

Forum

Adult Education for the 21st Century

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Adult education, as many other fields of education, is experiencing transformation. Those who have been involved in adult education will recall when the primary focus of the Pennsylvania Department of Education was on building the capacity of programs in the Commonwealth to provide basic education services to adults. The early pioneers were the “builders” of adult education services whose commitment and enthusiasm helped to draw attention to lifelong learning, especially to those who lacked basic education and literacy skills. The emphasis of early state leaders was to secure money to fund services for educationally disadvantaged adults and to find agencies that were qualified to educate low skilled adults. Those efforts were fruitful, as evidenced by the growth in the number of adult education providers in the Commonwealth and the number of adults who participate in educational programs or services. In the past success was largely judged by two factors: the number of agencies providing services and the number of adults enrolled in programs.

Today administrators of adult education programs are experiencing pressures of a changing nature. Not only are administrators faced with how to meet the literacy needs that far outweigh available resources, but they are being challenged on the merit of the services they deliver. Hard questions are being asked about what impact adult education services have on the lives of those adults who receive them. What happens to adults who enroll in adult education programs? Are they better prepared for the workforce? Do they participate more fully in their rights and responsibilities as citizens? Do they participate more fully in their children’s education?

On another front the very nature of what adult educators teach and what adult students learn is being debated. What skills should be taught to assist learners to compete in the job market? What basic skills do employers identify that workers need for global competitiveness? How can we tell if adult students are learning identified skills? How do we certify that adults indeed possess these skills?

These issues are being raised as a result of social, political, and

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educational changes that are transforming our country and our Commonwealth. As this article went to press, the United States Congress was deliberating sweeping changes in the way education and job training services will be provided to youth and adults. Up to 100 separate programs are likely to be combined into a single grant program to states designed to improve the country's workforce. While the specifics of the legislation are uncertain, several trends are likely to emerge.

The new block grant will shift considerable decision making to the state level. States will have the flexibility to design workforce development systems tailored to meet their individual economic development goals. Programs and services will be the result of planning among state agencies, local government, business and industry, and others. The new legislation is likely to require accountability measures of states and emphasize performance as a prerequisite to funding. Current proposals also call for significant decreases in federal funds over what is currently available, and federal participation is likely to continue to decline following the initial year of funding. Proposed changes to the welfare system will further affect educational programs for adults. It is likely that the federal government will require states to move large numbers of adults from welfare rolls into work or work-related activities. The welfare system's ability to continue to provide highly specific education programs to welfare clients may be affected. Current welfare reform proposals may increase the number of adults seeking to improve their basic skills through participation in adult education programs.

In September, 1995, the United States General Accounting Office issued a report entitled, *Adult Education: Measuring Program Results Has Been Challenging*. The report acknowledged that deficient literacy skills are not just an individual concern but that literacy problems threaten the nation's economy, which depends on increasingly high levels of workplace skills to remain competitive in a global marketplace. One of the principle findings of the report was that ensuring program results is difficult. Program evaluation, in large part, depends on having valid assessment instruments and accurate program data. The report concluded that the types of skills and knowledge needed to be considered literate are not clear, and states do not have sufficient direction for measuring results. Research has also questioned the validity and appropriateness of the student assessment used in adult education programs and, therefore, the usefulness of the data generated from these assessments. Various states have launched full-scale efforts to create effective accountability systems and to answer the critical questions posed by reports such as these.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education's Bureau of Adult Basic

and Literacy Education is preparing for the future of adult education in several ways. The department's mission is to ensure the best education for its citizens. Focusing on schools, teaching, learning, and students ensures that learners of all ages will remain central to the mission of quality education.

Focusing on education as a part of economic development and competitiveness will provide educational programs that meet the Commonwealth's needs for the 21st Century. The Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education has undertaken a quality improvement initiative called Educational Quality for Adult Literacy (EQUAL) that is designed to improve local program evaluation, create state performance standards for adult education and literacy programs, and restructure the adult education professional development system to better support local program improvement needs. The expected outcome is an accountability system that focuses on what adults know and can do as a result of educational intervention. Project activities are conducted with local pilot sites overseen by an advisory committee comprised of local program administrators and representatives of related education and job-training programs. Observations made by the pilot participants have resulted in local programs changing practices to improve learner outcomes, curriculum, and instruction. These pilot programs have also provided valuable insights on assessment and professional development needs for improved accountability and program performance. By approaching a statewide accountability system based on actual local program practices, the bureau will build the capacity for local programs to use high quality program evaluation to compete for resources in a new funding environment.

The need to reform adult education and to answer pressing questions about what adults need to know and do to be successful workers, parents, and citizens requires intensive effort. The Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education has responded by focusing its resources to support its reform efforts. In addition to creating performance standards that measure student achievement, the bureau is sponsoring several other initiatives to support local improvement efforts.

The bureau is reorganizing its professional development system to highlight the mission of providing professional development opportunities that result in learners enhancing their skills and abilities. Focusing on the importance of improving teaching and learning as a primary means of meeting the mission of professional development is consistent with the philosophy of the Pennsylvania Department of Education. The Regional Professional Development System will deliver training to local practitioners in such core content areas as "linking assessment and instruction" and

“cooperative learning.” Professional development opportunities are being expanded to include the emerging practices of practitioner inquiry and action research. The bureau also is creating a listing of learner competencies, developing an appropriate manner to assess those competencies, and providing statewide training to implement competency-based assessment. Through the use of practitioner technology networks adult educators will develop the skills needed to integrate technology into their classrooms and to expand professional development opportunities through on-line technology. Additionally, other demonstration projects are being funded to expand options to adult learners, including secondary high school diploma programs and school-to-work opportunities.

The bureau is committed to promoting adult education reform to meet the challenges of the future. Local adult education administrators will meet these challenges in this dynamic period of revitalization and improvement in order to prepare Pennsylvania’s citizens as workers, parents, and citizens.