

Executive Summary

The purpose of this 1999 study was to identify the successful strategies for adjusting to program reform used by programs in England since 1992, and then to determine which of these may be of value for program in Ontario. In Ontario the Ministry of Education and Training had recently implemented its Literacy and Basic Skills Program. This featured performance indicators for five services, a more transparent funding mechanism more closely tied to learner contact hours, expanded accountability and a new Learning Outcomes Matrix for assessing student progress. The Moser Report, *A fresh start – Improving literacy and numeracy*, had just been released in the United Kingdom. It described the existing state of literacy and numeracy services in the UK and made 21 recommendations to reform these services.

The challenges of program reform in Ontario

As a basis for this report, the author surveyed 14 program coordinators from the community-based sector from across Ontario in order to identify the challenges these programs were facing. In their survey responses, community-based programs expressed a need for more support and training in managing the five Literacy and Basic Skills services and reporting student progress using the five-level Learning Outcomes Matrix. This included the need for clearer definitions, more background information, common forms, a database and more in-service training for administrative staff. Program organizers were concerned about the time redirected from working with students to record-keeping and monitoring. They expressed the need for more time to adjust to these changes.

Community-based programs also identified an increased need for training, ongoing support and monitoring of volunteers. Most programs were in the process of reviewing the role of volunteers and modifying their volunteer training programs. Community-based programs were reluctant to increase the amount of reporting required from their volunteers.

Most programs surveyed felt under pressure to increase their learner contact hours. Since they were spending more time working with learners before they began training, they had less time to address ways to increase their contact hours. Most of the change in delivery was a response to the perceived difficulty of reaching or maintaining a funding threshold tied to contact hours through one-to-one tutoring. Irregular attendance remained a key issue and was identified as a barrier to progress.

Literacy delivery in England

In England, the research study was expanded from a focus on voluntary agencies to include both Further Education Colleges (FECs) and Local Education Authorities (LEAs). This was due to the limited number of voluntary agencies engaged in literacy programs, the similarity of programming based on a small group model using volunteers provided by the FECs and LEAs, the quality standards, the funding formula and the number of volunteers involved in the two largest sectors. Seventeen taped interviews with experienced practitioners from the three sectors formed the base for identifying and

analyzing strategies that could be relevant for Ontario programs. Prior to the interviews, program coordinators received a letter of introduction sent to English program which included seven questions and background information about the study and its goals.

In England, most learners received between two and four hours of guided instruction per week for 30-36 weeks per year, in either small groups of 6-8 or classes of 10-12 or more, depending on the level of the students. In these programs, many effective strategies were evident in the forms used to develop learning plans, outline schemes of work, prepare lesson plans, record work and assess progress.

Learner satisfaction and retention

The report *Time to Leave? Progression and Drop Out In Basic Skills Programs* (Kambouri & Francis 1994) suggested several ways to improve retention and attendance. While most personal reasons for leaving programs are beyond the control of program staff, instructors have underestimated the importance of dissatisfaction with progress and programs as reasons learners leave. Meeting the needs of students was identified as the basis for good attendance in basic skills programs. This includes helping the individual see improvement through individual tasks. There was evidence that the qualifications of instructors may be a more important factor contributing to retention than had been recognized previously.

In *Effective Approaches in Adult Literacy* (1992), Sue Abel concluded that the program features that have a positive impact on attendance and progress include: targeted programs with written objectives; higher expectation on the part of staff for regular attendance; independent work between sessions; and sufficient support for the individuals. Program organizers interviewed added factors such as clear goals and motivation. Short courses were identified as one way to engage new learners and to improve attendance. Programs that were offering students several hours each week in small groups identified more intensive programming as another way of enhancing student retention.

Learner accreditation

The Moser report was critical of the number of learner accreditation schemes that lacked credibility and clearly defined standards. From 1992-1999, basic skills organizers and instructors struggled to help learners achieve qualifications in order to maximize their program funding. The funding formula was so complicated that some voluntary organizations contracted out the calculation of their entitlement. While recognizing the importance of having the option of accreditation for learners, many of those interviewed believed that too much emphasis on this resulted in a decrease in program creativity and response to learner needs.

Volunteer role and training

The primary role of the volunteer in England had evolved from one-to-one tutoring to providing assistance in small groups working with several individuals under a paid tutor. The role varied depending on the paid tutor and the needs of the group. Volunteers sometimes took the whole group for short periods to allow the paid instructor to assess

individual progress. However, the number of volunteers involved in literacy programs had decreased.

It was recognized that the national volunteer training programs, City and Guilds Initial Certificates for literacy and numeracy, needed revision, they were still well-regarded as effective training programs. Serving as the initial training for both paid tutors and volunteers, the training programs had local practitioners delivering national programs. The program included direct training, written assignments, a six- to eight-hour placement and development of a small portfolio. Quality assurance was built into the process. In contrast, the portfolio-based professional qualification was viewed by several program organizers as a paper chase.

Funding and stability in the UK and Ontario

In 1999 programs in England and Ontario faced both similar and different challenges. Although the Ontario system had better funding overall, salaries in England were more consistent between sectors. Many voluntary organizations in England failed to adapt to the reforms of 1992 and ceased to offer literacy programs. Diversified funding was a characteristic of programs that had survived the earlier program reform in England. Predictable direct funding and accountability to the province has supported the development of the community-based sector in Ontario. A future consideration for community-based programs is whether diversifying their funding and activity base would provide greater long-term security for the sector.

Postscript

In 2004, it is clear that most of the National Strategy recommended in the Moser Report has been implemented in the UK. As part of the Skills for Life strategy, the government has set aggressive targets and committed significant resources to improving literacy and numeracy services. This strategy includes national curricula, national tests, a national media campaign, new teacher training initiatives, mandatory university qualification for literacy teachers and increased funding for research into basic skills development. The administrative structure has also changed with the new funding body and inspectorates.

Two recent documents demonstrate the current commitment to enhancing the role of the community-based sector in basic skills delivery in England. An exploratory study, *Community-focused Provision in Adult Literacy, Numeracy and Language*, identified the critical need to fund programs for development activities so they could do the ground work required to engage hard-to-reach groups in literacy services. As well, The Learning and Skills Council has unveiled a strategy to expand the role of the voluntary and community sector in literacy as a way to provide learning opportunities for more marginalized groups. This appears to be the beginning of greater voluntary and community sector involvement in mainstream-funded basic skills programming and enhanced recognition of their specialized expertise.

In the past five years, there has been very little change in the Literacy and Basic Skills program in Ontario that has had significant impact on literacy programs. Funding has remained dormant and maintaining programs as costs increase puts the focus in programs

on survival. The current situation in Ontario is in direct contrast to the dynamic developments that are evident on many UK websites. If the current commitment to basic skills development in the United Kingdom continues, it will be a place to look to for innovation, research and leadership in literacy and basic skills in the years ahead.