Adult education is one of the services provided to welfare recipients as a part of Families First, Tennessee’s welfare reform initiative. In June 1999, 10.4% of adults in Families First were enrolled in adult basic education classes. The Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) contracted with the Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) to provide information about the length of time it takes to make learning gains in adult education.

Sixteen adult education programs from the three grand regions of the state provided information from participant records that included standardized test scores, enrollment and testing dates. Researchers visited the programs and collected the information from records for participants who had test scores to show that they advanced a level or received a GED.

For this study, CLS researchers used only complete records with accurate test scores indicating that an individual advanced from one adult education level to another. The data collection process for this study highlighted the importance of maintaining accurate and complete records for participants because incomplete records could not be used even if they suggested that an individual had advanced a level.

Information on the placement and advancement of Families First participants was compared to traditional students in adult education (AE). Placement level, equivalent to a grade level in elementary or high school, is the academic level at which an individual is functioning based on standardized achievement tests. In adult education, individuals are placed at Level 1 (grade 1-5), Level 2 (grade 6 - 8), and Level 3 (grades 9 - 11). Findings are summarized as follows:

- More Families First participants enter at Level 1 (49%) compared to traditional adult education students (27%). Understanding the reasons for this difference is a question for further research.
- More Families First participants whose original placement was Level 2 or higher passed the GED examination compared to those who entered at Level 1.
- Traditional adult education students advanced to Level 2 in an average of 84 days compared to Families First participants who took an average of 156 days to advance to Level 2.
- Families First participants and traditional adult education students at Level 2 took the same amount of time to advance to Level 3 and to pass the GED examination.
- Families First participants who entered at Level 1 and passed the GED examination took 146 days longer than traditional adult education students.

Implications for practice – Although the average or median length of time to make progress is given in this summary, the complete study shows that some individuals may take almost five times longer than the average to make progress. Findings from this research support the policy decision not to apply time limits to individuals who enter adult education below Level 3. Instructors and case managers may find the information from this study useful as they help participants set reasonable goals for academic achievement.