

***Adult Education's Role
in
New Jersey's Workforce Development System***

A Report

of the

***April 22, 1999 Pre-Conference Symposium
Hosted by
the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning***

**with Financial Support from
The New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission
and
the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development
at Rutgers University**

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Introduction

How and Why the Symposium Was Organized

On April 22, 1999, sixty adult educators, workforce development specialists, and state-level policy makers met at the National Conference Center at the Ramada Inn in East Windsor, New Jersey. They were there to discuss the question of what role adult education should play in the state's emerging workforce development system. This Symposium was organized by the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning (NJALL), with financial assistance from the State Employment and Training Commission and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University.

NJALL organized this event in response to concerns expressed by many providers of adult education services (including basic literacy, English for speakers of other languages, and GED preparation) in the state. These adult education professionals have for a number of years stated that, while federal and state policy is pushing them to focus their services more directly on preparing people for jobs and to work in collaborative partnerships with other agencies, adult educators are often not given the guidelines, training, flexibility, or other supports they need to transition into this job-oriented, collaborative mode. This Symposium was designed to allow adult educators and others to discuss the potential and problems of work-oriented adult education and to map out actions which could enable adult educators to participate more effectively in creating new, integrated systems for adult learning and workforce development.

This report presents key statements made by Symposium participants. It was written by NJALL board member, Paul Jurmo, executive director of the nonprofit organization, Learning Partnerships, with input from other board members. A more-detailed summary of session discussions is available from the author.

Actions which Are Resulting from the Symposium

As 1999 comes to a close, NJALL is pleased that, in the six months following the Symposium, many of the day's recommendations were being adopted by state policy makers. (The reader can find the day's key recommendations on pages 5 and 6, where post-Symposium actions are noted in parentheses in the text.) In particular, nominations for the newly-created State Council for Adult Education and Literacy are now being solicited, and the State Department of Education is seeking candidates for the newly-created, full-time position of director of adult education.

NJALL will circulate this report to adult educators, policy makers, and others interested in building effective workforce development systems in New Jersey. NJALL looks forward to working with these stakeholders at the state and local levels, to facilitate further discussion and action related to the recommendations outlined here. Our aim is to ensure that New Jersey adults get the educational opportunities they need to be active participants in their workplaces, families, and communities.

Special Thanks

For their funding for this event, NJALL thanks the State Employment and Training Commission and the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development at Rutgers University. We also thank the conference presenters (Carmy Acciola, Debby D'Amico, Paul Jurmo, Fran Tracy Mumford, Carolyn Timmons, Hal Beder, Howard Cooper, and Enrico Prata) and the NJALL members who served as discussion facilitators (Hal Beder, Nancy Fisher, Marilyn Medican, Josette Peterson, Enrico Prata, and Barry Semple) and organized the event.

Discussion and Recommendations

The Big Picture: Adult Education's Changing Role in Workforce Development

In the opening session, participants listened to specialists in national and state-level policy (Debby D'Amico, Consultant, Teaneck; Paul Jurmo, Learning Partnerships, East Brunswick; Fran Tracy Mumford, State Adult Education Director, Delaware; Carolyn Timmons, John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development; and Hal Beder, Rutgers University), who made the following points about the role of adult education in the new workforce development initiatives emerging at the local, state, and federal levels:

- Historically, adult education and job-related services have not been sufficiently effective in helping employed and unemployed adults succeed in the world of work. These services have too often been fragmented, not focused on relevant skills and jobs, not used effective instructional methods, and relied on under-prepared and under-supported staff.
- The federal Workforce Investment Act (WIA) is driving adult educators, workforce development specialists, and others to re-think how services are planned and delivered. States and communities are supposed to be creating more-efficient, better-targeted systems for work-related learning, job placement, and related services.
- While the WIA has set some guidelines for what should be happening within states, the Act also allows state- and local-level decision-makers a fair amount of flexibility and creativity in how they interpret and implement the Act.
- Adult education has to play an important role in workforce development because so many of the adults and out-of-school youth to be served are limited in their English-language basic skills. Work-related adult education has shown its potential for helping employed and under-employed adults play productive and rewarding roles in the workforce, but this requires an infrastructure of good planning, collaboration, use of good practice, and well-supported professional staff.

Feedback from New Jersey's Northern, Central, and Southern Regions

Symposium participants then worked in groups representing the northern, central, and southern parts of the state. They also heard presentations by Howard Cooper (Middlesex County) and Enrico Prata (Essex County) service providers who had had some success in involving adult education in Workforce Investment Board (WIB) planning.

These discussions analyzed (1) how work-related adult learning services are already being delivered in the state; (2) factors that are blocking the delivery of high-quality adult education services which meet the requirements of new state and federal policy; and (3) actions which should be taken to create a more-effective, integrated system of adult education and workforce development.

These discussions are consistent with the experience and guidelines emerging from other states, summarized above. Here are key points raised by the New Jersey participants:

1. How work-related adult learning services are already being delivered in the state:

New Jersey adult educators are working with other service providers, employers, and unions to provide work-related learning opportunities . . .

. . . in a variety of settings (including community colleges, faith-based organizations, workplaces, community organizations, correctional facilities, and adult evening high schools);

. . . for many different types of learners who want to improve their employment prospects. These include various ethnic and linguistic groups; workers from many industries and job classifications (e.g., healthcare, retail, manufacturing, hospitality, landscaping); and young people through senior citizens;

. . . for both unemployed and employed people (The large majority of those who can benefit from adult basic education services are already employed. And those newly hired off the welfare rolls often need intense on-the-job education to ensure they retain their new jobs, succeed in them, and are prepared for better ones.)

. . . with funding from a several sources (including the State Departments of Labor, Human Services, and Education, as well as employer training funds and fees paid by learners);

. . . encompassing a wide range of academic and occupational skills from adult literacy to the fifth grade level, adult basic education (grades 6 to 8), English for speakers of other languages, GED preparation, and beginning to advanced levels of occupational training;

. . . in response to demands for new types of skills and knowledge resulting from new technologies, increased safety requirements, and other changing conditions;

. . . in collaboration with other agencies and employers which provide related services like job coaching, technical training, job placement, transportation, and childcare.

2. Efforts to create a more unified, effective system which integrates adult basic education and other work-related services are blocked by these obstacles:

a. Factors within the control of service providers and their funders:

-- Many stakeholder simply don't understand how inadequate basic skills is an obstacle to workforce development. They therefore don't make adult basic education a priority.

-- There is currently no single "place" which provides work-related adult education. There is too often a "silo" mindset, with programs operating in isolation from each

other. This is a holdover from traditional funding streams, which have driven WIB members to compete for the limited funding available, rather than find ways to collaborate and pool resources.

-- Employers see few incentives for getting involved in workforce development planning. (Why go to endless meetings which don't produce anything?) At the same time, some employers too frequently have a "something for nothing" mentality, looking for free services for their employees without being willing to invest anything themselves. (Employer involvement has to be "authentic," not superficial.)

-- It is hard to get the right people at the decision-making table. (Adult educators often feel excluded. In some areas, there are few businesses for WIBs to work with.)

-- There is a lack of standardization/guidelines from the state level to show how a WIB can effectively involve adult educators.

-- Inadequate resources mean limited staff are available over time to build effective community systems and provide labor-intensive programs.

-- Policy makers, funders, employers, and other decision makers sometimes have unrealistic expectations for programs, given the amount of funding available.

-- Too little attention has been given to assessing the special needs of particular populations (e.g., an older worker who has lost his/her job but who has significant work years ahead might need new job skills and might have other special needs like health problems or the need to care for elderly parents).

b. Factors in the larger economic and social context:

-- There are limited good jobs available for successful learners, thus reducing their motivation. Or, where decent jobs exist, workers can't get to them, due to lack of transportation or the need to care for young children.

3. To build a more effective system for work-related learning will require local- and state-level stakeholders to develop new ways of (a) defining the problems to be solved and (b) working together to plan, provide, and coordinate services. These innovations should include:

-- New ways to actively involve adult educators in planning, coordination, and monitoring of services. A well-organized planning process will allow those with real commitment, a cooperative mentality, and expertise to emerge. Options include adult literacy committees on each WIB and RFPs which require adult educators and other agencies to jointly submit proposals.

-- A comprehensive community needs assessment which shows (a) who the clients for adult basic skills services are, (b) what resources/services currently exist, and (c) recommendations for improving the existing system. The resulting information can be

made available in directories, databases, and other formats, to enable stakeholders to know where relevant services are available.

-- All stakeholders having a better understanding of the philosophical differences and “alignment” of the various institutions involved.

-- A commitment to creating new, more effective, integrated systems, by eliminating obstacles, strengthening links between various stakeholder, and otherwise taking the kinds of steps outlined here.

-- Incorporating work-related basic skills services into established curricula being used in various institutions (e.g., technical trainers need to know how to gear instruction to learners with limited basic skills or English-language abilities).

-- Providing employers with customized services geared to the particular needs of employees lacking basic skills. (For example, what are the particular learning needs of limited-English-proficient electronics assemblers or nursing assistants?)

-- A recognition that improving learners’ self-esteem and interest in learning (via peer mentors, support groups, etc.) is often necessary before learners will be able to benefit from basic education or technical training.

-- A recognition that “basic skills” now includes social (“soft”) skills (e.g., teamwork, conflict resolution) and “work ethic” rather than just the traditional “3Rs.”

-- Provision of a number of types of services for a learner at the same time and/or in a logical sequence, to enable the learner to move up through the system to higher levels of readiness and employment.

-- Provision of services at times and locations convenient to learners.

-- Involving learners and other stakeholders in setting relevant goals and giving feedback to clarify what results are occurring (e.g., increased job placements/employability, reduced welfare dependency) rather than relying on traditional (and largely irrelevant) academic goals and measures.

-- Persistence by all involved (including service providers, employers, and learners) to ensure that learners get in enough practice time to master what is being taught.

-- Well-supported opportunities (e.g., training, mentoring, resource materials) for program and staff development. (These opportunities can use federal staff development funds.)

Recommendations for State-Level Action

Working first in their regional groups and then in a plenary session, participants concluded the day by developing a set of recommendations for state-level decision-makers. By taking these actions, state-level policy makers and funders can enable local-level stakeholders to build the kinds of integrated workforce development systems outlined above.

State-level policy makers should:

- 1. Appoint a full-time state director with staff. New Jersey is one of the few states without a full-time state director. State-level leadership is vital for the collaborative planning and programming now required at state and local levels. (Note: As of October 1999, such a position had been created and applications were being reviewed.)*
- 2. Establish a State Council as soon as possible. The Governor has recently signed into law the creation of a representative State Council for Adult Education and Literacy. The appointments should be made as soon as possible to permit their input on such important issues as the state plan and performance standards, evaluation methodologies, funding criteria, and the role of the WIBs in the overall process. (Note: As of October 1999, nominations for the Council are being solicited.) The Council should solicit local-level input via a survey of WIBs to determine the status and needs of their literacy committees.*
- 3. Encourage WIBs to involve key stakeholders -- including adult educators and adult learners -- in the planning process. The State Council should provide guidelines which show each stakeholder group how to be effectively involved at the local level. Stakeholders should help to establish meaningful goals and performance standards, monitor progress via program evaluation, and allocate funding based on performance.*
- 4. Establish and publish a timeline for development and implementation of the five year plan required by WIA. This plan should be based on a careful assessment of the often-complex needs of the populations to be served and of the agencies, employers, and unions involved in the system. Services must focus on helping learners secure and succeed in good jobs while also ensuring (through family literacy activities) that their children are well-equipped for the future. There must be a commitment to quality to ensure that services effectively address those needs. Local-level WIB plans need to be consistent with and tied into the state-level plan. A state plan will be submitted to Washington in late 1999 and will be updated each year.*
- 5. Use federal adult education funds to support adult education, not for other purposes. This includes paying for adequate staff at the state level and allocating funding (i.e., federal discretionary money) for capacity building at the WIB level. The state plan should also enable adult educators to get access to other funding streams which historically have been inaccessible to them.*
- 6. Develop a comprehensive staff development system. The State Council should have a clear mandate and authority to ensure that there is an infrastructure of well-equipped professionals to do this work. This might include credentialing for adult education professionals and cross-training across such disciplines as adult basic education,*

vocational training, and job development. New ways of approaching work-related adult learning should be developed through special research and development projects.

7. See all of this as a means to building a comprehensive system of lifelong learning, which allows all in need of work-related services (both employed and unemployed, low-skilled and higher-skilled) to move up a ladder of educational and job-related opportunities.

Participants agreed that NJALL and other advocates for lifelong learning and workforce development should follow up to see that actions are taken on these recommendations. This includes educating legislators about the need to support good adult education policy.