Ohio Literacy Resource Center
Enhancing Adult Literacy in Ohio

Program Resources

Recruitment and Retention

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Even if a program seems to be exactly what a community needs, effective and targeted recruitment activities will be necessary to bring participants into the program. Retention, another ongoing issue in many programs, often involves meeting families' needs—both academic and "real world." Research indicates that personal relationships attract participants to program and encourage them to remain—relationships with teachers and with each other. Long ter participation grows out of feelings of trust, belonging, and ownership. These retention ideas are useful for both program planning and for "diagnosing" programs that are experiencing difficulty retaining students.

Retention: Why Do Some Leave So Soon?

The following advice, adapted from Linda Thistethwaite's presentation at the meeting of the College Reading Association (11/97), represents successful practices from literacy programs throughout Illinois.

The interim evaluation of *Evaluation of Adult Literacy P o-grams* (1994) brought the retention issue into sharp focus.
⇒ 36% of new adult learners leave the program before completing 12 hours of instruction.
⇒ Of those who remain, 50% leave before completing 16 weeks
⇒ Thus, for every 100 adult learners who enter a program, only 32 remain after 16 weeks.

Typical Reasons for Academic Failur

- Low self-esteem and a diminished sense of self-worth
- A history of passive learning
- No clear educational goal
- Little practice in decision-making and goal-setting
- A feeling of being overwhelmed by complexities and choice
- A lack of information about and/or understanding of "the system"
- Feeling alienated from the dominant culture
- Lack of experience in sustaining a commitment to ac a-demic excellence
- Lack of experience in time-task management or organizing for success
- Difficulty making and following through on commi t-ments
- No support network
- Peer pressure against putting in the time and effort

- required for learning
- Lack of depth and breadth in life experiences

Intake Procedures to Identify At-Risk Drop Outs

The research of Allan Quigley indicates that those most likely to drop out can be identified. He has developed a set of pr o-cedures and a screening device that focuses on behaviors and past schooling experiences.

- General intake interview
- The Prior Schooling and Self-Perception Inventory
  The learners are encouraged to reflect on their previous school experiences and to contrast them to their antici - pated participation in the adult education program: a) how well they will perform in the same subjects, b) how successfully they will make friends, c) how well they will relate to the adult education program teachers, and d) how well they will relate to the adult education program counselors. This Inventory is available from Penn State University.
- The Witkin Embedded Figures Tests determines field-dependence/field-independence whether the learner is a global, interactive lear ner or a logical, analytical one. Intake assessments often reveal that those most at risk of dropping out are field-dependent learners. These learners will be more successful with global learning instructional strategies and procedures, ones that focus on seeing the "big picture" and inte -relationships. They are less su c-cessful with analytical, independent ones. Those who are field-dependent learn best in small group, interactive situations where the focus on working together and build-ing friendships is a part of the academic experience.

Four Guidelines

- The first order of business is to realize the wide variety of opportunities that teachers have available to encourage adult learners to remain in their programs.
- Keep in mind that what happens the first several weeks, and indeed, the first several sessions, will influence adults' decisions to go or stay.
- Remember that ultimately it is the adult's decision. Situations beyond a teacher's control will impact whether the adult remains or leaves.
- Since adults are not a captive audience, the won't stay if they are not getting what they want.

General Orientation

Administrators can build in-program services and procedures that encourage student participation. Programs should try to provide transportation and bab-sitting assistance. Some-times when children enjoy these experiences, they can be the impetus for getting their adult caregivers to the program. Fo students who quit coming, programs can establish procedures for follo-up. Programs can give attendance awards. Programs can provide each new participant with a folder o handbook containing information about: child care; transp r-tation and parking; scholarships; graduation; community service phone numbers; attendance policies; building regul a-tions; typical schedules; and a calendar of special events.

A personal relationship with a teacher is the reason that many adult learners give for remaining in a program. To build relationships with students, teachers can

- Walk a new student around program facilities.
- Be animated, up-beat, and cheerful.
- Touch your students (within bounds, of course). Yet, at the same time, be sure to respect their "space." Be at-tuned to their reaction. Touching might involve a hand on the adult's shoulder or something as simple as shaking hands.
- Don't be defensive or evasive.
- Have a sense of humor and laugh at yourself rather than take every mistake seriously.
- Be firm, fair, and demanding, in the positive sense of knowing that students can live up to your expectations.
- Be predictable.
- Consider yourself part of the group. Tell students about yourself.
- Establish a positive school climate where harmony p e-vails.
- Be curious about your students—curious but not nosey.
- Find out what they're really worried about with respect to their being successful in the program.

If you have your own classroom:
⇒ Hang posters and pictures.
⇒ Have book displays.
⇒ Brighten the room with flowers.
⇒ Talk with the students about how together you might make the area a pleasant place to learn.
⇒ Have a message center.

⇒ Use color.
⇒ Get a coffee pot

If you don't have your own classroom or if you're constantly on the move from one location to the ne xt:
⇒ Have a "classroom" box (a picture frame with a motivational saying, a plant, a small bookrack to hold materials, etc.).
⇒ Have an interesting book bag that sits on the table.
⇒ Use colored paper when appropriate.
⇒ Talk with the student(s) about how together you might make the area a pleasant place to learn.

Teachers can empower adult learners to help set course goals and priorities and to become part of the process to foster a spirit of shared ownership. Part of this empowe r-ment is shifting the primary responsibility for learning to th students themselves, e.g., knowing what is required, developing a personal support network, and seeking help from the instructor at the first hint of difficulty. Use language that su p-ports your belief in the student's empowerment and success, e.g., "What can I do to support you as you work toward your goals?" or "What will work for you?"

Goals

Using the new procedures for O-PAS Student Experience Model, teachers can help students articulate their goals and preferences. As you fill out the forms, "visit" about student's life, goals, and feelings.

- Do not focus on academic goal-setting only. Adult learn-ers only tenuously tied to the program may have a difficult time articulating their academic goals.
- Important to goal-setting is goal evaluation. Has a set goal been achieved, is progress being made, or is no p o-gress being made?
- If students have indicated interest in a particular type of reading or even of specific reading materials, then use those materials to illustrate important points during instruction.
- As a part of the assessment procedures, have individuals contract with respect to attendance, curricular materials, and learning goals.
- Sometimes disinterested/negative spouses or other significant family members or friends can derail the p r-sonal goals of a learner. Invite these disinterested negative persons to class. Sometimes people are negative because they don't know what's happening. Elicit their help.
- Utilize the various intelligences that people have rather than relying only on the verbal/linguistic and logical/mathematical ones.
- Use a variety of types of computer communication, e.g., email and fax, for sending in completed materials if the student cannot attend.

Assessment

The following assessment procedures encourage program par-ticipation.
- Do as little assessment as possible.

- Begin with informal assessment measures before using formal measures. These informal measures may be something as simple as a "walking tour" to determine what the adult can find that s/he CAN read. Another informal assessment utilizes a literacy table full of a wide variety of reading material. Ask the adult to browse th table and a) find something s/he would be interested in reading, and b) find something that s/he CAN read. Include signs, children's books, recipes, joke books, a Reader's Digest, and so forth.
- Begin with the aspect of the test the stud nt feels most comfortable with.
- Encourage adult learners to self-evaluate. Make it easy for the adults to view themselves as part of the assessment team.
- Some adults are quite experienced in talking about what they can't do, so encourage them to talk about what they CAN do, what they've taught someone else to do, what they have already learned, and so forth.
- Meet with the adult individually to share assessment results. Ask for the adult's response and for additional input.
- From the beginning, plan to demonstrate growth in a variety of ways other than numerical scores on tests.
- Tell adults that the GED test is not easy but that they would not want it to be. They'll want to know they have really accomplished something when they pass.

Success
Recognizing small steps of student success encourages students to remain in programs.
- Teach something that can be learned very quickly. Thi might be a technique for remembering, a math "trick," or an easy way of dealing with an unknown word (underline it and go on).
- Use short lessons and change activities frequently.
- Recognize that asking questions is an indication of success. Make the student feel successful for having asked a good question.
- Make very shor -term assignments, perhaps ones that can be completed within the first 10 minutes.
- Establish routines. These routines may deal with homework assignments, review sessions, weekly/monthly assignments, or the format of the session itself.
- Overcoming the smallest hurdles should be causes for success. Don't wait for major accomplishments to recognize achievements or to celebrate.
  - -Praise for divergent thinking
  - -Bonus points for assignments completed on time
  - -A bulletin board to indicate weeks of perfect attendance with additional prize rewards
  - -Pictures and certificates
  - -Name and achievement in the program's newsletter
  - -Participation in the National Adult Education Honor Society or the program's own local hono society
  - -Special classroom promotion
  - -Awards assemblies
  - -Symbol and photograph (e.g., for having passed

the Constitution test, a small U.S. flag and a picture taken of the student with the teacher and with the flag)

Mentoring
Helping students form personal networks fosters a feeling of belonging.
- At one level this may be a classroom philosophy rather than an actual paring/grouping of learners.
- You may want to establish mentor groups rather than set up paired situations.
- Learners may be encouraged to find their own people to mentor by bringing friends to class
- In addition to the benefits for those bei ng mentored, the mentoring program benefits the program itself. The most successful programs are ones that use peers in a variety of capacities.
- An interesting mentor project is to make a scrapbook about successful role models.
- Introduce students to the concept of personal and professional networking and encourage them to use it as an educational tool.
- Have the students establish a buddy system for absences, work missed, assignments, and so forth.
- Use calling cards. Suggest that students call two members of the class each week. The call allows for discussion of questions about homework as well as making both the caller and the person called feel more connected.

Classroom Environment
Initial activities encourage attendance and establish group cohesion.
- Have students sit at tables. It's easier to form friendship when you're sitting at a table than when you're sitting in rows.
- As teachers, learn the names of all the students as quickl as possible. Encourage the students to do this, too. Perhaps play a name game of some kind every once in a while.
- Take 5 minutes of the class each session for the first several weeks to do some brief get-acquainted activity.
- Encourage the sharing of feelings about learning, about specific subject matter, and so forth. Share your own feelings and opinions.
- At the end of each class, ask one student to stay for just a minute to chat.
- Help the students to get out of the classroom. Encourag the joining of clubs and community activities.
- Have an attendance lottery daily to begin class (must be present to win).
- Have an auction at the end of the 8 -week session. During the 8 weeks, students receive play money for each day of attendance.
- Have a pot luck to encourage sharing on a variety of levels.

Teaching Strategies
Initial teaching strategies also help establish group cohesion.

- During the very first session the adult learner should be actively involved in learning something in a participatory way.
- Each day, short interesting group projects should be incorporated into the day's activities.
- Trivia is a team sport that can be used to review what has been studied, review procedures or explanations that have been given, bring out leadership qualities in otherwise quiet students, get the entire class involved in problem-solving, and make learning fun.
- Use the Bingo game for study of factual material. For each number on Bingo cards, create a question that the class answers as a whole.
- Teach a group of students a strategy. You can do this even if the students are reading different materials and have different reading/ability levels.
    - After demonstrating the strategy with an easy selection that all in the group can read, have the student independently try the strategy with material they independently need to read.
    - Reconvene the group at the end of the session and have the students discuss how it went: their success in using the strategy, problems they encountered, and any ideas they have for improving the strategy and making it more useful.
    - One strategy to try would be prediction strategy where the learner stops several times while reading to make predictions about what is going to happen next. Another good strategy involves recording what you already know about the topic of the selection you are about to read, writing down questions that you think might be answered as you read, and then, while reading, recording the answers to your questions as well as additional information that you learned.
- Begin the class with a "group share" activity
    - Discuss an event that it's time to celebrate, e.g., Martin Luther King's birthday or Grandparents' Day.
    - Discuss and issue that is a "hot" community item.
    - Read an excerpt from a novel or read a poem that naturally generates a response.
    - Read a picture book especially relevant to adults.
    - Discuss the new "word of the day".
- Start with a "status of the class" activity where all class members initially commit to their study plans for the session. Learners may find that they want to pair up to work on something together.
- Make a class anthology. Each class member contributes a selection. After the anthology has been copied and bound, the contributors may hold an autographing party and sign one another's books.
- Remember that group learning activities can be brief or extended. Wait until students are comfortable working in groups before initiating more extensive group activities. Activities that require more extensive group participation include the following:
    - Group discussion and research of an important community problem that needs to be addressed;
    - Literature circles where learners who have read th same novel share their understanding, personal responses, and questions with one another.

Respect those who are reticent and prefer to work alone. Provide opportunities for group participation but do not force an adult to be a member of a group.

Staff Development

The entire p ogram staff should be involved in recruitment and retention. Prepare staff by designing a workshop that addresses important retention issues, focusing on possible solutions rather than on problems. Distribute a retention newsletter each year, with fresh ideas for new teachers and reminder ideas for returning teachers. Develop a retention packet fo teachers that contains an easy-to-use format and a variety of retention-related activities. The Recruitment and Retention Bulletin would be a good resource for additional information. Design a retention ideas form and distribute copies of thi form to teachers and tutors. Returned forms can be compiled into a notebook and made available in a central location. Open staff meetings by sharing two to three ideas that staff members have tried.

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