

**Building a Professional Development System
for Adult Educators in New Jersey:
Options for Planners**

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by

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BACKGROUND

This document was prepared for SCALES, the State Council on Adult Literacy Education Services, a committee of the New Jersey State Employment and Training Commission. At that time, SCALES was considering how it might strengthen the professional development services provided to adult educators in the state. This paper drew on a literature review conducted by the author and on his prior experience planning and implementing – and participating in – professional development activities at local, state, national, and international levels.

Why New Jersey needs a professional development system for adult educators

The State of New Jersey has embarked on a number of initiatives to build the workforce needed for key industries which are seen as central to the State's future. But, so far, adult basic education has largely been overlooked as a component of the State's workforce development system. And little attention has been paid to developing the workforce of the adult basic education profession itself.

For New Jersey to develop a high-quality system of adult basic education which is tied to the State's economic and social development goals, it will require a well-prepared and well-supported "adult education workforce." This workforce is composed of instructors, administrators, and others at the local and state levels who do the work of planning and implementing basic literacy, ESOL, GED preparation, and related services for the state's adults and out-of-school youth.

As is common nationally, adult educators in New Jersey face many challenges which make it difficult for them to develop the expertise and other supports they need to provide high-quality services. Researchers have identified the following obstacles which adult educators around the United States must deal with:¹

- A part-time, revolving-door workforce due to:
 - Unavailability of full-time positions with wages and benefits comparable to those of K-12 educators;
 - High turnover among adult educators.

- Adult educators’ lack of access to pre-service or in-service training to enable them to become familiar with research and practice which has been developed in the various specialty areas of adult basic education (e.g., effective ways to teach ESOL, work-related skills, etc.; effective uses of educational technologies). This lack of access is due to:
 - Geographic remoteness: Adult educators often being spread across geographic areas, making it difficult for them to attend training sessions;
 - Time constraints: Busy adult educators lack time to attend PD activities, which are often scheduled at inconvenient times;
 - Information gaps: Adult educators lack access to information about available PD activities;
 - Goal mismatch: PD activities are often not relevant to many adult educators’ needs;
 - Few opportunities for face-to-face interaction: Adult educators commonly seek opportunities to share ideas with fellow adult educators and other resource persons, but these opportunities are rare;
 - Lack of professional certification opportunities for adult educators;
 - Inadequate funding for professional development;
 - Resistance by some administrators and policy makers due to a perception that investing in professional development takes away from providing direct service;
 - Multiple funding streams which make it difficult to have an organized approach to professional development;
 - Lack of professional development models for programs and states to learn from;
 - Practitioner apathy due to prior negative experience with professional development;
 - Lack of state-level infrastructure (e.g., adult education resource center) to support professional development activities at the local level;
 - Lack of stipends or travel allowances to allow adult educators to participate in professional development activities.

Guidelines for professional development systems

These challenges point to the need for a more-systematic approach to professional development for adult educators. A number of reports have identified guidelines for building professional development systems. These guidelines are summarized below:

A multi-level, collaborative approach

Based on surveys of a number of state-level professional development systems, Belzer, Drennon, and Smith² recommend that these systems have “cooperative leadership.” They define this as a collaboration of state-level leaders and others (especially at the local level). The state-level leaders have responsibility and authority to make needed changes but they do so with input from and in support of local-level leaders. A number of states

have established state adult literacy resource centers which work with regional centers which are responsible for organizing relevant training and technical support activities in their regions.

Wilson and Corbett³ suggest a two-pronged strategy:

First, those generating important information for educators must begin to adopt ways of sharing what they know, taking into account the constraints that educators face. This would require more direct contact between researchers, research disseminators, and educators, with the former actually going out into the field instead of having the field come to them. And, just as importantly, the ABE field – led by those in prominent positions – must address the lack of structural and occupational supports for educators to grow professionally.

Relevance of content

A 2003 report from the U.S. Department of Education⁴ stresses that . . .

. . . the content of professional development must be based on the systematically identified needs of instructors as well as the goals of the program. . . professional development will be more effective if its content is related to the needs of the instructors relative to their programs and learner populations . . . Content is often identified by both the instructor’s self-determined needs and preferences and the program administrator’s needs to improve instructional services, correct a program deficiency, implement a program change, and meet a Federal or State mandate. Content also must be aligned with national, State, or district standards in core content academic areas (e.g., reading, mathematics, and English language acquisition).

. . . quality professional development is based on knowledge of how adults learn. . . Instructor backgrounds, levels of motivation, knowledge and experience, and work environments impact learning and the ability to change as a result of professional development. Effective professional development builds on this knowledge and provides experiences with complex, real-world problems and situations. It also incorporates a variety of learning modalities and accommodates a variety of learning styles. . . It also must be structured so that it is sustained over time (not a one-shot workshop); allow opportunities for practice and feedback; and provide opportunities for reflection. . . .

Belzer, Drennon, and Smith⁵ state that professional development systems must have appropriate “scope,” which they define as providing a range of activities that meet multiple needs of the full range of adult education practitioners.

Accessibility

The U.S. Department of Education report⁶ states that, once content is identified . . .

There are a variety of ways to deliver professional development that incorporates these elements. These may include (1) a series of workshops on a specific content area that incorporates theory, demonstration, practice, feedback and coaching . . . with a facilitator that has the appropriate content knowledge . . . (2) peer coaching or mentoring sustained over time with opportunities for practice and feedback . . . (3) inquiry research that is embedded in instructors' own teaching practices . . . and; (4) involvement in program improvement and curriculum-development activities.

Belzer, Drennon, and Smith⁷ describe the many forms of professional development that states have developed to date. These include certificate programs (organized in modules), conferences, workshops, distance learning, special projects, and newsletters.

Tying professional development in with systems reform

The U.S. Department of Education report⁸ also notes that . . .

. . . Evaluation must be incorporated into the professional development process in order to document the changes in instructor behavior, program services, and student outcomes resulting from the professional development activities.

Belzer, Drennon, and Smith⁹ describe how a number of states have intentionally tied professional development for individuals in with program and system improvement initiatives. This integrated approach to system improvement focuses on making needed changes in all levels of the system rather than just focusing on training of individuals.

Ease of adoption/adaptation

The U.S. Department of Education report¹⁰ concludes by emphasizing that professional development activities must be easy to adopt/adapt by the agencies and individuals that use them. Factors that can facilitate or hinder such ease of use include . . .

. . . financial costs . . . the time allotment required . . . the availability and ease of acquiring the required materials . . . and the document design or structure . . .

What can New Jersey do to build an effective professional development system for adult educators?

New Jersey currently has several committees which are considering how to build a more-effective professional development system for adult educators. Outlined below are some short-term actions that these committees might take:

1. Be familiar with existing national research.

All of those involved in the planning of professional development efforts in New Jersey should be familiar with existing research on this topic. (See Appendix B

for sample guidelines developed at the national level and in one state and Appendix C for suggested readings.)

2. Be familiar with professional development activities that have already been provided in New Jersey.

Planners should be given a synopsis of the various kinds of professional development activities that have been provided to adult educators in New Jersey in the past. These include:

- state conferences (of NJALL, LV-NJ, Generation X),
- EFF workshops,
- LV-NJ training,
- program level training (including at One Stop Centers),
- graduate and undergraduate courses,
- community college continuing education courses, and
- regional adult education resource centers.

Those who have implemented the above activities might provide concise summaries of those activities which describe (a) who participated, (b) what topics were covered, (c) who served as trainers, (d) how these activities were organized and paid for, and (e) lessons learned (what worked, what didn't, and how such activities might be used in a future statewide professional development system.)

3. Prepare an initial professional development framework which shows:

- the various types/categories of adult educators who serve as the workforce of the adult basic education field;
- the skills and knowledge these various types of adult educators need to perform their jobs; and
- professional development mechanisms that those adult educators can use to develop the skills and knowledge they need.

See Appendix A for a sample planning grid and list of possible professional development activities to consider.

APPENDIX A

Sample Planning Grid and Possible Professional Development Activities

*Planning Grid:
Skills and Knowledge Required
by Adult Education Instructors, Administrators, and Others*

Skills & Knowledge	Instructors: Basic Literacy	Instructors: ESOL	Instructors: GED Prep	Instructors: Other Areas (work, family, civics, computers, technical test prep, etc.)	Administrators	Specialists in assessment or other areas	Job Developers
1. How have the definitions of adult literacy/adult basic skills evolved in the US? (What do we now mean by “basic skills” and what are basic skills needed for?)							
2. Who are the adults (nationally and in NJ) who are challenged by limited basic skills?							
3. What are the factors that cause those adults to have those limitations?							
4. What approaches to adult basic education have							

been developed?							
5. What principles of good practice might guide NJ adult education efforts?							
6. What adult education programs exist in NJ and who participates in those programs?							
7. What instructional and assessment methods have been developed to:							
7.a. Help adults develop basic skills they need for worker roles?							
7.b. Help adults develop basic skills they need for family roles?							
7.c. Help adults develop basic skills they need for civic roles?							
7.d. Serve those who want to pass the GED exam or other technical or academic exams?							
7.e.. Serve adults with learning disabilities?							
7.f. Integrate technologies							

into adult education instruction?							
7.g. Serve other special populations (e.g., inmates and ex-offenders, women, men, particular ethnic or linguistic groups)?							
8. What administrative practices have been developed to:							
8.a. Recruit and retain learners?							
8.b. Equip and manage facilities?							
8.c. Hire, prepare, and support qualified staff?							
8.d.. Generate and manage funding?							
8.e., Conduct formative and summative evaluations?							
9. What socio-economic conditions, policies, and funding impact adult education programs?							
9.a. How have advocates for adult education tried to shape adult education policy and funding?							

10. What professional development opportunities (e.g., training, jobs) exist for adult educators?							
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Possible Professional Development Activities

Formal training workshops and courses delivered . . .

- Face-to-face at:
 - State or regional conferences;
 - In-house training sessions (at program or local level);
 - In-depth training courses leading to certification (in institutes, undergraduate or graduate level courses, community college certificate programs).
- On-line courses delivered:
 - Within NJ;
 - By sources outside NJ.

Peer-support via:

- Mentoring by supervisors or co-workers in one’s own place of employment or by colleagues in other institutions. (Can be done face-to-face, by phone, or via email).
- Internships;
- Site-visits to other programs;
- Study circles;
- Project-based learning (in which teams of adult educators work on related projects and share their findings).

Self-study activities in which adult educators use the following means to upgrade skills and knowledge needed for particular professional tasks:

- Reading of texts (hard copy or on-line);
- Viewing of training videos;
- Fellowships (in which an adult educator is funded to conduct a relevant research project and then share the results with the field).

Research and formative evaluation projects in which staff of an adult education program work together to:

- conduct research about a topic of concern to them and/or;
- conduct a formative evaluation designed to better understand one or more aspects of their program (how it works, how it might be improved).

A P P E N D I X B

Sample Guidelines for Professional Development **from** **the Equipped for the Future National Center and the State of Kentucky**

Equipped for the Future National Center

Equipped for the Future was an initiative of the National Institute for Literacy designed to help states reform their systems of adult basic education. The EFF National Center (based at the University of Tennessee) has produced a handbook designed to help adult education programs introduce staff members to the EFF model and incorporate it into their day-to-day operations. This model combines program development with professional development and differs from the more familiar approach to staff development which consists of sending staff to occasional workshops in which they may or may not learn anything they can actually apply back on the job.

The EFF handbook presents four phases of collaborative activities which help staff develop expertise in the EFF model while deciding on how they will improve various aspects of program operations. Staff develop expertise in:

- The basic components (e.g., skills standards; principles of good practice for instruction, assessment, and administration) of the EFF model;
- Activities to use to design effective instruction, use effective assessment practices, evaluate program performance, and decide how to improve program operations in keeping with EFF standards.

EFF also developed an “EFF Specialist Role Map” which shows broad areas of responsibility and key activities that an EFF specialist (i.e., administrator and/or trainer who helps to integrate EFF standards and practices into adult education programs) should be able to carry out. These include planning of staff training activities, keeping abreast of resource materials, developing curricula, and dealing with policy issues and policy makers.

Kentucky Department for Adult Education and Literacy

A 2002 report about professional development for adult educators in Kentucky¹¹ describes how the state responded to the National Literacy Act of 1991 which “required states to utilize a minimum of 10 percent of certain federal funds for instructor training and development.” The state “created a branch to focus on training” and hired the report’s author to lead that effort. “Before that, staff development in Kentucky consisted primarily of an annual adult education conference.” That conference was coupled with irregular regional workshops. Program quality varied, especially in terms of how

participants' needs were assessed and training was provided. No comprehensive plan guided this effort. "Practitioners were doing the best they could with limited training."

The new professional development branch began by creating a plan for professional development, which was "a practitioner-centered, comprehensive, and long range training plan for continual delivery of professional development." New policies required "training for new instructors, a specific number of hours of participation each year, and professional development plans for all instructors. Professional development funds were allocated to programs by a funding formula to be used as incentives for instructors' participation." To help make professional development more accessible, the branch funded (through a RFP process) six regional PD coordinators.

This new professional development system was created in response to the kinds of problems identified above (under "Why is it important to have a framework to guide professional development efforts?"). These included "part-time instructors, often with no background in adult education; rapid turnover in the field; many adult education supervisors who had numerous other responsibilities and limited time to devote to adult education and program improvement; large numbers of non-degreed paraprofessionals teaching in isolation; and instructors with under-developed teaching skills."

The professional development branch "offered a wide variety of professional development activities, including workshops, inquiry-based projects, family literacy support groups, study circles, and collegial network groups. . . . the needs of providers were so great tat it was hard to focus our efforts. We tried to offer what new teachers needed, and what more experienced providers wanted, as well as everything in between. Balancing local and individual professional development needs and the growing needs of new state-level initiatives directed from the top added to the tension."

A new state adult education planning process led to the creation in 2001 of a team "to guide the renovation of our professional development system. Consisting of key stakeholders from all levels of adult education and all service delivery areas, the collaborative partners included representatives from public universities, community and technical colleges, Kentucky Educational Television, the Kentucky Virtual University (KYVU), the Council on Postsecondary Education, public libraries, business and industry leaders, and adult education practitioners, about 20 people in all. The new system needed to include standards and competencies for adult educators and the development of a coordinated, integrated, and searchable database for centralized resources for instructors."

"The adult education professional development team worked for more than seven months crafting a plan that would meet the charges set forth by the Council." With guidance from national experts and an infusion of new state funding, the new professional development plan incorporated distance learning and evaluation of student learning as an indicator of instructors' effectiveness.

The result was a new state professional development plan, issued in July 2001, which “called for an integrated system in which all processes and activities sponsored by the collaborative partners support the practice of adult educators provide long-term opportunities, are data-driven, guided by administrative practitioners, and utilize multiple delivery methods.” The Council on Postsecondary Education “. . . awarded the Department of Adult Education and Literacy \$1.3 million from the adult education trust fund to offer a comprehensive professional development program for adult educators currently in the field.”

This new program will offer “orientation training for new providers (instructors and program managers) and . . . on-line training so that instructors can remain in their programs while participating in orientation. . . To address the needs of our more experienced instructors and program leaders, a new center for professional development . . . was established at Morehead State University. The Adult Education Academy for Professional Development . . . is a university-based center for the professional preparation and development of adult educators. Through research, instruction, and model demonstration sites, the Academy will offer continuous, high-quality learning opportunities for all adult educators. Morehead was selected as the location for the Academy because it is the only postsecondary institution in Kentucky offering a master’s degree in adult education, which will eventually tie into an adult education teaching credential.”

Another training center was developed at the University of Kentucky to train adult educators in adult reading instruction. Participants can earn graduate credits by participating in four days of intensive instruction followed by further meetings at state university campuses and two coaching visits by university professors.

The state also created a Kentucky Institute for Family Literacy at the National Center for Family Literacy in Louisville. This Institute provides training and technical assistance to state-funded family literacy programs.

Resources were also committed to evaluating these professional development activities. University-based evaluators look at instructors’ reactions to the PD activities, their knowledge and skill gains, changes in their instructional practices, and changes in learner outcomes.

As a foundation for this new professional development system, the state developed standards which showed the competencies that the state’s adult educators were expected to have. These standards incorporated concepts from the Equipped for the Future standards, the National Reporting System, and other sources. To qualify for a professional adult education credential, adult educators in the state would eventually have to demonstrate that they “have the knowledge and skills to facilitate student learning.”

The state DAEL also worked with national and state sources to create a system of on-line learning opportunities. This included access to the National Institute for Literacy’s

LINCS special collections and discussion groups and on-line resources via the Kentucky Virtual University (www.kyvae.org).

The Kentucky report concludes: “Unless Kentucky makes a commitment to improve the employment structure and preparation requirements of adult educators now in the field, it may not be able to offer a brighter opportunity to those who will be entering the adult education profession in the future.”

APPENDIX C

Suggested Readings

American Institutes for Research (August 2003). “Evaluating Professional Development Resources: Selection and Development Criteria.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy.

Alisa Belzer, Cassandra Drennon, Cristine Smith (2001). “Building Professional Development Systems in Adult Basic Education: Lessons from the Field” in Review of Adult Learning and Literacy. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 2, Chapter 5.

Focus on Basics (December 2000). “A Conversation with FOB: Professional Development and Technology” in Focus on Basics, Volume 4, Issue C.

Sandra Kestner (June 2002). “New Directions for Professional Development: Kentucky’s Journey” in Focus on Basics, Vol. 5, Issue D.

John P. Sabatini, Melanie Daniels, Lynda Ginsburg, Kelly Limeul, Mary Russell, and Regie Stites (October 2000). “Teacher Perspectives on the Adult Education Profession: National Survey Findings about an Emerging Profession.” Philadelphia: National Center on Adult Literacy, University of Pennsylvania.

Betsy Topper and Mary Beth Gordon (June 2004). “A Comprehensive Professional Development Process Produces Radical Results” in Focus on Basics, Volume 7, Issue A.

Bruce Wilson and Dickson Corbett (April, 2001). “Adult Education and Professional Development: Strangers for Too Long” in Focus on Basics, Vol. 4, Issue D;

Information about regional-, state-, and local-level professional development systems can be found at the following web sites:

- Tennessee: http://www.cls.utk.edu/professional_dev.html;
- Massachusetts: <http://www.sabes.org/>
- Pennsylvania: <http://www.pawerc.org/foundationsskills/site/default.asp>
- Rhode Island:
www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/Literacy_Resources/
- New England: <http://nelrc.org>
- New York City: <http://www.lacnyc.org>
- Boston: <http://sabes.org/boston/>
- Philadelphia: <http://www.philaliteracy.org/profdev/index.html>

ENDNOTES

¹ American Institutes for Research (August 2003). “Evaluating Professional Development Resources: Selection and Development Criteria.” Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy; Bruce Wilson and Dickson Corbett (April, 2001). “Adult Education and Professional Development: Strangers for Too Long” in Focus on Basics, Vol. 4, Issue D; Alisa Belzer, Cassandra Drennon, Cristine Smith (2001). “Building Professional Development Systems in Adult Basic Education: Lessons from the Field” in Review of Adult Learning and Literacy. Cambridge, MA: National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 2, Chapter 5.

² Belzer, Drennon, and Smith, *ibid.*

³ Wilson and Corbett, *ibid.*

⁴ American Institutes for Research, *ibid.*

⁵ Belzer et al, *ibid.*

⁶ American Institutes of Research, *ibid.*

⁷ Belzer et al, *ibid.*

⁸ American Institutes of Research, *ibid.*

⁹ Belzer et al, *ibid.*

¹⁰ American Institutes of Research, *ibid.*

¹¹ Sandra Kestner (June 2002). “New Directions for Professional Development: Kentucky’s Journey” in Focus on Basics, Vol. 5, Issue D.