

Program Resources

Ohio Literacy Resource Center

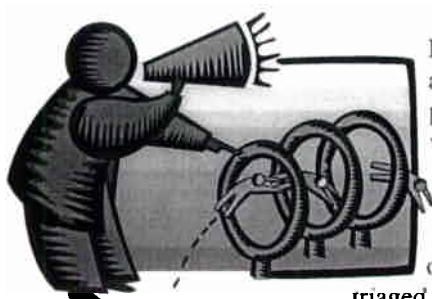
Enhancing Adult Literacy in Ohio

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Convincing the Community Chiefs: Strategies for Adult and Family Literacy Educators

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In many communities, adult and family literacy programs are associated with and sponsored by school districts. Issues of support and visibility surrounding these kinds of programs are often triaged behind more politically pressing goals such as increased student achievement on standardized tests and integrating technology in the classroom. For this reason, adult and family literacy educators can feel that their programs suffer from the “poor step-child” syndrome.

To make matters worse, community leaders may not see literacy programs as viable arenas in which they should or could participate. Why? Because literacy is “school stuff.” In addition to this myopic mindset, school personnel are desperately trying to meet an ever-increasing list of demands in multiple arenas with little to no increase in resources to support their efforts.

With these dynamics at play, how can you convince community leaders of the value in supporting adult and family literacy programs? This brief publication is an attempt to provide some food for thought regarding this conundrum.

Educators are Folks on a Mission

The first thing to think about is that you are part statesman and part apostle when it comes to family and adult literacy issues in your world. Much like any person with this kind of responsibility, you remain in this role in all social contexts, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. For example, President Jimmy Carter has not stopped being a leader simply because he is no longer serving as the President of the United States in the year 2003. Wherever he goes, he is viewed as a *man who might have something to say* about leadership. Literacy educators need to follow the President’s example by understanding that a big part of their role is to teach people at every opportunity of the benefits of

literacy programs.

In order to be an effective teacher, you need a firm grasp of information regarding the need and benefits of various programs for adults and families. If you do not feel comfortable with your depth and range of knowledge, start by reviewing other monographs available through the Ohio Literacy Resource Center, by contacting The National Center on Adult Literacy (215-898-2100), or by joining discussions online sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy’s Comprehensive Electronic Communication System (LINCS; www.nifl.gov/lincs).

Having a command of research helps you to build credibility with people you meet who may not understand the importance of what you are doing. Once you feel comfortable with being able to talk to people about why a quality work force is dependant on literate adults or the statistics explaining the relationships between literacy and poverty, you need to develop a mission statement for your own reference. A mission statement is not a longwinded diatribe explaining your philosophy. For purposes of this conversation, a mission statement is simply one to three sentences that *for you, personally, describe what you are doing*.

In order to craft a mission statement, imagine yourself in a coffee house. While you’re there, you chat with a neighbor’s teenager, your state legislator, and a professional friend you haven’t seen in years. When each one asks how work is going, your mission statement should be included in your answer. Your mission statement needs to be clear enough so that everyone can understand and remain interested in what you are saying. Your mission statement is also the context that should drive all of your professional decisions.

Build a Network of Believers

Networking is the art of building contacts and exchanging information with all sorts of people. Leaders will tell you that *networking is the most important tool for anyone who is trying to build support for something and bring about change*. To discover what sort of network you already have, create the following categories on a piece of paper and

then list the names of people you know in each one who understand and support your mission:

- People at various schools
- People at the school board office
- Local business owners
- Local agency heads (hospitals, social services, United Way, etc.)
- Local fraternal organization heads (Lions Club, Rotary, etc.)
- Media professionals (television, radio, newspaper)
- University personnel
- People in professional organizations who can help me

You can increase your categories geographically if you wish to include state and national levels. The next step is to analyze your lists. Where are the shortest lists? These are the places to start brainstorming new names of people whom you need to meet, have lunch with, and talk to about the importance of your mission. Along the lines of meeting people, remember that you never know when you will meet someone who could be a helpful addition to your network. Always be prepared for these opportunities by having your business cards readily available (you might even want to print your mission statement on your cards).

The last category listed above is unique to the others in that it is an arena for you to find support and mentorship in fulfilling your mission. You might want to contact people in this category to have a mentoring conversation or to get help in brainstorming some solutions to challenges you are facing. Obvious organizational choices for this category are the OLRC, your Regional Resource Center, or the Ohio Association for Adult and Continuing Education. At the national level, the following groups offer resources and support: the American Association for Adult and Community Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the International Reading Association, or the National Association for Partners in Education. These are just a few of the many organizations that have easy to find websites, are committed to building partnerships between school and community, and value literacy education.

Teaching, Strategy, and Salesmanship

At the same time you are developing your network lists, you need to create lists of people that are not simply ignorant of your mission, but are opposed to it. These lists will help you identify roadblocks to developing the resources you need to accomplish your mission.

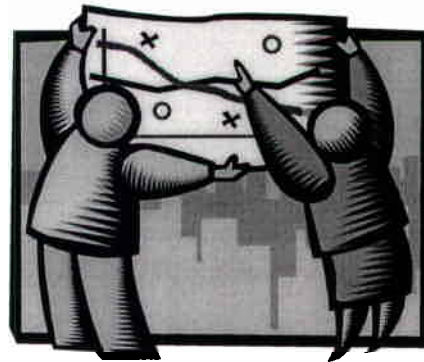
A specific plan that will help strengthen your literacy network and convince people of the value of your mission is as follows:

- Create a year-long calendar in which your network (advisory board, etc.) meets every month or two. When you make this calendar think of a goal that you would like to reach by the end of the year. This goal could be that all members of the group are more committed to adult literacy, or it

could be that by the end of the year you have a program up and going.

- Invite a group of people to be members of this group. Create a group that is comprised of 1/3 supporters, 1/3 ambiguous contacts in various categories, and 1/3 naysayers.
- Make sure the ambiguous contacts represent folks who have resources that you need (e.g., money, people, volunteer time, and space).
- Make sure at every meeting people are fed and comfortable. (This ensures a better mindset and more collaboration.)

The First Session—Making a Strategic Plan



Once you have a list of people that would make a strong network in terms of resources and support, invite them to a meeting to discuss literacy. In order to assure that those invited actually attend, put forth the ef-

fort to call and personally deliver invitations.

Begin the first meeting by having everyone relax with coffee, treats, and small talk. The treats are just as important as the small talk because people tend to be more collaborative when they are fed and working in a comfortable environment. Invite everyone to introduce himself/herself to the group and offer a sentence or two about what brought them to this meeting. You then explain that the reason for this meeting is to talk about family and adult literacy as it pertains to your community.

Break members into teams of three or four people each. Make sure that each team is balanced to include a representative from each sector in your community. For example, have one educator, one business leader, and one social services head on a team. Give each team a large piece of chart paper and have them list all the reasons why an adult or family literacy program is inconvenient or an unnecessary investment. Each group picks their top two answers and gives them to you. Bring your small groups back together as a large group and ask for the top two answers.

Write these answers on another large piece of chart paper so that you end up with a list that represents the thinking of the entire group. After completing this exercise, break the participants back into small groups. Have the groups brainstorm all the challenges that happen when one has employees who have low literacy skills. Again, have each small group pick the top two, bring the groups back together, and make a list representing the entire group.

The next step is to facilitate a discussion with the entire group that helps members realize that the long-term

benefits of family and adult literacy programs far outweigh the costs. (This is also a good juncture to utilize some of those facts and statistics you researched previously.) This discussion will probably take some time and energy. When appropriate, give the group a break to recharge. The length of the break provided should be sensitive to the needs of the participants and can range from an hour for lunch to twenty minutes, depending on the amount of time and resources available.

When the break is over, reassign the participants to new groups. Changing group structure is important because it alters group dynamics and attitudes as well as taking the emotionality out of the discussion.

After affirming the good work done before the break, check to see if all (or a majority) of participants have bought into the belief that a literate work force is highly desirable and that family and adult literacy programs can help achieve this.

The final step is to have the newly formed small groups brainstorm ways to realistically support family and adult literacy programs. Use the same formula again as before: Each small group picks the top two, then as a large group look at the list created. This final list essentially represents the group's short- and long-term strategic plan. It should also serve as a *template* for determining the year's meetings and agendas.

A Long-Term Investment

Following up a strategic planning session with thank-you notes is wise, along with a note to the newspaper reporter that covers education and local community issues. The strategic planning session described above can be stretched over two initial meetings. The time it takes to complete a strategic plan is directly related to the group of people you are working with. It is also important to begin to schedule one-on-one time with each of these members to simply chat and build a relationship. Use these moments not to give a hard sell, but to really try to get to know the person. Demonstrating an interest in another person's world helps to build credibility on your part along with extending the depth of your working relationship.

One of the most important aspects to becoming a successful lobbyist for support of any program is to remember that garnering support is analogous to a marathon, not a fifty-yard dash. Consistency and credibility are the keys, particularly in the areas of building and maintaining relationships within your network and convincing naysayers to change their minds.

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