

# **A Balancing Act:**

## **Learner and Program Needs Versus Policy Requirements**



**A Pre-Conference Leadership Institute  
of the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning**

**April 13, 2000**

**Report Prepared by Paul Jurmo, Ed.D.**

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## ***Executive Summary***

### **About the Institute . . .**

On April 13, 2000, sixty adult educators and policy makers gathered for a half-day Leadership Institute organized by the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning. Participants focused on how New Jersey adult educators can respond to the challenges and opportunities represented by new federal and state policies.

A panel of national experts was followed by special interest group discussions focusing on policy implications for adult basic skills and GED programs, high school diploma programs, ESL programs, and work-related adult education programs.

### **What we said**

Although there was no absolute consensus on the many issues discussed, summarized below are common themes raised during this event:

- New Jersey has several types of adult education programs, including basic literacy, GED and high school diploma, English as a second language, and work-related adult education programs. Participants in these programs come with a wide range of backgrounds, skill levels, needs, and interests. These diverse learners require a well-organized system of services which enable learners to move to higher levels of skill and opportunity.
- Federal (especially the Workforce Investment Act and National Reporting System) and state (e.g., New Jersey's new state plan for adult education) policies are pushing adult education programs to help learners either get, retain, or move up in a job; help their children with their schoolwork; or earn a GED or high school diploma. These policies have emerged in response to a number of economic, social, and political trends.
- These new policies are not always in sync with the outcomes that learners need to, hope to, or can realistically achieve. Policy makers and practitioners must get to know the adult learners they are trying to serve, so adult education services can be focused on what learners really need and want.

- Many programs already feel overwhelmed trying to serve their learners with the limited resources and time available to them. The new policies could add additional burdens to programs. Some programs feel they will be forced to focus on irrelevant goals and gather and report irrelevant data, using inappropriate assessment tools. Rather than being seen as a means for improving programs, assessment might end up being seen by adult educators as irrelevant or as a distraction or threat.
- Policy makers must understand the constraints that adult learners and adult educators operate under. Learners and programs should be held to high standards. However, those standards must be relevant to learners' real needs and realistic, given the constraints that learners and programs face. It's not enough to set higher standards if learners continue to face obstacles which inhibit their success and programs lack the staff, facilities, and other tools needed to create high-quality programs.
- Experience around the United States suggests that there is in fact greater flexibility in the new federal policies than many adult educators might realize. Adult educators in New Jersey and other states need to work with adult learners and policy makers to clarify the actual motivations of learners and the potential outcomes of adult education. From there, they can develop intensive, high-quality learning opportunities and support services and assessment tools which are relevant to both learners and policy makers. Along with these improvements must come professional development opportunities to develop the expertise and numbers of adult education staff.
- This work has great potential for transforming our current adult education programs into a high-quality system characterized by intensive, relevant, effective instruction and support services. It will require a commitment by adult educators and policy makers, forums (e.g., task forces, a state council, conferences) where these issues can be discussed further and new solutions developed (drawing on work done not only in New Jersey but in other state and national standards initiatives), and an open-minded spirit of dialogue and continuous improvement.
- Adult education is an under-recognized, under-supported field. Those who believe in lifelong learning need to become advocates and educate policy makers and others about the needs -- and potential -- of adult learners and adult education. This is why it is important for us to identify relevant goals and to develop effective assessment and evaluation tools. This will let us document both (a) what our learners and programs are achieving and (b) what needs to be in place for learners and adult education programs to succeed.

## ***Full Report***

### **Objectives of the Institute**

On April 13, 2000, the New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning (NJALL) hosted a Pre-Conference Leadership Institute at the Marriott Hotel in Somerset, New Jersey. Titled “A Balancing Act: Learner and Program Needs Versus Policy Requirements,” this half-day event was designed to enable sixty adult educators and state-level decision makers to:

- 1. understand what new federal and state policies are saying adult education programs should do to define goals and document and report results;*
- 2. analyze what New Jersey adult education programs are in fact doing in terms of goal-setting, individual assessment, and program evaluation;*
- 3. identify steps that state-level decision-makers and others can take to develop an effective system for (a) targeting adult education programs to diverse needs and (b) capturing what programs are achieving and teaching us about effective adult education.*
- 4. build relationships for future collaboration.*

NJALL board member Paul Jurmo has prepared this report to summarize key findings and decisions made at the Institute. This report will be widely circulated to state- and local-level decision-makers around the state to ensure that necessary follow-up actions are taken to strengthen adult education in New Jersey.

### **How the day was planned**

Planning for this event began in fall 1999 and was carried out by NJALL’s Conference Committee. Headed by NJALL President Marian Eberly and with the help of consultant Elyse Barbell Rudolph, the Committee communicated regularly via e-mail, fax, telephone, and in-person meetings. Meeting space and meals for the Committee were provided by Schering Plough, the employer of NJALL board member Bernadette Beglin.

NJALL is grateful for the hard work of this Committee and for Schering Plough’s significant in-kind support. We also thank our panelists -- Mary Beth Bingman, Debby D’Amico, Bob Bickerton, and Jim Bederka -- for bringing valuable insights and information for us to consider.

## **What the panelists and participants said**

The Institute opened with greetings from NJALL President Marian Eberly and introductory remarks by facilitator Debby D'Amico explaining the Institute's purposes and schedule of activities. (Debby is an NJALL board member with considerable experience in the issues which the Institute was to focus on.)

### **Opening panel**

This welcome was followed by a panel of national- and state-level experts who reviewed how the issues of goals, standards, individual assessment, and program evaluation are now being dealt with by federal and New Jersey state agencies. They also made some recommendations for how the field might create new ways of looking at how these important components of effective adult education systems. Here are some highlights of their presentations.

Mary Beth Bingman (researcher at the Center for Literacy Studies at the University of Tennessee) described findings of a paper which she recently prepared for the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. (See "Recommended Readings.")

- Both policy makers and practitioners presumably start with goals when setting policies and planning program services. The goals set by the Workforce Investment Act are "social" goals, to help society resolve particular economic and other problems. These problems have emerged in the midst of major changes in the national and world economy and from increased immigration and other social factors.
- Policy makers are also being pushed politically to be more "accountable," to demonstrate that government investments in fact produce the results promised for them.
- Adult education also is feeling the pressure for accountability now being felt by schools, where "raising test scores" and other outcomes are promoted.
- Within the adult literacy field, the definition of basic skills has expanded, to include a broader range of skills and higher levels of skills.
- These factors underlie the Workforce Investment Act's and the National Reporting System's emphasis on setting clear goals and standards for adult education programs.
- Earlier in the 1990s, programs were considered to have high quality if they included what was considered the components of good practice. Programs also were more focused on helping learners meet goals defined by the learners themselves. More recently, quality is defined less by process than by outcome. Under the federal Workforce Investment Act, programs are now expected to produce outcomes to demonstrate their value, and those outcomes are more narrowly defined, with an emphasis on work-related outcomes like improving the learners' employment status (i.e., getting a job or

promotion). (Other goals focus on enabling parents get more involved in their children's schooling and enabling learners to complete secondary school.)

- As of July 1, 2000, states will begin reporting to Congress whether and how their adult education programs are meeting these goals.

- Research at the University of Tennessee suggests that learners in adult literacy programs often cite kinds of outcomes from their participation which differ from what federal and state policies are now calling for. For example:

- Although employment-related outcomes were sometimes cited, many learners are -- due to age, already having a job they are satisfied with, or other reasons -- not concerned about getting or holding a job.

- Many lower-level learners did not get a high school diploma, primarily because they were starting out at a very low level of literacy skill and thus required longer and more-specialized education than many adult education programs can provide.

- Many learners who are parents were involved in their children's education, but many of those same parents had already been involved with their children's schools before ever joining the literacy program.

- Many learners cited changes in day-to-day literacy behaviors and in their self-esteem (or willingness to try new things) as valuable outcomes of their participation in a literacy program.

These findings suggest that (a) adult learners come to their programs with a wide range of valuable goals; (b) while the outcomes called for by the Workforce Investment Act are for many learners relevant, they are for many learners not relevant and overlook other valuable goals which learners might have; and (c) it is important for those funding and planning adult education programs to talk with learners to understand what programs should focus on.

- States have some flexibility in how they define and measure goals. States can set up their own accountability systems to include "secondary measures." States can also use a variety of types of measurement systems and don't necessarily need to use standardized, multiple-choice tests. (For example, Ohio is looking into using portfolio assessment systems.)

- There is also some possibility that current policy will change beyond the goals and measuring systems represented in the Workforce Investment Act and National Reporting System. (For example, the Equipped for the Future initiative of the National Institute for Literacy defines literacy skills in a broader way and might be incorporated into future state and federal policies.)

Debby D'Amico described elements of New Jersey's new, draft adult education plan, including:

- The state plan is concerned with the same kinds of issues (of goals, accountability, measures, etc.) which this Institute is focusing on and which adult educators in other states and at the federal level are struggling with.
- New Jersey, like other states, has millions of adults at low literacy levels, making them unprepared for the demands of the new workplace and to fulfill their roles as family members and citizens.
- In New Jersey (as in other states), adult education programs are expected to improve learners' literacy skills, help people get jobs and move up in jobs, and earn high school diplomas or GED. Programs will be evaluated in terms of whether they meet these goals. Learners will have to show progress in their skills according to a scale set by the state.
- There is no single assessment instrument required of all programs in New Jersey. In New York State, programs are now being asked to use the TABE and NYSPLACE assessment instruments for the next year. During that year, the State Education Department will evaluate the effectiveness of those instruments and of other possible standardized instruments. After one year, the state will re-think how assessment will be done. A similar process might be used in New Jersey, with the new State Council on Adult Education taking a lead and with input from the field.
- We should be trying to create a ladder of opportunity for adult learners to use to advance to higher levels of skill and opportunity. This is in keeping with American principles of opportunity. It should be arrived at through an American-style process which allows for democratic decision-making and which awards programs for high-quality work.

Jim Bederka (Bureau Chief, Office of Customized Training, New Jersey Department of Labor) said:

- The primary goal of the Office of Customized Training in the New Jersey Department of Labor is to create and retain high-wage jobs in the state.
- A recent evaluation conducted by the John J. Heldrich Center at Rutgers University indicated that the Office's Quick Start ESL program has been successful. This program requires companies to pay workers while they participate in classes.
- Other key findings of the Heldrich Center evaluation: (a) It is important to document entry-level data for learners (so program impact can be measured) and (b) it is vital to make it clear to businesses up-front just what is expected of them.

Bob Bickerton (Massachusetts State Director of Adult Education) discussed the implications (challenges and potential) of the Workforce Investment Act and related federal policies:

- Imbedded in today’s discussion is this question: “Is there an inherent conflict between the new federal policies (Workforce Investment Act and National Reporting System) and good practice?” Bob’s response: “Not necessarily.”
- We need to consider whether these policies represent barriers or opportunities. It is up to us to answer that question, as there is enormous flexibility in what we can do under WIA.
- Employability and family literacy are two common needs identified by adult learners. However, WIA defines these goals too narrowly. Originally, the WIA was going to be broader, but the religious right (including Phyllis Schafley) opposed what they considered government interference.
- We need to decide: Are we implementing a vision or a statute?
- In Massachusetts, the key question is: “To whom are we accountable?” The answer in Massachusetts is: ” the students.”
- If we believe that adult learners are our primary customers, then we need to look at learner needs and motivations when setting goals. (For many years, Massachusetts has asked learners to articulate their goals.)
- Useful outcomes to measure include:
  - Student participation (retention)
  - Learning gains
  - Goal accomplishment
- If we try to measure these outcomes, we should keep in mind:
  - It is difficult to measure learning gains in a meaningful way.
  - Student participation is easier to measure, but we need to look at population sub-groups and not just at aggregate data. (Massachusetts is moving away from aggregate reporting.) This will help us to be sure that programs aren’t just “creaming” (taking the easiest to serve).
  - We need to set high expectations for learners.
  - Validity and reliability of assessments are key. We need to consider whether standardized tests (like TABE) really measure what programs are trying to do.

- Programs should focus on serving learners, not worrying about federal requirements. The state needs to define the universe of learner needs and track progress on them.
- It is hard to decide what is meaningful to report.
- Accountability should not be a top-down discussion. (In Massachusetts and New York State, practitioners have had opportunities to give input into state planning.)
- Reporting should include adherence to performance standards. Massachusetts developed guidelines for adult education (Visit “[www.doe.mass.edu/acls](http://www.doe.mass.edu/acls)” and go to “ABE Guidelines.”) These guidelines show commitment to quality. This emphasis on quality has helped convince policy makers to increase funding for adult education. (Funding in Massachusetts has increased 800 percent since 1995. 25 percent of these funds go to paying for administration.)

### **Special Interest Group discussions**

After the above panel, participants broke into Special Interest Groups organized by adult education program type. These included: basic literacy and GED, English as a second language programs, adult high schools, and work-related basic skills programs (for incumbent workers and for the unemployed).

Each group was asked to discuss these questions:

- 1. Whom do you serve in your program? How are goals set? What outcomes are you looking for?*
- 2. What kinds of data do you collect? How do you collect the data (standardized tests, portfolios, etc.)?*
- 3. Who uses the resulting data (your staff, your learners, your funders)? What do they use the data for?*
- 4. How will your assessment and evaluation procedures change under the new federal and state policies for adult education?*
- 5. What might be done to improve how New Jersey adult education programs set goals, measure progress, and report outcomes and program needs?*

Summarized below are the key responses from each group:

#### **Basic literacy/GED programs**

- Basic literacy/GED programs serve a wide range of learners. These include people:

-- with different levels of skills. (Many learners come in thinking they need a GED program but really need help with basic skills before they can qualify for the GED test.)

-- of different ages (ranging from 17-year-old dropouts to retirees).

-- with different levels of fluency in English.

-- with high school diplomas but whose basic skills are weak. (These people need “academic enhancement” or brush-ups to be able to get into community colleges.)

-- with learning disabilities (both American-born and immigrant students).

- Learners have their own personal motivations for participating. These may or may not be the outcomes which funders are looking for.
- Goals are set based on some mix of standardized test scores and interviews with learners . Literacy Volunteers of America - New Jersey uses this information to develop individualized learning plans, but many programs lack the counselors or teacher time to do this customized goal-setting.
- Programs focus on a mix of basic (academic) skills and contextualized knowledge (i.e., functional knowledge needed for jobs, family duties, etc.)
- We need to be careful to not over-inflate the expectations set for learners. We also need to set incremental goals appropriate to each learner’s abilities.
- We need to measure persistence (retention) in programs. It is hard for many learners to commit themselves to sticking with an educational endeavor, despite the best efforts of the education providers.
- Many programs use portfolio assessment to collect documentation showing learners’ written work, interests, attendance, test scores, literacy behaviors, progress.
- Program data are used for a wide range of purposes, from deciding on what materials to purchase to making individualized learning plans for learners.
- Many programs are concerned that the new state plan is setting unrealistic goals for programs and that it was developed without adequate input from the field.
- Programs need technologies for administrative and teaching purposes. Standardized software is needed to collect data across programs.
- Emphasis should be on increasing the quality of services not just increasing the quantity (“numbers”) of students and classes. Dropouts remain a problem within adult education programs.

- We need to use funds to develop leadership within the field via professional development opportunities for administrators and teachers.
- We need to provide childcare and transportation so learners can attend consistently. Alternative delivery systems (e.g., computers, video, etc.) need to be developed, so learners can learn from their homes, workplaces, and other convenient locations.
- We as a profession need to fight for how we are to be measured. If we don't, others will make that decision for us and possibly set inappropriate goals and measures for us.

### ESL programs

- ESL programs serve a diverse population of limited-English-proficient adults. These include people:
  - with limited education (and literacy) in their home countries as well as highly-educated people.
  - who have work-related goals as well as others who are homemakers, retirees, or otherwise not focused on learning English for employment purposes.
  - who speak no English as well as people who primarily need help with English pronunciation.
  - who have been in the U.S. only a brief time as well as people who have been here for years.
  - who understand the sounds of the Roman alphabet and others who are familiar with a different form of script (e.g., Arabic, Chinese).
  - who are unemployed as well as well as people with long employment histories, sometimes at very high levels (e.g., highly-skilled, highly-paid technicians, scientists, etc. who might speak little English).

Each of these populations has special needs and interests. Programs have to be tailored to the needs of each individual.

- It is difficult to articulate the goals of the lowest -level learners and to document achievement at that level.
- Programs use a range of ESL assessment tools, including both commercially-produced standardized tests and teacher-made assessment tools geared to specific learning needs of their students.
- Data can be used by a wide range of audiences, including funders, administrators, teachers, and learners.

- If adult educators are now going to have to put more time into goal-setting, assessment, and reporting, more funds need to be made available to cover the staff time given to these activities. This is in addition to the additional funds which programs need for instructional activities, especially for the kinds of intensive instruction which many ESL learners need.

### High school diploma programs

- High school diploma programs serve those seeking a high school diploma. Many participants have a specific need to take courses in a particular subject area (e.g., algebra) which has prevented them from getting a diploma in the past or which they need to pass a professional licensing course.
- These programs use a mix of standardized tests and portfolio assessment. Some also track graduates' progress via follow-up surveys.
- The resulting data are used by administrators and teachers, the local boards of education and adult education councils, and the State Department of Education.
- The Core Curriculum Standards will be impacting high school diploma programs. This is an issue which programs need to get organized around. Advocacy is needed to develop alternative ways of attaining and assessing the Core Curriculum Standards. Adult learners have special abilities, interests, and limitations which need to be respected.
- Funding is needed to provide training for high school diploma program staff. These staff have to do what the regular high schools do but with smaller staff, limited facilities, adults with special needs, and irregular schedules.
- Technology is needed for distance learning and other mechanisms to serve learners.

### Work-related adult education programs

- Goals are set primarily by funders.
- Programs serve all levels of workers, from non-readers to PhDs.
- Programs thus serve many different types of learners but are being pushed to funnel all learners toward the same limited range of goals.
- Many learners in work-related programs are motivated to learn about technology of some sort.
- Learning disabilities is a significant factor in work-related programs and requires special instructional services and assessment tools.

- There is a need for some kind of consistent data-collection system so that programs can share information about learners across programs, to facilitate transition from one service to another.
- There is much interest in using portfolios as an alternative form of assessment. (Ohio is using them as their main form of assessment.) There is a need to develop alternative forms of assessment to document program impact. (One program uses a combination of student survey forms, written student testimonials, and photos to inform funders about what is being achieved in the program. Another program uses portfolios as a way of keeping learners informed of what they are achieving, so they feel motivated to continue.)
- Staff need training to be able to use alternative forms of assessment. The State Department of Labor might be interested in supporting such training if portfolios can demonstrate the kinds of outcomes (e.g., skill gain) which the state is now looking for.
- People are feeling bewildered about how to respond to both old reporting requirements and new ones which are looming.
- More time is needed to develop a sound system of assessment which responds to the many types of programs and learners represented in New Jersey. This includes recognizing that adults often drop in and out of programs to seek new jobs or deal with other life issues (children, health, elder care, etc.). Dropping out should thus not necessarily be seen as a failure of the program or learner.
- The State Department of Labor might be using employment data to track the employment-related progress of adult education students.

### **Wrap-up discussion**

The Institute ended with an open-ended discussion in which panelists and participants commented on issues raised earlier in the day, with a special eye toward “where do we go from here?” Here are some of those comments:

- Bob Bickerton: This Institute is a great beginning, but we need to have an action plan to move beyond brainstorming the above list of issues on which not everyone might agree. New Jersey needs a forum to take these issues a step further over time, to discuss these issues further and try to reach some consensus. This will allow us to eventually develop an action plan on which we can agree, so we don’t have to continually go through such exercises in the future. New Jersey needs to go beyond describing the problems and instead create a change in the system.
- Paul Jurmo and Debby D’Amico: There are a number of concrete actions which might enable us to keep this discussion going. As a field in New Jersey, we might:
  1. Create the proposed task force on accountability to oversee the activities outlined below. The task force should consider adapting existing processes (e.g., those developed

by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy and the National Institute for Literacy) to plan its activities.

2. Develop a series of work groups which conduct special projects to develop appropriate goals, instructional and support services, and assessment and evaluation procedures for specific populations and/or program types.

Each work group would carry out pilot projects in selected types of programs (adult high school, ESL, work-related education) or for particular groups of learners (learning disabled, immigrants from a particular ethnic or linguistic group, workers in a particular industry).

Each project would:

- Identify the needs, interests of those learners.*
- Identify and develop instructional and other services which help meet those learners' needs.*
- Identify and develop a range of assessment and evaluation tools which focus on the intended outcomes. This could include portfolio assessment and other forms of assessment.*

Each program-level project would be managed by a site-level educational planning team facilitated by a representative(s) from the state-level work group.

3. Hold an annual conference in which representatives of these work groups report on their site-level projects. Practitioners could document their work in a report.

4. Create a library (including a web-based resource collection) of resource materials on assessment to disseminate to interested practitioners. Make existing texts available at little or no cost to practitioners.

5. Create certification courses and/or graduate-level courses (like those at Rutgers University) on assessment.

6. Create scholarship programs and/or fellowship programs to enable practitioners to do research and develop expertise in these areas.

- Hal Beder: These assessment-related issues are profound. To deal with them will require a significant strengthening of the field's capacities because programs shouldn't be held more accountable with the meager resources they now have. We need to focus on the system's "IQ" (the Intensity of instruction and Quality of instruction). We need to figure out how to improve the system's IQ and face the realities of what it will take to do so (via increased instructional hours, improved staff training and career paths, etc.)

- Barry Semple: It is hard for us to change our perspective away from our historical tendency to try to serve people with under-equipped programs. We need to emphasize "IQ" (Intensity and Quality of services) as Hal Beder says.

- Linda Headley Walker: We need to recognize that learning disabilities is a significant factor for many adult learners. As a profession, we need training and tools to serve learning disabled adults with high quality services.
- Sue Marcus: ESL is an issue which is largely overlooked by current state policy. ESL programs need different kinds of services and assessment tools. Most ESL students are already working, so “getting a job” isn’t necessarily a goal for them. There is as yet no clear consensus on how to serve this population. This will require further discussion and work to build a consensus and develop solutions.
- Dian Bates: She wants to focus on quality in her efforts to build a new adult education system in New Jersey. So far, New Jersey hasn’t been collecting data which show what is happening to learners in our programs. The field will need to educate policy makers about the needs of learners and programs. We need to prove that something positive is happening to students in our programs.

She will create task forces to reach the kind of consensus we’ve been talking about. She likes working with the field and is willing to listen, but is also not afraid to make hard decisions.

The field, in turn, will need to avoid “looking back” to dwell on problems from the past. Instead, we all need to come with an open mind to look forward to positive solutions.

## Recommended Readings

- Beder, Hal. "The Outcomes and Impacts of Adult Literacy Education in the United States." Cambridge, MA: The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, January 1999.
- Bingman, Mary Beth. "Outcomes of Participation in Adult Basic Education: The Importance of Learners' Perspectives." Cambridge, MA: The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy, January 2000.
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- New Jersey Association for Lifelong Learning. "Adult Education's Role in New Jersey's Workforce Development System: A Report from the 1999 Pre-Conference Seminar." Lambertville, NJ: Author, 1999.
- World Education. "Standards Based Education" in Focus on Basics. Boston, MA: Author, September 1999.