

What Labor Educators Can Do to Strengthen the Basic Skills of Our Workforce

A “Can-Do” Guide of
The Open Door Collective
www.opendoorcollective.org

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Edition

Why workforce basic skills are important



To participate effectively in U.S. workplaces, workers need to be equipped with a range of basic skills, technical knowledge and skills, positive attitudes, credentials, and a system of social and practical supports.

Twenty-first century “basic skills” are much more than the ability to read and write simple text and understand and use numbers. Increasingly, attaining, performing, and advancing in jobs now require the ability to find and interpret complicated written information; to listen to, interpret, and convey oral information correctly; to communicate written information digitally and in hard copy; and to think critically, solve problems, and work in teams (often with co-workers from diverse backgrounds). Many jobs also require particular math skills, to manage quantitative information and use it to make decisions.

Workers need such skills to not only perform their job responsibilities but to carry out other tasks upon which their well-being and that of their families depend. For example, workers need basic skills to manage their wages and benefits; understand and pursue training and promotion opportunities; understand and protect their rights as workers; maintain their health and safety on the job; and transition into a new career or retirement. Outside the workplace, workers need basic skills to manage everyday, personal and family responsibilities (e.g., transportation, healthcare, financial management, housing, security, childcare, eldercare) if they are to be able to get to work regularly, on time, and able to focus on work. *Continued . . .*

This guide encourages representatives of organized labor (i.e., unions and labor studies programs) to consider why and how they might partner with adult basic skills efforts for the well-being of workers and their families and communities. ODC welcomes feedback at www.opendoorcollective.org.

In 2002, Transport Workers Union Local 100 and the Metropolitan Transit Authority created a \$10 million jointly-operated program for 35,000 subway and bus workers in NY City. It was based on a union study of training needs emerging as the transit system was modernized. TWU's education team quickly planned and implemented a series of educational activities focused on skills that members needed to qualify for emerging jobs and manage increasingly sophisticated technologies.

Activities included a series of test-preparation courses to help members succeed on the Civil Services Exams required for new jobs. Workers learned how to quickly and efficiently read and respond to test questions. In another course, workers upgraded the technical math skills required to move into college courses that prepared participants for higher-paying positions as electronics-repair technicians.

Carefully-selected course facilitators used participatory teaching methods to make the classes relevant and engaging, with learners sharing strategies, supporting each other, and building self-confidence.

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It is clear that employers rely heavily on having a well-equipped workforce. In addition, the well-being of workers, their families, their communities, and the economy as a whole is also intertwined with workers' abilities to apply basic skills to the many tasks required to attain, retain, succeed in, and advance in employment. Labor unions have long recognized the vital importance of worker basic skills for employers, workers, and their communities.

Gaps in worker basic skills and basic skills development

As the demands of U.S. jobs have changed, too often the U.S. workforce has not kept up with those demands.

Employers often say they can't find workers with the basic written and oral language skills and/or math skills, basic technical skills (e.g., understanding of how to use tools), background knowledge about the technical and social

requirements of jobs, technical credentials, and positive attitudes (e.g., persistence, motivation) that jobs require. "Give us job candidates with those basic skills and positive attitudes and we'll train and support them to be able to do the job" is what employers are asking for.

But, for a number of reasons, many potential workers – and current workers – do not possess those qualities.

Contributing factors include primary and secondary schooling that doesn't teach the right types of skills and knowledge, significant percentages of youth who don't graduate from secondary school, immigration from countries where English is not the first language, or various kinds of disabilities.

Complicating this problem is the fact that many otherwise-qualified workers are blocked from getting a job or persisting in it due to discriminatory hiring practices, criminal records that reduce their employability, or a lack of the supports workers commonly need to be able to hold a job (e.g., healthcare, transportation, childcare, or – increasingly – eldercare for aging family members). *Continued . . .* 2

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Other factors include internal migration patterns (i.e., movement of populations from rural to metropolitan areas) that have reduced the availability of qualified workers in remote areas; and the significant numbers of jobs that don't provide adequate wages, benefits, and other incentives to attract better-skilled workers.

Amid these considerable challenges, the good news is that many potential and currently-employed workers have recognized that they need to upgrade their job-related skills. They take advantage of relevant education provided in their communities, at their workplaces, or through their labor unions.

However, many other potential and current workers do not do so, due to a number of factors, including: a lack of adult basic education programs in their communities and/or workplaces, learners' prior negative experience trying to upgrade their skills, a lack of transportation or childcare that would allow potential students to participate and persist, scheduling conflicts with family or work responsibilities, a lack of

"The labor movement did not diminish the strength of the nation but enlarged it. By raising the living standards of millions, labor miraculously created a market for industry and lifted the whole nation to undreamed of levels of production. Those who attack labor forget these simple truths, but history remembers them."

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., speech to AFL-CIO, 1961

self-confidence that "I can do it!" or a simple lack of awareness about the potential benefits of participation and how to go about enrolling.

Another major challenge is the fact that some adult education programs aren't always ready and able – and funded -- to provide the particular kinds of work-related basic education that potential learners need for the many types of job tasks they currently or hope to perform. Creating such customized learning takes time, expertise, and staffing that programs might not have, especially if they have not been provided with necessary funding, professional development, and access to relevant curricula.

In addition, many adult education programs have long waiting lists – especially for English language classes – or might not provide services at the times that working adults are available.

While significant models of well-designed and -supported work-related basic skills programs have been created – many by labor unions (on their own or in collaboration with employers and other stakeholders) -- there are many factors that can make or break adult learners' ability to enroll and persist in basic skills programs that meet their particular needs.

In the early 1990s, organized labor played leading roles in workplace literacy programs operated through the National Workplace Literacy Program of the U.S.

Department of Education.

In one example, the United Auto Workers and General

Motors partnered to

implement a customized

math course at a Delphi plant in Rochester, NY.

Assembly workers learned how to monitor product

quality using a new

Statistical Process Control system.

What labor unions can do

Labor unions have a direct interest in and long history of helping their members strengthen the basic skills and technical skills and knowledge they need for their current jobs and to qualify for future employment opportunities.

Unions also help members prepare for occupational exams, enroll in post-secondary education, understand their rights and responsibilities as workers, manage their salaries and benefits, maintain their health, and prepare for job loss and retirement. Many unions support adult education and related services for community members in recognition

that some of those community residents might eventually become union members. Support for community improvement efforts is also a practical, positive way to raise the visibility of organized labor and increase community support for unions and workers.

We know that many union leaders and staff are already engaged in creating basic skills development resources for their members and for the current and future workforce more generally. Well-designed and – supported basic skills systems have great potential benefits for workers and unions, for forward-thinking employers, and for the communities that

depend on them. Unions often have know-how and in-kind and financial resources that they can contribute in partnerships with other community stakeholders.

As representatives of organized labor, please consider what you are already doing, what you might do, and what you might help others do in the following areas:

Phase I: Initial planning

Develop your background knowledge – and share what you know -- about why and how unions and employers have involved themselves in efforts to strengthen workforce basic skills in their union, their community, their city, or their state.

Nationwide, for several decades, significant good work has been done to develop effective models of work-related basic skills education. These have been customized to the particular skills needs of various industries and worker populations. These efforts can be learned from and built

“Every advance in this half-century -- Social Security, civil rights, Medicare, aid to education, one after another -- came with the support and leadership of American Labor. You have represented all the people, not just your members. You have been the voice of forgotten people everywhere.”

JIMMY CARTER, *Daily Labor Report*, 1980

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on. We urge you as labor union representatives to assign one or more staff members to read relevant reports and talk with union members and other stakeholders (including employers) to clarify how you might get involved in a meaningful way in this issue within your union and/or in your community. (See “For More Information” at end of this guide.)

You might then talk further with resource persons at your state or community level, to clarify more specifically what basic skills supports are currently available, where the gaps are, and how you might work with existing organizations to carry out one or more of the activities described below.

Consider why you might get involved in the issue of employee basic skills.

a. Do you want to strengthen the skills of your current union membership?

Or are you concerned about the skills of potential future members? Or both?

b. Are you more generally concerned about the employability and efficiency of the workforce in your community? Are you worried about high unemployment?

Are you concerned about more-specific related conditions such as the quality and availability of education and workforce development services, how taxes are invested, and public safety? (Unions understand that a problem-plagued community is less likely to retain qualified workers, employers, and jobs.)

c. Do you want to get involved in a community issue because you want your union to be seen as a positive, responsible leader in and contributor to community improvement?

d. Or are you motivated by some combination of a., b., and c.?

Phase II: Getting involved in one or more ways

With your initial planning in mind, you might now get involved in one or more of the following ways:

1. Support basic skills development in your community.

Your community might already have a number of programs that are, in some way, providing basic skills-related supports to community members and possibly to local employers and union members.

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BEST Hospitality Training (in Boston, MA) is a collaboration between UNITE HERE Local 26 and hotel employers. It offers training for incumbent workers and job candidates in English language learning, citizenship, ServeSAFE, and computer skills. In 2015, BEST became a U.S. Department of Labor-registered housekeeping pre-apprenticeship program.

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These programs might be based in community colleges, public school adult education classes, community-based non-profits, volunteer adult literacy programs, prisoner re-entry agencies, or other organizations. Often, these service providers communicate and collaborate in a formal or informal network, possibly tied to a workforce investment board or

On the day after the September 11th attacks in New York City in 2001, the Consortium for Worker Education (a citywide coalition of over 30 labor unions) began pulling together a worker education and job placement program for thousands of workers whose jobs disappeared after the destruction and closing down of Lower Manhattan.

In subsequent months, former workers in hospitality, garment, and other industries came to the CWE's mid-town office to get job search assistance and training in job-interviewing, resume-writing, and computer skills and in English as a Second Language.

similar umbrella agency. Unions might work with these existing programs and networks by:

- Providing in-kind assistance (e.g., help with fund-raising, volunteer helpers, meeting space, equipment and supplies, publicity . . .)
- Providing financial assistance targeted to particular projects or general operations;
- Referring union members and their family members to the programs.

2. Support basic skills development for members of your union.

If you believe that some of your current members might benefit from the upgrading of one or more of their basic skills, consider working with an education service provider to set up a basic skills support system for those workers.

While experience has shown that such a program can have significant benefits for both the participating workers and the union as a whole, it needs to be set up in a

respectful, efficient way. It can be tied in with the union's other advancement and training efforts, designed to enhance both the productivity, safety, and health of employees; their ability to retain and advance in jobs and move into new jobs requiring new kinds of skills; and their personal growth and well-being.

It is important to learn from past experience. There are a number of guides available (e.g., on www.opendoorcollective.org) that describe steps that unions and employers can take to form an education planning team (typically with the help of an outside education provider experienced in workplace education). Education partners can help clarify the basic skills needs of the union, partner employers, and individual workers; decide strategies for responding to those needs; recruit participants; and evaluate and support the program.

In some cases, your members might be referred to one or more local education providers for specific kinds of basic skills

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assistance (e.g., classes or tutoring in English, job-related writing or math). In other cases, you might set up in-house classes or individualized tutoring sessions run by outside basic skills instructors who might co-plan and co-teach with an in-house technical expert. These activities might be run jointly with one or more employers or as stand-alone union education services.

While this program is underway, union representatives, supervisors, and co-workers of the program participants might be shown how they can support the success of the program participants when they are on the job. For example, if the education program is helping workers improve the English-language skills they need to communicate on the job, English-speaking union members, supervisors, and co-workers can be shown how to take the time to speak clearly and helpfully to the English-language-learners on the job, to help them practice their English skills in authentic ways.

Union and workplace meetings and other communications can likewise be structured to use clearly-written, plain-language

documents and clear oral language, to ensure that all members of the union and company workforce can contribute to and benefit from those communications.

Your union might also advocate that employers provide various kinds of incentives – in the forms of release time, recognition, certificates, promotional opportunities, and bonuses and salary increases – to program participants who meet certain objectives.

And, as with any improvement initiative, your union education officials should monitor the education program, make continuous improvements as needed, and use the lessons learned in the education program to inform whether and how to continue to support members who might need to strengthen their basic skills.

“Students must have initiative; they should not be mere imitators. They must learn to think and act for themselves – and to be free.”

CESAR CHAVEZ

3. Plan and advocate for educational opportunities for out-of-school youth and adults.

Unions are looked to as a source of jobs and stability for communities. They can thus play very important roles as advocates for worker basic skills development. As union representatives, you can do so by:

- Participating in local- and state-level workforce development boards and speaking on behalf of strengthening educational opportunities for current and potential workers. Come prepared to not only describe the problem of limited basic skills but to recommend specific actions (e.g., improved coordination of services, increased investments) that various stakeholders can take.

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- Advocating for this issue when communicating with other stakeholders, including:
 - other labor unions (e.g., in labor councils and union publications),
 - public policy makers, and/or
 - employers (e.g., when writing contracts).
- Supporting adult education advocacy efforts through in-kind assistance (e.g., lending union communication staff to develop web sites or to develop web sites or videos, providing facilities and/or refreshments for meetings and conferences, underwriting telephone or printing costs) and financial assistance.
- Supporting the development of adult educators' and adult learners' leadership skills by, for example:
 - providing "scholarships" for adult educators or students to attend conferences;
 - supporting "leader fellowships" in which advocates do research, prepare resources, or otherwise develop leadership expertise and tools others can use.
- Participating in the planning and piloting of new basic skills systems for:
 - various worker sub-populations (e.g., individuals lacking high school diplomas, immigrants, older workers shifting to different jobs, people with criminal records, individuals with disabilities);
 - workers who need to perform particular types of basic skills-related tasks (e.g., clear language for customer service, use of data to make decisions, passing technical or college entrance exams);
 - career pathways for particular industries (e.g., home health care, retail, transportation/logistics, "green" jobs, construction, hospitality, waste management, agriculture, manufacturing).

The University of Massachusetts/Dartmouth Labor Education Center operates the Workers' Education Program (WEP). Begun in 1986 to bring English classes to garment workers in their factories, WEP has grown in the populations served, services provided, partnerships created, industries reached, and funding received. Classes in English for Speakers of Other Languages, citizenship preparation, and preparation for the GED exam have been offered in factories, union halls, and community centers in nearby cities. Unions are shown how to help graduates move into rewarding jobs and help employers establish classes in their workplaces.

At UMass/Amherst, the Labor/Management Workplace Education Program is a partnership of the University and unions representing university workers and faculty. The 30-year-old program offers instruction (in English, communications, computers, and other topics), counseling, and other services on and off campus to employees in various occupations. WEP aims "to inspire and support innovative worker learning . . . and empower UMass staff to learn new skills and gain confidence to improve their professional and personal lives."

In conclusion . . .

Forward-thinking labor unions now have opportunities to make a significant difference on this issue.

In so doing, you can enhance trust and collaboration among stakeholders who have common interests but too often don't communicate and collaborate.

Such thoughtful, informed, patient leadership can have multiple benefits for diverse stakeholders at this time of challenge --and opportunity -- for our nation.

For further information . . .

- *Visit www.opendoorcollective.org for resources on workforce education and union programs.*
- *Contact your state and/or local workforce investment board to learn how you might get involved.*
- *Communicate with labor union educators in your community and state, and nationally. Learn from their experience and, as appropriate, create joint education efforts.*
- *Reach out to employers to clarify why and how you might work with them to support workforce skill development.*
- *Visit www.nationalliteracydirectory.org to find adult education programs in your area.*

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