

Program Administrators' Sourcebook

*A Resource on NCSALL's Research for Adult
Education Program Administrators*

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December 2005



National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy

Harvard Graduate School of Education

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The Program Administrators' Sourcebook is published by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). NCSALL is funded by the Educational Research and Development Centers Program, Award Number R309B60002, as administered by the Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement), U.S. Department of Education. The contents do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Institute of Education Sciences or the U.S. Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.

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Introduction

If you administer an adult education program, you face a wide variety of challenges:

- How can you help students make “level” gains?
- How can you help students gain the skills they need to reach their goals?
- How can you help students stay in programs long enough to meet their goals?
- How can you prepare and retain good teachers?
- How can you document the successes of your program?

The National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL) has conducted research relevant to these questions. This Sourcebook is designed to give you, as a program administrator, direct access to research that may help you address the challenges you face in your job.

Why this Sourcebook? Where did it come from?

This Sourcebook is a resource for people who serve as administrators of adult basic, adult secondary, and/or adult English-for-speakers-of-other-languages (ESOL) programs, whether those programs are school-based, community-based, or community-college-based.

NCSALL's Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research initiative has developed a variety of tools to help adult education practitioners access, understand, judge, and use research. As part of this initiative, we developed a tool for the unique needs of program administrators. There is growing emphasis on “evidence-based practice” throughout the education field, and administrators need resources to help them use research to make decisions about the structure and services offered in their programs.

The first objective of this Sourcebook is to present all of NCSALL's **research findings** (as of 2004) in short sections related to key challenges that program administrators face in their work as managers of adult education programs. The second objective is to present the **implications** of these research findings for program structure and services, as well as some **strategies** for implementing change based on these implications.

NCSALL worked with administrators in the field to develop this book, drawing on their professional wisdom and putting it together with the research findings. During the development of this Sourcebook, we:

- brought together a group of five program administrators (the Program Administrator Work Group) and asked them to read NCSALL's research;
- asked them to list implications for policy or practice (either implications already listed by the researchers in their reports or implications the program administrators themselves thought were appropriate, based on their understanding of the research); and
- asked them to generate specific program strategies that followed from those implications.

We then took the research findings, implications, and strategies and formatted them into short, easy-to-digest sections. The Program Administrator Work Group reviewed the findings again and suggested changes and additions. Then, we sent it out to be reviewed by three additional program administrators around the country, for a fresh look. They made suggestions and revisions. Finally, we asked a small group of national, state, and program-level policymakers to add their final comments.

We envision this Sourcebook as an easy reference book for you as program administrators; however, it does not provide in-depth information about any one area of research or research study. For that, you should check out the full reports or other resources provided on NCSALL's Web site: www.ncsall.net.

Who is NCSALL?

NCSALL (the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy) is the only research center funded by the U.S. Department of Education that focuses specifically on adult learning. The goal of NCSALL is to improve the quality of practice in adult education programs through research. Since 1996, we have been conducting and disseminating research related to adult learning and literacy. We aim to serve students, teachers, program administrators, policymakers, and scholars in our field.

NCSALL is a partnership of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University.

How is this Sourcebook organized?

Each section has findings from the NCSALL studies. The findings are meant to be short and to the point, without emphasis on data or statistics. Then, a number of implications for adult education program structure and services follow the findings. These implications were generated both by the researchers in their reports, and by groups of adult education program administrators who read the research and applied it to their own work. For each implication, we then present several strategies for implementing change; program administrators who worked on our team generated these strategies. Finally, we include suggestions for additional resources (the NCSALL research report, related resources, etc.).

The Sourcebook is organized into five sections, which you will see in the headings of each page. The five sections include:

- Section 1: Teaching and Learning
- Section 2: Adult Student Persistence
- Section 3: Professional Development
- Section 4: Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education
- Section 5: Advocacy for Program Improvement

Within each section, you will recognize a common layout with the following features:

- Every section (except Section 5) starts with ***The Issues You Face***, a set of bullets that presents the challenges with which program administrators grapple.
- Following ***The Issues You Face***, you'll see ***Findings from Research***. Every set of findings from a particular study will also include a box ***About the Study***, which gives you some facts about the study, its design, and who conducted it.
- Following the findings from a particular study, you'll then see ***Specific Implications of the (NAME OF STUDY) Study***. Each implication includes a statement that looks like this:
What the research says:
Therefore, you should ...
This statement explains why the implication is supported by the findings of the research studies.
- Following the implication, you will find ***Strategies***. These are specific suggestions for ways you might address the implication at a program level.
- In some sections, you'll see ***Overall Implications for Program Change***, which includes implications and strategies common to all of the studies presented in that section.

About the NCSALL Professional Development Study

This study, conducted by ...

- Finally, in each section, there will be a box that lists **Additional Resources** on the NCSALL Web site where you can access further information, see the full research report or other publications, or find teaching and training materials developed by NCSALL that you may find useful for your program.

NCSALL Adult Development Study

To download the full report #, NAME, go to: URL
 To download articles...

The Sourcebook concludes with a section (Section 5) on advocacy that discusses how policy changes supported by research play a role in program improvement. This section also provides some advocacy tools.

How can I use this Sourcebook?

You may want to look at the Table of Contents and choose from those broad topics (Teaching and Learning, Adult Student Persistence, Professional Development, Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education) that interest you, and read that section in its entirety. You could skim the book and look at the boxes that describe the research and then read more about the findings from the research studies that relate to problems you face. You could skip to **The Issues You Face** in each section to see which sections address problems you have encountered in your program or work. You could look at the **Implications** and **Strategies** for ideas related to the issues you face.

The Sourcebook is *not* a handbook that tells you how to organize or run your program. It is, rather, a resource that gives you current information about research and suggests strategies for applying the research in your program.

There are potentially unlimited strategies for improving program structure and services based on the implications of research. We have not tried in this Sourcebook to be exhaustive; rather, we have included here the implications and strategies suggested by the researchers and by a group of program administrators. It is just a start at listing some ideas for practice and policy; we make no claim that it is, or ever could be, comprehensive enough for all program administrators across all types of adult education programs. The strategies themselves are *not* research-tested interventions; rather, they are *ideas* that program administrators, who have significant experience in the field, have generated based on the implications of the research that is presented.

What research is covered in this Sourcebook?

The following research studies are covered:

Study	Principal Investigator
Adult Development Study	Robert Kegan, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Adult Multiple Intelligences Study	Silja Kallenbach, World Education, and Julie Viens, Harvard
Adult Reading Components Study	John Strucker, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Classroom Dynamics Study	Hal Beder, Rutgers University
Pair Work Study	Stephen Reder, Portland State University
Sustained Silent Reading Study	Stephen Reder, Portland State University
Adult Student Persistence Study	John Comings, Harvard Graduate School of Education
Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study	Victoria Purcell-Gates, Harvard/Michigan State University
Professional Development Study	Cristine Smith, World Education
GED Impact Studies	John Tyler, Brown University
The Outcomes Studies	Beth Bingman, The University of Tennessee

How can research support program improvement?

As a program administrator, you are looking for better results. You are asked by funders to use research to justify your program. You are also being asked to promote evidence-based practice. In adult education, it is not possible to base every program decision on research, because enough research just does not exist to answer all questions. However, it is possible to provide evidence-based practice, defined as

*The integration of professional wisdom with the best available empirical evidence in making decisions about how to deliver instruction.*¹

—Grover Whitehurst, Director of Institute of Education Sciences

This definition calls for the use of empirical evidence from scientifically based research, defined by the No Child Left Behind legislation as

*[T]he application of rigorous, systematic, and objective procedures to obtain reliable and valid knowledge relevant to education activities and programs ... uses experimental or quasi-experimental designs ... with a preference for random assignment experiments ... and has been accepted by a peer-reviewed journal or approved by a panel of independent experts*²

The definition of evidence-based practice recognizes that educators need to draw on their own experience and the experiences of others by using professional wisdom, defined by Whitehurst as

- *The judgment that individuals acquire through experience*
- *Consensus views*
- *[I]ncluding the effective identification and incorporation of local circumstances into instruction*³

Research findings are one source of information for making decisions about how to structure a program and how to provide services to adult students. You may have identified a program area that you need to change and then look for research about possible changes that will address your need. Or you may learn of research that suggests changes you then want to make. To use research, you will need to:

- **Access** research that addresses questions that are of concern to you, your staff, and students.
- **Understand** how the research was conducted—the method used, the ways data were collected, the population being studied, the questions asked and how the data was used to answer these questions.
- **Judge** the relevance of this research to your situation. Does the population and context of the research have similarities to yours? Does the research give you information that you can use?
- **Use** the research to determine what changes to make in your program that will help students learn.

As a program administrator, you make a change because you believe that it will lead to improvements in your program and to better outcomes for students. Basing a change on research should increase the chances that you get the outcomes you want. You need to be ready to implement change. To effectively implement a research-based change, you will need:

- *A program improvement process* that starts with a problem identified by and discussed by you and the staff, preferably based on the data and experiences you have in your program.

¹ Currently at <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide003.html>

² <http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg107.html>

³ <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/methods/whatworks/eb/edlite-slide004.html>

- An integrated *plan of implementation*, one that considers and allows for the time it takes for change to happen, since change takes time.
 - *Professional development* for teachers and possibly other staff about how to implement the change.
 - *Resources* to support the increased preparation time teachers may need to implement the change.
 - *A way to evaluate results*, so that you have information about whether you achieved the results you wanted and whether there were unintended results, since making one change can have implications for other parts of your program.
-

For additional resources on implementing program change, see the Program Leadership and Improvement Special Collection at <http://pli.cls.utk.edu/>

Section 1: Teaching and Learning

The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that...

- ◆ Learning gains in reading may be difficult to achieve, and you need instruction in your program to be the best possible at moving students forward.
- ◆ You need to report on other National Reporting System (NRS) goals, in addition to reading-level gain, including students going on to postsecondary or new or improved employment; these goals require students to have skills beyond reading comprehension.
- ◆ You are accountable not just to federal and state funders, but also to students, local funders, the community in which your program is located, and other local stakeholders. These constituents, especially students, care about changes and improvements in literacy practices—using literacy—that affect their lives, such as helping children with homework, using numbers on the job, paying bills, and so on.
- ◆ Since very few instructors were trained as reading teachers, many may not be aware of the basics of how to improve reading and writing through instruction in vocabulary, fluency, decoding, and comprehension, and they may not know how to design curriculum based on students' daily literacy needs.
- ◆ The population of ESOL students is growing and your instructors may need to develop new instructional approaches to help those students.
- ◆ Student drop-out is a continual problem, and you want students to continue participating in the program as long as possible.
- ◆ Students in the same classroom react differently to the same instruction and those who do not respond well may become frustrated and leave.

NCSALL's research provides information to help you address these issues; specifically...

- The **Adult Reading Components Study** gives you information about the range of reading skills found among adult students and the importance of assessing adult students' vocabulary, decoding, and fluency skills in addition to their comprehension skills, so that you can help your teachers provide the best reading instruction possible.
- The **Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study** gives you information about how to help adult students reach goals besides making level gains on standardized tests, so that you can be accountable to students and local stakeholders.
- The **Sustained Silent Reading Study** provides information on an approach to reading instruction for beginning-level ESOL students.
- The **Pair Work Study** gives you information to help your teachers consider a specific ESOL instructional practice.
- The **Adult Multiple Intelligences Study** and the **Adult Development Study** give you information about the way adult students learn and develop, which may be relevant to student persistence.
- The **Classroom Dynamics Study** gives you information about how classrooms are structured in adult education, which may be relevant to helping students persist in the program.

The Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)

Findings from Research

Many adult basic education students below the General Educational Development (GED) level have reading skills similar to those of children at risk for reading difficulty. Phonemic awareness problems that existed in study participants' childhoods persisted into adulthood. Their reading comprehension and reading rate (fluency) seem to have stalled at middle school levels. Because of this, their background knowledge and vocabulary also topped off at that level.

Adults who test with the same grade-equivalency levels (silent reading comprehension levels) can have very different reading skill profiles in regard to vocabulary, fluency, and decoding. A reader's profile is a picture of a reader's abilities in each of the component skills. The component skills include **vocabulary**, **fluency**, **decoding**, and **comprehension**. A profile illustrates a student's pattern of scores on skills that compose reading ability.

ARCS researchers identified eleven clusters of students with similar reading profiles, grouped as (1) GED/Pre-GED, (2) Intermediate, and (3) Low-level/beginning. Different profiles illustrate different instructional needs. For example, two readers may test at the same comprehension level, say, grade-level-equivalent 6. However, one reader may score low on vocabulary knowledge but high on decoding ability, while the other may score high on vocabulary knowledge but

About the Adult Reading Components Study (ARCS)

Researchers, led by John Strucker of Harvard Graduate School of Education, designed the ARCS to describe the various types of readers enrolled in U.S. adult basic education (ABE) programs.

Researchers randomly selected, interviewed, and assessed 955 students (676 ABE and 279 ESOL) from adult education programs in Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, Tennessee, and Texas.

Students took a battery of reading and language assessments to determine their instructional needs, including assessments of their phonological awareness, rapid naming of letters, word recognition, oral reading, spelling, vocabulary, and background knowledge. The list of scores became each individual's "reading profile" of strengths and instructional needs. Researchers also interviewed students about their educational history and reading habits.

low on fluency. A reader's profile tells a teacher much more about that reader's skills and needs than just a comprehension score, since a reader may need direct instruction in one of the component skills in order to eventually improve his or her comprehension skills.

Specific Implications of the ARCS Study

Implication: Organize intake procedures to identify students' reading profiles and arrange classroom structures to teach accordingly.

What the research says: Adult students do not all share the same reading "profile." Adult students whose reading comprehension skills place them at the same grade-equivalency-level score often have entirely different "reading profiles"; their instructional needs vary according to different level skills in vocabulary, fluency, and decoding. Identifying those component needs and skills at intake will determine the type of reading instruction

that may help them make faster reading gains. The GED group needs help in passing the test and building skills (in preparation for postsecondary education). Beginning students, because their phonemic awareness and word recognition skills are poor, need direct, systematic, sequential instruction in these skills. The intermediate group, which comprises the largest percentage of adult students, need to increase fluency and strengthen background knowledge and vocabulary, and may also need to strengthen word recognition skills.

Therefore, you should ...

... assess at intake every student's strengths and needs in the four component skills, not just in comprehension, and help teachers organize their classrooms to facilitate reading instruction based on similar reading profiles rather than on grade-level-equivalency scores, which are usually derived from comprehension skills only.

Strategies

- ◆ **Assess beyond the Tests of Adult Basic Education or other standardized test.** Use subtests that will give you information about each student's vocabulary, fluency, decoding, and spelling skills. (Many examples of such tests can be found at: <http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/>. Use the free online reading assessment or use the chart to select an assessment that better fits your program's needs. Some tests assess more than one reading component.)
- ◆ **Provide information about each student's reading profile to the teachers before students enter the class.** Teachers can then use that information to create subgroups within their classes to offer specific instruction to students who are at the same level in vocabulary, fluency, decoding, or comprehension skills.
- ◆ **Help teachers organize classes** to allow for grouping by beginning, intermediate, and GED profiles, and divide the intermediate group into those whose greatest needs are vocabulary, fluency, or decoding. Such a structure will help teachers or tutors more readily assist groups of students in strengthening specific reading component skills.
- ◆ **Help students gain a better understanding of reading skills.** At intake, help students understand what skills comprise reading ability, where their strengths are, and how the program will help them with the skills they would like to develop. Encourage teachers to help adult students understand the reading process and components. (The NCSALL teaching material *Understanding What Reading Is All About* provides activities that support this and can be downloaded from <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/uwriaa.pdf>.)
- ◆ **Develop ways to help students see the connection** between the skills they acquire and the tasks they are trying to accomplish in daily living; for example, learning new vocabulary may make it easier for them to help their children with homework. Suggest that teachers create a bulletin board or other display that illustrates these connections. Provide teachers paid time to have one-on-one conferences with students to help each one explore these connections.

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Literacy Practices of Adult Learners (LPAL) Study

Findings from Research

Adult students in classes using real-life (authentic) literacy activities and texts read and wrote more often, and used a greater variety of texts, in their lives outside class than students from classes that relied on textbooks and workbooks. Students from the classes that used real-life texts for real-life purposes were more likely to report that they spent more time reading and writing outside of school.

The degree of teacher-student collaboration showed no influence on change in literacy practices. This study did not find a relationship between changes in at-home literacy and the degree of collaboration in the classes.

Specific Implications of LPAL Study

Implication: Make improvements in students' literacy practices a goal of your program and ensure that instruction helps students reach that goal.

What the research says: Participating in classes that used real-life activities and texts was related to increases in literacy practices in students' daily lives.

Therefore, you should ...

... ensure that increasing adult students' literacy practices is a part of your program's mission and that instruction is organized to maximize use of texts from students' lives.

About the Literacy Practices of Adult Learners (LPAL) Study

A team of researchers led by Victoria Purcell-Gates hypothesized that adult education classes would be more likely to affect adults' literacy practices outside of the classroom if the classes used literacy materials and activities that adults actually encounter in their daily lives, and if the classes involved the adult students in the planning of the class. The researchers defined **changes in literacy practices** as increases in the frequency of reading and writing in daily life and/or increases in the types of texts read and written.

Researchers collected data from 83 adult literacy classes in 22 states on two instructional dimensions:

- *authenticity* (how much the materials, activities, and texts used in the literacy classes actually came from adult students themselves, representing literacy activities and purposes used by people in their lives), and
- *collaboration* (how much teachers and students collaborated in planning the types of activities, texts, assessments, and governance used in the classroom).

They also collected data on change in 173 adult literacy students' literacy practices, using a detailed questionnaire administered to students individually in their homes every three months for up to a year, as long as they attended their literacy class. They asked students if they engaged in specific individual literacy practices, and if so, whether these practices were new or engaged in more frequently since beginning the class.

Researchers then analyzed student responses, and looked at the relationship between change in literacy practices and the degree of authenticity and collaboration in the classes the students attended.

Strategies

- ◆ **State in your program's mission** that you aim to improve literacy practices and communicate that to teachers, students, and the community.
- ◆ **Help your staff to develop a literacy practices assessment tool.** Gauge baseline and progress in literacy practices, for example, by asking students to list everything they read the previous day. Provide funds or incentives for groups of teachers to design and pilot an assessment framework that is linked to capturing changes in students' literacy practices.
- ◆ **Assess literacy practices at intake, but also along the way.** Identify students for whom improving literacy practices is important and assess their literacy at the beginning and periodically throughout their enrollment in the program.
- ◆ **Open a dialogue with students.** Ask students about their daily literacy demands and interests. Acquire reading materials of the students' choice.
- ◆ **Encourage teachers to develop and share lessons using authentic materials from students' own experiences.** Authentic instruction requires finding out from adult students in each classroom what daily literacy activities they want and need to do. Support teachers to develop lessons using authentic materials and to share those lessons at staff meetings, on bulletin boards, or electronically using a program listserv. Contact your regional or state professional development and technical assistance center for resources and support.
- ◆ **Suggest teachers develop theme-based instruction** that integrates authentic materials with skills instruction. See *Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom*: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/jacobson.pdf>.
- ◆ **Use literacy practices assessment results to evaluate and improve program services.** Study the ongoing results of such assessments and make changes in program structures and services that better support students in strengthening literacy practices. Collaborate with students in assessing how the program can better support them in improving literacy practices at home, work, or in the community.

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Sustained Silent Reading Study (Beginning-level ESOL Students)

Findings from Research

Students' achievement on standardized tests was not statistically different between the classes that featured Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) or skills-based instruction.

There was no statistical difference between the two groups on attendance hours, retention, and progress through the program.

Teachers reported that even beginning-level students enjoyed the silent reading activities, and that they learned skills such as book selection and documenting what they had read.

Specific Implications of the Sustained Silent Reading Study

Implication: Sustained Silent Reading is no more or less effective than other types of reading instruction for beginning-level adult ESOL students.

What the research says: This research found no statistical differences in attendance hours, retention, progress through program, or achievement on standardized tests between students in beginning-level ESOL classes who participated in skills-based instruction or in modified Sustained Silent Reading.

Therefore, you should ...

... consider, with teachers, whether Sustained Silent Reading could be an option for your program.

About the Sustained Silent Reading Study

Researchers Sandra Banke, Dominique Brillanceau, and Stephen Reder conducted this random assignment study in beginning- and intermediate-level ESOL classes at the NCSALL/Portland State University ESOL Labschool. Over the course of one year, adult students in one class received skills-based reading instruction as part of a curriculum of integrated English-as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction. Students in the other class received modified Sustained Silent Reading Instruction, in which students picked their own books, read silently, and then discussed what they read with other students in pairs or small groups. Both reading approaches took place in the context of integrated instruction in ESL. The teachers switched classes midway through the year so that having one teacher or another would not be a factor. Researchers then looked at such outcome factors as achievement on CASAS and other standardized reading tests, attendance and persistence in the program, and progress through levels in the program.

Strategies

To support those teachers who choose to use Sustained Silent Reading as an option or alternative to skill-based reading instruction ...

- ◆ **Develop a library of appropriate reading materials** for each classroom that could be used for silent reading either as part of a Sustained Silent Reading approach or as a supplement to a skills-based approach. Texts for beginning-level classes might include simple texts on science, history, or geography; guides such as cookbooks or repair manuals; children's books; and simple biographies and novels written for adults. Involve students in building this collection.
- ◆ **Encourage teachers who decide to use the SSR approach to work together to design post-reading activities.** These activities should involve students in sharing information from the texts they have read. These might include saying whether they liked the text and why, retelling what they have read, and sharing a new vocabulary word from their reading. The activities should be brief and retain the focus on reading "for pleasure."
- ◆ **Plan, with teachers, how students involved in SSR will log their reading.** The process of keeping track of what they have read in a file or portfolio may contribute to skills such as alphabetizing, using forms, and documenting progress.

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Pair Work Study (Beginning-level ESOL Students)

Findings from Research

Adult ESOL students can work productively in pairs, even at beginning levels of instruction.

In order to complete a task assigned by the teacher, students in pairs often must “negotiate” in order to complete the task: they strive, with each other, to communicate meaning, find the correct word, and determine the best way to complete the task.

“Negotiating meaning” appears to be an important element of language learning, favorable to second-language acquisition and not a negative element, as many teachers might see such back-and-forth attempts to be understood. When students have the freedom to “negotiate” the meaning and form of what they are saying to each other, this leads students to “notice” the specific areas of their language that need development. In the interactions with their partner, students discover what will “fix” the problem (pronunciation, meaning, etc.).

Student pairs will negotiate different aspects of the same pair activity. Therefore, pair activities help students with their specific language needs. In other words, teachers can expect that students will learn the things

About the Pair Work Study

Researchers Kathy Harris, Stephen Reder, and John Helleman used numerous videotape clips from beginning-level ESOL classes, recorded at the NCSALL/Portland State University Labschool, to investigate how adult students work together in pairs. Through extensive viewing of different pairs of students working together in “dyads” to complete tasks assigned by the teacher, such as sentence completion, vocabulary practice, and dialogue activities, the researchers looked at how students interact with each other to complete the task.

that they each need from pair activities, rather than all having the same learning experience.

When teachers come into the vicinity of a pair of students working together, the nature of the students’ interaction changes. Students often stop negotiating and instead (a) ask the teacher to solve the problem they are having, (b) perform successfully for the teacher, or (c) start to have an independent interaction with the teacher.⁴

Specific Implications of the Pair Work Study

Implication: Teachers should use pair-work activities in their beginning-level and intermediate-level adult ESOL classes.

What the research says: Adult ESOL students can work productively in pairs, even at beginning levels of instruction. Student-to-student interaction is important to second-language acquisition.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage teachers to use pair-work activities with adult ESOL students.

⁴ This finding comes from an ancillary study by Garland, J. N. (2002). *Co-construction of language and activity in low-level ESL pair interactions*. Unpublished MA Thesis, Portland State University, Portland, Oregon.

Strategy

◆ **Encourage use of and provide professional development as needed on a variety of activities using pair work.** These could include information-gap activities in which two people share information to complete a task; conversation grid activities in which students ask for information from many other students; sorting activities; and problem-solving activities, such as dialogues and role-plays in which students ask for information related to specific contexts (at work, in stores, etc.).

Implication: Help teachers learn how to support student negotiation in pair-work activities.

What the research says: “Negotiating meaning” appears to be an important element of language learning, and students in pairs can work on their particular areas of communicative difficulty. When teachers come into the vicinity of a pair of students working together, the nature of the students’ interaction changes and students stop negotiating.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage teachers to allow time for student negotiation in pair-work activities.

Strategies

◆ **Encourage teachers to use pair-work activities that promote negotiation between students.** Teachers should try a variety of activities—more and less structured—and observe which lead to more negotiations among their students.

◆ **Encourage teachers to give students participating in pair-work activities “space” to negotiate.** When a teacher approaches a pair of students they may stop their negotiations and either ask the teacher about what they find confusing, or share what they have done with the teacher. It may be difficult for teachers to observe without helping or correcting students struggling to establish understanding—or using “incorrect” forms to achieve understanding. However, this research suggests that giving students both the time and the physical space leads to more negotiation of meaning, which contributes to the development of their ability to communicate in English.

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Adult Multiple Intelligences Study

Findings from Research

Teachers in the study understood and applied multiple intelligences (MI) theory in two ways: (1) MI-inspired instruction and (2) MI reflections. MI-inspired instruction included the teaching practices and materials that teachers used when they applied MI theory in their adult education classes. MI reflections were activities that helped students to consider their own learning strengths, weaknesses, interests, and preferences.

“It’s not how smart you are, but how you are smart.”

Introduced by Dr. Howard Gardner, MI theory proposes that:

- Rather than just one overall static I.Q., there are at least eight intelligences (linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalist, interpersonal, and intrapersonal);
- Intelligences operate in combination; and
- Every person has a profile of intelligences that is manifested as different developing areas of strength.

MI-inspired instruction increased the authenticity of learning experiences. Because the MI theory’s definition of intelligence includes “real problems and products,” teachers used real-life problems to tap students’ intelligences, making instruction more authentic. Teachers found that student engagement in activities was highest when the content reflected student interests and realities. They also found that MI theory was a useful instructional framework that helped students make connections between new experiences, such as the content and skills that must be mastered for the GED, and experiences in their everyday lives.

MI-inspired instruction reduced teacher directedness and increased student control and initiative. Giving students choices in how they learn allowed students to

About the Adult Multiple Intelligences (AMI) Study

The Adult Multiple Intelligences Study, a collaboration between NCSALL, the New England Literacy Resource Center, and Harvard’s Project Zero, was the first systematic application of multiple intelligences (MI) theory to adult literacy education.

Silja Kallenbach and Julie Viens, codirectors of the research, designed the study based upon the following question: *How can MI theory support instruction and assessment in adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) programs?* From this overarching question, 10 teachers each designed their own research question, conducted research in their classrooms, and applied MI principles. The study’s codirectors looked across those ten action research projects for any patterns that emerged.

Researchers gathered data for the second, cross-site analysis by examining:

- teachers’ research reports
- teachers’ journals
- classroom observations
- semi-structured interviews conducted two to three times with each teacher researcher
- informal, tape-recorded conversations with participating students
- two progress reports and a final report written by each teacher
- notes from conference calls with three subgroups of teacher researchers
- e-mail communications, including AMI listserv postings
- artifacts of student work, videotapes, and photographs

identify, use, and demonstrate their particular areas of strength. This gave students confidence to take more control over their own learning, and it encouraged teachers to be less directive.

MI reflections enhanced students' perceptions of their abilities and career aspirations. Student self-reflection was a valuable component in building self-confidence and learning-to-learn skills, prompting students to see how they are smart.

Some teachers calculated significantly higher attendance rates in classes where they applied practices using both MI-inspired instruction and MI reflections.

Specific Implications of the AMI Study

Implication: Integrate MI-inspired practices into current classroom instruction.

What the research says: Students whose instructors utilized the Multiple Intelligences theory took more control over their learning, were more engaged in classroom activities that used authentic materials, and, in some cases, attended class more regularly.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage teachers to integrate MI-inspired practices into current classroom instruction.

Strategies

◆ **Work with teachers to develop a concrete action plan for gradually integrating MI-inspired practice into their instruction.** Such a plan would include helping teachers who are interested in the research to study MI concepts; discussing the relevancy of the study's findings; asking teachers who are interested in MI to pilot AMI classroom activities, and then to present their findings to the staff; and encouraging more teachers to try MI-based principles in their teaching.

◆ **Obtain materials** that teachers can use to provide MI-inspired instruction activities: art supplies, math blocks, musical adjuncts, tactile objects. Make the most of what you already have available, and seek in-kind contributions of supplies from local businesses for the types of materials teachers find they need most.

◆ **Give teachers freedom to alter the physical space as needed or to take learning outside the classroom when appropriate.** Teachers will need a learning environment conducive to different types of activities and groupings, physical movement, and room to display student work.

Implication: Integrate MI reflection into classroom practice.

What the research says: MI reflection enhanced students' perceptions of their abilities.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage teachers to integrate MI reflection into their classrooms.

Strategies

◆ **Add activities to intake and ongoing assessment** that help students to identify their intelligences and whether/how much self-efficacy, confidence, reflection on learning, and engagement have improved.

◆ **Conduct activities in staff meetings and in professional development that help both you and your staff to understand your own intelligences.** Encourage teachers to understand which intelligences are their strengths, and to recognize that is their natural way to teach. Know which intelligences are your strengths and recognize that this is where you tend to focus. Recognize that while you have strong proclivities to one or more of the intelligences, you and the teachers can and should develop the others, which will help you to better address adult students' strengths. For example, if math is not one of your intelligences, try to visit a class once in a while and sit with students who do have this intelligence while they work on a literacy activity using math materials.

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Classroom Dynamics Study

Findings from Research

Most classroom instruction in adult basic education focuses on developing basic skills, not on developing higher-level abilities such as critical thinking. Sixteen of the twenty classes in this study focused on teaching discrete skills in reading, writing, math, and GED preparation using commercial materials. Only four classes focused on meaning making. Teachers rarely introduced discussion that asked students about their opinions or beliefs, actions which may support development of important critical literacy skills.

Although teachers rank student needs as their top priority, their teaching doesn't reflect this goal. Teachers talked about meeting student needs, but rarely systematically assessed student needs or evaluated how their instruction was meeting the needs of individual students.

Class composition, enrollment turbulence, and funding pressures shape classroom dynamics. Classes that were relatively homogenous in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity seemed to promote sharing and community. Classes that offered continuous enrollment with students moving in and out placed constraints on effective teaching and learning. Varying funding regulation and eligibility requirements also affected how classes functioned.

About the Classroom Dynamics Study

Researchers Hal Beder and Patsy Medina observed 20 adult literacy classes in eight states and interviewed the teachers of these classes. They sought to investigate and describe classroom behavior in adult literacy education by considering critical questions such as:

- How is instruction delivered?
- What is its content?
- What processes underlie teaching and learning?
- What external forces shape classroom behavior?

Following a grounded-theory approach, they collected data from a limited sample of classroom cases and analyzed it for commonalities, themes, and categories to describe adult literacy classrooms. Although the sample size is limited and findings are not meant to be generalized to an entire population, the study generates new understanding and propositions for future research.

Specific Implications of the Classroom Dynamics Study

Implication: Use managed enrollment to support effective teaching and learning.

What the research says: Continuous, open enrollment made it difficult for classroom teachers to teach as effectively as possible because students were constantly moving in and out of class.

Therefore, you should ...

... consider limiting students' enrollment in classes to particular points in time.

Strategies

If you are concerned about enrollment turbulence in your program, consider whether to ...

- ◆ **Implement managed enrollment.** Offer classes for a predetermined length of time (10 weeks, one semester, etc.). Only let students enter at the beginning of the cycle.
- ◆ **Create waiting lists for classes,** a system for alerting students when a slot has opened for them, and alternatives for students who are waiting; for example, a computer lab. Let legislators know that your program has waiting lists because there is not enough funding to serve all those who want services.

Implication: Provide support for teachers' efforts to be student-centered.

What the research says: Although teachers rank student needs as their top priority, their teaching often doesn't reflect this goal.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide support and encouragement to teachers in their efforts to be student-centered.

Strategy

If you are concerned about being more student-centered in your program ...

- ◆ **Encourage teachers to integrate basic skills with student-identified themes and materials.** (See "The Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study" on page 14 for strategies.)

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

The Adult Development Study

Findings from Research

Developmental level (“ways of knowing”) shaped adult students’ choices, preferences, and experiences of program learning. Students who were **instrumental** learners oriented toward having direct instruction whereby teachers and peers “made” them learn. **Socializing** learners, while valuing direct instruction, particularly valued a sense of belonging in the classroom, stating that it supported their learning. These students wanted their teachers to be good role models. **Self-authoring** learners viewed their teachers as sources of knowledge, but also saw themselves and other students as knowledge generators and were willing to offer feedback to their teachers; they also had the developmental capacity to take responsibility for their own learning.

Differences in developmental level were not highly associated with levels of formal education. Adult educators should not assume that students with limited formal education have ways of knowing that are less complex than other adults. The range of developmental level of students in this study was very similar to those in other studies of adults from a wide range of socioeconomic status.

Adult students’ ways of knowing could change significantly, even over a short period of time. Some students changed not only what they knew but how they knew, developing more complex ways of knowing in the span of a year.

Cohorts were important to both supporting and challenging adult students. Tight-knit, reliable, common-purpose groups formed by students in these programs provided emotional support and challenged them to broaden their perspectives.

About the Adult Development Study

A research team, led by Robert Kegan of Harvard Graduate School of Education, followed the experiences of 41 adult students enrolled in three distinct programs—at a community college, a family literacy site, and a workplace—intended to enhance their English language fluency, content knowledge, and effectiveness in their roles as students, parents, or workers. Some students were enrolled in pre-GED classes, ESOL classes, pre-collegiate classes, and others were in an adult diploma program.

Researchers selected adult students from programs that were of longer-term and that intentionally incorporated a variety of supports and challenges to facilitate adult learning, including tutoring, advising, and technological support. They chose these criteria in order to gain a better understanding of how adults in the study perceived program learning; how, if at all, program learning helped them enact a particular social role; and how, if at all, these adults changed while participating in the program (transformational learning).

Researchers followed a “constructive-developmental” research approach because it considers the way a person constructs his or her reality—or experience—and how the way a person makes meaning of experience can change or develop over time.

The research team employed a variety of data collection methods, including qualitative interviews with students and teacher, focus-group interviews with students, and classroom observations. They also established quantitative surveys designed to assess life satisfaction, self-efficacy, and locus of control. At least three rounds of data were collected over the course of 7 to 13 months at each program site.

Specific Implications of the Adult Development Study

Implication: Support the development of student cohorts within the program.

What the research says: Cohorts were important in both supporting and challenging developmentally diverse groups of adult students, and the benefits of cohort learning were not limited by level of formal education. Cohorts in the study provided adult students emotional and psychological support while challenging them to broaden their perspectives.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage students to form tight-knit, common-purpose groups within the program.

Strategies

- ◆ **Encourage teachers to use small-group, collaborative instruction** as a regular part of their instructional practice.
- ◆ **Offer new students a comprehensive orientation to the program, preferably in groups.** Involve student leaders in providing group orientation to new students and fostering a sense of community.
- ◆ **Match new students with experienced students** who can offer support and teach them about how the program operates. Challenge your staff and student leaders to develop additional strategies that foster cohort development.
- ◆ **Implement managed enrollment.** Consider offering classes organized for a predetermined length of time (ten weeks, one semester, etc.). Only let students enter at the beginning of the cycle.

Implication: Provide appropriate learning experiences for students at all developmental levels.

What the research says: Developmental level (“ways of knowing”) shapes adult students’ choices, preferences, and experiences of program learning.

Therefore, you should ...

... encourage teachers to consider how to provide appropriate learning experiences for all types of students and ways of knowing.

Strategy

◆ **Encourage teachers to recognize their own way of knowing** and how their teaching approaches might reflect this. Support their efforts to include learning experiences appropriate for all students (students who are looking for the right answer from the teacher, students who value learning from teachers' modeling, and students who value having input into how and with whom they learn).

Additional implications are found in *Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change* beginning on page 28.

Teaching and Learning Research: Overall Implications for Program Change

In reviewing the research on Teaching and Learning, we identified certain implications that are consistent across all the studies; they are presented below. Some implications involved strategies for changes beyond the program level, and these are discussed in the section on advocacy (Section 5, starting on page 67).

Implication: Provide professional development for your teachers about teaching reading, using theories of adult development and multiple intelligences, and contextualized and meaning-making instruction.

What the research says: Students have different reading profiles, ways of knowing, literacy practices in their daily lives, intelligences, and needs and goals beyond just acquiring basic skills. For teachers to implement the most effective teaching strategies based on research, they need to learn about the research-based implications and strategies for instruction, including how to design curriculum based on students' daily literacy needs and how to design instruction that takes into account students' varied approaches to learning. Teachers need these skills to help all students make measurable progress.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide formal and informal training to help teachers in your program include research-based instructional practices.

Strategies

◆ **Assess teachers' existing knowledge and skills in these areas**, and assess their motivation to learn more about them. Make clear your expectation that all staff within the program, including you, have a professional responsibility to keep learning about these (and other) research areas for the benefit of the program and the students.

◆ **Help teachers participate in professional development activities related to teaching reading, adult multiple intelligences, adult development, use of authentic materials, and contextualized and meaning-making instruction.** Call your regional or state professional development resource and technical assistance center to find out what options are available to you and your teachers. Give input to local professional developers about needs of the teachers in your program.

◆ **Ensure you have at least one teacher who has been well trained in each area.** Designate one person to take responsibility for pursuing professional development in reading instruction, theories of multiple intelligence, theories of adult development, contextualized instruction, and meaning-making instruction. Pay them for a certain number of hours a week to support or advise other teachers in these areas.

◆ **Provide program-based professional development.** Bring teachers together regularly to participate in discussion groups, study circles, or practitioner research on reading, multiple intelligences, contextualized instruction, and adult development.⁵ Discuss the research findings and implications as they relate to your program's needs, and ask teachers to strategize about how to make changes in their classrooms based on the research findings.

◆ **Encourage teachers to work in pairs or small groups to share their experiences and ideas when they try new practices.** The NCSALL Professional Development Study found that teachers from the same program who participate in professional development together implemented more changes in practice.

◆ **Create mechanisms for teachers to share new instructional activities and materials.**
Ask teachers to document lesson plans of new instruction. Set up resource boxes or file cabinet space for teachers to store teacher- and student-developed resources/materials that support new instructional approaches in reading, adult multiple intelligences, and meaning-making instruction so that other teachers can see and use these activities.

◆ **Set up opportunities for teachers to observe each other's classrooms, particularly when they are trying out new activities or strategies suggested by the research.** Volunteer to teach one teacher's class (on a rotating basis) at least once a month so that the teacher is freed up to observe another teacher in his or her program. Suggest and allow teachers to merge two classes together to try out a new technique by team teaching it together.

◆ **Develop a way for teachers across programs to share information** about what they are learning and doing in their classes. Seek help from the local or state professional development organization to set up pages on its Web site for teachers to share activities across programs.

◆ **Ask your teachers to think about how to educate students about the research findings in this Sourcebook.** Strategize what program and classroom activities can help students learn more about what the components of reading are, what intelligences are, how they learn to learn, and how they can increase their literacy practices in daily life. Support student leadership groups that build higher-order skills and abilities as students work together to apply, synthesize, and evaluate what they have learned.

◆ **Seek out and attend professional development yourself.** Contact your regional or state professional development resource and technical assistance center to see what is available. Look on the Web for online courses or resources that you can read on your own.

◆ **Encourage teachers to pursue self-study.** Make a list of resources on the Web that teachers can access to learn more about these teaching issues. Order books, research reports, and practitioner

continued on next page

⁵ NCSALL has study circle guides and discussion guides in these areas, as well as research articles and other publications, ready for your use within your program. These are available at www.ncsall.net, under *Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research*.

Strategies *(continued)*

journals (like *Focus on Basics*) that teachers can read on their own. Encourage teachers working in similar areas (reading instruction, contextualized instruction, etc.) to form small “book clubs” where they can share ideas about what they have read individually.

◆ **Recognize and reward teachers’ efforts to learn more about what they have learned.**

Set aside time in staff meetings to allow teachers to share with others what they learned through professional development. Document the professional development activities your teachers engage in, and note these as a positive in the annual performance reviews or evaluations that you conduct.

Implication: Provide paid preparation time to all teachers.

What the research says: Teachers need time to develop strategies for adult-multiple-intelligence-inspired and contextualized instruction and prepare direct instruction activities for reading. Teachers who had paid preparation time made more changes in their knowledge and in their practices than did teachers who were not paid for prep time.⁶

Therefore, you should ...

... provide all teachers, no matter how part-time, with paid time to prepare for teaching their classes.

Strategies

◆ **Set up a formula for a minimum number of paid preparation hours,** and seek additional funding to cover these costs (see Section 5 for strategies related to advocating for increased funding).

◆ **Support joint planning time** so that teachers can talk about which instructional activities work in their classrooms. If your teachers generally work in isolation, pay teachers for online sharing time so that they can plan at a distance; or encourage teachers to meet outside of scheduled work hours to discuss classroom experiences (have them document their time and pay them as you would pay them for planning time).

Implication: Give teachers the freedom to make changes in the current curriculum.

What the research says: MI-based practices led to increased attendance, high student engagement in learning, and increased self-efficacy. Authentic/contextualized instruction led to increased literacy practices. Students with different reading profiles need different types of instruction related to vocabulary, decoding, fluency, and comprehension. Students have different ways of knowing and respond to different ways of teaching. Most adult literacy classrooms focus on teaching discrete skills, not higher-level abilities like critical thinking and problem

⁶ See Section 3 on Professional Development for more information about this research finding.

solving. Teachers who had the freedom to make changes to the curriculum changed more, after participating in professional development, than teachers who were required to use a set curriculum.⁷

Therefore, you should ...

... allow teachers to make changes in the curriculum in order to integrate new instructional approaches indicated by research.

Strategies

- ◆ **Discuss with teachers the connections between instructional changes based on research and increased learning.** Not every instructional change will lead to increased learning gains, but as program administrator you can encourage teachers to try instructional changes based on research.
- ◆ **Work with teachers to use program data to assess effects of instructional change.** Looking at assessment or retention data may help you and your teachers make decisions about effectiveness of specific instructional or curriculum approaches.
- ◆ **Recognize innovative, research-based practice.** When teachers make instructional or curriculum changes, recognize their efforts in staff meetings, newsletters, and so on.

⁷ See Section 3 on the NCSALL Professional Development Study for more information about this research finding.

Additional Resources

To learn more about NCSALL's Teaching, Learning, and Instructional Strategies studies, go to: www.ncsall.net

NCSALL Adult Reading Components Study:

- ◆ To see John Strucker's article titled **"What Silent Reading Tests Alone Can't Tell You: Two Case Studies in Adult Reading Differences"** (*Focus on Basics* Volume 1, Issue B, May 1997), go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=456>
- ◆ To see a description of ***How the ARCS Study Was Done***, go to: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_arcs.pdf
- ◆ To visit an interactive Web site that provides a mini-course on reading and an opportunity for teachers to match their students' profiles with that of learner profiles developed using ARCS data, go to: <http://www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/>
- ◆ To obtain a professional development activity for teachers, ***NCSALL Study Circle Guide: Research-based Adult Reading Instruction***, go to: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/adult_reading_scg.pdf
- ◆ To see a set of lesson plans for helping students understand the reading process, ***Understanding What Reading Is All About***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/uwriaa.pdf>
- ◆ For a complete listing of all NCSALL materials on reading, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=792>

NCSALL Literacy Practices of Adult Learners Study:

- ◆ To download the full report #17, ***Affecting Change in Literacy Practices of Adult Learners: Impact of Two Dimensions of Instruction***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report17.pdf>
- ◆ To download free the NCSALL Handbook for teachers titled ***Creating Authentic Materials and Activities for the Adult Literacy Classroom***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/jacobson.pdf>
- ◆ To obtain a professional development activity for teachers, ***NCSALL Study Circle Guide: Teaching and Learning in Authentic Contexts***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/tl.pdf>
- ◆ For a complete listing of all NCSALL materials on contextualized instruction and authentic materials, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=529>

NCSALL Adult Multiple Intelligences Study:

- ◆ To see the full report #21, ***Open to Interpretation: Multiple Intelligences Theory in Adult Literacy Education***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report21.pdf>
- ◆ To download a free copy of ***Multiple Intelligences in Practice: Teacher Research Reports from the Adult Multiple Intelligences Study***, go to:
http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_kallen0.pdf. (This link takes you to the introduction and the abstracts; the teacher reports are found on the same site.)
- ◆ To download a free copy of ***“Multiple Intelligences Resources for the Adult Basic Education Practitioner: An Annotated Bibliography,”*** go to:
http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/op_mi1.pdf
- ◆ To see a *Focus on Basics* issue devoted to adult multiple intelligences (Volume 3, Issue A, March 1999), go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=161>
- ◆ To see a study circle guide on the adult multiple intelligences study, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/ami.pdf>
- ◆ To see a mentor teacher group guide on adult multiple intelligences go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/mentor.pdf>
- ◆ ***Multiple Intelligences and Adult Literacy: A Sourcebook for Practitioners*** is available from Teachers College Press at: <http://store.tcpress.com/0807743461.shtml>
- ◆ For a complete listing of all NCSALL materials on adult multiple intelligences, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=753>

NCSALL Adult Development Study:

- ◆ To download the full report #19, ***Toward a New Pluralism in Adult ABE/ESOL Classrooms: Teaching to Multiple “Cultures of Mind,”*** go to:
http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/19_c1.pdf
- ◆ To download the “Executive Summary” of the adult development research report, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report19a.pdf>
- ◆ To download the issue of *Focus on Basics* on this research go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=148>
- ◆ To see a study circle guide on adult development, go to:
http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/adult_development_scg.pdf

NCSALL Classroom Dynamics Study:

- ◆ To download the full report #18, ***Classroom Dynamics in Adult Literacy Education***, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report18.pdf>
- ◆ To download the issue of *Focus on Basics* on modes of delivery of adult education go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=720>

Other Resources:

The Reading Package is a comprehensive listing of resources related to research-based reading instruction that includes professional development, training activities, technical assistance, free downloads, and other customized resources. *The Reading Package* is offered through NCSALL/World Education, the Equipped for the Future Center, The Center for Literacy Studies, SRI International, and the Center for Applied Linguistics. For a brochure, send an e-mail to ncsall@worlded.org.

Section 2: Adult Student Persistence

The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that:

- ◆ Many students don't stay in a program long enough to make level gains or to reach the goals they set for themselves.
- ◆ Student attendance is sometimes irregular, making it difficult for teachers to plan lessons that help all students progress.
- ◆ Classes become turbulent, with students entering, exiting, and attending at different times.
- ◆ It is difficult to count and to post-test students who stop out or drop out.

NCSALL's **Adult Student Persistence Study** gives you information to address these issues, specifically, information about:

- What students say supports and hinders their persistence;
- Persistence “pathways” found among adult students; and
- Lessons learned from programs that tried different strategies, which may help you decide how to address persistence in your own program.

The Adult Student Persistence Study

Findings from Research

Adult students needed supports to persist. Building supports may be more critical to increasing persistence than removing barriers. Adult students in this study had much more to say about supports to persistence than barriers to it. The most often-mentioned supports fell into four categories: goal orientation, personal relationships, teachers and other students, and self-efficacy.

- **Goal Orientation**—Findings show a significant relationship between persistence and having specific goals as a reason for entering adult basic education (ABE) programs. Theories of motivation also suggest that students weigh the benefit of reaching their goals with the cost of participation. Thus, defining, understanding, and focusing on their goals for participation may help adult students persist.
- **Personal Relationships**—The most frequently mentioned support among students was having the support of their families, friends, colleagues, God/church, support groups, community workers, mentors, and bosses. Helping students identify the people in their lives who can support their persistence and suggesting they ask for that support may help persistence.
- **Teachers and Other Students**—While this support is also a personal relationship, it is located inside of the classroom and may be something that programs can affect. Adult students said their teachers and their classmates were important supports to their persistence. Teachers should be helped to support their students' persistence, and students should be helped to support each other's persistence.
- **Self-efficacy**—Students said that their own determination and self-efficacy (believing they can achieve their goals) was important to persistence. Helping students build their self-efficacy could lead to greater persistence.

About the Adult Student Persistence Study

John Comings and a team of researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education conducted a study on student persistence, in two phases:

Phase One

Researchers conducted adult student interviews and tracked student persistence over time to develop advice for practitioners on how to help adults persist in their studies:

- Researchers interviewed 150 adult students from 19 pre-GED classes in 15 ABE programs in five New England states to address which of the supports and barriers were critical for programs to address.
- Adult students participated in two 30-minute interviews approximately four months apart. Researchers compiled data from the notes and coded for themes that emerged, which became the study's findings for Phase One.
- Information about each student was correlated with their persistence to identify relationships.

Phase Two

Researchers then studied the efforts of five programs as they attempted to increase student persistence over a three-year period:

- The programs conducted action research to identify strategies that were effective for them in supporting student persistence.
- The programs addressed persistence implementation strategies in four different categories:
 - Information gathering—to learn more about students and developments in the field
 - Instructional improvements—to make instructional techniques more engaging
 - Operational changes—to reform program processes and make services more accessible
 - Support services—to help students overcome personal and social barriers to persistence

Different “pathways to persistence” emerged. Some students stopped participating after the first few months. Others participated only intermittently because of barriers to participation. A minority of students were long-term participants. The five “pathways” identified included:

1. **Short-term students** enroll in a program and participate intensively for a short period in order to accomplish a specific goal. For some of these students, the short-term participation in a program meets their needs, but for some this participation leads to enrolment in a more suitable program.
2. **Tryout students** have barriers to persistence that are insurmountable and have goals that are not yet clear enough to sustain their motivation. These students end an episode of program participation quickly, with neither goal achievement nor transfer to another program. Students on the tryout pathway are motivated to learn, and their decision to join program services is a positive step. However, they are not ready to make a commitment to program participation.
3. **Intermittent students** move in and out of program services. During the time that they are not attending program services, intermittent students may stay in contact with their programs, and their episodes of participation and nonparticipation may reoccur several times and take place in more than one program. These students may have broad goals (such as improving language or basic skills ability) or specific goals (such as passing a citizenship test), but their goals require a long period of engagement to achieve. However, personal and environmental factors limit their ability to attend on a regular basis.
4. **Long-term students** participate regularly over a long period. Long-term students usually do not express instrumental goals, but rather talk of education as an end in itself. Long-term students have managed the personal and environmental factors that support and inhibit their persistence.
5. **Mandatory students** must attend a program because they are required to do so; for example, by a public-assistance or law-enforcement agency. Their participation is usually regular and long term, and their goals are often those of the agency that is mandating their attendance. Mandatory students overcome personal and environmental factors that constrain their persistence because they are required to do so.

Challenges in Implementation

In Phase Two of the study, researchers identified several findings regarding programs’ efforts to improve persistence.

The strategies closest to a program’s core mission of improving literacy—such as expanded computer-assisted instruction and improved tutor training—were implemented with little difficulty. Rather than breaking with past practice, these changes were incremental.

Programs found it difficult to develop a social-service capacity. Social services were restricted to on-site child care or transportation vouchers, were implemented slowly, and did not fully address students’ needs.

The emphasis on programmatic over social-service strategies limited programs’ potential to improve persistence, because many students had barriers to participation, such as unstable work hours, child care or transportation needs, or health problems.

Specific Implications of the Adult Student Persistence Study

Implication: Establish a program philosophy of persistence.

What the research says: Interviews with students revealed that many students believed that once they stopped attending they could not return.

Therefore, you should ...

... adopt policies that make clear your program's philosophy of persistence.

Strategies

◆ Meet with staff, board members, and students to consider the following tenets of a program-persistence philosophy:

- Students can stay connected to the program even with a lapse in attendance.
- Success and participation are not contingent on attendance but rather on connection to the program and continued work toward goals.
- If students need to stop participating, they are welcome to return.
- Students have the responsibility to notify the program of plans to drop out, and the program has the responsibility to make clear to students the various ways in which they might notify the instructor of these plans.
- Learning occurs at home as well as at the program.
- Students should be helped to continue learning at home if life demands interrupt program participation.
- Students have access to tutoring or materials they can work on outside of class, and teachers and tutors show students how to use those materials.
- Staff emphasize life-long learning skills, such as encouraging the habit of reading and writing every day, so that students continue practicing their literacy skills when they are unable to attend.

◆ Recognize the five pathways to persistence and establish ways to help students in each pathway:

- **Design an intake process that identifies tryout students.** Counsel them to delay entry and help them design plans to address barriers that constrain their participation so that they can return when the demands of their lives allow. Ask tryout students if you may follow up with them at a later date and then be sure that someone from the program does follow up.
- **Treat all enrolled students as intermittent students.** Challenge your staff to find ways to redefine participation as connection to the program, rather than hours of attendance in program services.

Make this connection meaningful, such that adult students have scheduled monthly discussions with program staff identifying progress on a self-study plan.

- **For long-term students,** clearly define steps (with measurable objectives) at orientation to provide them with extra help.
- **For mandatory students,** develop program strategies that help keep them motivated. Help them to recognize how they learn, how they are smart, and how learning can be enjoyable. Show them how learning can help them in their families, at work, with personal interests, or with barriers to improving their life situation.
- **For short-term students,** help them be specific in identifying their goals. If they need to transfer to another program, help them to be successful in a more appropriate program. Examples might include ESOL students transitioning to GED classes or pre-GED students transitioning to career counseling.

◆ **Develop mechanisms for receiving input from students about what helps them**

persist. Interview students who persist in your program to find out what they find best supports them in persisting. Ask teachers to conduct a force-field analysis activity in each class once or twice during the semester in which students identify forces that hinder them from persisting, forces that help them to persist, and strategies for reducing barriers and increasing support. Conduct focus groups of six to eight students periodically (a “student listening tour”) to help them identify their questions or concerns or answer questions you and your staff have about how to improve the program.

◆ **Partner with students to develop retention strategies and provide supports to**

persistence. Support student leadership in your program. Develop a student council or other leadership group. Help the group define its purpose and mission, and provide them opportunities to develop leadership, work, and academic skills.

◆ **Make persistence a program improvement priority.** Use the data/input from students to discuss with staff, at least yearly, how to continually improve persistence. Make changes in program structures or services based upon students’ feedback, and communicate to them clearly that you have done so based on their input.

Implication: Help students to define and make progress toward goals and see themselves as successful at learning.

What the research says: Adult students who had a specific goal as a reason for entering ABE programs were more likely to persist.

Therefore, you should ...

... help students set and see progress toward goals, and understand the forces that affect their participation.

Strategies

Setting Goals

- ◆ **Find out about students' purposes for attending during intake or orientation, and connect these purposes to their specific and broad goals.** Help students recognize how achieving their goals is a step toward succeeding at their broader purposes for participating in the ABE program.
- ◆ **Use a variety of assessments for determining students' skills and needs,** and provide students with information about their skills and needs. Reassess students on a regular basis and communicate the results to students.
- ◆ **Help students clearly identify their goals and develop an action plan to achieve those goals.** Take the opportunity to discuss the student's goals, skill assessment, and timeline to reach those goals. Provide a number of ways for students to set goals, such as (1) have students participate in one-on-one goal setting with a teacher, intake counselor, or student mentor; (2) make goal setting part of a classroom activity; or (3) conduct goal setting in small groups as students go through a student orientation. Encourage teachers to discuss with students their reasons for participating in ABE programs, perhaps using the "five whys" questioning strategy, asking students why they have set a particular goal up to five times in order to get at the underlying goal, e.g., getting a GED.

Seeing Progress Toward Goals

- ◆ **Revisit goals individually or as a classroom activity.** Revisit goals and action plans to track progress and revise as necessary, either one-on-one with a counselor or teacher, as part of classroom activities, or as part of student-support-group meetings.
- ◆ **Ask students to identify benchmarks for success.** During the intake process, student orientation, or the first weeks of class, establish ways for students to determine how they will know that they are successful and how they will document their progress.
- ◆ **Find ways, inside and outside the classroom, to celebrate progress.** Teachers may wish to award certificates, publish a classroom newsletter, or provide other visible forms of recognition that adult students are accomplishing their goals.
- ◆ **Provide ways for students to see success early in program participation.** During the first three weeks (the most critical for persistence), focus on one area in instruction where students are most in need of improvement. Then retest the student after three weeks, to show gains and allow them to experience an immediate success.

Understanding the Forces that Affect Participation

◆ **At intake, help potential adult students consider goals and life demands that might stand in the way of reaching their goals.** Discuss plans they feel they need to make in order to participate. If some feel their life demands are too great for participation, discuss what may need to happen before they feel they will be able to enroll in the program. Help students rethink goals to make them more realistic or to secure the support services they believe they will need before they can attend. Set up mechanisms for classes or cohorts of students to establish group goals and action plans, like securing better transportation to and from the program.

◆ **Include a force-field analysis as a formal part of orientation.** Help new students identify positive and negative forces affecting their ability to persist, and create strategies for managing those forces, such as contingency strategies should child care or transportation matters present barriers to participation, and strategies to continue learning if they need to stop out of the program.

Implication: Help students build self-efficacy and use supports inside and outside the program to increase persistence.

What the research says: Adult students who expressed self-efficacy (“within myself, wanting to accomplish it, willingness to try,” etc.) were more likely to persist. Adult students who identified the support of people in their lives or in the program were more likely to persist.

Therefore, you should ...

... help students build their self-efficacy and use supports inside (teachers and other students) and outside (sponsors) the program to help them persist.

Strategies

Build Self-Efficacy

◆ **Arrange for students to have contact with role models who have succeeded in ABE, ESOL, or GED class.** Bring these former students in as guest speakers at intake and orientation activities. Recruit past students to be counselors, teachers, administrators, or fill other leadership roles in the program.

Use Supports Inside the Program

◆ **Develop a culture of acceptance and support in the program.** Express the program’s philosophy of persistence in the student orientation, intake, or first week of classes. Create an informal, noncompetitive learning environment in which students feel comfortable working at their own pace. Support teachers’ efforts to care about and respect students.

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Strategies *(continued)*

◆ **Improve “first encounter” experiences with programs.** Make sure program staff answering the telephone always have clear answers to commonly asked questions, can give specific instructions on what students are to do next, and know what students need to bring with them to enroll in the program. Provide everyone with access to accurate program information in easy-to-read, pictorial, and verbal formats. Develop a sensitive interviewing process for new students at initial contact and right after intake. Use the same personnel to follow up with students as needed.

◆ **Establish a student orientation for all new students.** Make clear the program’s philosophy of persistence. Have the new students spend time with experienced students during orientation so that they have the opportunity to get advice and ask questions. Encourage them to think through what they feel they need in order to succeed. Provide orientation for those who are on a waiting list.

◆ **Promote sponsorship inside the program.** Print and distribute class lists with the names of students to encourage contact between students outside of class. Identify program staff or others within the program who will take responsibility for connecting personally with specific adult students. Match the adult student with a mentor to help them get through the first few months, to identify their goals, and to serve as an in-program support person. To do this, first identify volunteer mentors who are strong persisters and are interested in being a coach to new adult students; look for characteristics such as positive attitude, willingness to learn, and ability to serve as a role model; then explain to new students how the learning process will work and the student’s role in the process. Develop a connection between each student and a team (teachers, counselors, and other support staff) designated to touch base with that student.

Use Supports Outside of the Program

◆ **Promote sponsorship.** Identify people in the students’ lives who can be sponsors for students, and support sponsors’ efforts.

Implication: Offer direct social supports, such as child care (within the program when this is realistic) and develop a system for referring students to social services that are better equipped to help students cope with barriers to persistence.

What the research says: Personal and environmental factors matter to persistence.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide supports on site where possible and provide referrals to agencies and providers outside the program when necessary.

Strategies

- ◆ **Develop collaborations with social-service agencies** and build a large network of service providers to help students in your program persist.
- ◆ **Hire a program counselor to provide counseling services to adult students.**
- ◆ **If possible, provide direct services**, such as child care or transportation subsidies.

Implication: Adapt and add programmatic features, such as off-site instruction, individualized support, and learning plans, to make literacy services accessible to students on all pathways.

What the research says: Students have multiple pathways into adult education, and these pathways lead to different patterns of persistence.

Therefore, you should ...

... design your program so that it has multiple mechanisms for supporting persistence, including adding features that allow students to continue learning outside of the program.

Strategies

- ◆ **Provide enough information so that potential students can make an informed decision about enrolling.** Communicate what students might expect to gain by participation with what kind of time requirements and level of commitment.
- ◆ **Give potential students the opportunity to participate in sample activities before enrolling in the program**, providing them the chance to reflect on an ABE learning experience before committing to attend.
- ◆ **Establish program structures that allow students as many ways to participate as possible.** Reduce class size, provide opportunities for one-on-one tutoring, and extend hours of operation.
- ◆ **Establish managed enrollment in your program.** Managed enrollment provides students clear timeframes within which they can expect to achieve a certain amount of progress or have the opportunity to enroll again. Develop an attendance policy that encourages students to attend for as many hours as possible and provides clear guidelines for what happens when they do not attend for a minimum number of hours.

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Strategies *(continued)*

◆ **Establish a system of supports for students who are absent.** Make contact with the student and show them that staff at the program care. Send personal notes or letters home. Contact those who miss class through another student who calls or drops by with some “homework.” Enlist adult student volunteers to join a team of persistence support that coordinates dropout prevention strategies, like following up with students who stop out.

◆ **Provide alternatives for students who begin attending intermittently.** Provide ways students can reinforce what they have learned by providing “practice” materials or videotapes so they can learn at home. Send books home with students; don’t require them to keep them at the program.

◆ **Track students who dropped out by hiring current students to interview students who have left.** One-to-two months after they drop out, contact students who have departed to ask them what impact participation in the program had on their lives, what they did and did not like, why they left, and what might help them come back to the program if they feel they need to do so. Use this data to change your program’s instructional approach or the program’s structure to better support student success.

◆ **Provide ways for students to access and use computer technology.** Upgrade computer labs and encourage teachers to use computer technology in the classroom. Set up open computer lab hours for students to study on their own and connect students to free computer resources at libraries or other community institutions.

◆ **Pay teachers to support students in learning at a distance and provide materials for students to take home.** Give students videos, books, software, and other materials that they can use to study at home.

◆ **Develop student “cohorts”—groups of students who see themselves as a community.** Provide professional development for teachers on organizing and monitoring group instruction, particularly if individualized instruction is the norm in your program. Provide physical space for teachers so that they may offer various types of group instruction. Provide “small group” tutoring, which is more individualized but also fosters group interaction and builds community.

◆ **Address the specific needs of students with learning disabilities (LD).** Network with other programs and obtain materials from those that have systems in place for supporting students with LD. Pay a consultant to develop an instructional system to help and train tutors to teach adults who have learning disabilities. Ensure that teachers participate in professional development to increase awareness of LD among adult students. Have a process for screening and referral. Provide staff training in screening and referral processes for disabilities for your state or program. Provide training for program staff in inexpensive modifications that have been shown to benefit students with LD. Help students to understand what learning disabilities are, know their strengths and weaknesses, and create action plans to address them.

Additional Resources

To learn more about the Adult Student Persistence Study, go to: www.ncsall.net

NCSALL Adult Student Persistence Study:

◆ To read the full report on Phase One, ***Persistence Among Adult Education Students in Pre-GED Classes***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report12.pdf>

◆ To read reports on Phase Two, go to:

“One Day I Will Make It”—A Study of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs: <http://www.mdrc.org/publications/401/full.pdf>

“As Long As It Takes”— Responding to the Challenges of Adult Student Persistence in Library Literacy Programs: http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2003/lilaa/lilaa_full.pdf

“I Did It for Myself”— Studying Efforts to Increase Adult Learner Persistence In Library Literacy Programs:
<http://www.mdrc.org/Reports2001/LibraryLiteracy/IDiditforMyself.pdf>

◆ To download a study circle guide on adult student persistence, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/lp.pdf>

◆ To see a complete listing of all NCSALL materials and research on the topic of adult student persistence, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=791>

Section 3: Professional Development ---

The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that:

- ◆ Teachers are the key to helping students achieve level gains and reach the other job-related, life-related, and education-related goals for which your program is accountable.
- ◆ Many of your teachers come to work in your program with a K–12 teaching perspective and lack formal training in teaching adults.
- ◆ The turnover rate for adult education teachers is high, and some teachers' primary commitment is not to teaching in adult education.
- ◆ When you have part-time teachers teaching in multiple sites at various times of the week and day, teachers can become isolated, and it is hard to find ways to bring them together to learn from one another.

The NCSALL Professional Development Study has information about how teachers change and about their concerns and characteristics that may help you deal with these challenges.

The Professional Development Study

Findings from Research

ABE teachers have limited formal preparation geared specifically to teaching adults, and have limited opportunities for professional development and continued learning. There are three avenues for teachers to learn: (1) on their own through self-study, from teaching students, or from their own experience; (2) informally from colleagues (inside and outside of the program) and administrators; and (3) formally through professional development activities or coursework. Isolation, part-time job structure, and limited opportunities for professional development may require teachers to rely more on learning from self-study or from their own experience, a difficult proposition for those teachers who do not have the time or sufficient training to study on their own.

ABE teachers do not follow clear career paths into the field, work under less than optimal conditions, and a significant portion do not stay in the field for long. They lack many of the supports that would help them do the best job possible. Teachers are strongly affected by their working conditions and respond to them by: coping with the situation; challenging and trying to improve the situation; or leaving their job, and possibly the field, altogether. The main reasons teachers gave for why they would leave their ABE job were low salary, lack of benefits, limited working hours, and, to a lesser extent, lack of job security. Although teachers reported a fairly strong desire to stay in the field, they were less likely to want to work in the field five years from now (as opposed to one year from now), and even less certain they viewed work in the ABE field as their long-term career.

Teachers face unique challenges in their teaching because of the policies and structure of the ABE field, and how they approach these challenges is influenced by both program and individual factors. Specifically, teachers in adult basic education are faced with three challenges: (1) organizing instruction, (2) assessing student progress, and (3) developing curriculum. Programs'

About the Professional Development Study

A team of researchers, led by Cristine Smith and Judy Hofer, investigated how adult education teachers changed after participating in one of three different models of professional development (multisession workshop, mentor teacher group, or practitioner research group), all on the same topic of learner persistence. The study also investigated the most important individual, professional development, program, and system factors that influenced the type and amount of teacher change. This study was conducted primarily to help professional development decision makers plan and deliver effective professional development, and to understand the factors that influence how teachers change as a result of professional development.

- 100 teachers from three New England states participated in up to 18 hours of professional development in one of three professional development models.
- Researchers collected data from these teachers in three "waves" between July 1998–June 2000—Wave 1: before the professional development began; Wave 2: just after the professional development ended; Wave 3: one year after completion of the professional development.
- Researchers collected information about teachers' backgrounds; their program/teaching situation; amount and type of other professional development before, during, and after the NCSALL Professional Development in which they participated; their views about teaching; and their experiences as a learner, a teacher, a program member, and a member of the field.
- From the 100 teachers, 18 were randomly selected to serve as a subsample, providing additional data via interviews at the same three points in time. Researchers observed them once in their classrooms, and interviewed their program directors once.

beliefs about the purpose of ABE instruction, their curriculum development and assessment practices, and their policies on enrollment shape teachers' approach. Teachers' own knowledge and skills in curriculum development, their beliefs about the appropriate role for ABE teachers, and their beliefs about the purpose of ABE instruction also strongly affect how they approach these challenges.

Programs in ABE vary considerably from one another in facilities and resources, and in policies and structure. Limited resources and policies imposed by external forces affect the programs' ability to provide the types of services to students that they would like to provide.

ABE teachers typically play a limited role in the broader field of ABE, (e.g., advocating for students' needs, providing professional development to other teachers), either because they are unaware of opportunities or they are not so inclined.

Most teachers, even those who dropped out of the professional development before finishing 18 hours, changed at least minimally through gains in knowledge or actions in their classrooms; relatively few experienced no change at all.

The research identified four types of change: (1) no to minimal change, (2) thinking change (changes in thinking were greater relative to changes in acting), (3) acting change (changes in acting were greater relative to changes in thinking), and (4) integrated change. The majority (72%) of the 83 teachers who completed the professional development demonstrated change, most of which was thinking or acting change. The teachers (24%) who fell into the "integrated change" type also demonstrated a higher overall amount of change. They showed more sustained change, and in more arenas (classroom, program, and field).

Multiple factors—individual, professional development, program and system factors—interact to influence teacher change as a result of participating in professional

The researchers also documented all the information teachers gave them about their jobs, working conditions, and challenges in teaching in adult basic education.

development. Overall, teachers who changed more after participating in professional development were those who:

- Worked more hours in adult education,
- Had well-supported jobs (good benefits, ample prep time, paid professional development release time),
- Had a voice in decision making in their programs,
- Had their first teaching experience in adult education,
- Were relatively new to the field,
- Had more access to colleagues,
- Did not have an advanced degree (above bachelor's), and
- Participated for more hours in high-quality professional development.

Teachers who changed more were teachers who worked in programs that:

- Gave teachers benefits, paid professional development release time, and prep time through their adult education job,
- Had not previously addressed student persistence and gave teachers a voice in decision making in the program,
- Had mechanisms for collegiality among teachers in the program,
- Gave teachers freedom to make changes to the curriculum used.

Specific Implications of the Professional Development Study

Implication: Provide or increase access to professional development for your teachers.

What the research says: Teachers changed more and in preferable ways based on the amount of professional development they attended, and teachers who received more annual hours of paid professional development attended for longer.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide every teacher with opportunities to participate in professional development, and you should pay them to attend.

Strategies

- ◆ **Redirect money from the program budget to pay for a substitute** so that teachers can attend staff development. Compensate teachers at their regular rate of pay for professional development time.
- ◆ **Offer professional development within the program** by organizing in-house professional development run by the teachers themselves. Set up staff meetings so that one is administrative in focus, the next is a formal professional development activity, and the next is informal time for teachers to share ideas and problems.
- ◆ **Make professional development a local activity** by reaching agreement with another program to cosponsor a study circle or workshop that teachers from both programs can attend.
- ◆ **Establish learning activities and mechanisms for teachers** in your program who are new to the field of adult basic education, regardless of whether they have taught in K–12. Ensure that every new teacher attends an orientation or general training offered by the state professional development system. Provide a thorough orientation to your own program. Assign new teachers a mentor who is a more experienced teacher, and ensure that every new teacher is observed (with feedback) within three months of teaching.
- ◆ **Get to know the state or regional professional development staff**, and let them know what needs for professional development you and your staff have. Encourage them to build in discussion time during professional development activities for teachers to talk about their work, not just learn more about a technique or strategy. Encourage them to establish networks of “like” teachers (by role, by experience level, by program type) who can meet periodically and informally outside of their programs to talk about their work, new research, and new strategies.

◆ **Contact your local university and ask them to design an online course** about adult education for your teachers; then, offer one scholarship a year to a teacher in your program to participate in this course. Contact other program administrators to ask them to do the same, and work with the state professional development system to negotiate the topic of the course to attract other teachers throughout the state.

◆ **Ask teachers to write a short summary, to share with other teachers, about the professional development they attended.** Teachers could share by making a poster, or providing materials on a bulletin board. Publish summaries in a program newsletter, or have the teachers share their summaries via e-mail. Ask your regional or state professional development and technical assistance center to provide an online discussion board for your teachers, or use one online for free. To make discussion central to the sharing experience, give them suggested guidelines regarding how to interact on a discussion board.

◆ **Ask teachers to develop an action plan** after each professional development activity in which they participate to help them implement the strategies they have learned.

Implication: Allow teachers to participate more in decision making.

What the research says: Teachers who had more say in the decisions at the program level were able to take more action after participating in professional development.

Therefore, you should ...

... provide opportunities and include mechanisms for teachers to have a say in decision making about improving the quality of services.

Strategies

◆ **Ask teachers how they would like to be involved in decision making,** and get their ideas regarding formal mechanisms for having input in decision making in the program.

◆ **Set up informal discussion times.** Try establishing a free, electronic discussion list for your program. Encourage an open flow of communication among staff; do not use it for information dissemination purposes only. Use this venue not only for teacher sharing, but as a formal mechanism for gathering teacher input and advice.

◆ **Send out periodic surveys in which teachers can voice concerns or share advice** about program improvement. Ask a teacher to summarize and analyze the survey results for the rest of the staff.

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Strategies *(continued)*

◆ **Provide opportunities for teachers to brainstorm together some solutions** to their concerns and have formal mechanisms in place for choosing a solution.

◆ **Close class for a night and meet with teachers to evaluate the program.** Then, incorporate changes based upon teachers' feedback, and later share the results of those changes. For example, once a quarter, have teachers compile a list of concerns, and rank them. Put a teacher in charge of collecting concerns. At the meeting, discuss the priority concern, and involve teachers in setting next steps. Involve two or three teachers in piloting changes, and collect program data to use in evaluating the changes. Involve teachers in analyzing the data, and reporting back to the staff. Make refinements, and integrate changes incrementally until they are made program-wide.

Implication: Set expectations that all teachers in the program should and must continue to learn through professional development.

What the research says: Teachers with more experience teaching in the adult education field and teachers with higher levels of formal education were less likely to change. Teachers typically have limited opportunities for professional development and continued learning.

Therefore, you should ...

... establish expectations at program level that all teachers should continue learning.

Strategies

◆ **During the hiring process, convey that continued learning is a requirement of the job and part of the culture of the program.** You can do this by adding questions such as "Tell me how you would like to continue your professional learning while being employed as a teacher in this program." You can also add statements such as "In this program, we believe that teachers, as professionals, are never done learning. Every teacher is expected to build his/her professional knowledge and skills, based on problems encountered in his or her teaching."

◆ **Create a comprehensive plan to prepare teachers to teach adults.** Require teachers to have an annual professional development plan that lists the problems they face and what knowledge/skills they want to acquire in order to address that problem. Review these plans periodically to ensure that every teacher is attending program-based, regional, or statewide professional development related to these problems and topics.

◆ **Set an example by demonstrating your own curiosity and participation in professional development.** Make and publicize or post your own annual professional development plan, based on problems you face in your job or program data indicating where you need to make

changes. Let teachers know that you will be attending professional development or other professional learning activities to address your needs. After returning from professional development, find ways to share what you learned with teachers: a short update in a staff meeting, posting a summary of what you learned in a newsletter, providing a workshop or seminar about what you learned. Let teachers know that you expect them to do the same, and that their time in doing so will be compensated.

◆ **Encourage teachers to learn how to be trainers.** Identify teachers who are using successful approaches, based on good student achievement or other program data. Ask these teachers to provide a seminar inside the program for other teachers, sharing what they know. Encourage these teachers to develop a conference presentation or study circle for teachers outside the program. Contact your professional development state or regional office to find out whether they would be interested in sponsoring your teacher(s) to present to other teachers in the region or state.

◆ **Develop mechanisms that ensure that teachers constantly think about the problems they face** in their teaching, and that they seek professional development based upon an identified problem, rather than based on professional development that seems convenient but on a topic about which they are not interested.

◆ **Tie professional development to program improvement goals.** Do strategic planning with your teachers to determine goals for the coming year. After the goals are set, have teachers identify the professional development they will need to address the goals.

◆ **Encourage teachers to be involved outside of the program, as members of the field.** Encourage them to join and interact with others on state and national adult education discussion lists, which are venues for ongoing, informal professional development. Encourage teachers to submit presentation proposals and send them to regional or state conferences. Subscribe to national publications, keeping teachers connected to and informed of current events in the field. Support them in taking part in formal teacher inquiry projects, action research, or other opportunities that help them build their capacity as leaders in the field. Talk to your professional development system staff about opportunities for your teachers to engage in research, to train other teachers, to join in advocacy or policy efforts, and/or to play a leadership role within the region or state.

Implication: Create well-supported jobs for teachers.

What the research says: Teachers who had well-supported jobs were in a better position to take actions that led to preferred change. Teachers' top concerns about their jobs relate to their program (structure and mission, facilities, and administration) and their job (salary, benefits, and number of working hours).

Therefore, you should ...

... implement a plan for improving teachers' working conditions.

Strategies

- ◆ **Seek local support/fundraising by establishing a literacy council or coalition.** A literacy council is a committee of local citizens who are interested in supporting adult basic education in their community. Like a board of directors, they can initiate activities to raise funds for the program, and these funds can be used to support teachers. Establish a stakeholder advocacy group inclusive of business and industry and student organizations to lobby for more dollars. Enlist the leadership of professionals who are not tied to federal dollars (retired teachers or program administrators, independent consultants, other community stakeholders) to take a leadership role.
- ◆ **Partner with local businesses to provide adult education services,** asking that they provide support for the teacher's salary. Combine a few part-time teaching positions to create a job that has more working hours.
- ◆ **Obtain VISTA or Americorps volunteers,** who come with their own professional development monies. Provide VISTA volunteers with access to grant-writing training, and enlist their help in finding money to supplement your program and create better jobs for teachers.
- ◆ **Raise awareness about the needs of ABE teachers with the school system** (if you are school-based). Convince the state K–12 teacher's union to accept ABE teachers as members with full benefits. Share the successes and the barriers teachers in your programs face, and negotiate ways to help improve teachers' working situations. Collaborate with other program administrators within your local system. Address teacher working conditions by district, community, parish, or county. Enlist teachers in organizing and applying pressure from the field.
- ◆ **Seek community partners to provide better space for teachers.** Combine funding to get "economies of scale"; e.g., two programs could pool their resources to rent additional space that could be used by both programs as a teacher resource center.
- ◆ **Seek in-kind resources.** Approach local businesses, such as photocopy stores, office-supply stores, and local discount stores, to see if they will contribute supplies/materials or certificates for free supplies.
- ◆ **Advocate for teachers to have their own classrooms.** If the space must be shared with another teacher (K–12), advocate that the ABE teacher has equal access to the classroom blackboard, materials and supplies, and storage space.

Implication: Increase opportunities for teachers to interact (share ideas) and participate together in professional development.

What the research says: Teachers who participated in staff development with other teachers from their program changed more, and teachers in programs who had more access to colleagues during and after the professional development changed more.

Therefore, you should ...

... increase every teacher's access to their colleagues and to you, the administrator.

Strategies

In programs with more than one teacher or class:

- ◆ **Combine two classes**, so that one teacher teaches both classes, while one teacher goes to observe another teacher. Suggest that a beginning and an experienced teacher pair up to observe each other's classes.
- ◆ **Set up times for you to observe** (*not* evaluate) teachers' classes. Then discuss your observations with the teacher.⁸
- ◆ **Offer to substitute in a teacher's class while that teacher observes you**; then discuss the class afterwards, being sure to use a pre-observation/post-observation protocol.
- ◆ **Encourage short-term team teaching** among teachers who have recently completed a professional development activity together. Using suggestions above about how to free teachers up from their classes, ask teachers to coteach one of their classes, trying out a new strategy, technique, or approach they learned in the professional development.
- ◆ **Ask teachers to demonstrate a new strategy to others at a staff meeting.** Set up a resource room where one of the teacher's strategies are highlighted each month, complete with lesson plans. Publish a "lesson plan of the month" in the program newsletter, or provide a handout at a staff meeting.

In programs with just one teacher:

- ◆ **Help the teacher establish contact with another teacher in the nearest ABE program.** Provide times for the teacher to call or otherwise communicate with area ABE teachers, and encourage the teacher to do so.

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⁸ For an example of observation protocols, see NCSALL's Mentor Teacher Guide (Adult Multiple Intelligences) Appendix B: Handouts and Articles on Classroom Observation, Peer Coaching and Mentoring: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/mentor_b.pdf.

Strategies *(continued)*

- ◆ **Contact your regional or state professional development and technical assistance center** to find out if they have teacher networks, mentoring programs, or other individualized support mechanisms in which your teacher can participate.
- ◆ **Provide the teacher opportunities to visit other area programs.** Compensate him or her for time and travel. Encourage the teacher to open his or her classroom to other area teachers.
- ◆ **Encourage the teacher to network** and remain in contact with teachers he or she meets at professional development activities and events.

Additional Resources

To learn more about the Professional Development Study, go to: www.ncsall.net

NCSALL Professional Development Study:

- ◆ To read the full report, ***How Teachers Change: A Study of Professional Development in Adult Education***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report25.pdf>
- ◆ To read the full report, ***The Characteristics and Concerns of Adult Basic Education Teachers***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report26.pdf>
- ◆ To read a summary report of ***How Teachers Change***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report25a.pdf>
- ◆ To download the *Focus on Basics* on staff development go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/index.php?id=150>

Section 4: Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education

The Issues You Face

As a program administrator, you know that:

- ◆ Adult students and taxpayers care about the economic impact a GED has for the adult student and the community.
- ◆ You are accountable not only for students passing their GED tests, but also for helping them transition to postsecondary education and other training, and helping them to get and retain employment.
- ◆ You are accountable not just to federal and state funders, but also to students, local funders, the community in which your program is located, and other local stakeholders, and these constituents care not just about adults getting their GED, but about making improvements in adults' lives.
- ◆ Documenting educational gains and GED attainment are mandated measures of program performance and are a way to provide hard data to the state and federal government, but your students and program have goals and produce outcomes that the mandated measures do not capture.

NCSALL's research provides information to help you address these issues; specifically...

- The **GED Impact Studies** give you information about the economic impact of attaining the GED.
- The **Outcomes Studies** give you information about the impact of participation in adult education and literacy programs on students, their families, and their communities, as well as ways to assess this impact.

The GED Impact Studies

Findings from Research

A GED provides economic benefits only to low-skilled high school dropouts. There were no earnings differences between dropouts with and without a GED who left high school with high skills. However, among adults who left school with weak skills, those who earned a GED also earned 36% more income annually than uncredentialed dropouts with weak skills.

It takes time for the economic benefits of the GED to accrue, even up to five years, before measurable earnings differences appear. Those who left school with low basic skills, persisted to acquire higher skills, and passed the GED had, on average, a 15% gain in annual income after five years. However, earning a GED was not a path out of poverty. The average earnings of all high school dropouts from the GED Impact Study were very low. Whether this 15% raised the individual just above the poverty line or kept the individual below the poverty line depended on whether the individual was single or married, and whether or not they had dependents.

The returns on postsecondary education and training were as large for GED holders as for traditional high school graduates, but relatively few GED holders actually pursue postsecondary education. For GED graduates who earn a college degree, their earnings are the same as those who have a regular high school diploma and have

About the GED Impact Studies

The NCSALL GED Impact Studies, conducted by John Tyler and a team of researchers, examined the economic impact of the GED for people who left school without graduating. The research uses large, specially-constructed data sets from several states that allow linking of GED pass rates to Social Security earnings, using a variety of research methods. Tyler and colleagues wanted to know what difference it makes for high school dropouts to earn a GED, and whether leaving high school with lower or higher levels of skill was a factor in how much income could be earned with and without a GED.

Tyler reviewed this NCSALL GED work, as well as the work of others that influence what is known about the economic benefit of the GED. The findings reported in this Sourcebook are from his synthesis published as ***The General Educational Development (GED) Credential: History, Current Research, and Directions for Policy and Practice*** (see Additional Resources at end of this section).

gone on for the same level of postsecondary education. However, very few GED graduates go on to complete a two-year college degree or more.

Specific Implications of the GED Impact Studies

Implication: *Encourage and support adult students with lower skills to persist in preparing to pass the GED test.*

What the research says: The GED leads to increased earnings gains for adults who left high school with weak skills (36% earnings increase among 27-year-olds).

Therefore you should ...

... focus on building skills, not just on getting as many students as possible to pass the test in as short a time as possible.

Strategy

◆ **Help teachers develop a strong program for building the skills of pre-GED students,** and help adult students with weaker skills to understand why strong literacy skills are important.

Implication: Help students plan for and acquire the skills needed to succeed in further education (postsecondary or training).

What the research says: The returns on postsecondary education and training are as large for GED holders as for traditional high school graduates, but relatively few GED holders actually pursue postsecondary education.

Therefore you should ...

... encourage students to plan for postsecondary education and training after attaining their GED, and help them build the academic skills they need to succeed in postsecondary education.

Strategies

◆ **At intake, make a clear statement that GED is not the terminal goal of the program.**

Share implications of the GED research at the orientation for new students. Help students see how your program is prepared to help them not only attain the GED, but go on to further education that will help them reap the full benefits of a GED. Talk about “*when* you go to college” instead of “*if* you go.”

◆ **Help students think about the literacy skills and credentials they need for particular careers,** and make students aware of the research on the financial benefits of postsecondary education. (The NCSALL teaching material, *Beyond the GED*,⁹ provides lessons that address this topic while teaching basic academic skills.) Help them set goals toward that end. For example, perhaps a student needs some postsecondary education to benefit the most from the GED credential. Include setting goals for postsecondary education as part of the student’s plan.

◆ **Provide information on post-GED educational options in your area.** Encourage teachers to use this material as texts for academic instruction; for example, figuring the cost of a semester of training at various institutions as part of a GED math class.

◆ **Make strong connections to local postsecondary institutions or training facilities.** Ask these agencies to help you orient ABE and GED students to the opportunities their programs offer. If possible, hold some of your classes in their facilities.

◆ **Have supports in place for transition to postsecondary education and training.** Take students on a tour of colleges near your program. Invite admissions counselors from the college to give

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⁹ *Beyond the GED* is available free from: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged.pdf.

Strategies *(continued)*

an overview of the admission process, student support services, and financial aid. Invite a former student who has gone to college to come back and speak. (For more suggestions about building transition strategies, go to the National College Transition Network, www.collegetransition.org.)

◆ **Work with teachers to create lessons for GED students that include academic vocabulary** and practice in completing the types of assignments commonly required in postsecondary education. In your program, use the language of college (*semester, academic schedule, syllabus, text, etc.*). Help students learn strategies for skimming and organizing reading assignments, for writing essays, and for advocating for themselves with college instructors and teaching assistants.

The Outcomes Studies

Findings from Research

Analysis of data from the Tennessee Longitudinal Study identified a variety of positive outcomes reported by participants. Approximately one year after enrollment in adult literacy classes, students reported these outcomes:

- An increase in rate of employment from 32% to 48%
- An increased overall satisfaction with their financial situation
- An overall increase in self-esteem (as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale)
- Increased involvement in community (religious, parent-teacher, social/sports) organizations
- Positive changes in three of eight literacy practices examined (paying bills, working with numbers on the job, needing to memorize because of limited reading ability)
- Increase in the number of people who thought a book was a good gift for a child

The qualitative life history study found that the outcomes of literacy program participation in students' lives were diverse, often complex, and determined by individuals' life situations. The changes that seemed to make the most significant differences in students' lives were:

- *Changes from increased literacy skills.* Nine of the ten participants reported acquiring new literacy skills from their participation in adult literacy programs. For eight participants, these new skills in reading, writing, and computation led to changes in the ways they use literacy in their lives. These included:
 - Changes in the practical everyday activities of peoples' lives, e.g., filling out a money order
 - Changes in the ability to carry out work functions more easily

About the Outcomes Studies

Three NCSALL outcomes studies led by Mary Beth Bingman explored the impact of participation in adult education and literacy programs on students, their families, and their communities, as well as ways to assess this impact:

The Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Learners in Tennessee:

The University of Tennessee Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) conducted the Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants in Tennessee to identify if and how participation in literacy programs impacted the lives of adults in four main areas: (1) socioeconomic well-being (jobs, income, survival); (2) social well-being (family and community life); (3) personal well-being (self-esteem, life satisfaction); and (4) physical well-being (health and access to health care).

The Learner Identified Outcomes Study:

Using a life history methodology to build an understanding of outcomes in the lives of adult learners, researchers selected and interviewed ten participants from the earlier Tennessee Longitudinal Study of Adult Literacy Participants. The primary source of data for this study was extended recorded conversations with the ten participants about their lives before and after enrollment in adult literacy programs.

The Documenting Outcomes Study:

Over the course of two years, three teams of teachers and administrators from three adult basic education programs in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia—with NCSALL researchers serving as facilitators—took part in action research (research conducted in a practice context addressing a problem of practice) focused on developing approaches local programs can use to document the outcomes of student participation in adult education programs.

- Becoming more involved in their children’s education
- Increased access to and understanding of expository text, i.e., text that conveys information
- *Changes in sense of self.* Four participants, two who passed the GED test and two who reported the most limited reading skills at enrollment, expressed a strong sense of accomplishment. Three participants talked about losing their sense of shame at being in a literacy class. Three participants reported a new and stronger voice or new opportunities to express themselves.

The action research on documenting student outcomes at the program level found that:

- Local programs can develop documentation processes useful for planning and assessing their work.
- Action research is effective for professional and program development in adult education.
- Action research is a tool to help students set and monitor goals.
- Action research focused on outcomes can enhance processes for improving program quality.

Specific Implications of the Outcomes Studies

Implication: Support varied outcomes of participation in adult education.

What the research says: Participants in adult education report and value a variety of outcomes from their participation in adult education. Their reasons for learning basic skills often include but go well beyond the GED, better employment, or postsecondary education. Through program participation, adult students are able to become more involved in activities that better their lives, often affecting the lives of those around them.

Therefore you should ...

...support student outcomes that extend beyond mandated measures of program performance.

Strategies

◆ **Keep instruction organized around learning; do not let the program focus become centered solely on being accountable to federal policy.** Although you must comply with current accountability procedures, always begin and end with the adult student. Start with their participation goals and their broader purposes. Design instruction that involves the adult student in planning the activities in which they would like to participate to meet those goals. Keep the program’s focus always on students, teaching, and learning.

◆ **Contextualize instruction to real-life situations.** Encourage teachers to structure learning activities around the needs and concerns of the particular students they are teaching. (For more information and strategies about contextualizing instruction, see Section 1.)

◆ **Support a program mission that articulates how the program supports student outcomes beyond traditional program-performance measures.** Let program participants know what they might expect by participating in the program.

Implication: Document and measure varied outcomes of participation.

What the research says: Adults identify a wide variety of outcomes from their participation in adult education classes, and programs can develop ways to document these outcomes.

Therefore you should ...

... work with program staff and students to develop processes for documenting and measuring student outcomes.

Strategies

◆ **Use action research** to identify ways to document a variety of outcomes; for example, to develop and test forms on which students log their reading to children. Action research provides data that programs can then use to assess and improve program quality. The process provides opportunities for developing leadership and building new skills for participants—both staff and students.

◆ **Survey various stakeholders in your community to find out the outcomes they care about and how they could use outcome data.** Consider the needs of various stakeholders, starting with the adults who attend your program. Start by reviewing the various stakeholder groups and the outcomes they care about:

- Students
- Congress: Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), English Literacy and Civics Education Program, etc.
- State legislature
- Employers
- Health practitioners
- Higher education: admission standards and data on success predictors
- Taxpayers: community action groups, religious organizations, community-based assessments

◆ **Use instructional activities to document outcomes.** Work with teachers to help them design classroom reading and writing tasks that also document ways students think the program has helped them; for example, writing assignments on changes in goals or reading habits since enrollment.

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Strategies *(continued)*

- ◆ **Periodically organize a small focus group of students in the program to discuss outcomes.** Focus on a few questions like “What can you do now that you couldn’t do before? Have you noticed any changes at home with yourself or family members?” and so on. Record and integrate results into a broader system of outcomes documentation.

- ◆ **Use or adapt strategies from *How Are We Doing? An Inquiry Guide for Adult Education Programs* to document and measure outcomes.** *How Are We Doing?* is a guide for developing local outcomes documentation that can help programs be accountable to their own constituents even if the documentation is not acceptable to their primary funder. (The guide can be downloaded from NCSALL at http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry_guide.pdf.)

- ◆ **Utilize Equipped for the Future (EFF) tools for both accountability as defined by adult education’s current system (learning gains by level) and accountability regarding students’ and programs’ varied goals.** The EFF Assessment Resource Collection (<http://eff.cls.utk.edu/>) describes the performance continua and level descriptors for the EFF Standards. Performance measures based on the continua can be used to determine progress (or level gain) on a variety of literacy skills. (See the “Guides” and the “ARC Library” for the level descriptors for 11 of the 16 EFF Standards and for information on how they were developed and how they can be used to design, as well as assess, learning.)

- ◆ **Contact your regional or state professional development and technical assistance center for support.** Find out if they can help facilitate the action research process. Seek resources and technical support.

Additional Resources

To learn more about the Outcomes of Participating in Adult Education, go to: www.ncsall.net

NCSALL GED Studies:

◆ To read NCSALL Report #15, ***Cognitive Skills Matter in the Labor Market, Even for School Dropouts***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report15.pdf>

◆ To see a synthesis report on GED impact studies, ***The General Educational Development (GED) Credential: History, Current Research, and Directions for Policy and Practice***, go to: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/ann_rev/rall_v5_ch3.pdf

◆ To see a *Focus on Policy* reviewing findings and policy implications about the GED research, go to: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/fop/v1_1.pdf

◆ To read summary research briefs on these studies, go to:

The Economic Benefits of the GED: A Research Synthesis:

http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief_tyler1.pdf

So You Want a GED? Estimating the Impact of the GED on the Earnings of Dropouts Who Seek the Credential:

http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/brief_tyler2.pdf

Who Benefits from Obtaining a GED? Evidence from High School and Beyond:

<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=658>

The Devil is in the Details: <http://www.ncsall.net/?id=668>

Estimating the Labor Market Signaling Value of the GED:

<http://www.ncsall.net/?id=667>

◆ To see teaching materials on the GED studies, ***Beyond the GED: Making Conscious Choices About the GED and Your Future***, go to:

http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/beyond_ged.pdf

NCSALL Outcomes Studies:

- ◆ To read the full report #11, ***Changes in Learners' Lives One Year After Enrollment in Literacy Programs***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report11.pdf>
- ◆ To read the full report #13, ***"I've Come a Long Way:" Learner-Identified Outcomes of Participation in Literacy Programs***, go to:
<http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report13.pdf>
- ◆ To read the full report #20, ***Documenting Outcomes for Learners and Their Communities***, go to: <http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/research/report20.pdf>
- ◆ To see the program development guide, ***How Are We Doing? An Inquiry Guide for Adult Education Programs***, go to: http://www.ncsall.net/fileadmin/resources/teach/inquiry_guide.pdf

Section 5: Advocacy for Program Improvement

Program Change and Policy

This Sourcebook offers ideas about how program administrators might use NCSALL research to improve programs. Many of the strategies can be implemented without additional funds and within current policy guidelines. However, some strategies would inevitably require additional funding or changes in policy at the state or federal level.

This section provides information to help you make decisions and take action to shape policy decisions that affect funding and implementation of your program, including policies regarding research. The Program Administrator Work Group who helped us develop the Sourcebook provided key input to the development of this section.

Policy in adult basic and literacy education is enacted through several mechanisms:

- *Legislation*: The U.S. Congress and the individual state legislatures enact legislation that directs how states and programs can use funds, structure services for adult students, and document program results. The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) authorizes much of the current adult education policy. State and federal budgets also set limits on the amount of money available each year for adult education programs, support, and research. State and federal appropriations set the amounts that will actually be made available.
- *State plans*: State agencies can write goals into the state plan that describe how they will meet the policies outlined in state and federal legislation.
- *State initiatives*: States may implement specific initiatives aligned with the state goals written in the state plan. These state initiatives have policy implications for program and professional development.
- *Request for Proposals (RFP)*: State agencies can write policies into the RFP to which adult education programs respond in order to obtain state funding. These RFPs usually define what services programs can provide with state funds.

As a program administrator, in order to make changes suggested by research or by your own experience, you need policies that support you to implement new strategies, and you need the funding to make those changes.

The Role of Program Administrators in Advocacy

If you want policies—rules and regulations—that support research-based program improvements, and you want the funding to make those improvements, you may decide to become involved in advocacy.

Program administrators can influence policy in at least two ways:

- *Indirectly*: Programs can implement strategies that lead to better results and collect evidence to document these results; and
- *Directly*: Program administrators can use those results in conjunction with existing research to advocate for state and federal policies and funding that supports program improvement.

If you are a state employee, you are restricted in how you can advocate. You should become familiar with your local system's rules and restrictions regarding lobbying. Program administrators should advocate within the limitations or restrictions of their roles while abiding by local regulations, so as to not use federally appropriated funds for lobbying.

Areas for Advocacy

There is a need for advocacy in funding, performance accountability, teacher working conditions, and research. Below are some specific areas for advocacy in each.

Funding

Usually, programs feel they need more than what is appropriated by state and federal legislatures in order to offer high-quality services, and this requires the adult education field to advocate for:

- Increased funding or different funding formulas, based on whether the program needs to serve more students or needs to provide more or improved services to the students it currently serves
- Multiyear funding cycles, so that programs have knowledge of whether and how much funding they will receive from year to year and thus can plan and implement new strategies over an extended time frame

Performance Accountability

Because NCSALL research found that students report and value a wide variety of outcomes, including expanding their literacy practices and increasing feelings of self-efficacy, the adult literacy field should advocate for:

- Ways to count literacy practices as outcomes and to expand the range of assessments for the National Reporting System (NRS)
- A definition and mechanisms for “counting” adult student participation and study that occurs beyond classroom participation

Teacher Working Conditions

Because NCSALL research found that teachers who had well-supported jobs were more likely to take actions that led to preferred change, the adult education field should advocate for:

- Changes in state policies and funding formulas that would increase the number of full-time teachers, the amount of minimal benefits for all teachers, the amount of paid professional development time all teachers receive, and the ratio of paid prep time to teaching time for all teachers

Research

There are many questions related to program structure and services that NCSALL's research couldn't address with the funding it received. Among the many questions for which the field should seek research funding, the adult literacy field should advocate for research on:

- The costs and benefits of investing more heavily in teacher preparation and working conditions, so that programs and policymakers know more about whether and to what extent teacher preparation and teachers' working conditions are related to student achievement; about the turnover rate of teachers in adult education (how many leave the field each year); and about how much prep time, professional development time, training, and other supports are optimal for producing a strong and stable ABE teaching workforce
- Program outcomes, so that programs and policymakers know more about whether, and to what extent, varied outcomes can be measured, how to measure them (including easy-to-use literacy practices assessments), and how nonstandardized outcomes might be related to educational gains on standardized tests; and about the costs and benefits (in educational gain and impact on quality of life) of investing more heavily in a broader range of student outcomes

- Changes in basic skills and literacy practices over time, so that programs and policymakers know more about the types of instruction related to changes in skills and changes in literacy practices; about what the appropriate emphasis should be on developing skills and practices; and about how to assess changes in literacy practices over time
- The impact of specific instructional practices on student outcomes, so that programs and policymakers know more about the extent to which instruction based on theories of adult multiple intelligences, adult development, language acquisition, use of authentic/contextualized materials, and direct instruction in reading components has on retention and outcomes (both basic skills and literacy practices)
- The best ways to help ABE and GED students transition from adult education to postsecondary education, so that programs and policymakers know how to design and fund adult education to offer the most effective transition services and help more students enroll and succeed in college
- How to help adult students stay connected to adult education programs and continue their learning even when they cannot attend traditional programs

Tools and Strategies for Advocacy

Here are some ideas and sources for ideas and tools that you may find useful.

- *Use dire situations* (such as long waiting lists) to call for increased funding.
- *Use existing research* to make the argument for particular policies or funding you need to make program changes.
- *Use program data* to make the case for specific policies and more funding. You can implement research-based strategies that are feasible within your situation, and generate data that can be used to advocate for the policies and the funding your program needs to make greater improvements.
- *Identify and collaborate with key people*, for example, other program administrators, legislators and legislative staff who work on key committees, school board members, commissioners, newspaper editors, and so on, so that the message policymakers hear is consistent.
- *Advocate locally with groups* that can then take the ideas to the state or federal level.
- *Involve adult students in advocacy*, since they are often the most effective advocates for increased funding, by:
 - Providing adult students in your program opportunities to strengthen their political literacy skills¹⁰ through instructional activities that build their knowledge about civic participation while building reading, writing, and math skills
 - Participating in voter-registration campaigns and other activities that help students cast their votes¹¹
 - Providing opportunities for students to visit legislators, and/or inviting legislators to visit the program and talk to students
 - Supporting student leadership in your program¹²
- *Participate in existing advocacy mechanisms*, such as those organized by the National Council of State Directors of Adult Education (www.ncsdae.org), the Commission on Adult Basic Education (www.coabe.org), the National Coalition for Literacy (www.national-coalition-literacy.org), and state advocacy networks, and by joining the National Literacy Advocacy listserv at <http://lists.literacytent.org/mailman/listinfo/aaace-nla>.

¹⁰ Political literacy skills are defined as: Skills, attitudes, and actions that adults can use to actively engage the political world for themselves, their families, and their communities (Art Ellison, AAACE-NLE listserv, August 8, 2005, <http://lists.literacytent.org/mailman/private/aaace-nla/2005/003161.html>).

¹¹ Contact Voter Education and Registration Action (VERA) campaign for more information: <http://www.nelrc.org/VERA/>.

¹² Contact Voice of Adult Literacy United for Education (VALUE) for more information: <http://www.valueusa.org/>.

- *Help policymakers understand what matters to your program and the adult students your program serves.* Develop an ongoing, working relationship with state staff, legislative staff (both federal and state), and other policymakers. Maintain regular contact with legislative staff and share program data and research relevant to your program's needs.
- *Become more involved with your state professional association.* Use this network to advance advocacy agendas. Approach the organization's leadership and present your concerns at meetings, through the association's electronic venues, or by writing letters. If your state does not have a professional association, collaborate with other program administrators in organizing one.
- *Use opportunities* at annual or semi-annual program administrator meetings to suggest that discussions about the issues your program faces (like teachers' working conditions) be on the agenda.
- *Work with other administrators to change guidelines at the state level.* Use program data to illustrate how the changes you are advocating affect student outcomes.

See http://wiki.literacytent.org/index.php/Public_Policy for other information and links that might be useful for national- and state-level advocacy.

Information About NCSALL

NCSALL's Mission

NCSALL's purpose is to improve practice in educational programs that serve adults with limited literacy and English language skills, and those without a high school diploma. NCSALL is meeting this purpose through basic and applied research, dissemination of research findings, and leadership within the field of adult learning and literacy.

NCSALL is a collaborative effort among the Harvard Graduate School of Education, World Education, The Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, Rutgers University, and Portland State University. NCSALL is funded by the U.S. Department of Education through its Institute of Education Sciences (formerly Office of Educational Research and Improvement).

NCSALL's Research Projects

The goal of NCSALL's research is to provide information that is used to improve practice in programs that offer adult basic education (ABE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and adult secondary education services. In pursuit of this goal, NCSALL has undertaken research projects in four areas: (1) student motivation, (2) instructional practice and the teaching/learning interaction, (3) staff development, and (4) assessment.

Dissemination Initiative

NCSALL's dissemination initiative focuses on ensuring that practitioners, administrators, policymakers, and scholars of adult education can access, understand, judge, and use research findings. NCSALL publishes *Focus on Basics*, a quarterly magazine for practitioners; *Focus on Policy*, a twice-yearly magazine for policymakers; *Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*, an annual scholarly review of major issues, current research, and best practices; and *NCSALL Reports* and *Occasional Papers*, periodic publications of research reports and articles. In addition, NCSALL sponsors the Connecting Practice, Policy, and Research Initiative, designed to help practitioners and policymakers apply findings from research in their instructional settings and programs.

For more information about NCSALL, to download free copies of our publications, or to purchase bound copies, please visit our Web site at: www.ncsall.net

