



## **Key Characteristics of Exemplary Adult Education and Literacy Programs**

In Philadelphia, more than one out of five adults do not have basic literacy skills and approximately 400,000 have less than a fifth grade education.<sup>1 2</sup> Low literacy skills and lack of education are major barriers to seeking and maintaining steady and well-paying employment. Improving adult literacy levels in Philadelphia is one of Mayor Nutter's major initiatives for the City in 2010.<sup>3</sup>

To better understand best practices for adult education programs, PHMC talked to the Adult Education Director from the Center for Literacy, one of the nation's largest community-based providers of adult education and literacy programs. Based in West Philadelphia, they deliver services in over 100 locations throughout Philadelphia. Some of their programs include: adult diploma program, GED classes, literacy tutoring, workforce education, and English as Second Language classes. The Director's extensive experience in working with adult learners in Philadelphia gives him good insight on best practices in this field. He also provided several state and national resources on indicators of adult education program quality that are included in Appendix A.

### **Key Characteristics**

**Staffing:** Successful adult education programs have staff members who are committed to adult learners and know how to make the most of available resources with limited budgets. Staff must be flexible and work hours that are more convenient to adult learners. Additionally, staff must be trained in principles of adult education and should attend professional development courses.

**Volunteers:** Volunteers are critical to the success of adult education programs, as they often provide valuable one-on-one tutoring sessions with adult learners outside of a formal classroom. Volunteers must be trained in principles of adult education and literacy programs, as well as methods to monitor their learners' progress. Having a volunteer coordinator is important, as this person trains the volunteers and serves as their point of contact during the tutoring sessions. If volunteers need advice on how to work with their partners or need new materials to cover during their sessions, a volunteer coordinator is an invaluable resource. Without a coordinator, volunteer retention would be very low. It is important that learners be paired with volunteers for a certain period of time, as it is difficult for adult learners to make progress if their tutor partner changes constantly. Clear expectations should be established for how often and how long tutors will meet with their learners.

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<sup>1</sup> National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 2003: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/StateEstimates.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> Center for Literacy, 2010: <http://www.centerforliteracy.org/programs.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Philadelphia Inquirer, 2010: [http://www.philly.com/inquirer/columnists/karen\\_heller/88989787.html?cmpid=15585797#axzz0ptj8sQXs](http://www.philly.com/inquirer/columnists/karen_heller/88989787.html?cmpid=15585797#axzz0ptj8sQXs)



Congregations often can serve adult learners through tutoring programs, as congregations have easy access to a steady stream of volunteers. It may be easier for congregations to operate an informal tutoring program versus a comprehensive adult education program, since those programs need a higher level of staffing.

***Respect for adult learners:*** A distinguishing characteristic of adult education programs is that program content and language must be suitable and respectful of adult clients. For example, instead of using the word “student” which may imply a traditional teacher/student relationship where a student is subservient to the teacher, all state program materials use the word “learner” or “customer.” Using this type of language acknowledges the adults’ existing knowledge and real-world experience and makes them the focus of the program. The Pennsylvania Adult Basic and Literacy Education Indicators of Program Quality emphasize the importance of customer satisfaction and learner progress on individualized goals (see Appendix A). One quality area explicitly states that “program staff and learners jointly develop, regularly evaluate, and update an instructional plan that incorporates the individual’s learning styles and preferences” (p.7). This is just one example of how learners and staff are equals and collaborate on the learners’ participation in the program.

Successful adult education programs recognize that adult learner needs and learning styles may require non-traditional methods of teaching and accommodate them whenever possible. This means holding classes and sessions outside of typical working hours for adults that work, providing one-on-one tutoring, group classes, and other methods of delivering services that are flexible. It is also important to hold the classes where it is convenient for adult learners to attend, such as local houses of worship, residential facilities, libraries, or other community centers.

Understanding this key principle is difficult sometimes for organizations that have worked in child education, but not in adult education. Congregations that have held learning programs for children may feel that they are suited to take on adult education without realizing the differences in program structure and content. It is important that congregations research training opportunities before embarking on an adult education program.

***Practical program content:*** Related to the program quality area of “respecting adult learners,” curriculum should be practical and relevant to the individual learner’s goals. Many adult learners are interested in advancing their careers, starting a new career, transitioning into post-secondary school, or attending other educational or training programs. Program content should help learners work on their personal educational or vocational goals. Materials from their current or future job can be utilized as part of the curriculum to make it hands-on and practical for the older learner.

Some programs that have provided educational programs for children may have learning materials and textbooks that they think they can use with older learners. However, this is



not an effective way to teach adults and participants may be turned off from a program that uses children's books for their teaching materials.

**Assessment and evaluation:** To have an effective adult learning program and demonstrate program success, learners' progress must be monitored during their participation. There are many official assessments that state funded programs use for standard programs, such as the adult diploma program or GED classes. However, informal measures should also be used to monitor learners' progress and help learners' view their improvement. Seeing concrete improvement over time is important to keeping learners motivated and committed to the program.

**Space:** The learning environment where an adult education program takes place should be well-lit, clean, and suitable for adults. Additionally, having computers available is useful for learners and staff to access online resources. Many learners want to improve their computer literacy as well as language or numerical literacy, so having a computer lab is valuable.

**Community relationships:** It is important for adult learning programs to have working relationships with libraries, local businesses, work-ready programs, and other community resources. Since many learners attend adult education programs to advance their career goals, it is important that programs be able to refer them to job readiness or placement organizations. Libraries are also a valuable resource for organizations that are looking for materials that are appropriate for adult literacy programs. The Philadelphia Free Library has a program called the "Reader Development Program" which gives away two free library books a year to adult learners who have a library card.<sup>4</sup> Books cover topics such as reading, writing, math, job skills, parenting, biography, fiction, GED and ESL. Program staff can also access these books for their own classes.

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<sup>4</sup> Free Library of Philadelphia, Reader Development Program: <http://www.freelibrary.org/libserv/rdp.htm>