

Building a Workforce Learning System for Union County

A White Paper
for the
Union County Workforce Investment Board

Submitted by the WIB Adult Literacy
and Education Committee

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Building a Workforce Learning System for Union County

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Basic Skills and Other Career Tools that Union County’s Workforce Needs

Historically, “adult literacy” in the United States was measured in relatively simple terms – the ability to sign one’s name or the completion of an agreed-on number of years in primary school or (for immigrants) the ability to speak some rudimentary English. In the past two decades, employers, labor unions, policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders have sought to re-define the basic skills that U.S. workers need for the new American workplace. The resulting definition of “workforce basic skills” now includes not just simple reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities but a broader range of skills needed to manage new technologies, work processes, and standards. In addition to basic skills, workers need particular forms of technical and intercultural knowledge, credentials, self-efficacy (self-confidence and willingness to take on new challenges), a plan for the future, and support networks.

The particular basic skills and other career tools needed by workers vary depending on the job and industry that they want to work in. In Union County, workers need to be prepared to find and perform jobs in retail, healthcare, hospitality, construction, transportation, and other industries.

Union County’s Workforce Readiness Gaps

Large numbers of Union County adults and out-of-school youth (16-to-21-year-olds who lack a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school) lack the basic skills to attain, retain, and succeed in the County’s emerging workplaces. This has significant implications for those individuals, their families and communities, and for employers and the County’s economy and tax-base.

Union County has approximately 331,148 individuals who are 18 to 65 years old, typically seen as “working age adults.” These include:

- 57,860 individuals (17 percent) who lack a high school diploma or equivalent;
- 77,199 individuals (23 percent) who speak English less than very well;
- 177,097 individuals (53 percent) who have no more than “basic” prose reading abilities.

A number of adult populations in the County are particularly challenged by limited literacy, limited language fluency, and/or a lack of a secondary school credential. These include:

- out-of-school youth;
- linguistically isolated and in some cases under-educated immigrant populations in Plainfield, Elizabeth, and other communities;
- Haitians (both adults and their children);
- refugees;
- ex-offenders;
- older adults whose limited literacy or language skills make it difficult to move into new jobs and/or deal with financial, health, housing, or other responsibilities;
- adults with learning disabilities.

Union County's current workforce education programs

Union County's publicly-funded adult basic skills education programs serve approximately 3661 adults per year, a fraction of the thousands of the County's low-skilled adults. Of these:

- 866 (24 percent) are studying basic literacy skills,
- 245 (7 percent) are in GED test preparation classes, and
- 2550 (70 percent) are in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

Because those who enroll in these programs typically do so with the hope of improving their occupational status, these programs place a special emphasis on helping participants improve their job-related skills and earn credentials (e.g., GED, U.S. citizenship) that help them advance in their careers.

These programs are operated by Elizabeth and Linden school districts, the County Vocational Technical High School, Literacy Volunteers of Union County, Workforce Advantage, the Union County One Stop, Union County College, smaller community- and faith-based organizations, and a few for-profit (proprietary) schools.

The programs have built an infrastructure of staff and facilities, despite having limited, irregular, and hard-to-access funding.

Components of a more-effective workforce learning system for Union County

A more effective system should include:

1. Improved needs assessment and planning at County and program levels;
2. Adult education and workforce development programs equipped to work together to serve under-educated job seekers and incumbent workers;
3. Evidence-based standards for work-related basic education;
4. Demonstration projects to prepare various worker populations for jobs in various industries;
5. Professional development opportunities to build a cadre of workforce education professionals;

6. A new emphasis on learning both inside and outside the classroom;
7. Easily accessible and well-equipped facilities;
8. Effective uses of computers and other technologies for instructional and administrative purposes;
9. Effective recruitment and retention strategies.

How stakeholders can help build an effective workforce learning system

Key stakeholders include:

- Employers from various industries;
- Labor unions from various industries;
- Social service providers and community based organizations;
- The criminal justice system;
- Adult education providers.

What stakeholders can do in a three-year systems reform initiative:

Year 1: Plan and implement initial demonstration projects

- Build stakeholder involvement.
- Assess workforce needs of key industries.
- Plan, prepare for, implement, and evaluate career pathway demonstration projects for key industries.
- Plan and build support for Year 2 and 3 activities.

Years 2 and 3: Continuous improvement of initial demonstration projects, creation of new projects, and documentation and dissemination of lessons learned.

How this paper was written

This paper was written in 2007 and 2008 by Adult Literacy and Education Committee Chair, Dr. Paul Jurmo, Dean of Economic Development and Continuing Education at Union County College. The framework and content for the paper drew on previous policy research that Dr. Jurmo had done inside and outside New Jersey. Specific Union County data were provided by Committee members, the U.S. Census, and other sources identified in the Endnotes. Special assistance was provided by Jean Forstenhausler (Linden Board of Education) and Phillip Kandl (Union County Workforce Investment Board). This paper was presented to the WTB at its March, 2008 meeting.

Part 1

The Basic Skills and Other Career Tools that Union County’s Workforce Needs

Introduction

Historically, “adult literacy” in the United States was measured in relatively simple terms – the ability to sign one’s name or the completion of an agreed-on number of years in primary school or (for immigrants) the ability to speak some rudimentary English. In the past two decades, employers, labor unions, policy makers, researchers, and other stakeholders have sought to define the basic skills that U.S. workers need for the new American workplace. The resulting definition of “workforce basic skills” now includes not just simple reading, writing, speaking, and listening abilities but a broader range of skills needed to manage new technologies, work processes, and standards. In addition to basic skills, workers need particular forms of technical and intercultural knowledge, credentials, self-efficacy (self-confidence and willingness to take on new challenges), a plan for the future, and support networks.

The particular basic skills and other career tools needed by workers vary depending on the job and industry that they want to work in. In Union County, workers need to be prepared to find and perform jobs in retail, healthcare, hospitality, construction, transportation, and other industries.

This chapter summarizes:

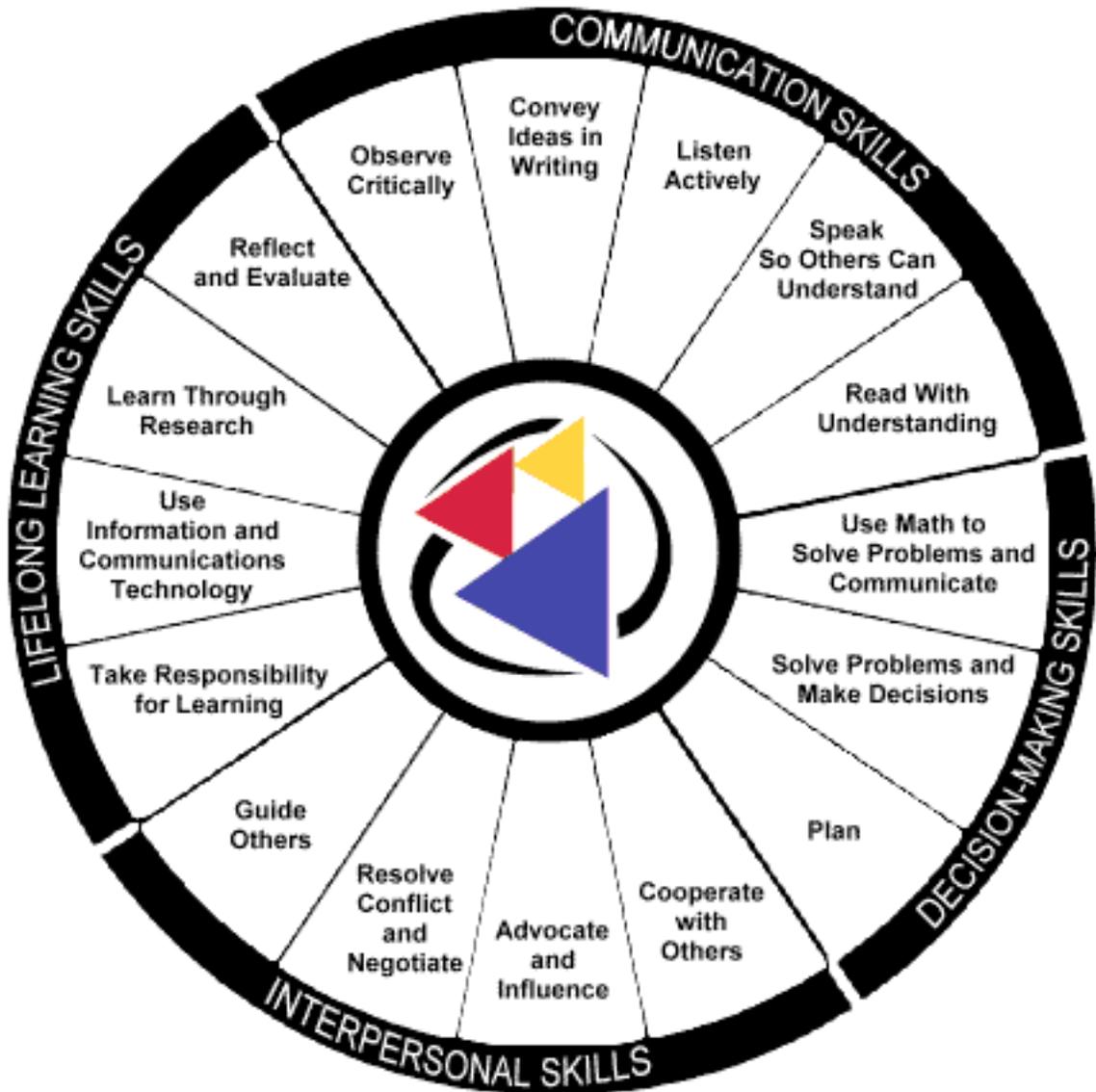
- *The basic skills and other “career tools” that Union County’s workforce now needs;*
- *How adults use these career tools in Union County workplaces;*

Basic skills and other career tools that Union County’s workforce now needs

In the past two decades in the United States, a number of reports from employers, organized labor, and government workforce and adult education agencies have redefined “workplace basic skills,” in the following ways:¹

- “Workforce basic skills” is no longer simply the traditional “3Rs” of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Workers who want to hold more than the lowest-paying jobs are now expected to have a broader mix of communication (i.e., oral and written communications), decision-making (e.g., problem-solving), interpersonal (e.g., teamwork), and lifelong

learning skills (e.g., ability to deal with changing workplaces and job opportunities), as well as at least beginning-level computer skills. The National Institute for Literacy – through its Equipped for the Future systems reform initiative – has summarized these skills in the “EFF skills wheel” below:



- “Workforce basic skills” vary according to the context in which they are used. Workers need particular skills for specific job situations. For example, a nursing assistant needs different basic skills than those needed by a truck driver or food service worker.
- “Workforce basic skills” are now more complex. Workplace tasks often require a number of basic skills at once, and each of those tasks could require higher levels of those skills. Customer service personnel are now required to know about a wide range of products, use computers to research information, quickly elicit relevant information from customers, and use databases to enter customer information and make sales – all over the phone. Nursing assistants now must be able to “multi-task” and perform record-keeping, reporting, and other duties previously reserved for registered nurses.
- Workers need not just “basic skills” but other “career tools.” In addition to solid communication, decision-making, and other basic skills, workers need other “career tools” if they are to be able to respond to the demands of particular workplaces. These “tools” include:
 - particular forms of technical knowledge;²
 - an understanding of how to navigate the “culture” of a particular workplace;
 - self-efficacy (i.e., self-confidence and willingness to take on new challenges);³
 - credentials (e.g., a high school diploma or post-secondary certificate or diploma, legal documentation such as immigration papers, a clean criminal record, a good credit rating, a driver’s license);⁴
 - a plan for the future;⁵
 - support networks (e.g., family members, friends, community agencies, co-workers, supervisors) to provide guidance and practical supports (e.g., childcare, transportation, housing).⁶

How adults use these career tools in Union County workplaces

Union County adults need the above-described basic skills and other career tools to succeed in the jobs which have emerged in the County in the past decade. Lower-skilled workers in Union County (and in New Jersey and the United States as a whole) now have a harder time finding jobs which primarily require stamina and manual skills while paying family-supporting wages and benefits. Those jobs have largely disappeared, either replaced by mechanical and digital technologies or exported to other countries where lower wages are

paid. Fewer workers work in unionized companies, where their unions are able to negotiate better wages and benefits. For workers to move beyond subsistence-level jobs (i.e., insecure jobs which pay barely enough to cover day-to-day expenses), they need strong basic skills and other career tools to:

Get a rewarding job.

While lower-skilled job-seekers can still find low-wage jobs in Union County, their chances of securing better-paying jobs increase greatly if they have strong literacy skills, English fluency, and at least a high school diploma. Literacy and English fluency are needed to read job listings, contact employers for more information and to set up job interviews, talk with job counselors, prepare resumes, develop support networks (with others who can help them “get their feet in the door”), and present themselves clearly and confidently in job interviews. Job-seekers also need intercultural skills, to understand what employers in particular industries expect of their employees. And job-seekers need educational or professional credentials to present to prospective employers.

Retain, succeed in, and advance in employment.

Once a worker gets a job, his or her chances of succeeding in that job are increased if he or she is properly equipped with the necessary literacy and language abilities, educational credentials, and the other life tools described earlier. Without such tools, workers also typically can’t advance -- move to positions that offer better pay, benefits, job security, or working conditions. A lack of literacy, English fluency, self-confidence, and social skills also blocks workers from acquiring knowledge informally through interaction with co-workers and formally through participation in training programs and post-secondary education.

The Union County economy is negatively impacted when workers who are otherwise motivated and ready are held back from maximizing their potential in the workplace. The County’s efforts to build a world-class and secure transportation system, healthcare facilities able to care for an aging population, retail and hospitality centers to serve local and outside markets, safe and productive manufacturing plants, and new “green technology” initiatives will be hamstrung if the County’s workforce is not properly equipped. The following examples illustrate the particular basic skills and other career tools that Union County workers now need:

- **Retail and customer service workers:** The retail industry is one of the top employers in Union County. An estimated 31,750 employees will work in retail in 2014. Retail salespersons and customer-service representatives are among the occupations that will experience the most growth in Union County in the coming decade. Retail is also the industry where most workers get their first job. Entry-level retail jobs -- as cashiers, salesclerks, customer service personnel, and stockroom workers -- require significant basic skills (including oral communication, problem-solving, and specific forms of math)

as well as technical knowledge about the products being sold. Higher-level jobs in retail – as store managers, purchasing agents -- require even higher levels of these skills.⁷ These same kinds of skills are needed by customer service personnel in virtually all other industries – including financial services (banking and insurance), hospitality (hotel and restaurant), healthcare, transportation, and security.

- **Healthcare workers:** The healthcare industry is the largest employer of workers of any industry in Union County. An estimated 34,000 people will work in healthcare in 2014. It is expected to grow tremendously in the coming decades, with a 24.6 percent growth rate between 2004 and 2014. Healthcare employers are in great need of qualified workers for better-paying jobs in nursing and various technical areas. Lower-paying jobs (as home health aides and nursing assistants) will have high rates of growth, and these jobs require strong communication and problem-solving skills. Because many of these jobs are unionized, they provide opportunities for training and advancement. For workers to move into better-paying healthcare jobs, they need English fluency, technical math, a high school diploma, and often some specialized college-level education.⁸
- **Construction workers:** Immigrants make up large percentages of Union County's construction industry workforce, but they tend to hold jobs at the low-skilled and low-paying end of the industry. Nonetheless, construction is the highest-paying industry for the County's immigrants. Construction jobs will grow by about 8.7 percent between 2004 and 2014 as housing, transportation, and other construction grows. Better jobs in the industry – for both immigrants and non-immigrants -- require communication skills, technical math, and post-secondary training.⁹
- **Manufacturing workers:** The manufacturing industry in Union County has declined significantly since the 1980s, when Union County was the leading manufacturing center in New Jersey. Currently, about 35,500 Union County residents work in manufacturing jobs. When workers lose those jobs due to downsizing or plant shut-downs, it is difficult for them to move into similar jobs in other manufacturing companies. These workers often suddenly find themselves needing stronger literacy skills or English fluency to switch to new careers. Those manufacturing companies that have remained in the County have often adopted new technologies and work processes to allow them to produce high-quality, custom-ordered products in a hurry. Workers in these remaining manufacturing companies often now need new kinds of communication and technical skills to work in this changing industry.¹⁰
- **Transportation industry workers:** Union County is a hub for the transportation industry, with passenger and freight train, boat, air, truck, bus, and auto traffic using the county's roads, ports, airports, and rail systems to

transport people and goods around the county, to nearby states, and outside the U.S. There will be an estimated growth of 6.1 percent in transportation industry jobs between 2004 and 2014, with about 14,800 workers employed in that industry in 2014. The transportation industry is implementing training to ensure that transit workers are able to operate and maintain vehicles, serve customers, and provide reliable, safe service. For transit workers to participate in this training, perform their jobs safely and efficiently, and move beyond low-level jobs, they need higher levels of basic skills and English proficiency.¹¹

An important segment of the County's transportation industry is trucking, which moves goods into, out of, and around the County 24 hours a day. Motor vehicle drivers, which include operators of transit buses, school buses, heavy and light trucks, taxis, ambulances, and fork lifts, will have high rates of growth through 2014. Trucking companies offer opportunities for drivers to move into management or become owner-operators.¹² The transportation industry also is in great need of repair personnel (e.g., auto, truck, and bus mechanics; glass installers; body repair specialists) who can use computers to consult on-line manuals, order parts, and enter data for the many types of vehicles they are called on to maintain.¹³ These technicians also need to be able to participate in regular training on new technologies and environmental and safety issues.¹⁴

In many cases, these skilled transportation jobs are being filled by immigrants. Employers frequently state that many native-born young Union County residents don't want blue collar jobs, even if they offer better wages and job security than can be found in over-flooded white collar job markets. It can be argued that the transportation industry in Union County offers opportunities for good jobs to blue-collar workers that once were found in the industrial plants that have increasingly moved out of the County.¹⁵

Operate one's own business.

Employment policy and services typically focus on helping job seekers become employed in workplaces owned by others. However, self-employment is often a very real interest and option for many Union County residents, especially immigrants who arrive with significant entrepreneurial skills and experience and an interest in setting up their own businesses.

However, the success rate of small businesses is generally not good. To survive and thrive in competitive markets, potential entrepreneurs need particular basic skills and technical knowledge so they can navigate the services available to small businesspersons, get loans, keep financial records, market themselves, interact with English-speaking customers and suppliers, use computer software, and follow legal codes related to their business.¹⁶

Manage personal responsibilities.

To be able to take a job, participate regularly and actively, take advantage of promotional opportunities, and properly use benefits that are provided by employers, workers need to be able to manage a wide range of personal responsibilities. These include:

- Managing transportation, childcare, elder care, and housing;
- Maintaining one's own health and safety;
- Managing personal finances (including salaries and benefits);

These responsibilities require particular basic skills and various forms of technical knowledge.

Implications for Union County's economy

Union County still provides jobs which don't require sophisticated literacy skills, English fluency, or a secondary school diploma. However, those jobs tend to pay low wages, have limited benefits, and provide few opportunities for advancement through participation in post-secondary training. Employers state that they want and need to upgrade their operations to make them more competitive; they need well-prepared workers to use the new work processes and new technologies and to maintain the higher standards that these emerging workplaces require.

For the sake of low-skilled adults, their families, their communities, and their employers, Union County workforce stakeholders need to better understand the basic skills, technical knowledge, credentials, and other requirements of the County's emerging jobs and the readiness (or lack thereof) of the various worker populations who now live here. Such an understanding of the County's workforce challenges will be necessary if Union County is to ensure that its worker populations are equipped for the demands and opportunities of the jobs that will be opening up in the coming decade.

Part 2

Union County's Workforce Readiness Gaps

Introduction

Large numbers of Union County adults and out-of-school youth (16-to-21-year-olds who lack a high school diploma and are not enrolled in school) lack the basic skills to attain, retain, and succeed in the County's emerging workplaces. This has significant implications for those individuals, their families and communities, and for employers and the County's economy and tax-base.

School completion, language proficiency, and reading skills of Union County adults

Who are the adults and out-of-school youth who constitute Union County's workforce? And how equipped are they to respond to the demands of the County's workplaces? Data from the U.S. Census and other sources are provided below to help answer these questions.

Union County has approximately 331,148 individuals who are 18 to 65 years old, typically seen as "working age adults."

Large numbers of this worker population are blocked from maximizing their potential – and that of their workplaces and the County economy – by a lack of basic skills (including fluency in English) and secondary educational credentials.

- High school completion
 - Of the County's 331,148 18 to 65 years olds, approximately 57,860 individuals (17 percent) lack a high school diploma or equivalent;
 - 39 percent of these 57,860 individuals live below the poverty line.
 - Hispanic adults (37 percent) are much more likely to lack a high school diploma than Whites (16 percent), African-Americans (14 percent) and Asians (12 percent).
 - Two thirds of the 57,860 adults without a high school diploma are foreign born.
 - 50 percent of the 57,860 adults without a high school diploma are unemployed.

- English proficiency
 - Union County has approximately 144,000 immigrants who are between 18 and 65 years old. The County also has approximately 9,000 Puerto Rican-born adults who are in this age group. (Puerto Ricans are not counted as immigrants because they are U.S. citizens. The Puerto Rican population, however, shares many of the linguistic and educational characteristics of immigrants from Latin America.)
 - Of those 158,496 adult immigrants and Puerto Ricans, 77,199 (54 percent) speak English less than very well. These include 54,129 who speak Spanish as a first language, 19,033 who speak another Indo-European language, and 4,0387 speakers of Asian/Pacific languages.
 - Approximately 28,800 (20 percent) of the County’s population of immigrants between 18 and 64 entered the U.S. since 2000. (Newer arrivals tend to have lower English fluency than immigrants who arrived prior to 2000.)
 - Approximately 53,849 Union County adults over age 18 who live in linguistically isolated households. Of these, 35,957 (66 percent) speak Spanish as a first language, 14,213 (26 percent) speak another Indo European language, and 2,469 (5 percent) are speakers of Asian/Pacific languages.

- Reading skills

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy¹⁷ measured the ability of a cross-section of Americans to read prose text. When applied to Union County census data, the NAAL suggests that 177,097 County residents have no more than “basic” prose reading abilities. African American and Latino adults fall disproportionately into this category:

Racial/ethnic group	18-to-65 y.o. with “Below Basic” prose reading abilities	18-to-65 y.o. with “Basic” prose reading abilities	Total 18-to-65 y.o. with “Basic” or “Below Basic” prose reading abilities
White	7% (11,127)	25% (39,738)	32% (50,865)
African American	24% (16,690)	43% (29,903)	67% (46,593)
Latino	44% (36,426)	43% (35,598)	87% (72,024)
Asian/Pacific Islander	14% (2,317)	32% (5,298)	46% (7,615)
Total individuals	66,560	110,537	177,097

Adult populations which face particular challenges

Several populations have particular challenges in terms of their basic skills, English proficiency and high school completion rates. These include:

Out-of-school youth

At this writing, precise figures were not available from public education officials about the dropout rates of Union County public schools. There was also a lack of clarity about what the term “dropout rate” means. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that large numbers of students who enter public high schools in the County’s urban school districts do not graduate within four years and many of them never graduate at all.

These young people are often “disconnected,” participating neither in education nor in employment. These youth also are more likely to become entangled in the criminal justice system, become pregnant, and engage in behaviors which put their health at risk.

Those who enroll in GED preparation programs often find programs that are crowded and/or not designed to respond to the particular needs and interests of young people.

Immigrants

Latino immigrants in Plainfield

Plainfield, Union County’s second largest municipality, has experienced a 72 percent increase in its Spanish-speaking population since 1990. Currently, there are an estimated 12,000 Spanish-speaking individuals living in Plainfield (approximately 25 percent of the population). The actual number is likely higher, given that many immigrants were not counted in the 2000 Census. Many of these newer arrivals come with relatively few years of formal schooling from their home countries. This presents a challenge for the local schools, where 45 percent of public school children are now from Spanish-speaking homes.

About 30 percent of families of Plainfield schoolchildren speak a language other than English at home. Many of these homes are considered “linguistically isolated,” with no one in the home being fluent in English. When parents lack the English proficiency and educational background to work with their children’s teachers, it is difficult for the schools to integrate immigrant children into the school population and ensure their academic success. This is contributing to the high dropout rate in the city’s schools and to dangerous divisions between Latino and non-Latino youth.

Immigrants in Elizabeth

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, the City of Elizabeth ranked high on two major indicators of limited English language proficiency.

Among U.S. cities with populations of 100,000 or more, Elizabeth ranked number 10 in terms of the percentage of people five years old and older who spoke a language other than English at home. (An estimated 75,305 people - - 67.5 percent of the overall population -- fell in that category.) The city ranked ninth in terms of the five-year-old-and-older population who spoke English less than “very well.” (An estimated 41,068 individuals -- 36.8 of the city’s population – were in that group.) While many of these immigrants come to the U.S. with relatively higher levels of education, their limited English proficiency makes it difficult for them to participate effectively in work, family, and community roles.¹⁸

Haitian immigrants

Although Latinos are the largest and most visible immigrant population in Union County, there are also 8,355 Haitians in the County, with the largest concentrations in Elizabeth, Roselle, Linden, and Union. Many Haitians arrive not only without fluency in English but with limited or no literacy in their first language. This impacts adults’ abilities to ensure their children’s academic success. Community leaders are now particularly concerned about the growing problem of gang violence among Haitian youth. Some of these youth initially banded together for protection against harassment from other youth groups. However, these Haitian groups have now evolved into gangs engaged in criminal behavior.¹⁹ For the Haitian community, family literacy services and educational services targeted to youth are thus particularly important.

Refugees

The International Rescue Committee’s Elizabeth office serves about 250 refugees, who include Cubans, Meskitian Turks (Russian-speaking people from on the border between Turkey and Georgia), Ethiopians (whose men generally know English better than the women), and Eritrean women. These recent refugees and other former refugees face many obstacles which block them from integrating into the local culture and economy. These challenges include a lack of proficiency in English, little familiarity with U.S. culture and the various services and opportunities available to them, few financial resources, a lack of family and other support systems, a lack of understanding of how to manage personal responsibilities in a bewildering new society, traumatic experiences in their country of origin, a lack of confidence in their ability to engage in the new society, cultural practices which discourage women or other social groups from getting an education, a lack of educational credentials (either because they never earned them or they had to leave them behind), a lack of the occupational skills needed for U.S. jobs, and (for some) limited basic education in their first language.

Ex-offenders

There are currently almost 27,000 inmates housed in New Jersey state correctional facilities. Union County has the fifth largest number of inmates in state

prisons of New Jersey's 21 counties. An additional 950 inmates are housed in Union County Jail.

18 percent of state prison inmates are under the age of 25. 78 percent are between the ages of 25 and 54, considered prime working age. An estimated 75 percent of these inmates lack a high school diploma.

It costs the state an estimated \$32,400 per inmate per year to incarcerate these individuals.

14,000 of these inmates are released back into society each year. About 60 percent of these inmates return to prison within one year.

National research has shown that inmates are much less likely to return to prison if they have solid basic skills, job skills, and connections to jobs, ongoing education (especially a minimum of two years of post-secondary education), and a support system upon release.

Research and experience nationally and in New Jersey has shown that well-designed adult education programs integrated with job training, career planning, and other social services can help ex-offenders to successfully get their lives moving in a positive direction. Such services can significantly reduce the costs of incarceration and other criminal justice infrastructure. In addition to reducing the costs of incarceration, helping ex-offenders to stay out of prison also provides hope for inmates and their families, helps hard-to-employ ex-offenders to succeed in the workforce and become tax-paying citizens, and contributes to safer communities more conducive to economic development.

Older adults

About 138,083 Union County residents are between the ages of 45 and 65. Many of these older adults will remain in the workforce for anywhere from 5 to 25 more years. They need to be prepared to deal with new requirements in their current jobs, move into supervisory-level jobs, and to move to new workplaces if they wish or are forced to change jobs. Many employers are particularly interested in hiring older workers because of the skills and maturity they bring with them. However, a lack of particular skills (e.g., communication skills, computer skills), an educational or career plan, or self-confidence can prevent these mature workers from being successful in the county's emerging workplaces. These older workers also need to be able to manage the particular health, financial, housing, and other personal tasks that all older Americans face.

Adults with learning disabilities

Learning disabilities include dyslexia and other conditions which make the performance of reading, writing, speaking, listening, math, and other basic skills tasks difficult. Learning disabled adults can lead highly productive lives when they are able to compensate for their disabilities and build on their other strengths.

The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL)²⁰ states that estimates of the percentage of U.S. adults who have learning disabilities vary widely, from 3 to 15 percent. NIFL cites estimates that between 30 and 80 percent of low-literate U.S. adults could have a learning disability.

While the exact numbers of learning disabled adults in Union County is not known, this factor should be taken into account by planners of adult basic skills programs. Educational assessment, placement of individuals in appropriate classes designed for the learning disabled, teacher training: all of these steps are needed if adult education programs are to successfully help learning disabled adults successfully manage their disabilities.

Implications for Union County's economy

Thousands of Union County working-age adults are challenged by a lack of a high school credential, literacy skills, and English language proficiency. An effective workforce education system customized to the particular needs and abilities of these populations can help them participate more effectively in the County's economy.

Part 3

Union County's Current Workforce Education Programs

Introduction

Part 3 summarizes key information about the County's current efforts to fill these workforce skills gaps:

- *Numbers of participants enrolled in workforce education programs;*
- *Where those programs are based and the services they provide;*
- *How the programs are funded;*
- *The County's "adult education workforce;"*
- *Accomplishments of the County's workforce education programs;*
- *Challenges the county's adult basic skills education programs face.*

Numbers of participants enrolled in workforce education programs

Union County's publicly-funded adult basic skills education programs serve approximately 3661 adults per year. Of these:

- 866 (24 percent) are studying basic literacy skills,
- 245 (7 percent) are in GED test preparation classes, and
- 2550 (70 percent) are in English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction.

These numbers represent small percentages of the:

- 57,860 Union County 18 to 65 year olds who lack a high school diploma;
- 77,199 Union County 18 to 65 year olds who lack proficiency in English.

Where those programs are based and the services they provide

These services are provided primarily by public schools (Elizabeth and Linden), Union County College, community based organizations, Literacy Volunteers of Union County, the Union County Vocational-Technical Schools, and One Stop Career Centers. A small number of for-profit "proprietary" schools also offer basic skills training. These programs

constitute the County’s current workforce preparation opportunities for adults and out-of-school youth who lack literacy skills, English fluency, or a high school credential.

Most of these programs consider workforce preparation as an important focus of their activities, although many also help adults to prepare for family and civic roles. In addition to providing instruction in basic literacy, ESL, and GED test preparation, these programs also sometimes offer personal, academic, and career counseling; job placement and job skills training; citizenship preparation; parent education; health education; financial education; and/or computer training.

Examples of programs that mix adult basic education with workforce preparation include:

- The Retail Skills Center (at Jersey Gardens Mall) which provides specialized training in the basic skills workers need for entry-level jobs in the retail and other service industries);
- An apprenticeship training program operated by the County Vocational-Technical School, which helps women and minorities enter the construction trades;
- Basic skills training for incumbent workers in local workplaces (offered through UCC’s Industry-Business Institute);
- A new education program for ex-offenders at the County’s two Day Reporting Centers;
- UCC’s assessment centers for the GED exam and the National Work Readiness Credential Exam.

How the programs are funded

Union County’s adult education programs vary in how they are funded. Although they rely primarily on public funding, they also receive charitable donations, volunteer help, in-kind donations (of equipment, space), and-- in some cases – student or employer fees.

Key public funding includes:

Source	Recipient	Services Funded
<u>Federal:</u> Workforce Investment Act Title II (via NJDOLWD)	Union County ABLE Plus Consortium: UCC, Elizabeth and Linden Bd. Of Ed., Literacy Volunteers of Union County, UC Voc-Tech High School, Workforce Advantage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic literacy; • GED test prep; • ESL (including ESL to prepare for US Citizenship exam).
<u>Federal:</u> Workforce Investment Act Title I (via NJDOLWD)	UC One Stop Career Centers	Computerized job-related literacy instruction in Literacy Link computer labs.
<u>State:</u> NJDOLWD Customized		Basic skills instruction for incumbent workers, provided

Training		on company premises (includes Retail Skills Center at Jersey Gardens Mall)
<u>State and County:</u> GED testing	UCC's GED Testing Centers in Elizabeth and Plainfield	GED exam
<u>State and County:</u>	UC Vocational-Technical School	Apprenticeship program for women and minorities in construction trades

The county's "adult education workforce"

Unlike the county's K-12 and post-secondary education systems, adult basic skills programs tend to rely heavily on a part-time and volunteer "workforce." Few full-time jobs are available for instructors, administrators, staff trainers, researchers, evaluators, or curriculum developers. The quality of services suffers when staff turn over frequently and newcomers -- who lack prior training, experience to fall back on, or many opportunities for professional training -- have to learn their work on the job. Issues and practices that have been previously discussed, researched, and developed are often re-discovered as something new that should be discussed, researched, and developed.

Despite these significant obstacles, those wishing to professionalize the adult education field can point to some positive developments:

- New adult education professionals: The field is being replenished by newcomers who include both younger people (recent college graduates) and older adults (who are looking for second careers after years working in K-12 education or other fields). They see adult education as a career that offers unique rewards (i.e., the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives, meet people from different backgrounds, apply their creativity to a meaningful endeavor).
- Professional development opportunities: For 2007-2008, the ABLE Consortium has received extra funds to provide professional development opportunities for ABLE partner staff and instructors. Union County College is developing a new non-credit Professional Certificate Program for Adult Educators, drawing on similar college-level training programs around the U.S. Union County adult educators can attend conferences and workshops in nearby New York City. Instructors and administrators can also engage in "self study" and use web sites and print materials to get access to research, sample curricula, and other information to build their expertise.
- A core of experienced professionals: Despite high turnover of adult educators, a core of experienced professionals has remained in the field for many years. These adult educators have significant expertise, a historical memory of past efforts, and links to resources. They can play leadership roles in efforts to expand and improve the current system.

Accomplishments of the County's workforce education programs

Adult education programs can point to data showing positive academic achievements by those who persist in their studies. Limited-English-proficient immigrant adults are developing fluency in English, and English speakers are developing literacy skills and passing the GED exam and moving on to post-secondary education.

These adult learners are better able to help their children succeed in school, manage health and financial responsibilities, get employed and perform their jobs more efficiently and safely, integrate into the lives of their communities, and move on to higher education. Many immigrant adults have used civics education programs to pass the citizenship exam.

Many of these programs focus primarily on work-related outcomes – helping learners develop particular skills and credentials they need to get a job, perform their current job better, or move into higher levels of education and training required for career advancement.

Challenges the County's workforce education programs face

Despite the positive results of programs for those who persist and the infrastructure of supports that has been created for programs, the current collection of workforce education services in Union County faces considerable challenges, including:

- Thousands of adults – both immigrant and U.S.-born -- who lack the basic skills and other “life tools” that adults now need to participate beyond minimal levels in work, family, and community roles. These adults also tend to have multiple obstacles (e.g., health problems, childcare demands, work responsibilities, etc.) that prevent them from participating in programs.
- Heavy demand for adult education services: Programs report hundreds of people on waiting lists due to lack of classes. Many programs have simply stopped maintaining waiting lists because they know that they will not be able to serve anywhere near the number of people who want to enroll.
- Limited, tenuous, and hard-to-access funding: Programs report that their funding is inadequate and unpredictable, and requires administrators to constantly focus on fundraising and paperwork rather than program improvement. In some cases, funds are returned unused to funders by agencies not organized to use funding effectively or not able to produce required assessment data.
- Pressure to provide services in unrealistic timeframes and use “accountability measures” (especially standardized tests) that don't respond to the actual needs and

- interests of learners. This pushes programs to focus on raising student test scores on a test while ignoring the real-world learning needs that learners bring with them when the enroll.
- Policies which push low-skilled, hard-to-employ adults into employment without ensuring they also develop the basic skills and other life tools they need to succeed.
 - Meager support for adult education from stakeholders (e.g., groups that represent populations which have limited basic skills). Union County’s employers, labor unions, community and religious organizations, K-12 schools, criminal justice agencies, and other groups are impacted when thousands of Union County residents remain under-educated. With a few exceptions, these stakeholders currently are not involved in the County’s adult education efforts.
 - An under-developed adult education infrastructure: Examples include:
 - Cumbersome recruitment, referral, assessment, and placement procedures (which take resources that could be used for direct service);
 - Few professional development opportunities for administrators, instructors, or assessment specialists. (Unlike other professions, adult education agencies generally don’t require their personnel to meet agreed-upon standards and don’t provide training and other opportunities to enable practitioners to meet those standards);
 - Few opportunities to share (and purchase) curricula or other resources across programs;
 - Lack of well-equipped facilities that are open at times and locations accessible to learners;
 - Limited mechanisms to help lower-level students move into the next level of training. (For example, a learner in a GED class might need extra individualized tutoring to ensure his/her success. Learners could also benefit from clearly-defined career pathways which show them how to move into rewarding jobs in various industries.)
 - Limited investment in educational technologies for learners to use in adult education programs, other community settings, or in the home;
 - Inadequate coordination among programs, resulting in unproductive redundancy of some services and a lack of other needed services;
 - Waiting lists for education programs and GED testing centers.

Implications for workforce education practice and policy

The good news for planners of a countywide adult learning system is that Union County has a foundation of adult education programs and professionals to build on. However, existing programs serve only a small percentage of the county’s adults who are challenged by limited literacy skills, limited English proficiency, and a lack of a high school credential. It will be very important for planners and funders to understand what services currently exist, their strengths, and the challenges they face.

Part 4

Components of a More Effective Workforce Learning System for Union County

Introduction

While current workforce education programs have many positive features, they serve only small numbers of the County's job seekers and incumbent workers. These programs are hindered by a lack of resources, under-equipped staff and facilities, a reliance on limited instructional strategies, a lack of a guiding vision, and a lack of support from the stakeholders who have the most to benefit from a high quality workforce education system.

The many Union County adults who lack basic literacy skills, English-language fluency, or a high school credential will need to engage actively in multiple learning opportunities if they are to develop the skills, credentials, and other life tools they need for work, family, and civic roles. Adult learners will not only need to have access to high-quality adult education programs, but should also engage in self-study (i.e., focused learning outside the adult education program setting) and in "situated learning" (in which they will practice and refine their skills through by applying them in everyday situations at work and in the community).

Outlined below are key components of a more effective Union County workforce learning system.

Components of a more effective workforce education system

A better-coordinated, more effective workforce education system in Union County should have the following components:

Component #1: Needs assessment and planning at the County and program levels

A well-equipped planning team needs to be created at the County level which can, on an ongoing basis:

- clarify which jobs will be available in Union County in the coming decade and the knowledge, skills, credentials, and other career tools that workers will need to successfully perform those jobs.
- work with adult education and workforce development specialists to create career pathways which show stakeholders (workers, employers, labor unions, and service providers) what jobs are available, the skills and other career tools required for those jobs, and how they might develop those required tools and secure jobs.
- work with adult education and workforce development specialists to create industry-specific integrated service systems to help workers move into appropriate jobs in various industries. These systems will include educational and career assessment and counseling, instruction in basic skills and technical skills, credentialing and certification, and referrals to needed social services. The Retail Skills Center is attempting to build such an industry-specific career pathway system. Similar systems can be developed for transportation, tourism/hospitality, healthcare, and other key industries in the County.

Component #2: Adult education and workforce development programs that are equipped to work together to serve under-educated job seekers and incumbent workers

Currently adult education and workforce development agencies are often not in sync with each other, even though they often are serving essentially the same populations. These agencies need to reorganize themselves internally and also develop new relationships with each other, so that – working together – they can more efficiently help low skilled workers succeed in the workplace.

To move into better employment opportunities, many adult learners will need job counseling and help dealing with family responsibilities (e.g., childcare or eldercare, healthcare, transportation, housing) that otherwise can block them from taking or succeeding in a job. Adult education students must have access to appropriate case management staff to ensure that they develop well-organized strategies for moving toward their life goals. This is a key area in which adult educators and workforce development specialists can work together.

Adult education programs need to develop their capacity to focus on the work-related needs of learners. This might entail creating special worker education departments or units that can (a) use effective adult education practices to help learners succeed in the workplace and (b) work with workforce development agencies (such as the One Stop centers) and other important stakeholders (e.g., employers, labor unions).

Workforce development agencies, in turn, need to develop the expertise they need to (a) respond to the special needs of the many job seekers who are challenged by a lack of literacy skills, English fluency, or a high school credential and (b) work more effectively with adult education agencies.

Component #3: Use of evidence-based standards for work-related basic education

The current collection of adult education programs is spread very thin, trying to serve multiple learning needs of many different learner populations, while using many different instructional tools. The result is a hodgepodge of instructional approaches which have varying degrees of effectiveness.

Those programs that want to help learners develop the skills and credentials they need to get jobs or succeed in jobs should use practices that have been designed specifically for those purposes. The Equipped for the Future (EFF) standards, developed by the National Institute for Literacy and adopted by the State of New Jersey, can serve as a framework for Union County's workforce education system. EFF has identified the range of basic skills that adults need for worker roles and provides guidelines for effective work-related instruction. EFF also shows administrators and policy makers what they need to do to provide supports that instructors and learners need to succeed.

EFF already is the basis for the National Retail Federation Foundation sales and service curricula and the Work Readiness Credential assessment now being piloted by the State Employment and Training Commission. Though the EFF standards were officially adopted by the state in the early 2000s, little has been done to train adult educators and otherwise help and motivate them to really incorporate EFF into their day-to-day operations. In Union County, this could be done by:

- Clarifying for adult educators and workforce development specialists what EFF is and how EFF can guide workforce education efforts in the County;
- Providing training to administrative and instructional staff in the adult education and workforce development programs in the County;
- Supporting demonstration projects (See "Component #4," below) which use EFF standards to prepare various populations of workers for jobs in various industries.

Component #4: Demonstration projects to prepare various worker populations for jobs in various industries

Union County should create a number of demonstration projects which prepare various worker populations for jobs in various industries. Borrowing from the Retail Skills Center model, a number of demonstration programs might be established for retail, transportation, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, utilities, manufacturing, or others (e.g., "green technologies" which improve the County's environment and save energy and other resources).

Drawing on the planning described above under "Needs assessment and planning at the County and program levels," each project would provide educational and career assessment and counseling, instruction, and other support services to enable selected worker populations (e.g., out-of-school youth, older workers, English language learners, ex-offenders) to move into and succeed in jobs in those industries. These noncredit

educational services would be sequenced to help participants move systematically “up the skill ladder” required for particular jobs. In some cases, participants would move into college-credit programs. Though the specific content of instruction would vary from industry to industry, the basic multi-service model and many of the assessment and other tools could be essentially the same across industries.

Staff would be prepared and supported to provide services customized to particular industries and worker populations. A program for sales and service industries might, for example, develop specialized services for young people, older workers changing their careers, immigrants, or customer service personnel in particular industries which, while not retail per se, emphasize customer service skills for their workers (e.g., hotels and restaurants, financial services). A special “electronics academy” might be established to prepare workers for entry-level jobs as installers and repairers of electronic equipment, computers, or electrical equipment in multiple industries (e.g., utilities, transportation, financial services, healthcare, security) that use such equipment. As participants in demonstration projects, staff would share what they learn with others in the County and State who want to provide similar services.

Component #5: Professional development opportunities to build a cadre of workforce education professionals

Building a high-quality workforce education system will require a core of experienced, trained, full-time professional adult educators. These people will provide leadership as services are expanded and improved. Existing professionals need to be supported with training, adequate salaries and benefits, and opportunities to share what they know with newcomers. New professionals need to be recruited, trained, and otherwise given opportunities to move into the field with some assurance that they and their work will be supported.

In addition to these full-time professionals, part-time professionals and volunteers also have important roles to play. To build this “adult education workforce,” special efforts should be made to recruit newcomers from the following sources:

- family members, friends, and co-workers of adult learners: The field should recognize that many adult learners have friends and family members who might want to help people who are close to them to improve their basic skills. These friends and family members can provide individualized tutoring or might help out in programs based in their local communities. These “helpers” might have benefited from a good education and now want to “give back.”
- college students: Most colleges encourage their students to get involved in some kind of community service activities. Colleges in Union County should consider setting up service learning programs which give their students opportunities to get involved in adult literacy efforts. This will allow college students to provide a service to their communities while developing skills (e.g., in teaching) and knowledge

(e.g., a better understanding of the conditions in which adult learners live and adult education programs operate) they can use in their future professional and personal lives. Some of these college students might consider working in the adult education field after they graduate.

- professionals who have expertise in non-teaching areas such as fundraising, public relations, technologies, healthcare, psychological counseling, legal issues, and particular industries. These people can provide technical assistance to adult education program staff and students.
- retirees who can volunteer as teacher's aides, organizers of special events (e.g., graduation parties) and projects (e.g., daycare for students' children, programs to provide job seekers with suitable clothing), and administrative assistants (e.g., to help with registering of students, paperwork).
- former adult education students: Many graduates of adult education programs are interested in staying connected to the adult education field. They can do so by getting volunteer or paid positions as teacher's assistants or administrative support staff. (AmeriCorps and other volunteer programs might support such involvement of former adult education students.) In so doing, they can draw on their own experience as learners to ensure that programs meet student needs. These former students can also develop job skills that they can use in other careers they might want to pursue in education, social services, or other fields.

Component #6: A new emphasis on learning both inside and outside the classroom

Those wishing to build an effective workforce education system need to think outside the usual "box" that equates "learning" with "program." Research in adult education and workplace learning now recognize that low-skilled adults need to not only develop skills and knowledge through formally-organized instruction but through self-study and everyday practice in real situations ("situated learning"). These three venues are described below:

Program-based learning: For the Union County adults who lack basic literacy skills, English-language fluency, or a high school credential, it will be very important for them to participate in individual, group, and/or computer-assisted instruction provided by adult education programs. Such instruction can provide a foundation of skills and knowledge, an educational plan, self-confidence, connections to educational resources for ongoing skill development outside the program, and links to job, family, and community resources. With this foundation, learners can also further develop their skills, knowledge, and self-confidence outside the program setting through self-study and situated learning.

Self-study: While face-to-face program-based learning is important for adults who want to improve their literacy skills and/or English fluency, it can at best provide a limited number of hours of instruction for any single learner each week. To really

master what they are taught in a program setting, learners have to continually use and develop their skills and knowledge outside formal instructional settings. Self-study is a very important strategy which all adult learners – whether they are in a formal education program or not – should engage in.

“Self-study” can take many forms, including use of print materials; use of computers and other electronic technologies; and informal tutoring or peer-learning sessions with family members, friends, and/or co-workers.²¹ Learners can tap into a number of existing self-study resources, including library collections, print publications (including newspapers), educational videos, and web-based learning (including use of educational web sites and downloading of recordings onto MP3 players).

Situated learning: Every day in Union County, adults build their literacy skills, English-language fluency, technical knowledge, and self-confidence by taking on the challenges of applying what they know to tasks they face as workers, family members, and community members and citizens. They typically do so without consciously being aware that, by simply engaging in everyday activities, they are developing their skills and knowledge.

Union County can help its under-educated adults build their skills through everyday situated learning by configuring itself as a “learning community” in which all community institutions – workplaces, union halls, K-12 schools, healthcare providers, retail establishments, and others -- make themselves more “adult learner” friendly and thereby make it easier for adult learners to engage in situated learning in those institutions. This idea is beginning to take hold around the U.S., as – for example – hospitals make their services more accessible to limited English proficient patients and K-12 schools set up special parent education programs to help lower-skilled parents to navigate the school system. Some employers have likewise adopted Peter Senge’s concept of “the learning organization” and re-designed training sessions, team meetings, and documents to make them more accessible to workers who lack literacy skills or English fluency. Retailers have taken a lead on this for years by hiring bilingual salespeople, using adaptive technologies (e.g., scanners), and printing marketing messages in multiple languages, to make them more accessible to workers and/or customers who might lack English fluency or literacy skills. These kinds of changes to how institutions work and communicate with their customers and workforce can create environments in which under-educated adults feel welcomed and actively develop the skills they have through situated learning.

Component #7: Easily accessible and well-equipped facilities

Workforce education programs need to find ways to make themselves accessible to the adults they want to serve. Greater emphasis should be placed on creating workplace programs, to enable workers to study before or after work or during break-times. (The

Retail Skills Center is a variation on this model, being located in a shopping mall which RSC students can use as a “learning lab” to observe how the retail industry works.) Program planners should also consider locating adult education programs in K-12 schools (to allow parents to attend the same school their children attend) and in neighborhoods where large numbers of potential adult learners live. Program services should be scheduled at times (e.g., evenings, weekends) when adults are available and, if possible, provide childcare to make it easier for parents to participate. And programs should help learners get access to distance learning opportunities which they can use outside normal program hours to extend the number of hours they devote to learning.

Adult education programs also need to be well-equipped with necessary learning technologies (e.g., computers, projectors, cameras, copy machines) and space for counseling and other private activities. And programs should take a page from library systems that are designing themselves to make adults feel welcomed and comfortable (i.e., with comfortable furniture, attractive décor, “non-institutional” lighting, and even coffee bars).

Component #8: Effective uses of computers and other technologies for instructional and administrative purposes:

Program planners need to recognize that knowledge of basic computer operations (e.g., web browsing, email, word-processing, etc.) is now a basic skill for virtually all adults. Computer skills are needed for them to move ahead with formal education and informal learning and for many tasks they face as workers, consumers, users of the healthcare system, and community members. Well-equipped computer classrooms will be necessary in most programs, and new efforts should be made to get low-cost computers (including refurbished donated computers) into the homes of adult learners, to help them continue their learning outside program contexts and to provide learning opportunities to their family members, as well. Equipping adult education programs with learning technologies is something that the County’s technology firms and the thousands of technology-savvy Union County residents (e.g., college students, information-technology professionals) can help with.

Component #9: Effective recruitment and retention strategies

Adult education programs must develop strategies for:

- Recruiting learners

If programs get the resources they need to expand and strengthen their services, they will need to refine the strategies they need for recruiting students. This might include a County-wide recruitment system, which uses the Internet, well-designed flyers (in multiple languages), mailings, a directory, and perhaps a central hotline. These strategies can better inform the community about available services and make it easier for adults to enroll. Employers, social service providers, labor unions, and other institutions can be shown how to get the word out about available programs and encourage and support their workers/clients/members to take advantage of adult education programs.

- Retaining learners and helping them to succeed
Adult education programs must recognize why so many adults drop out of programs before making significant learning gains. These factors include personal needs and responsibilities (e.g., healthcare, transportation, childcare), negative history with education, and programs that don't match student needs. Programs need to put dropout-prevention strategies in place (e.g., more accessible facilities, case management, student-led support groups and social activities, more relevant curricula). These strategies should be designed to help staff understand student needs, encourage learners, ensure that learners have a plan for moving ahead, and help them deal with factors that might otherwise lead to irregular attendance or dropping out.

Implications for workforce education policy

Building an effective workforce education system in Union County will require more than just “more resources.” Adult education, economic development, and workforce development leaders need to have a vision for what an effective County-level workforce learning system should consist of. These leaders then need to have the time, expertise, authority, collaborative spirit, and resources to implement such a vision.

Part 5

How Stakeholders Can Help Build an Effective Workforce Learning System in Union County

Introduction

Building a more effective workforce education system will require the active involvement of not just the adult education providers who now operate Union County's adult basic skills programs. Other institutions also have important roles to play, because they are impacted by the fact that so many of the County's adults and out-of-school youth lack literacy skills, English fluency, or a secondary school credential.

These stakeholders include employers, labor unions, healthcare providers, K-12 schools, social-service providers and community- and faith-based organizations, the criminal justice system, businesses, colleges and universities, public- and private-sector funders, and government and community leaders.

This chapter describes why these stakeholders should get involved in the building of a Union County workforce education system and how they can – individually and collectively – do so.

Who Are the Stakeholders and Why Do They Need to Be Involved?

Building a more effective workforce education system will require the active involvement of not just the adult education providers who now operate Union County's adult basic skills programs. Other institutions also have important roles to play, because they are impacted by the fact that so many of adults and out-of-school youth lack literacy skills, English fluency, or a secondary school credential needed in the County's workplaces. Although virtually all public and private institutions have a stake in building a more effective workforce education system, outlined below are key stakeholders who should see this as a priority:

- Employers are impacted when they cannot find employees who can perform required job tasks productively and safely and meet industry and government standards. Employees commonly cite the need for workers who can communicate clearly with customers, co-workers, and supervisors; handle technologies; understand and manage their benefits; participate in ongoing technical training; and be able to move to higher levels of responsibility.
- Labor unions want to ensure that their members are prepared to respond to changing job demands, qualify for employment opportunities, manage their benefits, and understand their rights as workers.

- Social service providers and community-based and faith-based organizations are frequently blocked from helping their clients move to economic self-reliance by the fact that so many of their clients lack necessary fundamental skills and educational credentials.
- The criminal justice system – which includes the courts, police, prisons, and other agencies – typically must deal with adults and out-of-school youth who lack literacy skills. An estimated 75 percent of Union County ex-offenders lack a high school diploma. This lack of essential skills and educational credentials is a major impediment to reducing the cycle and high costs of criminal recidivism and reincarceration. If ex-offenders are to break this cycle, they need to be able to secure and succeed in living wage employment.
- Adult education providers: Adult education providers obviously have a stake in strengthening and improving current services. They have much to contribute to this discussion, as they can inform other stakeholders about what learners need, areas of the current system that need strengthening, and new initiatives that might be undertaken. Adult educators can also steer stakeholders away from ineffective ideas.

What Stakeholders Can Do in a Three-Year Systems-Reform Initiative

The above stakeholders have roles to play in a collective three-year initiative to build a more effective workforce education system for Union County. This initiative can be broken into the following steps:

Year 1: Planning and implementation of initial demonstration projects

The Workforce Investment Board can create a project team that will:

- Assess the workforce education needs and capacities of key industries.
Borrowing from the recent Heldrich Center report and other documentation, the planning team can clarify:
 - The workforce education needs of several key industries in the County. Industries might include retail, transportation, financial services, healthcare, hospitality, utilities, manufacturing, or others.
 - Resources already in place that might be used to respond to those needs;
 - A small number of industries to focus initial demonstration projects on. (That is, which industries have needs that can be focused on in Year 1, and which of those industries is prepared to participate in a demonstration project to respond to those needs?)
- Plan, implement, and evaluate an initial round of demonstration projects.
These projects will:

- Serve the priority industries identified through the above needs assessment;
 - Customize services to the needs of particular worker populations that want to work in those target industries or are already doing so. (Populations might include out-of-school youth, older workers, immigrants, people with disabilities, or ex-offenders.)
 - Develop educational resources (e.g., curricula in such areas as technical math, customer service skills, basic computer skills) that are relevant for the above industries and populations but which can then be adapted for other industries and populations, as well.
- Build stakeholder involvement.
The project team will meet with representatives of various industries to better understand their workforce needs and identify ways that those representatives can get involved in the above demonstration projects. These stakeholders can:
 - Help in project planning;
 - Encourage their incumbent workforce to participate in the program;
 - Be willing to consider program graduates as potential employees;
 - Provide space, equipment, resource persons, and other in-kind supports;
 - Contribute to a fund to support the demonstration projects.
 - Build the infrastructure required for high-quality services.
The project team will ensure that the infrastructure described in Part 3 is in place. This infrastructure includes staff, facilities, and procedures required for high-quality workforce education programs. This infrastructure is vital for these demonstration projects to move ahead promptly and efficiently, so that high-quality services are provided, results can be demonstrated, and effective practices identified.

Years 2 and 3: Continuous improvement of initial demonstration projects, creation of new projects, and documentation and dissemination of lessons learned.

In Years 2 and 3, the project team will:

- Continue the initial demonstration projects, evaluate them, and improve and expand them based on that evaluation.
- Create new demonstration projects, using the process outlined in Year 1 above.
- Document and disseminate the results, products, and lessons learned for each demonstration project, to create a collection of resources for ongoing provision of high-quality workforce education services.

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