

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 335 549

CE 058 812

TITLE Literacy at Work: A Multi-Agency Collaborative Project. Final Report.

INSTITUTION Cuyahoga County Dept. of Development, Cleveland, OH.

SPONS AGENCY Department of Labor, Washington, D.C.

PUB DATE Sep 90

CONTRACT 4-P9-ZK-LC-00

NOTE 10p.

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adult Basic Education; Adult Literacy; *Agency Cooperation; *Coordination; *Economically Disadvantaged; *Employment Potential; Federal Programs; Illiteracy; *Literacy Education; Mathematics Instruction; Out of School Youth; Reading Instruction; Referral; Remedial Programs; Staff Development; Testing; Welfare Recipients; Writing Instruction

IDENTIFIERS Job Training Partnership Act 1982; Ohio (Cuyahoga County)

ABSTRACT

A Cuyahoga County (Ohio) project developed a multiagency, comprehensive basic skills improvement system designed to increase the employability of people receiving public assistance, out-of-school youth, and Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) clients. An advisory committee composed of individuals representing the collaborative groups was established to guide the activities and ensure all collaborators were informed and involved. At least 400 intake workers and employment counselors participated in a 90-minute training session. Although an initial objective was to upgrade the county JTPA testing system so that test results in reading and math would be more meaningful with regard to client placement, it became clear that it would be practical to have as many agencies as possible using a common testing tool. Recommendations were to find an acceptable, not perfect test; decide upon "passing levels"; develop a referral process; and develop a client tracking process. Recommendations with respect to referral were the importance of orientation, communication, and linkage with all agencies. Classroom training programs at the fourth- to eighth-grade levels in writing and mathematics were found to be more effective when students were subdivided into separate and distinct classes by levels of ability. Other recommendations for training were use of computer-assisted instruction and nontraditional teaching methods. (YLB)

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ED335549

Cuyahoga County
Department of Development
SDA # 21

Literacy at Work:
A Multi-Agency Collaborative Project
Final Report

September, 1990

This project was supported in whole by federal funds of the Job Training Partnership Act (Public Law 97-300, Section 123) and with approval from the State Education Coordination and Grants Advisory Council in Ohio.

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FINAL REPORT

4-P9-ZK-LC-00

**LITERACY AT WORK:
A MULTI-AGENCY COLLABORATIVE PROJECT**

INTRODUCTION

In July, 1989 the Cuyahoga County Department of Development was awarded a grant by the Ohio Department of Education's Office of Job Training Partnership Services. This final report is intended as a summary of what was learned as a result of that grant. This report does not include many of the details attendant to program implementation and operations, but rather focuses on the broader lessons learned throughout the course of the project. It is our hope that others embarking on similar projects might benefit from our experiences. Specific materials pertinent to the project are available through the Cuyahoga County Department of Development's Learning Center.

One out of five adults in Greater Cleveland is functionally illiterate. This situation has led to a plethora of economic, social and individual problems, not the least of which has been the effect of illiteracy on employment potential. The goal of this project, therefore was to develop a multi-agency, comprehensive basic skills improvement system designed to increase the "employability" of those receiving public assistance, out-of-school youth and Job Training Partnership Act (J.T.P.A.) clients. Because public agencies and educators were reporting difficulties in recruiting and serving individuals at the lower end of the literacy continuum, special emphasis was placed on recruiting and developing programs for this population.

The project was a cooperative one that initially included as collaborators the Cuyahoga County Department of Development, which encompasses both the Office of Employment and Training and the Learning Center; the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program; the Cuyahoga County Private Industry Council; the Cuyahoga County Department of Human Services' Fair Work Program; the Greater Cleveland Literacy Coalition; and the Regional Office of the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services (OBES). Later, other public agencies and non-profit organizations became involved in the project. The majority of the project was "housed" at the County's J.T.P.A. Learning Center.

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The objectives of the grant, briefly stated, were to: establish an active advisory committee; train government employees, but particularly intake workers and employment counselors (both hereafter referred to as "workers"), on issues relevant to illiteracy and educational program resources available to clients; upgrade the literacy testing system; establish an effective recruitment and referral system, with emphasis on the lower level reader; and develop "segue" writing and math programs for the lower level (i.e., 4th to 8th) reader.

It should be noted at the outset that during the course of this grant project first a pilot Fair Work Program and then the JOBS Program were implemented in Cuyahoga County. Thus, we are able to report not only on the grant objectives, but also what we learned as the project expanded to include JOBS clients.

THE PROJECT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The project's Advisory Committee was established to guide the activities of the grant and to ensure that all key collaborators were both informed and involved. The Committee was composed of individuals representing the collaborative groups. (Please refer to the Introduction for a list of these agencies.) The Advisory Committee met prior to the start-up of grant activities and thereafter at approximately six-week intervals.

There are several recommendations that we would make with regard to such a committee. First, the importance of all parties being represented from the outset should not be underestimated. Prior to any activity beginning, each collaborator brought information about his or her programs and needs, as well as thoughts about the impact of this project on operations. From the outset, then, expectations and barriers were clear, and very little arose between the collaborators that came as an unwanted surprise. An added benefit of this broad-based group was that we found issues outside the purview of the grant being discussed and resolved, as the Committee provided a forum for discussion that did not previously exist. In fact, we found the interactions of this group to be so helpful that the decision was made to continue meeting after the expiration of the grant.

To make expectations clear and to ensure that a project remains on track, we recommend that committees prepare and discuss a detailed work plan that includes activities, time lines and the names of the parties responsible for each activity. Once this document has been agreed to, it can serve as the agenda for each meeting. A clear work plan helps ensure that discussion remains focused and also aids in keeping the project on track. While it is somewhat time-consuming to prepare, the initial time taken can prove to be an invaluable time management tool in the future. However, it serves no purpose whatsoever if there is not "buy-in" from all collaborators at the outset of a project. There should be an understanding that the document can be amended if circumstances so warrant.

Finally, we recommend that one or more people on an advisory committee have planning, and not program implementation, as their primary responsibility. The objectivity brought by "planners-only" helps keep the group's focus on the overall goal rather than on individual program elements. Having no vested interest in a program, these individuals can also serve as effective monitors as the project progresses.

TRAINING INTAKE WORKERS AND EMPLOYMENT COUNSELORS

In this "information overload" era, it should come as no surprise that even the best workers are not aware of all the resources available to their clients; this is particularly true of those new to the job. For that reason an important objective of this grant was to provide training on illiteracy and the free education programs available to clients. While the initial objective of this grant was to train approximately 100 professionals representing J.T.P.A., Human Services and OBES agencies, it quickly became apparent that far more than 100 required information. Thus, by the project's conclusion, at least 400 had participated in a 90-minute training session.

During the training process several things became apparent that led us to the following recommendations. First, it should not be assumed that those working with clients have the information required to offer the client the full array of services needed. Sessions on community resources should be an integral part of both worker orientation and in-service training. Moreover, these sessions should be offered on a periodic basis so that changes in the service system can be made clear to workers. We found these sessions to be of such value that we plan to continue to offer them in the future.

Second, we recommend that professionals working with clients be given information on how to tactfully and effectively approach a client in need of education. Because most people who are functionally illiterate are embarrassed by their lack of skills, we found it helpful to role play situations that involved approaching a client on this topic. A worker who makes an inappropriate or even unkind remark to a client faces the danger of that client being even more "turned off" to education.

Finally, if there is a literacy hotline in the area, we recommend that workers be given that number. In this way a worker must make only one call to obtain the necessary information, rather than calling agency after agency. A brochure or even a xeroxed sheet listing the hotline (and/or key literacy program) number(s) makes it easier for the worker and more likely that the appropriate program will be located for the client. An easy-to-use resource directory of literacy services such as the ones published by the Greater Cleveland Literacy Coalition and the Ohio Literacy Network can also be quite helpful to workers.

UPGRADING THE LITERACY TESTING SYSTEM

An initial objective of the grant was to upgrade the County J.T.P.A. testing system so that test results in reading and math would be more meaningful with regard to client placement. However, with the advent of the pilot Fair Work Program and later the JOBS Program, it quickly became clear that it would be exceedingly practical to have as many agencies as possible using a common testing tool. Because clients tend to make use of several agencies within the overall service system, it makes sense for all components of that system to use the same test. By so doing, the client is subjected to only one testing situation; moreover, testing costs to the overall system are greatly reduced.

Our experiences in the area of testing have led us to make several recommendations that we hope will prove helpful. First, the use of a common test proved to be fairly successful and we suggest, particularly in light of the JOBS Program, that every effort be made to implement this approach. In our case, the agencies that agreed to use the same test were: the city and county J.T.P.A. Learning Centers; the Department of Human Services; the County Consortium of ABE Programs; and OBES. Others implementing this approach may want to include additional agencies, particularly if those agencies are involved in the client intake process.

The second recommendation we make is that groups not wait until the "perfect test" is found. Lengthy discussion and experimentation led us to realize that, at least at this time, there is no such thing. The objective should be to find a test that's the most acceptable to all parties involved. In our situation, agencies elected to use the WRAT math test and Gates-McGinitie reading test at the point of intake. Several agencies decided to do additional diagnostic testing when a client registered in their program; as examples, writing samples were often examined and, when appropriate, the practice G.E.D. test was administered.

Third, decisions must be made with regard to "passing levels" on the test(s) in those situations where a diploma or G.E.D. is not required, but rather the options are to place a client in an educational or vocational class. In our case, it was agreed that any client who scored below the sixth level in math or the eighth in reading must be enrolled in educational classes, unless an exceptional situation warrants a waiver. It should be noted that we have often talked about raising the "passing grade" levels, and this issue is still under discussion.

Along with establishing testing criteria, a clearly defined referral process should also be developed. With regard to referral, worker knowledge of resources again plays an important role, as it is at this point that appropriate client referrals must be made.

A fourth recommendation is that any worker involved in testing should be given training by a professional competent in the area of test administration. This training should, of course, be offered periodically for new workers. We found two useful training techniques that others may want to employ. First, we wrote and distributed a short list of guidelines for test administration and client referral; this gave workers something "handy" to refer to if they had questions. Second, part of the training included trainees actually taking the tests; this was done to sensitize test administrators to the stress and anxiety experienced by clients.

Fifth, we recommend that a client tracking process be developed to monitor the testing and referral system. In our case, we established a procedure that called for test results being entered into the computer as part of the client record. Each month a report is generated on all new clients who scored below passing levels; the computer also "kicks out" names of clients for whom no test scores have been entered. Follow-up takes place to ensure that clients are appropriately enrolled in education classes.

Finally, for those who have not already done so, we recommend a concerted effort to expand and strengthen programs for clients functioning at low levels of literacy. Test results, particularly of JOBS clients, has shown us that programs for clients at this level are becoming an increasing necessity.

DEVELOPING A RECRUITMENT AND REFERRAL SYSTEM

Another objective of the grant was to develop a recruitment and referral system that focused on those functioning at the lower end of the literacy continuum and, thus, traditionally considered "hard to serve." However, with the advent of first the pilot Fair Work Program and shortly thereafter the JOBS Program, recruitment of this population essentially became a moot point. While we originally hoped to recruit 40 people in this category, at the conclusion of the grant we had recruited and served 69, and more were regularly entering the program. We were, in fact, obliged during the course of the grant to obtain additional classroom space.

Thus, with regard to this objective our key emphasis was on the referral process, both at the level of the individual worker and at the broader systemic level.

We have several recommendations with regard to referral, many of which are discussed in other sections of this report. However, a few additional suggestions should be mentioned at this point.

First, we observed that the type and quality of orientation given by the worker to a client prior to placement seemed to affect the client's attitude and behavior when he/she arrived at the educational program. We suggest, therefore, that workers not only give clients information on the program and its sanctions, but also that a discussion occur on what the client can expect to encounter in an educational program; the educational program can and should supplement this with an on-site orientation session. The importance of orientation was brought home most clearly during the pilot Fair Work Program. Clients in this program were given an orientation of several weeks that focused on such important issues as self-esteem, behavior management, problem-solving and expectations; these clients, as a group and in the main, appeared to be the most positive about the educational process. Unfortunately, this type of in-depth orientation and training is expensive and probably not affordable when large numbers of clients are involved.

Our second recommendation is an obvious one, but it must be said: a forum should be established that promotes communication and established links among all agencies involved with clients. All too often, misunderstandings and poor client services result from lack of communication. "Time out" meetings should be scheduled to work through broader issues pertaining to services and inter-agency links. It was our opinion that the successful links we established (e.g., the "flow" of clients from the Department of Human Services to the County's J.T.P.A. Learning Center) were both due to and dependent on our commitment to "time out" communications sessions.

DEVELOPING BASIC SKILLS TRAINING

Another objective of this grant was to develop classroom training programs at the 4th to 8th levels in writing and math, while maintaining the G.E.D. program already in operation. This objective was established because of our assumption (which proved to be correct) that the client typically described as "hard to serve" would most likely be functioning at the lower end of the literacy continuum.

The curricula developed for these basic skills classes, which are running on a year-round basis, are available through the Cuyahoga County Learning Center, as are the very positive evaluations of the programs. For the purposes of this report, however, here I will focus not on content, but rather on the process and experiences that led us to a series of suggestions for others.

First, we found that even in the relatively limited spectrum of the 4th to 8th levels, it is best to subdivide students into separate and distinct classes by levels of ability. Mixing students at the 4th and 8th levels appeared to hamper both. For that reason a multi-level approach was developed, and clients progressed through each level as their basic skills increased.

Second, we learned that classroom-only education in writing and math did not always suffice for clients starting at lower levels, despite the fact that writing was taught in the context of social studies and required readings. We learned over time that a "reading-only" program had to be established for clients at too low of a level of literacy to hold their own in the "easiest" (i.e., first level) classroom program, and we are now working at developing such a program that will use "real" life and job materials. It also appears that tutors will be required at this level for supplementary assistance.

Third, we observed that computer-assisted-instruction (c-a-i) seems to have value for clients functioning at lower levels, but primarily only when it is used to develop "rote" skills. While clients at the G.E.D. level seemed to find c-a-i both helpful and acceptable, the lack of human interaction and guidance did not seem to suit clients at lower levels. Part of the reaction we encountered might have been a result of the software used; we are now exploring other software packages.

Fourth, we quickly learned that it was necessary to develop clearly stated guidelines on attendance and classroom behavior. We found that the guidelines not only clarified expectations, but also initiated an understanding of the relationship between "rules" and getting and holding a job. We observed, to no one's surprise, that explaining why the rules were in effect helped gain adherence to them.

Fifth, with regard to client orientation, we learned that a certain degree of "selling" was called for. While no false promises were made, benefits were emphasized, as were client rights and responsibilities. It was made clear from the outset that while sanctions would be applied if necessary, the program would make every effort to provide other types of motivation.

Sixth, we became aware that, particularly with this client population, some non-traditional teaching skills were necessary. While it is perhaps overstating the obvious to say that clients often have personal problems, what is less clear is the degree to which the teacher can and should become involved in those difficulties. Here, the role of the case manager comes into play, and we learned that the most effective workers remained accessible to the client and teacher, even though the client was, at least temporarily, "placed." Regardless of the worker's involvement, however, it was clear that the teachers weren't "just teaching;" the need for teachers to do "social work" was present in almost every learning situation.

We learned that teachers should also participate in an orientation program that should include learning to interact effectively with the "non-traditional student" and information on the program in which the client is involved and support services available to that client. We also learned that teachers as well as students need periodic "pep talks."

Since clients with whom we worked were participating on a voluntary basis, we had limited experience with those mandated to attend and subsequently exhibiting overt resistance to the program. In the next phase of our collaborative efforts we will be working to motivate and teach those mandated to participate in education.

THE COLLABORATORS

Members of the project's Advisory Committee were: Ms. Nancy Cronin, Cuyahoga County Department of Development; Ms. Phyllis Osol Dykes, Greater Cleveland Literacy Coalition; Mr. Dean Fangman, Cuyahoga County Department of Development, Division of Employment and Training; Ms. Pat Heller, Cuyahoga County Department of Development, Learning Center; Mr. George Hill, Cuyahoga County Department of Development, Division of Employment and Training; Mr. Dan Koncos, Ohio Bureau of Employment Services; Ms. Jayne Kuhnen, Cuyahoga County Department of Human Services; Ms. Carolyn Milter, Cuyahoga County Department of Development; Mr. Larry Robinson, Cuyahoga County Department of Development, Division of Employment and Training; Ms. Catherine Thomas, Cleveland Heights - University Heights Adult Basic Education Program; and Ms. Maureen Weigand, Cuyahoga County Department of Human Services.

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