet supports your message long after the interview ends. It gives reporters something to quote, refer back to, and share with editors or colleagues.

Use this template to create a quick, clear overview of your program and the broader impact of adult education. You can print it out for in-person interviews or email it afterward with a thank-you note.

Adult Education Fast Facts

- 43 million U.S. adults read at or below a third-grade level.
- Every \$1 invested in adult ed yields up to \$60 in increased wages and social savings.
- Adult learners are diverse: parents, immigrants, returning citizens, older workers.
- Programs include: literacy, numeracy, digital skills, ESL, GED, career pathways.
- Funding covers only a fraction of the need—many programs rely on volunteers and donations.

COABE has national and state fact sheets available on our <u>Educate & Elevate</u> website.



Why It Matters

Facts build credibility and context. When paired with strong stories and a clear message, they show that adult education isn't just inspiring—it's *essential*. A good fact sheet can turn a five-minute interview into a full article, op-ed, or future feature. Keep it handy, and always follow up with it!



Practice Q&A

5. Practice Q&A

Preparing for questions is one of the best ways to feel confident in a media interview. Sometimes reporters will share questions in advance, but often, you'll need to think on your feet. The more you understand the outlet's audience and typical tone—local news vs. policy podcast, for example—the better you can anticipate what they'll ask.

Below are a few **common questions** you may hear in interviews, along with sample responses. These answers are just a starting point—**the most powerful responses combine facts and personal stories.** Don't forget to return to your **message triangle** when shaping your answers.

Sample Questions & Answers

Q: Why do adults need help with reading or math?

A: There are many reasons—systemic inequities, interrupted education, language barriers. What matters is that they're coming back to learn, and that's something we should celebrate and support.

Q: Isn't that what high schools are for?

A: Ideally, yes—but adult education gives people a second chance. Our systems failed some learners. This is how we lift everyone up, including their children and communities.



Q: How is this different from job training?

A: Adult education is often the foundation—reading, writing, and English skills—that make job training possible.

Q: What's the biggest barrier you face?

A: Funding. Demand is high, but we don't have the capacity to serve everyone. We need more investment and visibility.

Q: Why should we invest in English classes for immigrants?

A: Learning English helps people work, parent, and engage in their communities. It strengthens our local economies and civic life.

Final Tip

There's no perfect answer—just an authentic one. Stay calm, speak with heart, and always bring it back to the real lives impacted by adult education. With a few facts, a compelling story, and a clear message, you'll leave a lasting impression.





6. Outreach Templates

Media coverage doesn't happen by chance—it starts with a strong pitch. Reaching out to local reporters or editors can feel intimidating, especially if you've never done it before. But local news outlets are *always* looking for uplifting, community-based stories—especially ones that show people overcoming challenges and making positive change.

Use this template to craft a short, compelling email that gets to the heart of your story and invites a conversation. Feel free to adapt the language to fit your tone or the specific outlet you're contacting.

Pitch Email to Local Media

Subject: Local Adult Learners Achieving Big Dreams-Great Story Opportunity

Hi [Reporter's Name],

I'm reaching out to share a powerful local story: adult learners in [Your City/County] are achieving their GEDs, learning English, and starting new careers—despite tremendous odds.

Would you be interested in speaking with a program leader or learner from [Your Organization]?



We'd love to connect you with someone who can speak firsthand about the challenges and triumphs of adult education.

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Thank you for considering!
[Your Name]
[Title, Organization]
[Phone, Email]
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Final Tip

Don't be afraid to follow up. If you don't hear back after a few days, it's perfectly okay to send a polite follow-up email or call the newsroom. You're not bothering them—you're offering a meaningful local story that deserves to be told.

For more detailed information about reaching out to the press, explore COABE's Media Outreach Toolkit.





7. Resources & Links

You don't have to go it alone.

Whether you're preparing for an interview, gathering data to support your message, or learning how others are successfully engaging with the media, the resources below offer trusted information, tools, and examples. Use these links to dig deeper, build your confidence, and stay aligned with the broader field of adult education.

COABE Media Outreach Toolkit

This comprehensive resource includes sample press releases, social media tools, talking points, and more—all designed specifically for adult education programs. A great place to find additional templates and media engagement strategies.

Educate & Elevate

COABE's award-winning national campaign showcases success stories, state-specific impact data, and advocacy tools. Share this site with reporters or policymakers to demonstrate the national reach and value of adult education.



Faces of Adult Education

A collection of learner and program stories submitted by COABE members. Use this to find compelling, real-life narratives or to encourage your learners to share their own stories.

U.S. Census Bureau - Education Data

Reliable national and state-level statistics on adult education levels—great for grounding your messaging in publicly available data.

National Skills Coalition

Find up-to-date research, talking points, and policy briefs related to workforce development and adult education. These materials can help strengthen your media messaging with credible stats and national context.

U.S. Department of Education - OCTAE

Explore official information about adult education programs, federal priorities, and funding under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Useful for background, data sourcing, and staying informed on policy language.





8. Appendix

This section is designed to help you put the toolkit into action. You'll find templates, worksheets, and space to personalize your messaging. Whether you're prepping for an interview, crafting your own talking points, or collecting learner stories, the tools here give you a head start. Feel free to copy, adapt, and share with your team or partners.

Use the Appendix to make this toolkit your own—and to turn preparation into confidence.

Appendix A: 2025 COABE Talking Points for Legislators and Social Media

This appendix provides up-to-date, ready-to-use talking points tailored for conversations with policymakers and social media outreach. Use these to ensure your advocacy is consistent, focused, and aligned with COABE's current priorities—whether you're meeting with a legislator or posting online.

Appendix B: Message Triangle Blank Template

A practical, fillable template designed to help you craft your own core message, supporting points, and real examples. Use this tool during interview prep or message development to stay clear, concise, and impactful when speaking about adult education.



2025 COABE Talking Points for Legislators and Social Media

I. Adult education serves a wide swath of Americans and a variety of locations.

Talking Point #1

Adult education focuses on a population that is extremely challenging to reach.

Adult education focuses on a population that is extremely challenging to reach. More than 2,000 federally funded adult education programs provide services to **1.5 million** learners nationwide and experience a 72% success rate with this population.[i]

Displaced Homemakers: **21,781** English Language Learners: **943,061**

Homeless/Runaways: **18,189** Low-Income Adults: **321,426**

Single Parents: **113,580** Ex-Offenders: **92,877**Migrant Farm Workers: **10,742** Exhausting TANF: **6,098**Long-Term Unemployed: **65,117** Learning Disabilities: **63,845**

[i] National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2019). Data Point: Adult Literacy in the United States. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/

Talking Point #2

Educating Adults Creates Stronger Communities

Low-skilled adults are:

- 2x more likely to be unemployed;
- 3x more likely to be in poverty;
- 4x more likely to be in poor health; and
- 8x more likely to be incarcerated.

Educating adults creates stronger communities. Higher education levels are correlated with lower rates of chronic diseases like diabetes and asthma. A mother's education level is the highest determinant of a child's academic success.[i] Better-educated parents raise better-educated, more successful children who are less likely to end up in poverty or prison. Inmate participation in adult education reduces recidivism by 30%.[ii]

[i] National Institutes for Health. (2010). Improving mothers' literacy skills may be the best way to boost children's achievement.

http://www.nichd.nih.gov/news/releases/pages/102510-reading-family-income.aspx

[ii] National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies. (2018, September 17). U.S. National Supplement: Prison Study 2014, PIAAC 2012. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/blogs/nces/2017/01/11/default



II. Adult education helps hard working Americans secure employment and support themselves and their families.

Talking Point #3

Research shows that when our nation invests in adult education, outcomes improve

More than 80% of learners that enter a program with the stated goal of getting their high school equivalency (HSE) credential reached that goal. A longitudinal study of adult education participants found that participation in at least 100 hours of adult education was correlated with an almost \$10,000 increase in annual earnings. With increased investments and attention placed on the adult education pipeline, even more adults can become educated and quickly make progress in earning the skills needed to obtain better jobs.

Talking Point #4

Research shows that earnings increase and unemployment rates decrease with educational attainment.

On average, the earnings of an individual with a high school diploma or its equivalent are 27% higher than those without. [i] Additionally, the unemployment rate of those without a high school diploma is 5.6%, while the unemployment rate of those with a high school diploma drops to 3.9%. For those with an Associate's degree, the unemployment rate drops to 2.7%.

[i] "Education Pays." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 5.1 Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment, 2023, August 29, 2024. https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/unemployment-earnings-education.htm.

Talking Point #5

47% of GED recipients go on to higher education and have a 90% persistence rate.

While adult education provides so much more than just the high school equivalency, it is certainly a milestone. Many students complete their program and begin working while others pursue higher education. Studies show that 47% of GED recipients go on to higher education and have a 90% persistence rate. Adult education learners have grit and determination. They are fighting for a better future for themselves and their families!

[i] National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2019). Data Point: Adult Literacy in the United States. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/



III. Adult education helps employers by developing a skilled workforce proficient in reading comprehension, basic math skills and digital and information literacy.

Talking Point #6

28 million adults in the US lack the basic digital skills that they need to use a computer.

Despite this, most adults in the workforce are using computers every day on the job.[i] We must invest in digital literacy to ensure a competitive workforce. Federally funded adult education programs provide digital literacy services while providing literacy, numeracy, citizenship, and workforce readiness skills. In addition to digital literacy skills, information literacy skills are crucial for adult learners so they are prepared for accelerating advances in technology in the workplace.

[i] National Center for Education Statistics [NCES]. (2019). Data Point: Adult Literacy in the United States. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/

Talking Point #7

More than 24 million adults lack a high school diploma.[i]

Close to 10 percent of all adults lack a high school diploma. And over 45 percent of adults, 116 million Americans, have only a high school education or less. Data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that over the next decade, there will be over seven million projected job openings each year in occupations typically requiring a high school diploma or its equivalent and nearly two million jobs requiring at least some postsecondary. Further, it is predicted that by 2031, 4.7 million job openings will be available for workers with a high school diploma compared to only 1.3 million job openings for those with less than a high school diploma.[ii] Currently, over 50 million Americans have jobs that require no more than a high school education, but jobs with this comparatively low level of educational attainment are disappearing quickly.

Americans need additional education and upskilling opportunities to fill those job openings and contribute to our economy. Educating motivated students with the skills that companies need provides qualified candidates for hard to fill positions.

[i] Census Data 2022. Published 2023. https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2022/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html

[ii] Anthony P. Carnevale, Nicole Smith, Martin Van Der Werf, and Michael C. Quinn. After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, 2023. cew.georgetown.edu/Projections2031.



Talking Point #8

Adult education can train students to fill the jobs industry needs today.

44 million adults are low-skilled, 30 million lack a high school diploma, and 66 million adults in the U.S. have limited English or reading skills, and more than 60 million can't perform simple math.

We cannot depend on a robust economy to solve this problem. A stronger economy will bring people back into the workforce but it won't provide the skills training they need. According to Alan Daley's "Overcoming the Skills Shortage," "More than 75 percent of manufacturers report moderate to severe skill shortages and up to 11 percent revenue losses from increased production cost and sales losses due to those shortages. Service industries are hardest hit. Thirty-three percent of all small businesses say they cannot identify candidates qualified for job openings. And 43 percent of small business owners say unfilled jobs are impeding their growth or expansion."[i]

Adult education programs can train these students to fill the jobs industry needs today.

[i] Daley, Alan. (2017) Overcoming the Skills Shortage. https://www.realclearpolicy.com/articles/2017/03/03/overcoming_the_skills_shortage_110178_.html

Talking Point #9

Adult education is good for business.

Companies miss out on growth opportunities, product development suffers, and profits stagnate without a skilled national workforce. America needs an "all hands on deck" approach to bring every available worker to the labor pool.

Adult education brings businesses options by preparing existing workers with competing life and family responsibilities with the skills that companies need through flexible classrooms and curriculum.

Talking Point #10

English language learners are important to the job market.

English language learners are important to the job market. Immigrants make up for the decline in the U.S.-born workforce as Baby Boomers retire. In 2024, immigrants make up 19 percent of the U.S. workforce.[i] However, nearly 25.7 million adults have limited English proficiency.[ii] We



must train and educate these adults by increasing their English language proficiency, improving their basic skills, and helping them achieve a high school diploma or its equivalent, so that they are prepared to join and contribute to the future workforce.

[i] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Civilian Labor Force Level - Foreign Born [LNU01073395], retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/LNU01073395, November 20, 2024.

[ii] U.S. Census Bureau. "Language Spoken at Home by Ability to Speak English for the Population 5 Years and Over." American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B16001, 2022, https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2022.B16001?t=LanguageSpoken at Home. Accessed on November 20, 2024.

IV. Adult education helps the economy by addressing a growing skills gap and lessening the need for assistance from Federal benefits programs.

Talking Point #11

The return on investment into adult education is undeniable

The adult education graduate can typically earn close to \$10,000 more per year once they get their high school diploma.[i] And as we gain more skilled workers, the entire economy benefits as well. For every 400,000 adults who earn a high school diploma, we gain \$2.5 billion back in tax revenue and reduced expenses.[ii] That's \$6,250 per person! And on top of that, the estimated value to our economy in reduced costs for public support programs for low-skilled, low-literate adults is \$200 billion annually.

[i] Morgan, Kevin, et al. The Case for Investment in Adult Basic Education. ProLiteracy, 2017, https://www.proliteracy.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Case-for-Investment-Reder.pdf.

[ii] McLendon, L., Jones, D. and M. Rosin. (2011). The Return on Investment from Adult Education and Training. McGraw Hill Research Foundation.

Talking Point #12

Research shows that earnings increase and unemployment rates decrease with educational attainment.

On average, the earnings of an individual with a high school diploma are 27% higher than those without.[i] Additionally, the unemployment rate of those without a high school diploma is 5.6%, while the unemployment rate of those with a high school diploma drops to 3.9%. For those with an Associate's degree, the unemployment rate drops to 2.7%.



[i] "Education Pays." U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Table 5.1 Unemployment rates and earnings by educational attainment, 2023, August 29, 2024.

https://www.bls.gov/emp/tables/unemployment-earnings-education.htm.

Talking Point #13

Expanding your focus on adult education will fill more jobs.

Some jobs will be filled by those currently on a postsecondary track or by those who can easily be retrained and provided with a new skill set. However, in order to support local businesses and build the U.S. economy, we must focus on lower-skilled workers to meet future demand. Without a major correction, tens of millions of Americans will be unprepared to fill the next wave of jobs, and we could face a dramatic increase in unemployment nationwide. We must ensure that the 43 million working-age Americans who possess low literacy skills get the education they need to access the skills training that will help fuel our future economy.

Talking Point #14

You can educate or you can incarcerate.

Many of the programs in our federal budget fall under the following categories: health, education, and reform. When we think about low-literate adults, you can educate, or you can incarcerate. With the 80% success rate that federally funded programs have[i], the clear choice is investing in adult education!

For example, incarceration within the juvenile justice system, 16% percent of detained students graduated from high school, compared to 72% of non-detained students. Among those who cumulatively spent more than a month in juvenile detention, 8% graduated. Fifty-seven percent (57%) of detained students dropped out of high school, compared to 14% of non-detained students. Sixty-two percent (62%) of students who accumulated more than a month in detention dropped out.[ii]

The effects of dropping out have long lasting effects on an individual's life, with high school dropouts 3.5 times more likely than high school graduates to be arrested in their lifetime and 63% more likely to be incarcerated than their peers with four-year college. [iii]

[i] Johnston, J. Howard, PhD. (2010) Dropout Prevention: An EPI Research Brief. Education Partnerships, Inc. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED537949.pdf

[ii] Gertseva. A., & McCurley, C. (2019). Education Outcome Characteristics of Students Admitted to Juvenile Detention Olympia, WA: Center for Court Research, Administrative Office of the Courts



https://erdc.wa.gov/publications-and-reports/education-outcome-characteristics-students-admitted-juvenile-detention

[iii] *Literacy Mid-South*, "The Relationship Between Incarceration and Low Literacy." https://www.literacymidsouth.org/news/the-relationship-between-incarceration-and-low-literacy.

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V. Funding and Accountability Asks

Talking Point #15

Funding for adult literacy is inadequate.

According to a report published by The Literacy Assistance Center (LAC) of New York City, "...funding for adult literacy education is so inadequate that fewer than 4% of adult New Yorkers in need can get into classes in any given year.[i] For fiscal year 2020, WIOA Title II spending per participant is less than \$750 per adult learner.[ii] However, unemployed residents with prior U.S. work experience who enrolled in an employment-focused English course boosted their earnings by an average of more than \$7,100 annually two years after starting the program, compared with unemployed non-English speakers who weren't in the program. Among all participants, including those who started out with jobs, the average annual increase during the second year was more than \$2,600.[iii]

[i] Literacy Assistance Center (2020) Literacy & Justice: A Call for Transformative Action. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fW4scuzRYn8bUPrxhZ4tTBjtscTAcvMM/view

[ii] Comings, Reder, Rosen (2020). An Open Door Out of Poverty. https://www.literacymn.org/odc/open-door-out-of-poverty

[iii] Johnston, Katie. (2020). First-of-its-kind study finds 'stunning' earnings gains for immigrants who learn English. The Boston Globe.

https://www.bostonglobe.com/2020/11/23/business/language-success/

Talking Point #16

Adult Education Needs Updated Reporting Requirements

Adult education data reporting requirements are antiquated and do not fully capture the number of learners served by programs. We recommend:

- Modernizing NRS reporting requirements to allow for programs to more accurately reflect the number of learners served, such as including review of the 12-hour rule;
- Expanding the metrics of success for graduates to include innovative indicators that show more than either postsecondary education or employment;



• Ensuring that all graduates be counted in programs' enrollment totals, rather than only those who pursue postsecondary education or obtain employment; and

Streamlining **and modernizing** data collection requirements for career pathway programs, including incumbent worker programs, to encourage more employer and industry partnerships.



Message Triangle Template

Use this to stay grounded in your core message during interviews:

Core Message	Supporting Point	Real Example
Adult education transforms lives	Many adult learners achieve GEDs, new careers, or citizenship	
It's essential to our workforce	54% of U.S. adults read below a 6th-grade level	
It deserves more attention and funding	Funding is still below pre-2008 levels	