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 skills[10] 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 votes[11]
    - Providing opportunities for students to visit legislators, and/or inviting legislators to visit the program and talk to students
    - Supporting student leadership in your program[12]
- *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.

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[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**