

# **"Reinventing the NWLP"**

**Recommendations for  
the National Workplace Literacy Program**

**Submitted November 1994  
to the U.S. Department of Education  
in conjunction with the reauthorization  
of the Adult Education Act**

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## CONTENTS

Co-signers of this document .....	i
Executive summary .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Needed actions .....	2
1. Rethink the assumptions on which NWLP is based.....	2
2. Open a new dialogue. ....	5
3. Develop a new mission statement. ....	6
4. Rethink how to assess needs and progress.....	7
5. Require that sites demonstrate their readiness.....	8
6. Reach out to special contexts and workforces.....	9
7. Restructure itself as a "continuous improvement/ learning" organization.....	10



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

As workplace educators, we are hopeful that the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP) can be strengthened as part of the reauthorization of the Adult Education Act. NWLP has been a driving force in generating interest and ideas for workplace education. We fear that, without continued federal leadership, efforts to create workplace education programs for the new American workplace will grind to a halt. This paper is an effort to do for ourselves what we are asking the organizations we work with to do: continually improve how we do our work.

### Needed actions

We recommend that NWLP be continued and strengthened through the following actions.

The NWLP should:

#### **1. Rethink the assumptions on which NWLP is based.**

NWLP should reconsider what is needed to provide contextualized learning which is meaningful for the new American workplace and workforce. NWLP should:

1. Acknowledge that, to change to "high performance" organizations, workplaces must not only ensure that workers' skills and knowledge are appropriate but introduce other necessary changes in work processes, equipment, compensation, and other practices and supports. NWLP should thus promote an integrated, comprehensive approach to workplace change which goes beyond just improving specific skills of a small number of workers.
2. Acknowledge that worker education programs should focus more heavily on generating interest in learning and broad, transferable skills and knowledge rather than on narrow, immediately-applicable skills. Programs also should be seen as more than a one-time "class" but a system of multiple learning opportunities, for workers with varying needs, both in the classroom and out. This might mean, for example, that supervisors be trained in how to facilitate learning on the job. To create such learning environments, all stakeholders -- including supervisors, union representatives, and learners -- must be actively involved in setting goals and running learning activities.

#### **2. Open a new dialogue.**

To draw on the valuable experience which workplace educators have gained in the past seven years, NWLP should make extra efforts to open and sustain communication at

all levels within the Program and with others who have until now been outside the NWLP. This "new dialogue" can be achieved through (1) site-level planning teams, (2) meaningful evaluation and dissemination of findings, and (3) ongoing staff development across sites (via conferences, E-mail, mentoring, and a well-staffed clearinghouse).

### **3. Develop a new mission statement.**

Through a self-assessment, NWLP should develop a new mission statement which captures broader, longer-term, and multi-faceted goals and activities. We suggest a mission statement which includes:

- The NWLP will help American workplaces and workers make the transition to new, "high performance" ways of organizing work. NWLP will focus in particular on creating work environments which enable all employees to participate actively in the continuous improvement of the organization and of their own lives.
- In so doing, NWLP will not only contribute to the creation of stronger workplaces but stronger communities, as well.
- NWLP will serve as a national demonstration program which fosters creation of a broad range of strategies for enabling workers to develop and use the skills and knowledge they need.
- NWLP will more heavily emphasize dissemination of what is learned in its field sites.

### **4. Rethink how to assess needs and progress.**

To enable programs to help both individual workers and their organizations make the changes they need to make, NWLP should promote new ways of assessing the needs and abilities of not only individuals but the organizations they work in. NWLP should also promote the creation of mechanisms for involving all key stakeholders in identifying needs and monitoring progress, to avoid producing assessment data which aren't used effectively.

### **5. Require that sites demonstrate their readiness.**

Too many NWLP programs flounder when the "partners" at the site level are not prepared to really work together as a team to create and sustain a solid, meaningful basic skills initiative. To ensure that sites are in fact ready to effectively use federal funds, the NWLP should require all prospective sites to go through a workplace needs assessment process before applying for longer-term funding.



NWLP should also do a follow-up study of its funded sites, to identify the critical variables which an organization should demonstrate to qualify for public funding.

#### **6. Reach out to special contexts and workforces.**

NWLP should continue to target special worker populations and types of workplaces, to (1) create models of contextualized learning relevant to various contexts; (2) draw new stakeholders (population groups and industries) into the field; and (3) tap into other funding sources.

#### **7. Restructure itself as a "continuous improvement/ learning" organization.**

NWLP should itself adopt a "high performance" organizational model. (NWLP might go through a re-organization process similar to those which the National Institute for Literacy is facilitating for five statewide literacy policy groups.)

Such a restructuring would be consistent with the kinds of changes which NWLP is now asking the companies it works with to make. By making such improvements, NWLP would not only better serve the workplace education field; it would serve as a model for other federal agencies now struggling with the question of how to "reinvent government."



## **Introduction**

This position paper has been prepared by a group of workplace educators who are hopeful that the National Workplace Literacy Program (NWLP) can be strengthened as part of the reauthorization of the Adult Education Act. We are supportive of the National Workplace Literacy Program and feel it has contributed much to the development of the workplace education field.

We are concerned that, without continued federal leadership, the progress now being made to develop education models appropriate for the new American workplace will grind to a halt. We feel that, as stakeholders who have invested much time in this field, it is our right and responsibility to help strengthen this vital Program further. This paper is not presented as "the final word" about the NWLP's future. Rather, we see this paper as an effort to do for ourselves what we are asking the organizations we work with to do: continually improve how we do our work.

We recommend actions which the NWLP might take to build on the valuable experience it has given the field. Many of these are longer-term, broad actions which would require policy makers to take extra time to translate into revised regulations. We hope that the reauthorization process allows policy makers to invest the kind of attention which we have given to this paper.

We use the term "NWLP" broadly here to include the U.S. Department of Education staff, federal policy makers, and other stakeholders in the workplace basic skills field who have an interest in seeing that the Program continues to play a leading role.

We define "NWLP" in this broad way to encourage those thinking about the NWLP's future to move away from ascribing responsibility to a few individuals in Washington. Rather, we hope stakeholders will think of NWLP as a "system," a national collective effort in which many kinds of stakeholders can benefit and also take responsibility.

While we would like in this way to get more stakeholders involved in taking ownership for NWLP, we nonetheless also acknowledge the particularly vital role U.S. Department of Education staff play in improving the Program. In our last recommendation, we suggest actions for strengthening the ability of NWLP staff to do the work suggested here.

## **Needed actions**

The National Workplace Literacy Program (here defined as U.S. Department of Education staff, federal policy makers, and other stakeholders in the workplace education field) should:

### **1. Rethink the assumptions on which NWLP is based.**

The NWLP was established to serve as a national demonstration project, to test some basic premises related to workplace basic skills education and thereby provide information which the field could use to improve theory and practice. Two of the basic premises underlying the NWLP have been:

**Premise #1:** Employee basic skills are a key determinant of workplace productivity, and improving employee basic skills will have a positive impact on improving productivity.

**Premise #2:** To improve employee basic skills, a "functional context" approach to instruction is necessary. ("Functional context" is a concept developed in studies of how people learn. It indicates that people learn best by relating what they already know to the achievement of meaningful tasks in the contexts in which they operate.)

NWLP should now re-examine those premises in light of evidence which has come in from its seven years of funded projects and from other sources in the fields of adult education and organizational development. We have done so ourselves and have concluded that those original assumptions should be revised, as shown below:

#### **In the new workplace, "productivity" is determined by more than traditional employee basic skills.**

Job performance is determined by more than workers' knowledge and skills. It also requires an environment in which employees are able and encouraged to use what they know. For organizations to be productive, they thus need not only to be sure that employees have appropriate skills and knowledge but ensure that the work environment is structured (with appropriate equipment, compensation, job-upgrading, communication and decision-making channels, etc.) to enable and encourage workers to effectively use the knowledge and skills they have. Expecting a basic skills program to by itself transform a workplace into a productive organization is unrealistic.

This broader view of what a workplace requires underlies the current major shift of American companies to new, "high performance" approaches to work. We define a

high performance workplace as one which not only produces high-quality products and services but provides a high quality of work life for all employees, as well.

Workplaces which are trying to move in a high performance direction ask for workers who can take initiative, identify problems, seek information and analyze it, make decisions, and take responsibility for a wide range of tasks. The traditional basic skills of reading, writing, oral English, and math are also important, but only within the framework of the above skills. This emerging concept of "employee basic skills" is in contrast to the one developed in more-traditional workplaces which expected workers to be proficient in one, pre-determined "job" defined in a job manual written by someone else. "Basic skills" in that old workplace tended to mean "read the job manual and follow orders."

Given the developments of the last seven years, NWLP should (1) rethink what kind of workplace it is trying to create, (2) acknowledge that employee basic skills are just one of many ingredients in a high performance workplace, and (3) define basic skills more broadly than the 3Rs used in one's job. NWLP might then broaden its focus to include not only the upgrading of individual workers' skills but the creation of workplace learning environments which meet the needs of both the organization and individual workers.

### **A new interpretation of "contextualized learning" is needed.**

We agree that contextualized learning is an important concept and one which should continue to guide the NWLP. However, this concept has tended to be interpreted within the NWLP to narrow the focus of funded programs to classroom-based instruction which aims at improving the ability of individual workers to perform discrete job tasks (e.g., reading manuals, filling in forms) they face in their current jobs. This narrow interpretation overlooks many important realities:

#### Learners need to see instruction as relevant.

It is appropriate to focus instruction on current job tasks if that is in fact what workers need and if they actually have opportunities to use those skills in a meaningful way. However, that is often not the case. For example, as the nation moves toward the new, "high performance" workplace described above, many workers -- by choice or due to changing job requirements -- are interested in moving into other jobs. These workers need transferable knowledge and skills to enable them to make those changes rather than narrow skills and knowledge which prepare them for jobs which are essentially irrelevant.

Workers also need to be involved in setting learning goals. If they don't see an education program as relevant to their own interests, they are unlikely to participate actively.

The "classroom" model doesn't adequately meet learners' learning needs.

Research indicates that learners improve their skills through practice ("time on task"). A basic skills initiative should thus try to develop opportunities for learners to get as much practice developing their knowledge and skills as possible.

Workplace programs, however, tend to provide learners with only a few hours each week in the classroom. If they are lucky, learners might be able to get further practice applying their skills back on the job. Programs need to instead consider how to increase the amount of time learners give to practicing their skills in real, meaningful situations. Instructors might thus have to work more closely with supervisors to see that workers receive the social and other supports they need to use what they are learning in the classroom.

Workers can also reinforce what they are learning through use in the literacy tasks they face outside the job. Programs should thus encourage workers to see non-job-related literacy tasks as opportunities for ongoing learning rather than as a distraction from "more important" job-specific learning.

Many companies -- especially smaller ones -- don't have enough workers to justify setting up a separate basic skills "class." These companies can't invest the time and resources required to set up the kind of full-fledged "program" typically found in NWLP. They need guidance on what other strategies might work in their situations.

Many workers need more than a one-time, low-level basic skills class; rather, they need a range of ongoing learning and other activities. Too often, even good basic skills programs don't lead to lasting change because there is no infrastructure of supports to enable workers to continue to improve their skills.

### **A new model**

Given what NWLP and other workplace development efforts have shown us about what "contextualized learning" means in the new workplace, we suggest that NWLP promote a workplace education model which:

- defines "employee basic skills" as more than mastering of literacy tasks developed by others, but as a broad range of knowledge and thinking and communication skills which workers need to participate actively in the continuous

improvement of the organization and their own lives;

- encourages workers to develop an ongoing interest in learning for the future rather than just for their immediate jobs;
- ensures that workers see learning activities as meaningful rather than imposed;
- links basic skills activities more effectively to other education, training, and organizational development opportunities;
- ensures that organizations continue to provide basic skills supports after federal seed money ends;
- provides multiple kinds of supports to enable workers to develop the particular skills and knowledge they need.

In short, we recommend that NWLP reconsider what is needed to provide contextualized learning which is meaningful for the new American workplace and workforce.

## **2. Open a new dialogue.**

In order to draw on the valuable experience which workplace educators have gained in the past ten years, the NWLP should make extra efforts to open and sustain communication at all levels within the workplace education field. This "new dialogue" can be achieved through:

- Establishment of site-level planning and evaluation teams which will document their interests and experience and communicate it to NWLP. (These teams should be composed of representatives all stakeholder groups -- managers, supervisors, union representatives, education providers, and worker-learners.)
- Careful study of feedback from those site-level teams.
- Periodic meetings of site representatives and other resource persons. Meetings would be participatory in nature, to allow sharing and analysis of experience and action planning.
- Electronic mail linkages within the field.
- Directories of resource persons in the field, to facilitate communication by phone and mail.
- Dissemination of reports, position papers, sample curricula, guidebooks, etc. via

a clearinghouse staffed by people with the time and expertise to guide callers to appropriate sources.

- A frank self-assessment, not only of what goes on at the site level but at the national level within the NWLP.

This self-assessment and communication at the national and local levels can help NWLP clarify what's working and what needs to be improved at all levels. This would also bring new ideas and energy into the field and help NWLP better perform its dissemination function.

### **3. Develop a new mission statement.**

NWLP can use its self-assessment to develop a new mission statement which captures broader, longer-term, and multi-faceted goals and activities.

We suggest a mission statement which includes the following:

1. The NWLP will help American workplaces and workers make the transition to new, "high performance" ways of organizing work. NWLP will focus in particular on creating work environments which enable all employees to participate actively in the continuous improvement of the organization and of their own lives.
2. In so doing, NWLP will not only help organizations create high quality products and services but a high quality of work life for all employees. (Indicators of such high quality work life include safety, job security and advancement, fair wages, benefits, and good employee relations.) NWLP will thus help create a new approach to workplace development which meets the needs of both the larger organization and individual employees.
3. In so doing, NWLP will not only contribute to the creation of stronger workplaces but stronger communities, as well.
4. NWLP will do so by serving as a national demonstration program. Stakeholder teams will test various approaches to enabling employees to better use their existing knowledge and communication and thinking skills to participate actively in the achievement of the organizations' and learners' goals for continuous improvement.
5. Specific learning objectives for each site will be based on a careful, ongoing analysis of the needs, interests, and resources of both the host organization and individual learners.
6. As a demonstration project, NWLP will document these learning objectives and



how the programs structured themselves to respond to those objectives. NWLP will show what in fact was achieved by those projects (both in terms of anticipated and unanticipated outcomes) and what actions are needed to strengthen those programs. This information will be used internally by participating project sites and disseminated more broadly, to shape future policy - including NWLP policy -- and practice in the field.

Such a mission statement will indicate NWLP's willingness to serve as a true demonstration project in which a range of goals, ideas, interpretations, and procedures can be tried, analyzed, and disseminated. It will bring new life to the field by capturing the interest of many who now see only the limits set by NWLP rather than NWLP as a source of creativity and opportunity.

#### **4. Rethink how to assess needs and progress.**

If, as stated above, NWLP should aim at helping workplaces make the transition to new, "high performance" ways of organizing work, then it should rethink how programs go about assessing the needs around which site-level activities are organized. "Needs" should not be seen solely as the inabilities of selected employees to perform particular tasks. Rather, for a workplace to make the transition to a high performance state, both the organization and individual employees might have to change.

Assessment in such a case would consist of an analysis of the needs, interests, and abilities (readiness) of both the organization and of individuals. Such an analysis will demonstrate what needs to be done to help the organization and individuals meet their goals for continuous improvement.

Assessment of organizational needs can be done through a workplace needs assessment process which examines the organization's goals, current organizational development strategies, the role of employee basic skills in such strategies, and what the organization might do to help workers use and improve the skills they already have.

Assessment of individual needs would look not solely -- or primarily -- at immediate job-related impact. (Research now indicates that it can be misleading to try to make too direct and immediate a link between a short-term employee basic skills program and such indicators of job performance as scrap rates and attendance rates.) New indicators should be considered, such as the worker's self-concept vis-a-vis literacy and learning, as well as how she actually uses literacy. The latter should include documenting not only what workers do in the classroom but back in the real contexts where they have to use literacy. Such information-gathering procedures as interviews, observation, and simulations can be used to clarify workers' interests, their abilities to meet those goals, and steps which individuals might take to meet those goals.

Assessment as such is not a "test" of an individual. Rather, it is ongoing study of

what both the organization and individuals need to do to enable workers to participate actively in the continuous improvement of the organization and of their own lives.

What to do with that assessment information must also be re-considered. Rather than merely package test data and attendance figures in a report for the funder, programs should find new ways to use the information they are gathering about organizational and individual needs and progress. One way to get this information into the hands of decision-makers at the site level is through planning teams which meet periodically to review the evidence emerging from the program and then make relevant decisions to strengthen the program.

## **5. Require that sites demonstrate their readiness.**

Too many NWLP programs flounder when the "partners" at the site level are not prepared to really work together as a team to create and sustain a solid, meaningful basic skills initiative.

To ensure that sites are in fact ready to effectively use federal funds, the NWLP should require all prospective sites to go through a workplace needs assessment process before applying for longer-term funding. As stated under #2 above, a workplace needs assessment would require a site to: (1) pull together a team of stakeholders (e.g., managers, union representatives supervisors, learners, and education providers), (2) clarify whether the organization has a strategy for transforming itself to a high performance model, (3) assess the strengths and limitations of the various pieces of that strategy, and (4) clarify what basic skills-related activities might be implemented to help the organization and individuals meet their goals for continuous improvement.

Prospective sites would use the results of this workplace needs assessment to demonstrate the readiness of the site to effectively implement a basic skills program integrated with a systematic, long-term strategy for organizational development.

By funding such workplace needs assessments, NWLP will be able to be more certain that, in fact, prospective sites have established a vision and an infrastructure which will support a solid program.

Through ongoing monitoring of the sites, NWLP should clarify whether sites are sustaining their investment in the continuous improvement of their projects. NWLP should provide adequate resources for technical assistance to enable stakeholders to support their projects. If stakeholders can't live up to their responsibilities, however, NWLP should have the right to withdraw funds from a particular site if necessary.

NWLP should also do a follow-up study of its funded sites, to determine which sites continue to invest in worker education after the federal funds stop. Such a study could identify the critical variables which an organization should demonstrate to qualify for public funding.

## **6. Reach out to special contexts and workforces.**

NWLP has to some degree targeted special worker populations and types of workplaces in its funding guidelines. NWLP should continue to do so, to (1) create models of contextualized learning relevant to various contexts; (2) draw new stakeholders (population groups and industries) into the field; and (3) tap into other funding sources.

NWLP might, for example, fund projects for:

- Workers with learning disabilities or physical handicaps;
- Workers from various cultural groups -- especially those who are not native-English-speakers -- to respect special learning styles;
- Small companies which might not have enough workers to warrant a single class but who nonetheless could benefit from a variety of customized educational activities;
- Women workers, to enable them to deal with special interests or problems affecting their learning;
- Workers in particular industries (e.g., workers from a number of hospitals in an area might be served in a single program at a community learning center);
- Workplaces which are promoting employee ownership and worker decision-making;
- Workplaces producing special products (e.g., energy-conservation devices) and services (e.g., environmental clean-up, specialized agriculture) of high priority in local economic development schemes;
- Workplaces being required to conform to federal safety and environmental regulations (e.g., construction workers working in toxic-waste areas) or those trying to shift from military to non-military products;
- Workers keenly interested in learning how to use computers for workplace communications and problem-solving;
- Workers spread across a number of small businesses in a rural area (who might be served by distance-learning activities coupled with periodic face-to-face meetings);
- Supervisory-level workers who might resist being mixed with lower-level

workers, but who nonetheless might need to upgrade their own skills and learn how to respond to the basic skills needs of those they supervise.

## **7. Restructure itself as a "continuous improvement/learning" organization.**

The above changes in many ways reflect the steps a workplace might go through to transform itself to a "continuous improvement" organization. Such a quality improvement process entails clarifying what "customers" (stakeholders) want, re-thinking what "processes" need to be in place to meet those stakeholder goals, preparing organizational stakeholders for their roles through ongoing learning activities, and -- through ongoing communication with all involved in the organization -- continually monitoring progress and refining operations.

The National Institute for Literacy is currently helping several state-level literacy policy groups make the transition to this "continuous improvement" way of serving its "customers." NWLP might now go through a similar process.

Such a restructuring would require staff who have the time, vision, and technical skills necessary to help a government agency shift to a new way of operating. At present, NWLP is operating with only a small staff already under great demand trying to respond to many different stakeholders: funders, funded sites, and others interested in learning from NWLP's experience. If that continues to be the case, expecting the Program to change significantly is a moot point.

We recognize that this is a time when the federal government is under pressure to reduce rather than expand its workforce. Nonetheless, we suggest that the Department increase the number of NWLP staff -- and provide all staff with whatever training and other supports are needed -- to ensure that NWLP staff have the time, expertise, and motivation needed to carry out the kinds of changes proposed here.

Such a restructuring would be consistent with the kinds of changes which NWLP is now asking the companies it works with to make. By making such improvements, NWLP would not only better serve the workplace education field; it would serve as a model for other federal agencies now struggling with the question of how to "reinvent government."