

Themes from the Small Group Sessions

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**NCSALL REPORTS #10A
April 1999**

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As part of “The Impact of Welfare Reform on Adult Literacy Education Conference,” small group discussion sessions were conducted after each paper presentation contained in this publication. A facilitator and a recorder were assigned to each session; and after each session, a summary of the session was prepared by the recorder so that we could capture the themes discussed. Based on the recorders’ reports, it was possible to identify three main themes that characterized the discussion: (1) issues and problems raised by the Personal Responsibility Act; (2) how adult literacy instruction should respond to welfare reform; and (3) how the adult literacy education system should respond to welfare reform. An elaboration of these themes follows.

Issues and problems raised by the Personal Responsibility Act

Nearly all conference participants were concerned whether the jobs acquired by TANF recipients would be low-paying, dead-end jobs or good jobs. For most, a good job was defined as a job with income sufficient to permit self-sufficiency, a job that could lead to career advancement, and a job that provided benefits. Several noted that these ingredients—adequate income, career advancement and benefits—were job characteristics that many adult literacy education teachers did not enjoy.

Discussants were concerned with the skills gap for TANF recipients entering the workforce. Good jobs generally require skills and education that exceeds the education level and skills most TANF recipients possess. This is especially true for TANF recipients who are assigned to adult literacy before they are required to work. Where and how will TANF recipients acquire the advanced skills and education they need to qualify for good jobs and career advancement? Employers are reluctant to pay the costs, as are most state governments. Certainly, given the salaries of most TANF recipients, they themselves lack the capacity for investment.

Many conference participants lamented the fact that many learners enrolled in JOBS-sponsored adult literacy programs had been forced to terminate enrollment because of the work requirements of the new legislation. If previous learners are now employed, it makes sense to bring adult literacy to them through workplace education. However, few participants were hopeful that employers of TANF recipients would embrace the workplace education concept, let alone finance it.

The most commonly-expressed theme with respect to welfare reform was the need to prepare TANF recipients not only for employment, but also for self-sufficiency. Self-sufficiency means a living wage and hope for the future. Many believed that the new legislation was inadequate in this respect and that welfare reform had merely increased the numbers of people condemned to the working poor.

How should adult literacy education instruction respond to welfare reform?

Most conference attendees noted that while adult literacy education has traditionally responded to a wide range of learners' individual needs, there is now a one-size-fits-all mentality that focuses on narrow employment goals. It is vital for adult literacy to continue to meet learners' needs and to recognize differences in instruction. As one group noted, how can one treat a group of homeless, low-level TANF recipients the same as a group of learners who are almost ready to take the GED? Many were concerned that the legislation promoted a narrow vision of adult literacy that emphasized basic skills training rather than broad-based education. Welfare-sponsored adult literacy needs to do more than teach narrow skills if learners are to become employed in good jobs. At minimum, it must teach problem-solving skills and it must empower. There was concern that narrow adult literacy performance standards tied to employment would shape instruction in ways that prevented teachers from meeting a wide range of learners' needs.

Many felt that in the atmosphere of reform, adult literacy teachers were confused regarding their roles. Were they to be responsible simply for narrow basic skill gain or were they also to be charged with changing attitudes, assisting in job acquisition and providing employment information? If the role of teacher were to change in response to welfare reform, who was going to provide the staff development necessary to help teachers make the change?

Is the purpose of welfare-sponsored adult literacy to mainstream learners; that is, to equip them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes believed to be requisite for success in the dominate society? If so, should we not ask learners' permission before we proceed with the makeover? Accepting the questionable assumption that we should strive for this kind of mainstreaming, is it possible?

How should the adult literacy education system respond to welfare reform?

At the state level, the adult literacy education system typically involves, at minimum, the Departments of Education, Labor, and Health and Human Services. At the local level, it includes a variety of stakeholders including public schools, community colleges, learners, employers and case workers. Most felt that in the past this system had been very poorly coordinated and that lack of coordination had created waste and had impeded the ability to address learners' needs. Many conference participants noted that if adult literacy is to be successful with welfare recipients, it needs to be of sufficient intensity and duration. Under the JOBS program most welfare recipients received at least 20 hours per week of instruction, but under the Personal Responsibility Act many of those who were receiving at least 20 hours per week of instruction are now receiving far less. There was also the feeling that adult literacy had to provide for long-term needs as well as short-term needs. This will require better connections with providers of advanced

vocational and higher education as well as the means for TANF recipients to pay for it. It will also require better connections with employers.

Finally, conference participants recognized that the needs of welfare recipients varied by state. Needs in rural states, for example, differ substantially from needs in urban areas. Although differences in state welfare programs often make the program seem chaotic, to some extent the differences are valid adaptations to differing state contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS

At the final session of the “Impact of Welfare Reform on Adult Literacy Education” conference, the participants developed draft recommendations for practice, policy and research. The draft recommendations were subsequently sent to all participants for further comment. Based on comments received, the following recommendations resulted.

Practice

1. If welfare recipients are to become self-sufficient, adult education—both basic and advanced—must be equal in importance to job acquisition.
2. The population served by adult literacy education should include the working poor as well as welfare recipients. Funds should be made available to enable this.
3. The mission of adult literacy for welfare recipients should be to promote learners’ self-sufficiency. To this end:
 - The goals of learners, their families and the community must be respected and addressed. Learners’ goals and needs must guide instruction.
 - Instruction must be of sufficient intensity and duration.
4. Support services must be funded and provided before and beyond initial employment. These include transportation, child care, health services, counseling and case management, and support for welfare recipients’ entrepreneurial activities.
5. A high performance system for adult literacy education must be developed and implemented. This would include:
 - Better collaboration and coordination among state agencies that serve welfare recipients, providers and other stakeholders—particularly employers.
 - An expanded system of staff development that meets teachers’ professional learning needs substantially and in-depth.
 - Instruction of sufficient intensity and duration both for welfare recipients assigned to adult literacy and those who are employed.

Policy

1. Welfare policy formation should be an open process. Policy decisions at the national and state levels should meaningfully involve all stakeholders in welfare reform, including welfare recipients. Information regarding policies under consideration should be readily available to all stakeholders.
2. Welfare policy should focus on promoting long-term self-sufficiency for welfare recipients rather than short-term employment gains. Welfare policy that merely adds to the number of working poor should be avoided.

Research

1. Realistic and fair performance standards must be developed, and feasible methods of measuring performance must be implemented. Adult literacy education practitioners should be consulted in the process of developing standards.
2. A longitudinal study should be implemented to measure the long-term benefits gained by welfare recipients who engage in adult literacy education.