

"Building Partnerships
for a Stronger Workforce"

Remarks Made by
Paul Jurmo
Business Council for Effective Literacy
New York, NY

at the Roundtable Discussion on Workplace Education
during
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Introduction:

Good morning, everyone. I hope you're all well rested and ready to tackle the challenge which has been presented to you today. Today will begin with a roundtable discussion in which representatives from a half-dozen workplace basic skills programs in the state will describe some key features of their efforts.

And later today you will have an hour and a half to begin mapping out strategies for strengthening workforce basic skills efforts in Arkansas.

My job this morning is to moderate the roundtable discussion. Let me begin by telling you who our speakers are.

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My name is Paul Jurmo, and I have been asked to speak for ten or fifteen minutes about models of "effective workplace literacy partnerships" which have been developed around the country in the past few years. I will then turn the floor over to the panelists to let them describe how they have worked

jointly with other institutions in their communities to set up employee basic skills programs.

I work for the Business Council for Effective Literacy, a national clearinghouse of information based in New York City. We provide information and technical assistance to the business community, public policy makers, and others who are concerned about the adult literacy issue as it affects individuals, communities, and the economy. Because workplace and workforce literacy have become such "hot topics" in the past three or four years, we have been pushed to pay particular attention to the question of how best to set up workplace education programs.

We have found that, so far, a lot of people have been talking about the workplace literacy issue; a growing number of state governments, corporations, and unions have gone a step further and begun setting up worker basic skills programs; but only a relative few employers, unions, and state governments have invested the thinking, resources, and long-term commitment needed to develop sustained, quality programs which meet the many complex skills needs of the emerging workplace.

Let me be more specific about how people are now defining the skills which workplace literacy efforts should be focusing on:

I. The skills needed:

The discussion on workplace literacy has pushed employers, public policy makers, adult educators, and others to re-think

what "literacy" or "basic skills" is in the context of the new workplace. We can cite reams of reports which tell us that workplace literacy is not the same kind of literacy we were taught back in grammar school. We are told that, in the modern U.S. workplace, employees now need to be able to think critically and creatively about problems, to communicate orally and via text, and to work in teams to perform real, increasingly-complex tasks. New technologies and new ways of doing work like team-problem-solving are now becoming the norm in the U.S. workplace and are pushing more responsibility onto the shoulders of the average worker.

These same reports tell us that the pool of available workers is relatively less-prepared to handle these new demands, because the new workforce is composed more and more of historically-undereducated populations: American-born poor people and foreign-born people with limited English-language skills. Not only are the basic literacy skills of this emerging workforce relatively weaker, but the fact that workforces are increasingly diverse culturally and linguistically further complicates communication, teamwork, and problem-solving within the workplace.

II. Models of "workplace literacy partnerships":

To deal with this apparent gap between what workplaces now demand and what workers can do, lots of activity is now taking place, involving many different types of institutions at many

levels. One idea we hear about in this new workplace literacy field is that of "partnerships." The idea of people from different sectors working together in harmony to share resources to achieve common goals is a nice one, and we are frequently urged by policy makers to form these kinds of partnerships.

To actually build strong, effective partnerships is a different matter, however, one which requires hard work and resources. There are costs entailed in building collaborative efforts. Time given to organizing planning meetings, and mapping out collaborative strategies -- and raising funds for them -- is time which we cannot give to the ongoing work required to keep our respective organizations running. Don't get me wrong, I am not opposed to forming partnerships. I just think we need to educate ourselves about effective ways of putting together collaborative efforts before we take the risk of trying to set one up.

The good news is that there are a number of models of workplace literacy partnerships which we can learn from. Let me describe ^{several} several models which adult educators, employers, unions, public policy makers, and workers themselves have developed:

A. Collaborative curriculum development: When we hear this term "partnership," we normally think of a coalition or task force composed of representatives of local businesses, adult education institutions, government, and possibly labor unions. I will talk about that type of partnership in a minute, but let me first talk

about another collaborative model which has been developed at the level of the individual workplace.

What I'm talking about here is the model of collaborative curriculum development in which a team composed of managers, union representatives, educators, and -- most importantly -- workers themselves jointly create a meaningful curriculum. While it might seem obvious that any useful education program has to be jointly and carefully planned, that has until now not been the norm in workplace literacy efforts. Until recently, most workplace programs tended to consist of having a local adult education instructor come into the worksite and lead employees through a standardized, pre-packaged adult education curriculum.

More and more, however, workplace educators recognize the need to carefully tailor the curriculum more directly to what workers already know -- and need and want to know. How to do this kind of customized curriculum planning is another question, however. This is where the principles of "partnership" or "collaboration" come into play.

A team of managers, educators, union representatives, and workers themselves provides a vehicle through which all parties concerned can have a say in defining program goals, responsibilities, and operating procedures. Workers themselves need to be part of such a team, because, if given the opportunity, they have a lot to say about what is needed for them -- and the workplace -- to work more efficiently. Involving workers and other key parties in the planning process is not only

good sense from an instructional perspective, but it is good sense from a human relations perspective. People need to feel a sense of ownership for an activity if they are to really support, and a collaborative planning process is a way of building the trust and ongoing communication central to an effective workplace human resource effort.

B. Multi-sector efforts at the community and state level : Let me turn now to the more-familiar form of "partnership" I referred to earlier. This is the multi-sector workforce "coalition" or "task force" kind of partnership which we see formed by high-level business or government leaders at a local or state level. These groups until now have tended to focus on defining the workforce literacy "problem" and making a few recommendations, but too often they have not gone much beyond that.

But, again, there is good news to report on this front. Employers are, for example, looking beyond their immediate workplaces to find other people who are likewise concerned about the skills of the available workforce. These linkages are being formed at local, regional, and state levels.

In Hartford, CT, for example, a half-dozen major employers - including banks, insurance companies, and other types of companies -- have formed a coalition with the Greater Hartford Community College. This coalition is looking at the skills of those companies' current and prospective future workforces, and the college is in turn developing educational services tailored

to the workforce skills needs they've identified. By collectively applying for a federal Department of Education workplace literacy grant, the coalition was able to secure financial support for this program.

Other coalitions are being put together by companies representing a single industry. For example, in Arlington, VA (outside Washington, D.C.), a number of hotels have hooked up with the adult basic education program to have ESL instructors come into the hotels to provide on-site educational services to employees. Also in Virginia, a number of small building-contracting companies whose office are located near each other in an industrial park in the town of Springfield have arranged to have an adult basic education instructor run classes for their employees at the industrial park before the workers go out to their job sites in the morning. Small businesses, in particular, will have to build partnerships with other institutions, simply because they don't have the resources to "go it alone" and set up education programs by themselves.

At the state level, the Massachusetts Workplace Education Initiative -- which is itself a collaborative effort of several state agencies -- has in several ways fostered the creation of workplace education partnerships at the local level. Even though the state is experiencing severe budget cutbacks, the Initiative has put together a pot of money from state and federal education and job-training sources which it then makes available through a competitive bidding system for the development of local workplace

literacy partnerships. To qualify for these funds, each partnership must be comprised of an employer, a union (where there is one), an educational institution like a community college, and the local Private Industry Council. Because the Initiative recognizes that effective workplace education programs require a considerable amount of tender loving care, each partnership must also have someone -- usually a community-college staff person -- assigned to coordinate the program on an ongoing basis. The funding guidelines also require that the curriculum not be of the off-the-shelf, pre-packaged variety. Rather, the curriculum must be customized by the partners so that it responds to the real needs and interests of the workers. The Massachusetts Initiative also has done careful, ongoing evaluation of these programs, using participatory research methods like interviews which allow all of the partners -- employers, union representatives, educators and trainers, and workers themselves -- to have a chance to say how well the program is meeting its goals. The state is also providing opportunities for workplace educators from across the state to get together to share their experience and resources in ongoing staff-development workshops. So, through creative grant-making and planning, the Massachusetts effort has very consciously build the principle of partnerships into what they hope will be an ongoing statewide commitment to the notion of employee education.

C. Trade associations: Trade and professional associations are

other vehicles for sharing of resources and collaborative planning. For example, the American Bankers Association last year investigated the employee basic skills needs across the entire banking industry and has now -- with the help of Simon & Schuster and researchers Jorie Philippi and Larry Mikulecky -- developed a curriculum which local banks can use to upgrade their employees' job-related skills. The National Association of Printers and Lithographers has developed a similar job-related program -- with the help of Linda Stoker -- which local printing companies can now use in their employee education programs.

Professional associations of human resource personnel -- like the American Society for Training and Development, the Society for Human Resource Management, and the American Management Association -- have put together guidebooks which show members how to deal with workplace literacy issues.

I am telling you about these national associations for two reasons. One, you might make use of the resources already put together by these national groups. And, two, you might call on the local or state affiliates of these and similar groups to see what role they might play in your partnerships.

D. Unions: Unions also have vital roles in workforce education partnerships, either in collaboration with employers or in cooperation with other unions. In New York, Chicago, and Boston, for example, unions concerned about the basic skills of their members have formed union education consortia in which they share

resources, provide teacher training opportunities, and jointly submit funding proposals.

III. Recommendations:

I don't have time to talk about other promising examples of workforce education partnerships which have been developed around the country in the past few years. If you'd like to read more about these models, please give me your address after this session and we'll put you on the mailing list for our national newsletter.

Let me conclude with a few recommendations to those who have a role in forming effective workplace education partnerships:

Employers and unions: Employers and unions cannot be expected to be "experts" about how to set up an employee basic skills program. But they need to do their homework to more deeply understand not only what others are saying about the employee basic skills issue but what "basic skills" really means in their own workplaces. Employers and unions can do this through reading of reports, by talking with others who have already gone through the process of putting together effective programs, and by putting together a planning team to figure out what education and training needs their workforce might have. Management and labor also have to realize that this workplace literacy problem is a complex one and pre-packaged, "quick fixes" will not be much of a solution.

Public policy makers: Public policy makers likewise need to educate themselves about the wide range of workplace literacy problems likely to exist in their states and communities and the range of solutions now being developed. Otherwise, although they might have the best of intentions, they might eventually be held accountable for throwing taxpayers' money at high-profile-but-low-quality "workforce initiatives."

Vendors: Vendors of adult education products and services can be either our allies in building quality workplace education programs, or they can be competitors for limited workplace education funds. Those vendors that promise employers and public policy makers a simple solution to problems they have not really studied, are doing no one a favor.

The media: In too many cases, the news media until now have gotten away with doing superficial "scare" pieces about the "workplace illiteracy crisis." While it is important to draw the public's attention to the problem, we also need more in-depth analysis about the complexities of the problem and what is really being accomplished in current workforce education efforts -- and what else needs to be done and by whom.

Adult educators: Adult educators have as a field been

pushed in recent years into trying to do more and more work with limited training; inappropriate pre-packaged materials and assessment tools; meager salaries and benefits; and instructors who don't really know the learners, communities, and contexts they are supposed to be working with. In workplace programs, we are being pushed into focusing too narrowly on a limited number of reading, writing, and math tasks when in fact instruction should be aiming at broader thinking, communication, and social skills which workers can use not only on the job but in their lives with their families and communities.

Enlightened business leaders -- including Delmar Redigar, who spoke last night -- don't see their employees merely as robots to be fine-tuned. And we as adult educators shouldn't fall into the trap of defining our role too narrowly just because we think that kind of talk will please funding sources. We need to learn how to negotiate with the business community without selling ourselves short. We need to be sure that we get the training, appropriate assessment systems, and other resources we need to do a good job.

Workers: And, finally, if we believe that workplace literacy partnerships should aim at building not only a more technically-efficient but also a more just and democratic society, then we need to remember the central role which workers themselves play in these efforts. We mustn't forget that the success of workplace literacy education in this country will be

largely up to the workers who will participate in the programs we create with them. If we leave them out of the process of putting together our educational partnerships, we will likely fail to take advantage of their considerable valuable knowledge and positive motivations.

Reports describing "the decline of the American workforce" suggest that the U.S. economy is burdened by a workforce which isn't up to the challenges of a new world economic order. One question which we should also be asking is: How ready are we in this room to take on the workforce education challenges now being presented to us? No doubt all of us will have to constantly upgrade our skills and strengthen our resources if we are to take advantage of the new opportunities ahead of us. One place those of us here today can start is by creating an open and honest dialogue with others in this room which will aim at defining where we go from here.

With that challenge, I turn you over to our speakers.