

Job Success Basics



Central New York Staff Development Consortium

The Central New York Staff Development Consortium (CNYSDC) is one of eight statewide consortia established by the New York State Education Department to provide ongoing professional growth opportunities to the greater adult, family, and alternative education community.

In its mission statement, CNYSDC pledges to “provide its adult learning community with imaginative ideas, current information, and functional strategies which will affect quality learning.”

To learn more, visit the CNYSDC web site at www.centralstaff.org.

TEACHING ADULTS often requires rethinking the learning environment.

To create a new environment, teachers can use tools such as KET’s “*Math Basics, Learn To Read, GED Connection, Workplace Essential Skills, and TV411*,” says Georges Marceau, executive director for the Central New York Staff Development Consortium (CNYSDC). “We use them all. *Workplace Essential Skills* is wonderful, and *TV411* is also very high quality for the pre-GED student.”

Covering a six-county region of New York State, Marceau works with both distance learning and traditional programs, demonstrating how to integrate videos into existing curricula and how to use online components.

“This is about nurturing, not demonstrating products,” cautions Marceau, who has researched and published on the nature of staff development. “Teachers go back to their sites and see how they can integrate what they’ve learned, get used to a program, find funding, adapt to their regional needs, and come back for more training. Systemic staff development is a big, long-term process, not a single event.”

To succeed, the process requires energetic, highly-interested educators.

“Equal sharing of the learning process is critical – not assuming the teacher as authority,” says Terri Bickford, family advocate and trainer with Literacy Volunteers (LVA) in Chenango County (NY) Opportunities for Chenango, Inc. “This needs to be one-on-one learning from each other, totally different from your traditional educational learning model.”

A good example is an exciting program devised by Bickford and Juliette Monet, director of Literacy Volunteers of Chenango County, Opportunities for Chenango, Inc. After seeing a *Workplace Essential Skills* overview, the two attended a more detailed implementation session. They asked Marceau for more information on improving skills of employed learners and soliciting employer support. With Family, Adult and Workplace Literacy (FAWL) funding from the New York State Departments of Labor and of Education, the two created Job Success Basics.

Reading and Earning

It isn’t that these workers can’t read at all; it’s a comprehension issue. Employers may assume that since workers have high school diplomas, they don’t have anyone who can’t read. Yet, in Chenango County, Bickford says 14 percent of workers read below the fourth grade level, and 42 percent have some difficulty with basic reading and other skills.

“When you’re trying to read and stopping at each big word and struggling to get an individual meaning, you will never get the point of the article or the chapter,” Bickford says. “These adults are trapped in a

world where they don’t speak the language. People talk to them and they pretend to understand, but they’re terrified they’ll be asked to do something in connection with what was said. They won’t read the paper. Church involves reading, so they won’t go. They won’t volunteer. They can complete a simple job application, but don’t understand one with longer words. Even on a benefits application, there are shaded boxes, long words. Adults will walk out rather than ask for benefits they need because they WILL NOT reveal that they can’t read. Our whole society is based on reading. They feel useless, worthless.”

Many LVA clients were struggling with literacy in the workplace, according to Monet. “Some had refused promotions because that would risk exposure. They would do anything to avoid co-workers or employers finding out: take projects home so the spouse could help or claim they forgot their glasses and let a co-worker read. We saw this and wanted to help.”

Monet and Bickford sought solutions from a business perspective for two reasons:

1. While there are a few large industries in Chenango County, most employers are small businesses that are really struggling with employees who lack the reading, math, or writing skills to do what needs to be done. Moreover, U.S. firms lose an estimated \$60 billion in productivity each year due to workers’ lack of basic skills.
2. Because transportation or other issues may prevent adults from attending programs on their own time, employer-endorsed assistance is more likely to be used.

Tailor-made solutions

“We wanted to develop a curriculum that could be offered to businesses and tailored to their situations,” Monet says, “and we wanted to focus on how to present the program so businesses would see the scope of the problem and the value of investment in worker skills.

“When we saw *Workplace Essential Skills*, we thought it would be wonderful for the project,” Bickford says, adding that its flexibility assures successful adaptation in a variety of settings. “We purchased videos and workbooks with the FAWL grant.”

Monet says they found the level was a little too high, so they scaled it down and simplified it a bit.

Job Success Basics features a series of three-hour workshops that can be adapted to any literacy level or content area, customized to meet employer/employee needs, delivered at the work site or in the community, and offered on a flexible schedule. Emphasized are learning how to learn; soft skills (workplace communication and behavior, teamwork, ethics and attitudes); literacy-related skills (reading, writing and math); and technology skills (computers). Sessions are free to the learners.

Since January of 2003, 50 to 70 adults have been served in three programs held at the Chenango One Stop. Sessions meet two mornings a week, with a day in between. This allows time to reflect, as well as time to go back to work and try things, then discuss in class what worked and what didn’t. Learners also practice at the One Stop computer lab.

Curriculum design is only part of the story.

“We have to get adults to be open to learning and to participate,” Monet explains. “The goal is a non-threatening environment. Class sizes range from six to 15 to build a feeling of safety, and no one is allowed to make fun of others. I make mistakes sometimes on purpose, so they know we’re all human.”

No one is asked to read aloud or do things they can’t. Instead, participants break into small groups and get to know each other. “We go around the class with a story, and each person has to continue it,” Bickford adds. “The rule is that we won’t be sarcastic about what the previous person said. Students get creative, build the stories, *laugh*. They open up a little and begin to trust.”

Learners view small video segments, then role play or discuss the topic, relating the material to experiences in their own lives.

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“As a team, they create a comic strip,” Bickford says. “It doesn’t have to be funny. We talk about their lives. Maybe they take a bus to work. What could happen? They have no clue how to do this, but when they learn to solve problems instead of waiting for someone else, or to look at options and make a decision (realizing they’re not limited to one choice), it amazes me the creativity that comes out of them.”

Different strokes for different folks

In addition, Bickford says that learners don’t understand decimals, fractions and percentages, so they spend time on that, using calculators. She then gives them the calculators.

“After using highlighters to dissect and de-mystify business forms, students keep the instruments,” Monet says. “The tools symbolize what they learned that day and help them remember it.”

Throughout, each point is reinforced in several different ways using a variety of teaching methods to meet different learning styles.

“We have flip charts in color, videos, activities so that the learners are up and moving,” says Bickford. “Our students learn differently. In school, they couldn’t learn by listening to lectures and taking notes. It didn’t work for them.”

In the proper environment, those who need movement, for example, learn just as well as those sitting and taking notes.

“Doing different styles takes longer,” Bickford says, “but you get people actually learning and walking away with something. While there isn’t a formal assessment for individual learning styles, if you have a plan for different styles, then everyone is covered.

“I teach the skills, but they have to use them. They have to learn to think outside the box of fear. That means developing self-esteem.

“The teacher has to build a relationship with the students. This bolsters a learner’s comfort level in class and helps in other ways. If a student has been evicted or has other problems that interfere with learning, the teacher can do case management.”

Bickford recalls a learner who confided that she was in an abusive situation, something she had not told her social worker. She felt that if she let her boyfriend abuse her, he wouldn’t hurt her children. Because she had “learned” that telling the truth caused problems, she had a history of telling conflicting stories that confused her counselors. With her teacher present, she was able to open up to a counselor. Over time, she began dressing better, looking people in the eye, and exhibiting new self-assurance.

Understanding a learner’s life is essential to helping him/her succeed, Bickford adds.

“If you have a house with no hot water, how can you keep yourself and your clothes clean? If you have no car and there’s no bus nearby, how can you get to work? How can you access resources? Part of our success is that people are not treated as second class. We treat them as adults, with respect.”

While the program is still new, “we feel very successful,” Monet says. “It’s a major feat to get people to come back to a classroom (a setting where they experienced failure), to enjoy it, to feel safe. In class, people are laughing, talking.” And they change. “Self-confidence increases. And if people feel better about themselves, they’ll do better.”

Job Success Basics is a collaboration, including the

- Afton Consortium, a GED provider
- State Office of Employment and Training
- Delaware-Chenango-Madison-Otsego Board of Cooperative Education Services (BOCES)
- Chenango/Delaware/Otsego Workforce Center
- County Department of Social Services

Guidance and feedback are provided by a workplace literacy advisory committee that includes LVA tutors, business people, and social services and community representatives.

For more information on Job Success Basics, contact Juliette Monet at Opportunities for Chenango, Inc., P.O. Box 470, Norwich, NY 13815, or e-mail at lva@ofcinc.org. Grants are available to help employers fund worker training. Businesses should contact their Workforce Investment Area office to learn more.



Find a job Keep a job Get ahead

Here are just *some* of the lessons covered:

- Matching skills and jobs
- Showing up on time
- Reading, understanding and following directions
- Estimating and problem-solving
- Communicating clearly with customers and co-workers

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