

# New Paradigms for a New Economy: Challenges for New Jersey Adult Educators

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## **The challenge**

Policy papers, news reports, journal articles, and our own experience tell us: the American workplace is changing. To become "high performance" organizations, workplaces are being challenged to upgrade technologies, create new decision-making procedures and invest in employee training and education to enable all employees to participate actively in the continuous improvement of the organization (New Jersey Council on Adult Education and Literacy, 1993).

There is now a wider recognition of the need for high-quality adult education services. We as a field must organize ourselves in ways which would enable us to provide them (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, 1990).

## **The good news**

The good news is that, emerging from workplaces, government, communities, and the adult education field are tools we can use to create adult education services which the economy – and society – now need.

## **From the workplace**

The "high performance" organizational model argues that, for companies to survive and compete and for workers to retain good wages and benefits, American workplaces need to restructure themselves. These innovations include a new focus on the customer and quality; decentralized, participatory decision-making mechanisms; upgrading of technology; constant improvement of employee knowledge and skills; and a willingness to communicate, learn from experience, and continuously improve how work is done.

"Total quality management" is an organizational philosophy which has guided companies trying to make the shift to high performance. Central to TQM is a planning process which pushes employees to continually answer these key questions:

1. Who are our "customers" (those we want to serve)?
2. What do they need?
3. How must we organize what we do (our work "processes") to enable us to meet those customer needs?
4. How will we monitor what we do, to ensure that we continually refine our objectives and improve operations to meet important goals?

To enable all employees to participate actively in these new ways of making decisions and in handling new technologies, employees should see and structure themselves as a "learning organization." In such a case, "learning" is not the traditional, top-down process of taking in information supplied by someone else. Rather, it is "creating and building the capacity to create that which you previously couldn't create."

In a "high performance," "learning" organization, workers work and learn in teams. Such team learning "starts with dialogue," the capacity of a member of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine "thinking together." "A learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how

they create their reality. And how they can change it." "In a learning organization, there is a special spirit of an enterprise made up of learners" (Senge, 1990).

#### ***From government***

Voters in New Jersey -- and across the nation -- have in recent years responded favorably to politicians' calls for "smaller government." Adult educators might interpret this apparent shift (note that relatively few Americans actually voted in recent elections) in national sentiment in two ways.

On one hand, we might -- with dismay -- see this as a rejection of the principles of equal opportunity and justice which have sustained us in a generally difficult line of work. Viewed another way, however, this apparent shift in national sentiment might be seen as a rejection of bureaucracy, an inefficient, top-down way of using resources. In other words, we might view the changing public mood as an opportunity to redesign our efforts to make them more efficient and targeted to real needs (Osborne and Gaebler, February 1993).

#### ***From the community***

American -- and New Jersey -- communities have been hit hard by a tidal wave of interconnected problems. Exporting of jobs, dwindling tax bases, crumbling infrastructures, and stagnant incomes; toxic waste, disease, and substance abuse; disintegrating families, undereducation, hopelessness, and anger are just a few. For these problems to be turned around, active, thinking, creative problem solvers are needed.

To help people develop the knowledge, skills, and hope they need to create better lives for themselves, new forms of adult education are being developed. This nonformal education occurs in many contexts within which community members live and work. Because it is embedded in community activities outside of formal education structures, it is often not even recognized as "education." It nonetheless provides community members with learning opportunities which are participatory in nature, helping community members collectively identify and solve problems. In the process they develop the knowledge and critical thinking skills

they need and solutions which their communities are hungry for.

These forms of problem-solving adult education have been developed within community-based organizations in this country and others for many years. They are a vital educational resource of which most from outside those contexts aren't aware (Harman and Hunter, 1985; Kindervatter, 1979).

#### ***From adult education***

Adult educators have borrowed the "collaborative," "problem-solving" concepts developed in workplaces and communities and combined them with practices developed in literacy and other disciplines. The result is new forms of basic education which are "participatory" in that they encourage the learner to take high levels of responsibility, control, and reward for the learning process.

In such programs, "literacy" is seen not so much as a tool for mastering information developed by others; rather, literacy is a medium through which learners can actively understand and shape their world. The learner is actively involved in defining learning objectives and developing strategies for applying his/her knowledge and skills to meeting those objectives. The learner develops basic skills not in the abstract but through practice applying them to real tasks of importance to the learner (Fingeret and Jurmo, 1989).

In workplace settings, innovative adult educators are structuring worker education programs as "learning teams." Participants and other stakeholders collaboratively set learning objectives which focus on enabling learners to develop the knowledge and competencies they need to be active participants in the creation of new, high-performance workplaces. Learners then develop skills through active, real learning projects such as developing action plans for solving workplace problems, or career enhancement (Jurmo, 1994).

#### **What these adult education resources have in common**

These ways of viewing adult learning and development have much in common. They assume:



- The learner is an active participant in the creation of knowledge rather than a passive recipient of someone else's knowledge.
- Learning is social in nature, with individuals pooling their knowledge and interests to learn from each other to change the contexts in which they live.
- Effective learning requires respect for the knowledge and skills of the others with whom one learns.

These "new paradigms" represent a shift from more familiar, "top-down" perspectives on social organization. In "top-down" (hierarchical) bureaucratic institutions, the individual is expected to follow prescribed directives determined by experts at the top. In the new organization (whether government, workplace, or community), the individual is to be an active, thinking participant.

#### **Creating a "high-performance" workforce readiness system in New Jersey**

Those involved in pre-employment and workplace education programs are now being asked to help adults prepare to work in the "high-performance" workplace. Ironically, in many ways we as providers of adult education services have not made the shift to that way of operating.

Some examples: Not much is invested in adult educators' training. We have little say in the policies that affect us. We haven't invested in technologies (e.g., electronic mail) which could help us communicate and work better. We generally don't have professional wages, benefits, or career paths. The goals set for our programs often don't reflect our customers' needs. And the tools we use for assessment and evaluation don't focus on whether client needs are being met; nor is the resulting information used to continuously improve our operations (New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, August 1994).

To help us resolve the dilemma of inadequate readiness in the face of increasing demand, we might apply some of the principles and practices of high-performance organizations and participatory education to the re-engineering of our own field. We might learn from the experience of other states (see the profiles of

Tennessee and Massachusetts in Appendix B) where adult educators have put collaborative planning mechanisms in place.

Closer to home, New Jersey's Workforce Investment Boards are being set up with the same kinds of collaborative principles and mechanisms in mind. WIBs are to be the vehicle for identifying needs and coordinating services at the local level. They are supposed to be part of a larger workforce readiness system which involves all stakeholders in responding to customer needs, using resources efficiently, and documenting results. In turn, this statewide system is to encourage the creation of high-performance workplaces across the state (New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission, December 1994; *Ibid.*, March 1992). Suggested below are some actions which might be taken at various levels of the system to ensure that it fulfills its mission.

#### ***At the state level***

The State Employment and Training Commission is establishing a central coordinating office, the Workforce Policy Committee. This Committee might emphasize the research-and-development nature of the state initiative. Rather than merely "throw money at" local projects without clearly defining how resources will be targeted to customer needs, the state initiative might set up local projects as testing grounds for particular concepts and methodologies. WIBs and individual pre-employment and workplace programs would be expected to use a systematic planning process to clarify objectives meaningful to learners and other stakeholders, and then map, implement, and evaluate activities to meet those objectives. The state initiative would then feed the resulting knowledge about what works (and what doesn't) back into funding guidelines and ongoing staff development opportunities.

In this system, the state-level coordinating office would be seen as an instrument of meeting local stakeholder needs, rather than the reverse. State-level guidelines would be based on ongoing study of developments in the field nationally and feedback from local sites. At all levels of the system, staff would be expected to adopt a "collaborative learning for continuous improvement" ethic.

The state office might consider establishing a learner advisory panel or similar mechanism for getting input from those the initiative is supposed to serve. Borrowing an idea from welfare reform, commission members might be paired with program participants, to get a clearer idea of the real-life interest of those who enter adult education programs.

***At the community level***

NJALL supports the SETC's effort to structure WIBs as true, collaborative learning organizations. As such, WIBs should go through a thorough process of re-thinking who local adult education providers should be serving, what those clients really need to achieve, and how best to structure and coordinate services.

The new WIBs now have a chance to avoid the too-familiar tendency of setting up mini-bureaucracies whose primary function is to channel public funding into "programs," regardless of the relevance of those programs. In such cases, taxpayer money is not well spent and the good will and efforts of instructors and clients are wasted.

Transforming the WIBs into "high-performance learning organizations" will require some extra work. To give this concept a chance to succeed, the state initiative might fund pilot projects in a few select WIBs. These WIBs might – with the help of a special technical assistance team – field-test collaborative decision-making procedures which can then be adapted by other Boards.

WIBs should develop mechanisms for involving adult learners in the planning process. WIBs might, for example, set aside a number of seats on the Board for adult learners. Or Board members might be paired with adult learner "buddies" participating on a learner advisory panel serving the Board. Such learner involvement can serve as a reality check for Board members who might otherwise have limited understanding of the realities of adult education student lives.

***At the program level***

These collaborative planning concepts can also be incorporated into day-to-day operations at the program level:

Education planning teams: Pre-employment and workplace education programs can be managed by "education planning teams" composed of representatives of key stakeholder groups: learners, managers, supervisors, union representatives, and education providers. These teams would go through a collaborative process of analyzing needs, developing goals and strategies, and monitoring progress. In so doing, the teams would (1) ensure high-quality education services targeted to real needs, (2) build buy-in and support for the program by stakeholders who might otherwise not feel ownership, and (3) give stakeholders practice in collaborative decision-making procedures which they can apply to their organizational development initiatives.

Within the classroom: Rather than structure classrooms in a traditional, top-down academic mode, learning activities can be structured as opportunities for collaborative learning. The classroom would mimic the decision-making and learning situations learners face in their jobs and other contexts. Learners could develop transferable knowledge and competencies by participating in problem-solving and action-planning projects. They would thereby become independent learners, thinkers, and problem solvers, able to take on tasks they face in their lives on and off the job.

**What these changes will require**

NJALL applauds the SETC's efforts to date, and we look forward to being active participants in the creation of a new, collaborative way of "doing business."

We recognize, however, that change doesn't always come easy, and those interested in moving in this direction should be aware of what we will need to have in place to succeed. These changes will require:

**Time:** We will have to find time to learn, to think, to re-do what we now do, and to create something new. Real change requires commitment and perseverance.

**Expertise:** We need to re-think what we already know and can do, analyze what we need to create a new system, and take on the challenge of educating ourselves. If we are supposed to be in the business of enabling



others to be lifelong learners, we need to do the same ourselves. Such self-education will require commitment of resources not only to training, technical assistance, and ongoing communication, but the creation of adequate salaries and benefits to attract and keep those willing to do this work.

**A new, positive attitude:** We need to have "an attitude." This attitude is made up of respect for ourselves and for what we and others we will be working with already know, a willingness to create new relationships with others, a willingness to stand up for what we feel is right, and a willingness to take some risks and "stretch" ourselves to do and be something different.

As adult educators, we are now asking learners, employers, unions, and policy makers to make these investments of time, expertise, and attitude. Such investments will be necessary if we are to create a new way of thinking about and organizing adult education efforts.

As stakeholders in this system, we should also practice what we preach and make the same kind of investment ourselves.

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APPENDIX A

Adult Education and Workforce Readiness:  
Reports from New Jersey

*From 1990 through 1994, a number of major reports were issued calling for a "new and improved" adult education system in New Jersey. Those mapping out strategies for a new workforce readiness system in 1995 might take the time to refresh their memories about what has already been written on this subject. Here are the synopses of five reports:*

**Help Wanted: A Competent Workforce for the 21st Century**

Published in 1990 by the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning, this policy paper describes changes in the state economy and the implications for undereducated adults. The adult education delivery system is seen as lacking coordination, with many adults "falling through the cracks" and/or going through redundant and time-consuming assessment and application procedures.

NJALL recommended creation of an effective, integrated, and "user-friendly" adult literacy and job-training system which meets the needs of the economy and individuals. The paper asked that the Governor appoint an adult literacy and job training task force composed of key stakeholders in adult education, business, labor, human services, and transportation.

**A Unified State Plan for New Jersey's Workforce Readiness System**

In March 1992, the State Employment and Training Commission presented a plan for a new workforce readiness system in New Jersey. This plan was in response to the perceived shortage of skilled workers cited in NJALL's "Help Wanted" paper. The proposed system was to coordinate all institutions involved in job-related research, education, training, and placement.

The plan was guided by four principles:

- \* services must be consumer-driven.
- \* services should be continuously improved through ongoing evaluation.
- \* basic skills are the foundation of workforce readiness.
- \* the potential of all workers should be developed.

This plan attempts to provide services which respond efficiently to both the lifelong learning needs of individuals and the human resource needs of employers. It moves away from the more familiar view of lifelong learning as a series of encounters with unrelated programs. It instead connects individuals, educational institutions, workplaces, and human services in a more holistic system which stresses collaboration among all stakeholders.

The plan presents strategies for carrying out the four guidelines. At the local level, Workforce investment Boards are to identify labor market needs and oversee appropriate coordinated services. At the state level, a Workforce Policy Committee composed of the Commissioners of Labor and Education, the SETC Executive Director, and a Governor appointee will review local WIB plans and coordinate activities with other relevant state agencies (Commerce and Economic Development, Human Services).

**National Adult Literacy Survey**

Issued in 1993, this report summarized the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), a project funded by the U. S. Department of Education and administered by the Princeton-based Educational Testing Service. NALS used an expanded definition of literacy to survey over 26,000 adults to identify their demographic and educational backgrounds, literacy practices, and abilities vis-a-vis three common types of literacy: prose, document, and quantitative literacy.

For a national adult population of 191 million, the survey found:

- \* 21 to 23 percent (40 to 44 million) of US adults have the lowest level of skills, unable, for example, to total entries on a deposit slip.
- \* 25 to 28 percent (or 50 million) of US adults are at the next level of proficiency, considered to be of marginal competence.
- \* 60 percent of these nearly 100 million inadequately-skilled adults lack full-time employment, and nearly 50 percent of them are at the poverty level.



New Jersey was one of twelve states which participated in state-level use of the NALS instruments. The resulting study (SALS) indicated that 1.2 to 1.4 million New Jerseyans scored at the lowest literacy level and an additional 2.5 to 3 million were at level 2. As in the national survey, low literacy skills were closely linked to low income and limited employment opportunities.

NALS portrayed literacy as a kind of social "currency" which allows individuals to advance in jobs, make informed choices as consumers, and participate as citizens. A nation with large numbers of citizens lacking such "currency" will be blocked from meeting its social, economic, and civic goals.

#### **Adult literacy in New Jersey: Meeting the Challenge of the 21st Century**

In 1992, Governor Florio created the New Jersey Council on Adult Education and Literacy. Made up of representatives of education, social services, business, labor, and government, this independent, non-partisan, oversight body was to ensure that all New Jerseyans attained the fullest possible level of literacy.

The Council issued a report in fall of 1993 which attempted to raise public awareness about literacy's role in families, workplaces, and communities. The report also recommended improvements in the state's adult education system:

Family literacy: Promote the family as educator and involve the schools and the public in family literacy efforts.

Workplace literacy: See the new, "high -performance" workplace as an educational arena and not just a place to "earn a living." Significantly increase the number of workplace education programs.

Adult education delivery system: Recognize the current limitations of the system, including underfunding and fragmentation. Improve coordination among public and private-sector adult education providers; increase funding for non-profit literacy agencies; and target adults with special needs, older adults, and non-English speakers.

This report was to be a catalyst for revitalization and systemic change of adult education in the state.

#### **Adult Literacy Education in New Jersey: An Agenda for Action**

In this 1994 paper, the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning identified several persistent problems in the state adult education system along with steps for solving those problems:

- \* To overcome the lack of resources for literacy education, legislators and others should become advocates for adult education and new funding sources should be identified.
- \* Existing funding streams should be pooled to create a holistic, coordinated system which meets learners' multiple needs.
- \* Legislators should pass a comprehensive adult education and literacy act to (1) enable programs to provide comprehensive services, (2) expand resources as the system expands, (3) respond to the large numbers of low-skilled adults, (4) speed up the funding process to enable programs to provide timely services, (5) provide high-quality staff development opportunities for adult educators, (6) increase the supply of full-time professional staff, (7) develop appropriate forms of technology for learners and practitioners, and (8) improve support services for learners.
- \* Duplication of services, waiting lists, inappropriate assessment, and lack of support services block learner participation and should be eliminated. One-stop, comprehensive adult centers are one means of doing so.
- \* Special recognition should be given to programs which demonstrate effective stakeholder collaboration.
- \* To maximize efficiency, procedures for applying for funds, accounting, accountability, and assessment should be streamlined.



**APPENDIX B**  
**What other states are doing**

The National Institute for Literacy has sponsored a project in five states in which stakeholders from the literacy community are redefining outcomes, measures, and procedures for adult basic education efforts. In Tennessee, stakeholders are going through a modified TQM process at both the state level and in selected counties. This is done via task forces composed of representatives from agencies providing adult education and employment-related services. These stakeholders are rethinking who their customers are, what learners want to achieve when they walk into an adult education center, and how the various agencies might reorganize what they do to help clients meet their needs. In these task forces, learners play active roles in defining the outcomes they hope to achieve.

This process is pushing the Tennessee adult education community to define success as helping the participant "get a job," "get my commercial driver's license," or "get involved in my daughter's school" rather than "advancing a grade level." This process is also getting stockholders who otherwise rarely cross paths to rethink how they might communicate and cooperate to more efficiently use resources.

A half-dozen years ago, in Massachusetts, several state agencies concerned with the readiness of the state's workforce established the Massachusetts Workplace Education initiative. The MWEI has since then funded workplace education programs in three-year cycles, assuming that a workplace program would devote its first year to "getting started," the second to refining itself, and the third to transitioning to local (employer and/or union) funding.

MWEI initially relied on Private Industry Councils as its local funding agents, but found that PICs often didn't know much about what was then a new concept: workplace education. To ensure real investment by local stakeholders, MWEI promoted the concept of education planning teams composed of key stakeholders at each site. These site-level teams are given guidelines, funding and technical assistance to help them effectively plan and oversee their respective education programs.

MWEI has consistently emphasized evaluation as a way of learning from the project sites. Evaluation, though, is seen as a responsibility of each site-level planning team, and teams are helped to clarify objectives and develop ways of monitoring and fine-tuning program operations. Stakeholders are thereby expected and enabled to pay active attention to the programs they are getting state money for. The findings of these evaluations have been plowed back into the initiative's funding guidelines and into the staff development system, which provide training and technical support to workplace educators.