

# Focus on Basics

CONNECTING RESEARCH & PRACTICE

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## Implementation Isn't Easy

*Staff turnover and staff resistance impair implementation of the Youth Cultural Competence model. This Missouri program comes up with a hybrid that works.*

**by Janet Geary**

**T**he North Kansas City School District Adult Education and Literacy program had a problem. About 600 students were enrolling throughout the year, of whom about 60 percent, or 360, were younger than 25 years old. Overall, only about 10 percent of the youth who listed completion of the GED as a primary or secondary goal were actually completing it within the year. As the administrator of the program, I was

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National Center for the Study of  
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# Welcome!

Any mid-40-year-old parent of a teen will tell you that the difference between a 16-year-old and a 44-year-old can be vast. But in adult basic education (ABE) classes, where the great majority of learners are between the ages of 16 and 44, 16- and 44-year-olds are often being taught side by side. In this issue of *Focus on Basics*, we explore the challenge of serving youth well without sacrificing the quality of service to older students.

Our cover story and the two that follow it form a trilogy: the journey from theory, through professional development, to practice. Missouri literacy program director Janet Geary and a colleague participated in what might be described as a “Cadillac” of professional development programs when they learned an approach to educating youth called Youth Cultural Competence. Janet writes candidly about the trials of implementation from her perspective as a program director. The changes her GED program made have resulted in increased retention and positive outcomes. Are they running a program that could be identified as a youth cultural competence program? Perhaps.

To find out, read Josh Weber’s article, page 6, on Youth Cultural Competence (YCC). YCC draws on what is known about youth development and has three main components: youth involvement, positive peer influence, and youth popular culture. He traveled to Missouri a number of times to provide training and support to Geary and colleagues from seven other programs in the Kansas City area, in a professional development process described by Betsy Topper and Mary Beth Gordon of the Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning in the article that starts on page 10.

Young dropouts need to improve their basic skills because skills matter to their economic futures, writes NCSALL researcher John Tyler, in the article that begins on page 16. Jennifer Roloff Welch and Kathryn Di Tommaso examine how many youth are in the ABE system and why. It’s a substantial number and may well grow over the next few years.

Oregon’s Virginia Tardaewether sees no reason to separate younger and older students. What better place to learn to live together, she suggests, than in the ABE classroom? (See page 22.) Students of all ages mix successfully in a high school for beginning English for speakers of other languages in Fairfax, Virginia. Originally established for young immigrants, explains principal Shelley Gutstein, the program now enrolls students of all ages. More about this model on page 23.

In South Dakota, Lara Ann Frey and Yvonne Lerew found it necessary to create a special class for young immigrants who had age-specific psychosocial needs as well as language learning needs. They describe the course they created in the article that starts on page 26. A community college in New Mexico also found that separating students by age works for them. Teachers Lilia-Rosa Salmon and Anastasia Cotton find that both the younger and older students now feel freer to address age-specific concerns within their classrooms and their academics have benefited as well.

These stories show us that there is no one way to serve youth well. Some programs separate them, to the satisfaction of both groups. Others keep them together. What does seem to appeal to both age groups is class-based instruction, and space to address personal as well as academic concerns. The findings of NCSALL researcher Robert Kegan and his team, that being part of a cohort plays a substantial role in successful education, seem to be substantiated yet again (see *Focus on Basics* Volume 5B, at <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/2001/adult4.html>).

Sincerely,

Barbara Garner  
Editor

## Implementation

*continued from page 1*

*searching for a way to improve retention and GED completion rates, particularly among the youth in our program. I decided to start by focusing on the group of under-25-year-old day students, which includes about 20 people on any given day.*

At the same time, the Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning (MAAL), a consortium of adult educators from the metropolitan Kansas City area, observed that adult education programs throughout the area were having trouble serving youth well (see page 10). In July, 2000, the MAAL invited our program to participate with a cadre of adult education teachers from other area programs to explore the Youth Development and Research Fund's model of youth workforce preparation, Youth Cultural Competence (YCC). Our lead teacher, Karen, and I participated in this training and decided to apply the YCC techniques for engaging youth in workforce readiness training to our GED preparation program.

Our program model had been open-entry, open-exit, with individualized instruction. Students could come into the center at any time — we were open 43 hours a week, over five days and four evenings — and work on their own, receiving periodic input from a teacher. To implement the model we learned about in the YCC training (see page 6 for more about this) would involve significant programmatic changes. We wanted to shift to twice-a-week group sessions, in addition to individualized instruction. Karen would have to teach group lessons using different instructional methods than those to which she was accustomed, and she would need to draw on radically different instructional materials.

## Introducing Change

As administrator, I am free to institute change as I see fit, but change won't happen unless those who implement it are also invested in it. To prepare for changes in instruction methods and materials, Karen and I decided to start small. We invited several of our young students to participate in a focus group to see what kinds of music they listened to, what movies they went to see, and who their "heroes" were. We provided snacks and held a drawing for a \$10 gift certificate as an incentive. We emphasized that we wanted to make the group sessions critically relevant to their lives and tried to let them do most of the talking and record their ideas. The



focus group helped us to get acquainted with the students and observe how they might interact in a classroom setting.

We advertised the change to all the 16- to 25-year-olds enrolled in the program at the time by sending them postcards, putting up fliers, and putting notes in their individual folders. We wanted participants to come to both group sessions a week, but did not require it. We have the luxury of having a separate room adjoining our learning center in which to hold our group sessions, and we had a part-time teacher available to help those who wanted to continue to work on their own.

I worked with Karen to design lessons and activities that integrated elements of popular culture with critical reading, math, or language arts activities. Our students were interested in hip-hop music. We developed a lesson around music following the YCC model. Students are given sheets with the typed out lyrics to a song that has a positive message. The song is played for all to listen to as the students follow the lyrics. Students highlight passages that have meaning to them, then share what they highlighted and why. This activity encourages students to examine the content of the song critically, gives them an opportunity to express themselves, and pushes them to take a look at their music and the message it conveys. The teacher is able to observe students interacting and note how they verbalize their thoughts. This is an engaging way to build critical thinking and reading skills needed for the GED.

Another lesson we developed involves cell phones. Many of our students use cell phones and were discussing issues regarding usage, bills, and service restrictions. We developed a math activity using the actual cell phone bills of our students. We discussed the parameters of various plans, how costs were figured, and how plans differ. The students all became better consumers and developed math and critical thinking skills in the process.

## Implementation Grant

A \$5,000 implementation grant from MAAL helped us get the program started. With those funds, we added two items to our program that appeal to nearly every young person regardless of educational level: food and money. We always had snacks and drinks available during class. The students developed a reward system based on attendance, with one student assuming responsibility for tracking attendance. Students earned a \$20 gift certificate to a store of their choice after attending class for a spec-



ified number of hours. After a few months, we found out that people were more interested in socializing and being together than in the academic progress. So, since the focus of our program is academic progress, we shifted to rewards for progress on the Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and GED practice tests rather than on attendance.

The fund also allowed us to purchase current magazines for the learning center for students to read. We selected magazines based upon students' interests based on conversations with them. We have used *The Source*, *Teen People*, *Nascar Illustrated*, *Tiger Beat*, *Twist*, *Basketball News*, *Road Racer*, and *Pro Wrestling Illustrated*. We also base reading and language activities on the magazines.

We discovered that most of our students are not accustomed to spending any time at all thinking about their thinking and making connections between education and life. At the end of an activity, we asked, "How does this apply to GED?" At first, they couldn't answer. We had to "feed" them the answers, pointing out, for example, that hip hop music was a form of poetry. To promote an understanding of this connection, an essential component of each activity is reflection. Each lesson ends with a discussion of the role of the activity in preparing for the GED test.

## Staff Turnover

As of July, 2002, our primary teacher, Karen, was not able to continue working with the two teen-focused group sessions and grant funds were no longer available. The next year was spent struggling to find a teacher who could take our work with youth to the next level. We suspended group instruction for five months. I was looking for a teacher who was able to relate well to young people, had strong teaching skills, and who was willing to experiment with new concepts. I trained the teacher we hired on YCC; MAAL provided some training as

well. We restarted the teen-focused group sessions. Our new teacher was able to develop the relationships with the students but not to integrate the material with youth popular culture or relate the lessons to GED prep as effectively as we had hoped. The students were not always encouraged to analyze why they engaged in certain activities and lessons. They were not actively involved in planning the classes; and youth popular culture was seldom used as a vehicle to teach the required academic skills.

That year we added a Learning Support Specialist (case manager) to our team. Even though our program is located in a suburban area and most of our students are not dealing with the severe poverty and crime associated with an urban area, complicated issues frequently hinder their academic success. Our students deal with mental and physical illness, domestic violence, substance abuse, family responsibilities, unstable housing, and legal proceedings. The Learning Support Specialist counsels students, refers them to appropriate agencies, and assists them when disruptions occur. She facilitates group sessions focusing on communication skills, employability skills, and interview techniques. The supportive relationship she develops with the students as they journey through the GED preparation process is different from the kinds of relationships their teachers have with them.

The Learning Support Specialist is employed half-time in our program and half-time by Synergy Services, Inc., a local service agency. The development of this partnership was without a doubt the highlight of the year. The agencies cooperate to aid participants in both programs. For example, Synergy had already developed a workplace readiness component that the facilitator was able to personalize and offer to our students. We receive donations of children's books and school supplies that we give to Synergy to use in their teen parent program.

At the same time, several of our

students in their late 20s and early 30s told us that they felt left out and wanted to participate in group sessions as well. They were welcomed into the class along with the teens. Each session now has from 10 to 15 students, half of whom are younger than 25; half are 25 to 35. The classes were effective: retention rates were up to about 80 percent, but, in May of 2003, we were once again looking for a teacher.

## One More Change

The final major change to our program design resulted from this change in teaching staff and the introduction of project-based learning via another staff development offering from the MAAL. Project-based learning involves having students participate in a relevant project in order to develop academic skills (see *Focus on Basics*, 2D, at <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/1998/fobv2id.htm>). The project selected by the students is a bimonthly newsletter to share with present and potential students that illustrates what is available in the GED program. Students determine the content of the newsletter, write the articles, take the photos, and edit the work.

Now, four days a week we have at least one group session and on some days we have more than one. Topics include reading, language, math, and (at least once a month) employability skills. The groups are open not just to the younger students but to all students. The majority of the students are under 25, but the groups are definitely of mixed ages. For example, recently in one class of 11 students, six were under 25 and the oldest was 58.

"The various groups we offer have grown naturally. We started by offering a math group. The students then began to request that we offer other groups focusing on other subject areas. Each time we offer any group, the Learning Support Specialist and I go around the classroom and personally invite every student to join us in class. We try to keep our approach quite low

key and non-threatening. Our students are now our primary recruitment tool," reports Lorie, our primary instructor.

One group session a week focuses on the newsletter, which integrates material from multiple subject areas. Students still have the option of participating in group instruction or continuing to work independently. About 80 percent of all students who attend on any given day choose to participate in the groups. Students offer various reasons for this. "I'm a visual person, so I can grasp the material better in groups than when I work on my own. We make the work fun. When you enjoy something while you're learning, you remember it longer," explains Novena.

Tammy, a returning student, comments, "I've been in GED classes off and on for several years, and I never completed. I lost interest when I was working all by myself. Now I look forward to coming each day."

Our students have a great time laughing and learning together. Mixing the ages doesn't seem to be an issue. The life experience of the older students is well received by the younger students, while the younger students often introduce freshness and energy to the class. The mixed ages also helps keep the group time focused on academics rather than socializing.

Students encourage and support each other when needed and challenge each other when it is appropriate. Debbie, the Learning Support Specialist, comments, "I personally enjoy relating to the student as a whole person not just on an academic level. It's really heartening to observe the students interacting and connecting with each other as well as with the staff."

The relationships formed in the groups continue during the individual study time and students often work together outside of group time. "You

can get ideas from other students as well as the teacher. We help each other a lot too. It helps me learn when I help someone else," says Loi, a current student.

We have discovered that students involved in the group instruction stay in class longer, are more likely to reach their academic goals, continue to have contact with the Learning Center teachers once they leave class, and keep us apprised of their progress toward achieving their life goals. The students who attend our group classes

***"Our day program has evolved into a learning community that blends direct group instruction, project-based learning, Youth Cultural Competence, and fun."***

averaged 93 hours in class as opposed to 36 hours per student in the overall program. The GED pass rate program wide is about 10 percent. The students in our group classes have a pass rate of about 22 percent.


## **A Learning Community**

Our day program has evolved into a learning community that blends direct group instruction, project-based learning, Youth Cultural Competence, and fun. Even though the blend of direct group instruction and individualized instruction is working well in the day program, the evening teachers are convinced that their population is significantly different and would feel hampered by direct group instruction. Change is always uncomfortable, and not all of our teachers are willing to abandon their comfort zone and try new and different methods. As we hire new

teachers, they are expected to use more directed group instruction rather than individualized instruction.

YCC helped us understand the value of student involvement in planning activities and the importance of a positive peer culture. We discovered that lessons that revolved around popular culture were engaging, but students struggled to make the connection between those lessons and the GED preparation process. Students enrolled in our program are interested in GED preparation regardless of their ages; therefore, their commonality becomes GED preparation rather than age. It seems to us that making positive personal connections with each other as well as with staff, being involved in planning, and having the common goal of passing the GED help the students persist. The real shift was in getting students into groups. The connections they make with each other and our staff often continue after they

leave the program, whether they actually complete the program or just drift away. Sometimes they return to our learning center as students and sometimes they just come back to chat. They feel we are all in this together.

Our program is not perfect and neither are our processes, but our learning community is meeting students' needs better than it was four years ago. We continue to strive to provide experiences for our students that will lead them to make academic progress, solve problems, learn the value of lifelong learning, and nurture relationships. 

## **About the Author**

Janet Geary is the Director of Community Education Services for the North Kansas City School District in Kansas City, MO, and has been involved in adult education and literacy since 1986. During her tenure in adult education, she has helped initiate and carry out several projects to fine tune processes and services for adult education students. ❖

# Youth Cultural Competence: A Pathway for Achieving Outcomes with Youth

by Josh Weber

**The employment and training community has educated out-of-school youth and prepared them for the workforce since the 1960s. As the adult basic education (ABE) system serves increasing numbers of young adult learners, the ABE community should learn from the mistakes of past programmatic efforts to serve this population. In this article, I review the challenges experienced by the youth employment and training field likely to be relevant for the ABE community and discuss an innovative programmatic framework — Youth Cultural Competence — for addressing these concerns.**

Employment and training programs for out-of-school youth in the United States have not had a strong record of success (Bloom et al., 1997; LaLonde, 1995; Department of Labor, 1995). As even the Department of Labor states: “the existing research on the training strategies, program structures and supportive services tried in the past leads to sobering conclusions...there is no evidence that any of the programs have had more than a modest and short-term effect” (Department of Labor, p. 5). The poor outcomes of the employment and training field include average General Educational Development (GED) attainment rates of only 30 percent and a failure to increase

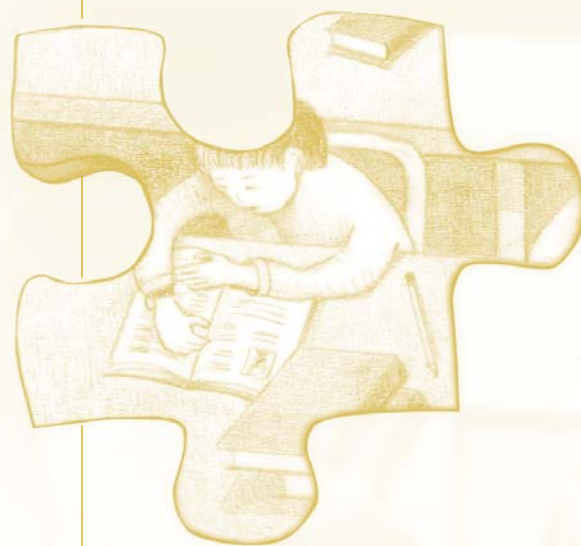
markedly the long term earnings of out-of-school youth. Three factors are the primary source of these difficulties and are also likely challenges for the ABE community.

First, employment and training programs have struggled to retain youth participants across an array of program structures and sequences. Evaluations of various youth service initiatives have found attrition rates as high as 30 to 50 percent (Higgins, 1992). Indeed, programs serving youth who have rejected traditional forms of education and dropped out of school often fail to prevent them from dropping out a second time, this time from the out-of-school youth program. Thus, the retention challenges of the youth employment and training field suggest that the ABE community needs to find concrete mechanisms for attaching young adults to educational programs and making them feel comfortable with, and engaged by, their learning environment.

Second, employment and training programs have frequently been overwhelmed by the number and intensity of the problems confronting their youth participants (Department of Labor, 1992). Traditionally, employment and training programs have been constructed with the single-minded focus of preparing out-of-school youth for work and connecting them with the labor market. However, youth do not participate in these interventions in a vacuum. Out-of-school youth from disadvantaged communities gen-

erally face a host of problems, including poverty, inadequate housing, dysfunctional families, substance abuse, and physical and mental health issues, that prevent them from fully participating in programs and reaping the benefits. As a result, a key lesson for youth initiatives is that employment services or GED preparation alone are not sufficient to achieve strong outcomes. Instead, ABE programs should either offer a comprehensive array of services that address young people’s total developmental needs or find a way to link youth with existing community services and supports. Teachers will be likewise challenged to expand their role as educators and develop a skill set more often associated with social workers, counselors, and even parents.

Third, and perhaps the dominant undercurrent in the difficulties already



discussed, employment and training programs have struggled to recognize the difference between serving youth and adults and to adapt accordingly. For much of the field’s history, youth programs have not been developed, structured, or staffed in a substantively different fashion than are adult programs. A common manifestation of this disconnect has been an inability to motivate and engage youth. Adults who participate in employment and training or GED programs are driven by immediate economic concerns and



therefore are often relatively goal-directed and self-motivated. In contrast, youth who dropped out of school struggle to appreciate the value of training or education, do not necessarily connect short-term difficulties with long-term rewards, and are uninspired by traditional instructional techniques and training/curricula removed from their daily experiences and popular interests (Higgins, 1992; National Academy of Sciences, 2002). Thus, while it is intuitively obvious that youth are different from adults, ABE programs will have to transform this platitude into a commitment to understanding how youth and adult learners are different and to developing organizational and pedagogical practices to serve young learners' needs.

## Youth Cultural Competence

In response to the struggles of the youth employment and training field and a "nothing works" mentality in many policy circles, researchers and practitioners have proffered a host of empirically tested practices for addressing youth's needs. In my experience, this "best practices" improvement approach has met with tepid results. This is because effective replication depends upon a host of intangible variables such as program context, leadership, and teamwork. ABE programs need a cohesive organizational vision: an operating belief system around which teachers and administrators can build a reinforcing set of strategies designed to motivate, engage, and effectively educate youth participants. Youth Cultural Competence (YCC) is one such platform that is not only grounded in empirical evidence but also is based upon and resonates with the experiences and insights of the youth practitioners and educators who work directly with youth on a daily basis.

Youth Cultural Competence is both a belief system and a series of programmatic strategies targeted at helping programs to retain, engage,

and educate youth. YCC is grounded in the concept of youth development and has three major programmatic components: youth involvement, positive peer influence, and youth popular culture. It was coined and conceptualized by the Youth Development and Research Fund (YDRF), a youth policy organization that improves programs and policies for at-risk youth through research, training, and an emphasis on best practices and youth popular culture.

## Youth Development

Youth development is an asset-based approach that recognizes that young adults have distinct developmental needs and strives to meet these needs through a comprehensive set of educational, social, cognitive, and support services. In practical terms, adopting a youth development framework as part of attaining YCC means recognizing that young adult learners are developmentally different from adult learners and making a commitment to make organization-wide changes to the structure of classroom learning, curricula, and instructional practices. Teachers and administrators need to plan together to devise a structure for reform that does not burden teachers with an excessive array of new responsibilities and also includes a way to evaluate new practices.

ABE teachers also need to become a conduit for connecting

young adults with the support services they need to overcome multiple barriers to educational achievement. Teachers and administrators should strive to identify youths' personal and institutional obstacles to success, develop relationships with community service providers, and make an active effort to involve youths' families and/or support networks in the educational process. Working together, ABE programs must provide teachers with the professional development they need to prepare for these new roles.

## Youth Involvement

One of YCC's three core tenets is that young adults must be actively involved in and given ownership of the educational process. This kind of youth involvement directly addresses young people's developmental needs for "opportunities to belong" and "feelings of efficacy and mattering." As the National Academy of Sciences has noted, "older students desire increasing opportunities to have input into classroom and school governance and rules. Evidence suggests that their motivation is optimized when they experience this type of change in classroom and school management" (2002, p. 92). The most authentic way for youth programs to ensure that they engage and educate young adults effectively is to give youth a substantive role in shaping, managing, and even facilitating educational practices

## Promising Practices

The National Youth and Employment Coalition's Promising and Effective Practices Network (PEPNeT) is an assessment system for evaluating youth development programs. They suggest that six programmatic aspects of youth development have a demonstrated link with improved outcomes for youth:

- Nurturing adult/youth relationships
- Building youths' responsibility and leadership
- Having an individual focus and age/stage-appropriate outlook
- Facilitating family and peer support
- Providing support services and opportunities
- Building a sense of self ♦

Source: <http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/>

and organizational procedures.

Genuine youth involvement results in other important benefits for young adult learners. First, youth who are given a leadership role in shaping educational and management practices will likely find it difficult to fault teachers or the organization for not caring about them or for being insensitive to their needs. In this way, youth involvement is both a motivational technique and a retention strategy. Second, youth who are invested with decision-making power are apt to develop the confidence they need to tackle academic challenges they may have shied away from in the past. Third, youth involvement can foster a learning environment that promotes achievement. Adolescents, more than adults, are heavily influenced by and conform to cues in their surroundings that suggest social norms of behavior (National Academy of Sciences, 2002). Consequently, programs that can create a culture of active youth involvement will automatically socialize new students into a powerful ethos of achievement.

Teachers and administrators can incorporate youth involvement into their programs in concrete ways. Most critically, any reforms designed to make educational practices more YCC should be driven by the input of youth participants. ABE programs should form a youth consulting team, leadership group, or student government structure (with corresponding incentives) designed to guide the program on how to meet better the educational and developmental needs of young adult learners on a continuing basis.

Youth should also be involved with classroom management and the delivery of educational content. ABE teachers should continuously ask themselves: “Do I need to make this decision, teach this lesson, do this evaluation, etc., or can I involve the students in my class to take on these roles instead?” For example, students

can be tapped to lead discussions, master a specific lesson module and teach other students, construct their own individualized education plans, and design an incentive system. Any mechanisms that ABE programs can use to transform students into active participants and decision-makers will improve student retention and engagement and, ultimately, students’ educational achievement.

*“A reliance on positive peer influence as an instructional strategy is particularly useful for programs that work with dropouts.”*

## Positive Peer Influence

Academics and the media alike have focused on the powerful role of peer pressure in encouraging youth to adopt harmful behaviors. If youth’s peers are such a strong influence then peer pressure also can and should be utilized as a mechanism for encouraging positive development (Parr, 2002). Research has demonstrated that youth whose peers have or are perceived to have higher educational aspirations are more likely to have higher educational aspirations themselves, to possess more positive academic self-concepts, and to be more engaged in school (Child Trends, 2002). In addition, peer-mediated educational strategies — including peer tutoring, cooperative learning and an emphasis on group achievement, and peer modeling — have proven to be correlated with significant increases in student achievement and often to be more effective than traditional teacher-mediated instruction (Parr, 2002; Utely, 1997; Department of Labor, 1992).

A reliance on positive peer influ-

ence as an instructional strategy is particularly useful for programs that work with dropouts. These students may resist achievement messages that they perceive as unrealistic or unrelated to their personal struggles. An easy way to navigate this credibility challenge is for teachers to draw on student leaders in the classroom to act as their motivational mouthpieces. Out-of-school youth may also struggle to believe that they can succeed, given their past academic frustrations, and thus be reluctant to invest too much of their self-concept (and therefore the needed time and energy) into their studies for fear that they might fail again. In this case, peers’ encouragement, testimonies of success, and modeling of achievement-related behaviors can be the “social proof” that young adults need to believe that success

is possible.

ABE teachers can harness positive peer influence through peer-mediated instructional strategies. Teachers can encourage study groups and student-led discussion sessions, organize group projects, match students for peer tutoring and mentoring around specific lesson modules, and establish supportive forums for peer feedback and evaluation. Teachers can also foster a collaborative learning environment in which students, rather than teachers, are seen as the experts. In a peer-driven learning environment, students simultaneously feel pressured to master educational content so they can shine in front of their classmates while unconsciously modeling for each other the attitudinal and behavioral norms that promote educational achievement and positive development.

## Youth Popular Culture

Youth popular culture — which includes movies, music, magazines, dress, language, attitudes, and activities such as skateboarding and rapping



— can be a powerful tool for engaging young adult learners and promoting achievement. While the research is inconclusive about whether young adults' actions can be directly attributed to these influences, it is almost impossible to deny that youth's values, behaviors, and perceptions of social norms are heavily influenced by their popular culture (National Academy of Sciences, 2002; Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, 2001). Practitioners who work with youth may not like, for example, hip-hop music, but hip-hop often connects with and influences out-of-school youth in a way in which traditional forms of communication have been unable. As a result, any youth program that is serious about finding a way to engage young adults cannot ignore the power of this cultural medium.

Educators would rightly balk at the notion of playing pop music in an educational setting or letting youth “freestyle” in the back of a classroom simply because it would make them and the program seem more YCC. Instead, youth popular culture should be viewed as a bridge for reaching young adults “where they are” and connecting them to academic content that might otherwise be boring or abstract. Youth popular culture can be an important enhancement to traditional instructional techniques because young learners' academic outcomes are directly connected to their ability to feel safe, comfortable, and respected (National Academy of Sciences, 2002).

Youth popular culture can be used as an instructional strategy in a number of ways. First, teachers should try to bring youth popular culture into the classroom (or better yet, challenge students to find a way to apply their popular culture to classroom activities) and use it as a starting point for discussion and analysis. For example, students who live in an inner-city neighborhood might watch clips from a movie that

relates to their experiences, such as *Boyz in the Hood* or *Menace II Society*, and then write an essay analyzing the main themes or characters' choices. Students might also be more receptive to reading aloud from magazines that reflect their interests, such as *Sports Illustrated* or *Rolling Stone Magazine*, than from a standard English textbook. Second, instructors can use youth popular culture as a connector to more rigorous material. Music lyrics are another form of poetry, a discussion on the evolution of youth culture can turn into a history lesson, and an analysis of record sales and profit margins can be used to teach basic math skills.

An emphasis on engaging students through their popular culture should not be confused with the need for a multicultural, multilingual approach. Sensitivity to students' ethnic cultures is an important part of making youth feel comfortable and respected. However, youth popular cultures often cut across ethnic lines. Educators concerned with becoming more YCC cannot assume that students will be motivated by hip-hop

***“An emphasis on engaging students through their popular culture should not be confused with the need for a multicultural, multilingual approach.”***


simply because they are African-American or won't be engaged by hip-hop because they are white and live in the suburbs. Instead, a YCC approach challenges ABE teachers to maintain an appreciation for students' multicultural backgrounds and multilingual needs while separately identifying and harnessing the forms

of youth popular culture most relevant to students' specific popular interests.

Finally, youth popular culture can be used to promote positive youth development. While many movies or song lyrics highlight notions that are antithetical to achievement, youth popular culture is replete with messages that encourage youth to invest in behaviors that will facilitate positive development. Teachers can engage students to analyze positive song lyrics and use the words of popular singers, such as Mos Def, Beyoncé, or Kid Rock, for example, to promote the beliefs and behaviors needed for academic achievement: messages that students might ignore when expressed through more traditional outlets.

## In Conclusion

Youth cultural competence is not a cure-all intervention or a substitute for rigorous academic preparation and time-tested instructional practices. Instead, YCC is an operating framework through which ABE programs

can assess the educational and developmental services they provide to young adult learners. It is a set of tools — youth development, youth involvement, positive peer influence, and youth popular culture — for achieving improved outcomes with youth given their distinct educational and developmental needs. YCC offers ABE programs a pathway for harnessing youth's assets, and for using young people themselves as assets, to promote both their own and their peers' educational success. 

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### About the Author

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# A Comprehensive Professional Development Process Produces Radical Results

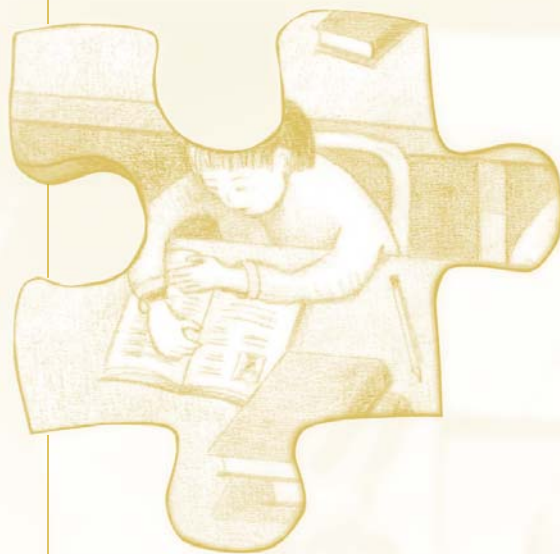
*In metropolitan Kansas City, practitioners get a chance to learn, test, and refine new teaching strategies that really work with youth*

by Betsy Topper & Mary Beth Gordon

**Y**oung adult learners in General Educational Development (GED) programs in metropolitan Kansas City were dropping out: typically more than half left within weeks of enrolling. The practitioners who served them were sometimes more relieved than alarmed. The young people in their programs were, as a group, unmotivated and disruptive in the learning environment. And they seemed to be immune to every teaching strategy practitioners tried.

The Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning — an organization committed to strengthening the adult basic education (ABE) system in the five-county metropolitan Kansas City area — was not willing to abandon an entire population segment, especially one that accounted for more than half of all participants in 70 area GED programs. So Alliance staff researched, funded, and implemented an 18-month-long professional development process designed to give practitioners the skills and intensive support they needed to work effectively with young adult learners in GED programs. This effort has proven to be successful on several levels. It has revolutionized

the way metropolitan Kansas's GED practitioners work with young adult learners, turned frustrated practitioners into highly motivated educators eager to work with youth, and substantially improved outcomes for young adult learners in our GED programs.



## Identifying the Problem

A January, 1999, survey of the adult literacy programs with which the Alliance works produced, among other things, one statistic that startled us: 52 percent, or more than 10,000, of the participants in local GED programs, were young adults ages 16-24. This seemed to contradict conventional wisdom that more mature adults — who after years in dead-end jobs under-

stood the value of a GED — dominated GED and other adult literacy programs. We confirmed our findings with area GED practitioners, including the eight members of our advisory group, the Professional Development Planning Work Group (PDPWP), which guides our professional development efforts. PDPWP members and other GED practitioners quickly oriented us to the realities of youth in the GED programs in our region.

According to local GED practitioners, the vast majority of young adults in Kansas City area GED programs are required to enroll in order to receive public assistance, qualify for job training, or meet a condition of probation.

Practitioners also told us that because young adult learners are not in GED programs by choice, they rarely seriously pursue studies that lead to a GED. Those who do try usually falter in the GED system of independent study. Most drop out within a few weeks after enrolling, according to attendance records.

Many practitioners confided that they had no idea how to motivate these reluctant learners.

## The Search for Models

The next step was to assist GED educators in securing training that would enable them to better meet the needs of young adult learners. PDPWP members warned us that GED practitioners did not want to be inundated with educational theories. What they really needed was hands-on, practical experiences that would show them how to involve alienated young people in the learning process.

Finding a viable youth education model was much harder than we had anticipated. The adult education and literacy literature provided no suggestions. When we turned our attention to the youth development field, we found the resources we needed. The most valuable of these was the American Youth Policy Forum (AYPF), which carries out extensive research into best

practices related to youth development.

We asked AYPF to help us put together a one-day workshop that would present an overview of some of the best practices for working with teens. About 40 area GED practitioners attended this event. In fact, when we ran out of seating, many practitioners were willing to stand for hours just so that they could hear what the presenters had to say.

A demonstration of a teaching strategy known as Youth Cultural Competence (YCC) by a representative of the Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc., in Gaithersburg, MD, captured everyone's attention. The YCC strategy integrates elements of youth culture such as rap music, media images, and pop icons into the academic curriculum. What may sound superficial in theory turns out to be a powerful youth-oriented teaching tool in practice. As we — Alliance staff and practitioners alike — could see from the simple exercises demonstrated with youth volunteers during the workshop, YCC captured the attention of youth and engaged them in learning.

We were overwhelmed by the positive feedback from the practitioners who attended the workshop. Their consistent message: YCC training is exactly what we need to engage the young adults in our classroom.

We knew that practitioners were ready for something new. But we wanted to check with youth in GED programs to make sure we were moving in the right direction. We hired a consultant to conduct in-depth interviews with young people in area GED programs. The findings: traditional GED programming was not working for them. We decided to raise money and devote considerable staff time to see if YCC training for GED practitioners would result in significantly better outcomes for young adult learners. Critical to our eventual success was an early decision to give the effort our full support. If YCC failed, it would do so based on the limitations of the model and not because of haphazard professional development or because

we lacked the patience and resources to see it through.

## Initial Planning

We spent the next few months designing an intensive, long-term professional development experience around YCC that would stimulate permanent behavior change among GED practitioners. We negotiated with officials at the Youth Development and Research Fund (YDRF), the organization responsible for creating the YCC concept. We provided them with information so they could restructure their basic YCC training program, which focused on youth job development concerns, to emphasize issues related to adult learning.

Our initial training plan, which was devised in consultation with our funders and the professional development work group mentioned earlier, started with a three-day workshop covering all aspects of YCC. We limited the workshop to 16 people so that participants could get the attention they needed to digest and practice teaching strategies that would be a huge departure from those they commonly used. To maximize the impact of this training, we also required that two practitioners from each participating GED program attend the training. The intent was that practitioners who worked in the same program could support one another in implementing YCC strategies. And, we favored participants from GED programs with large numbers of young adult learners. As a result, the 16 participants in our initial training came from eight area GED programs that served 75 percent of the young adults in GED in our area.

During the planning process, our funders, who by this time had embraced the notion of YCC, wanted to make sure that training participants would have an opportunity to test YCC principles in their classrooms. They talked about how easy it is to get excited about new ideas presented in training only to become frustrated — and eventually give up — when faced



with the difficulties of implementing those ideas. They requested that we put aside enough money to award a \$5,000 mini-grant to each of the eight GED programs participating in YCC training. The mini-grants could be used, for example, to purchase boom boxes or other equipment needed to create lessons around rap or hip-hop music. They could pay for gift certificates for youth as incentives for regular attendance or academic achievement. They were to be awarded on the basis of a simple letter of intent from participants in YCC training.

## The Process Begins

Our three-day YCC training was conducted by Josh Weber of YDRF (see the article on page 6 for theory) in July, 2000. Participants were immersed in YCC principles and practices. They learned the theory behind YCC, including why conventional approaches to education are not relevant to young people in GED today. More compelling than the theory was the hands-on, down-to-earth instruction in YCC strategies. Participants learned, for example, how to use an ad in a youth magazine to capture the attention of their young adult students. They learned how to use the lyrics of a rap song to initiate a meaningful discussion about poetry and literature. Josh explained and demonstrated strategies and then the participants practiced these strategies under his supportive guidance.

The GED practitioners left this three-day workshop re-energized and committed to the principles of YCC. They talked about how eager they were to try out the new strategies they had learned. Their enthusiastic comments demonstrated that they believed that they had found a way to get through to young people in their classrooms.

## Continued Support

The original YCC training plan called for an intensive workshop plus the mini-grants. However, before the July YCC workshop ended, everybody involved agreed that continuing formal

support would be beneficial. As Josh explained, participants would likely encounter a host of external and internal barriers in trying to implement key YCC strategies. For example, YCC suggests conducting small group classes for young adult learners, but the eight programs participating were built around independent study.

The Alliance sponsored support sessions, which we called breakthrough sessions. The sessions — convened at six-week intervals — gave training participants an opportunity to talk with one another about how YCC strategies were working in the classroom. We hired a professional facilitator to conduct the two-hour luncheon sessions. We felt that someone skilled in stimulating honest, nonjudgmental discussion of YCC successes and failures could help bring participants' skills to the next level. The breakthrough sessions were well attended and always elicited lively, useful discussions of YCC issues. Over time, participants became a cohesive support team, encouraging each other with advice and powerful personal support.

Eventually, breakthrough session participants asked questions about certain YCC practices that they could not answer through collective wisdom. Several participants were overwhelmed by the response of students to their YCC efforts. For example, some young people were so pleased by the changing attitudes and behaviors of their instruc-

tors that they began sharing everything with them, including the intimate details of their sexual experiences. We agreed we needed more information about YCC implementation.

Six months after the YCC workshop, we arranged a video conference with Josh, our YCC trainer. Participants discussed their YCC concerns and problems with him, and he offered thoughtful answers and suggestions. Participants left the video conference upbeat and fully committed to making YCC work in their GED classrooms. Two additional video conferences, which featured groups that were successfully using YCC principles, proved to be very helpful in boosting the confidence and upgrading the YCC skills of our training participants.

## Evaluation

We evaluated our YCC efforts in several different ways. We held two focus groups consisting of young adult learners in programs served by YCC-trained instructors, facilitated by a professional consultant who had no stake in the outcome. Focus group participants were unanimous in their praise of the positive changes taking place in GED programs. Said one youth, reflecting the attitudes of his peers: "It's like I'm not invisible anymore. My teachers accept me for who I am. I can tell they really want to help me learn."

About nine months after the initial

## Outcomes

Here are a few specific examples of positive outcomes experienced between July 2000 and December 2001:

- North Kansas City Adult Education and Literacy: GED graduation rates among young adults seeking GEDs more than doubled from barely 10 percent to about 25 percent.
- Kansas City, Kansas, Community College ABE: Retention rates among young adults grew from 40 percent to 75 percent.
- Family Literacy Center: Attendance among teens and young adults increased 30 percent.
- Genesis School: GED pass rates reached an unprecedented 90 percent among young adult learners in the school's GED prep classes.
- Kansas City ABE: Enrollment among young adult learners has climbed 68 percent due to a peer-to-peer recruitment effort implemented by enthusiastic young adult learners. ♦

training, Josh returned to Kansas City for several days to observe YCC trainees in their classrooms and to provide one-to-one coaching. He also led a workshop in which he identified specific ways in which GED practitioners could make YCC even more effective. By late summer 2001 — after YCC had been implemented in Kansas City area GED programs for more than a year — Weber distributed in-depth surveys to YCC training participants as well as to the young adults they served. He returned to Kansas City in September to provide an overview of results and to explain how GED programs must change if they are going to be successful in attracting and keeping young adult learners. Based on the growing positive buzz about YCC, some 50 GED practitioners and program directors attended this event. A new round of YCC training for the uninitiated has since begun. Seven GED programs are participating.

## A Sea Change

YCC training participants have changed in ways we would have never predicted. Seemingly staid practitioners who appeared to be mired in traditional GED teaching methods eagerly embraced YCC. They were willing to try “guerilla teaching tactics,” as some described them, to get through to youth who had given up on education.

GED programs utilizing YCC principles have been transformed. That is what GED practitioners tell us and what we have observed during site visits. Before YCC, young people in Kansas City area GED programs were too often sullen figures, sitting silently at a table or desk, hunched half-asleep over an open book. Today, young people in GED classrooms led by practitioners trained in YCC are excited and energized. They are sitting together at tables — perhaps enjoying snacks or beverages — engaged in the experience of learning. They are talking about math, literature, history, and more — all in the context of issues relevant to youth.

*continued, page 14*

## Funding a Professional Development Program

### Our Costs

The Metropolitan Alliance for Adult Learning spent nearly \$44,000 on its Youth Cultural Competence (YCC) professional development program, or \$2,750 per participant for 18 months of intensive training and support services. This relatively small investment led to a sea change in youth-oriented teaching strategies among ABE practitioners and substantially improved outcomes for their young adult learners.

Close to a quarter of the YCC budget involved training fees (\$7,000) and travel costs (\$3,000) to bring a trainer to Kansas City for three training or coaching sessions. Another \$10,000+ was for professional consultation services, which included facilitating the breakthrough sessions and conducting focus groups and one-to-one interviews with young adults in ABE.

Other costs included more than \$2,600 for meals and refreshments served during training and breakthrough sessions (about \$10 per person per meal); \$20,000 for the mini-implementation grants to ABE programs; and \$400 for brochures about the training.

The \$44,000 YCC professional development budget does not include Alliance staff time (about 25 percent of the director's time over an 18-month period) or the space and technical equipment required for the training presentations, breakthrough sessions, and video conferences. One of our funders — Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation — provided free space and state-of-the-art equipment for most YCC-related activities.

### Duplicating this Training

The Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc., in Gaithersburg, MD, developed the YCC training model that we used. However, groups with more limited financial resources can probably find a local organization especially skilled in working with youth to put together a viable, YCC-like professional development program for ABE practitioners. The Alliance can advise you on this. (See contact information below.)

### Securing Funding

Here's a suggestion for ABE programs in communities where there is no Alliance-type organization that supports system-wide ABE efforts: Join forces with several ABE programs in your area. Identify local funders who fund, or might be open to funding, education or youth development programs. Send a few of your most articulate and persuasive representatives to meet with each potential funder.

You can make this argument: Every year, thousands of kids in our community drop out of high school. Most will face a host of problems, ranging from very limited job opportunities, to chronic poverty, to a higher-than-average risk for involvement in crime and substance abuse. The best way to change their bleak future prospects is to help them earn a GED through local ABE programs. Unfortunately, ABE programs nationwide have failed dismally with young adult learners. But now there's a practitioner training model, tested and proven in Kansas City, which dramatically improves the success rate among young people in ABE. Will you help us to fund this effort in our community? ❖

### Contact Information

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Although the collection of data has been spotty until recently, the information available documents a substantial improvement in outcomes among young adult learners served by YCC-trained practitioners. In general, GED graduation rates have increased and dropout rates have fallen.

## Successes, Challenges, Missteps

Our original, 18-month, intensive YCC training and support effort (July, 2000, through December, 2001) is now complete. Many things worked; some things did not. The basic YCC training, as well as the support systems that evolved, worked very well. We now know that the continuing breakthrough sessions were critical. YCC training would never have transferred so comprehensively to the GED classroom without them.

An essential element of YCC is the establishment of small group sessions or classes designed specifically for young adult learners. YCC will not work unless young people are given an opportunity to express themselves in a youth-friendly setting. Therefore, administrators must be brought on board, because policies and procedures have to change at the GED program level to make YCC viable. This ranges from the organization of space for young adult learners, to the scheduling of classes, to the attitudes of the people who oversee GED programming.

Site visits and one-to-one coaching by YCC trainers led to some extremely valuable adjustments in YCC practices. For example, the YCC trainer noticed that some practitioners using YCC principles failed to connect the learning occurring in the GED classroom — a math lesson tied to the cost of a two-pack-a-day smoking habit — to the math concepts covered on the GED. Once this was pointed out, practitioners routinely related lessons to the GED.

We could never have sustained this effort without the support of 10 local funders who gradually came to

embrace what initially seemed like an extreme, unproven approach to education. The reason they supported YCC: nothing else had worked well with Kansas City area youth.

In retrospect, we would make three changes. Some GED program directors who voiced support for YCC training balked when YCC-trained practitioners under their supervision tried to introduce new ideas. For example, a few were reluctant to separate young adult learners from more mature learners or to permit rap or hip-hop music to be played in GED facilities. A potential solution to this: Secure, prior to training, a written commitment from program administrators to support key YCC components and strategies.


The Alliance charged a modest \$125 for the intensive, three-day YCC training, which did not begin to cover our costs. (See sidebar on page 13 for information on funding a YCC training.) We no longer charge even nominal fees for YCC training. Our rationale is that we are asking people to participate in a long-term professional development effort that will lead to programmatic and instructional change. We do not want to give them any reason to refuse.

Although we have an enormous amount of anecdotal information, we lack a large body of consistent statistical data documenting the success of our YCC efforts. We should have been (as we are now) more intentional in setting up a data-tracking component. This is especially difficult because we work with myriad independent GED programs that maintain statistics in different ways.

## In Conclusion

The Alliance was able to implement a long-term, intensive professional development effort that fosters and supports radical behavior change over time among GED practitioners. It was not easy. To duplicate a professional development program like this, which gives practitioners a chance to learn,

practice, and eventually fully integrate new teaching strategies, requires a lot of planning, resources, commitment, and creative thinking.

- First, typical short-term training programs, no matter how good, will not permanently change the behavior of practitioners. The only way to do this is through long-term support.
- Such support must be provided on many levels, including follow-up workshops, site visits and other technical assistance, and continuing support sessions.
- Continuous information gathering is important. We used structured interviews and focus groups with our target population (young adults). This information helps bring to the surface the kind of additional training and support services that may still be needed.
- Practitioners need the tools to implement the strategies they are learning. One example is the \$5,000 mini-grants our funders provided to make GED programs more youth-friendly.
- Tracking, evaluating, and adjusting training and support services are critical to meet the evolving needs of practitioners.
- Long-term, comprehensive professional development efforts require funding and ways to keep funders engaged.
- Commitment and patience are necessary to see such a major professional development program through to its conclusion. This includes securing the commitment of participating practitioners to become part of a continuing learning experience. 

## About the Authors

Betsy Topper is the director of the Metro Alliance for Adult Learning. She spearheaded the Alliance's effort to bring Youth Cultural Competence training to area GED programs.

Mary Beth Gordon is a freelance journalist with 20 years' experience writing about the not-for-profit sector. For the last four years, she has written extensively about adult literacy issues, including editing "News," a regional adult literacy publication. ♦



## Connecting Research and Practice...

*Compiled by Cristine Smith*

Features of the MAAL Professional Development on YCC	Research and Literature that Support these Features
The training was continuous and extended in duration (an initial three-day workshop, breakthrough sessions, video conferences, one-on-one coaching, and site visits).	<i>Intensive, longer-term professional development better enables teachers to retain and incorporate concepts into their teaching than single-session activities</i> (Porter et al., 2000).
The initial workshop introduced the concepts and techniques; coaching and site visits provided support once back in the GED classroom.	<i>Good professional development includes components of demonstration, practice, and feedback</i> (Joyce & Showers, 1995); <i>follow-up to the professional development by a coach helps teachers to take action on what they learn</i> (Joyce & Showers, 1995; Joyce et al., 1993).
The breakthrough sessions helped teachers share their ideas and experiences in trying to make the YCC strategy work.	<i>Because many factors influence how much practitioners can initiate change in their classrooms or programs, it's important for them to have opportunities to strategize about barriers to implementation in order to deal with the program forces that may hinder change</i> (Smith et al., 2003).
Requiring that two practitioners from each program attend the training ensured that they could support each other once back in their programs.	<i>Participating in professional development with others of the same program increases the effectiveness of the professional development</i> (Garet et al., 2001).

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# Skills Matter in the Types of Jobs Young Dropouts Will First Hold

by John Tyler

***Do basic cognitive skills matter for the least educated? They may not, if computerization of the workplace has “deskilled” the types of jobs in which young dropouts are first employed. This is, therefore, an empirical question that has received little attention and less systematic research. The ideal way to examine this question would be to begin with a pool of school dropouts, randomly assign individuals in this pool different levels of cognitive skills, and then follow them into the labor market to see if those with higher levels of cognitive skills were employed more and earned more than those with lower skill levels. To approximate this situation in a recent research study, I used data on General Educational Development (GED) candidates who attempted the GED exams in Florida between 1995 and 1998, when all were 16 to 18 years of age.***

I used the scores of these individuals on the math portion of the GED battery as a measure of their basic cognitive skills. To score well on the GED math exam, you have to know basic math, you have to be able to read the problems, and you have to be able to follow basic instructions. These data are well suited for determining the economic importance of

cognitive skills for dropouts for several reasons. First, the GED exams are a high-stakes test for these dropouts and so we think that individuals bring their best effort to the exams. As a result, test scores on the GED exams are likely a better measure of underlying cognitive skills than test scores on standardized tests with no stakes attached. Second, these data contain very recent labor market information on a large sample of dropouts. Following the dropouts for three years after they last tested on the GED, I observed earnings as recently as 1998 and 2001. Third, these data allow me to control at least partially for confounding factors that could limit what we can learn about the returns to skills. For example, if, in a random sample of dropouts, we see a dropout who has a higher test score earning more than a lower-scoring dropout, we do not know how much of the observed earnings premium is a result of higher cognitive skills and how much is a result of unobserved (to the researcher) factors correlated with both higher test scores and greater earnings.

## Confounding Factors

Unobserved motivation is an example of such a confounding factor. If we assume that motivation is rewarded in the labor market and that more highly motivated individuals tend to score higher on a standardized test, then failure to control for motivation will lead to overestimates of the causal effect

of cognitive skills on earnings. In the data I used for this study, all dropouts indicated a desire to obtain a GED and all had sat through the seven-plus hours of testing. It is thus likely that selection into the data set itself controls for some level of motivation. I used other variables in the data to control for other potential confounding factors as well. Finally, it is likely that earnings information taken from state administrative records, as were used in this study, are a more accurate measure of earnings than self-reported earnings. In summary, while not as good as true experimental data, the data on GED

***“...public policies supporting skill-enhancing programs could have a positive impact on the economic outcomes of low-skilled individuals.”***

candidates offer several distinct advantages over typical survey data in answering this research question.

Using these data I found that young dropouts do experience a nontrivial economic return on basic cognitive skills in their first jobs in the labor market. Based on earnings in the first three years after taking the GED exams, dropouts who score a standard deviation higher on the GED math exams can expect earnings 6.5 percent higher than those with lower scores. (A standard deviation is a measure of how much spread — variation —

## NCSALL RESEARCH FINDINGS

there is in the data. We normally think of education interventions that can move test scores by a quarter of a standard deviation as fairly big effects.) This is the best evidence yet that basic cognitive skills, at least as represented by scores on a math exam, do matter in the types of entry level jobs that young dropouts first hold.

## Implications

The implication of this finding is that public policies supporting skill-enhancing programs could have a positive impact on the economic outcomes of low-skilled individuals. One way to increase the cognitive skills of dropouts would be to keep them in school longer. However, no dropout prevention programs have, under rigorous evaluation, been proven to be able to do this consistently. The alternative is to focus on programs that could directly affect the cognitive skills of dropouts. The only program that has undergone a rigorous evaluation in this context is the federal Job Corps program. A randomized evaluation of Job Corps found that it increased the math skills of participants by a tenth of a standard deviation (Schochet et al., 2000). Since skill enhancement is only one component of Job Corps, and since the general pool of dropouts is less disadvantaged than the Job Corps-eligible pool, it is reasonable to expect that a program focused on skill-enhancement could increase basic cognitive skills of the random dropout by something more than a tenth of standard deviation.

What if we could find or develop programs that could, on average, increase the basic cognitive skills of dropouts by as much as a quarter of a standard deviation? Based on a set of reasonable assumptions concerning interest rates, inflation rates, and productivity growth in the economy, the returns to skills I measured using Florida GED candidates mean that increasing the cognitive skills of a dropout by a quarter of standard deviation would result in an

increased earnings stream over a lifetime worth between \$20,000 and \$40,000 if paid out in a lump sum today. This calculation does not factor in the personal and societal benefits such as better parenting skills, better health, and increased civic participation that would likely result from increased cognitive skills. Ignoring these other potentially large benefits, a program that could increase the basic cognitive skills of dropouts by a quarter of a standard deviation and that costs less than \$20,000 per participant would more

than pay for itself from both society's and the individual's viewpoint.

## In Conclusion

Skills matter more in today's labor market than they ever have. But the ramifications of this have primarily been seen in terms of relatively highly skilled individuals. As my research shows, basic cognitive skills are also important for the least skilled in the labor market: young dropouts with low levels of education and little to no work experience. The message

## Why Do Skills Matter?


In the 1980s and 1990s the college wage premium — what college graduates earn above those with only a high school education — grew at unprecedented rates (Murphy & Welch, 1989). By the end of the 1990s it was more important than ever to enter the labor market armed with a college degree. What caused this explosion in the importance of a college education? Most analysts now agree that changes in the structure of the US economy led to a demand for more highly skilled workers that outstripped the ever-increasing supply of college graduates (Katz & Murphy, 1992). Changes in the goods and services we tended to produce, the design and structure of the workplace, and the tools used on the job were all geared to the abilities of more, rather than less, highly skilled individuals. Economists call this type of transformation “skill-biased technological change,” that is, technological change that favored particular skill groups, in this case those with higher skills.

There is a convincing argument that the driving force behind the declining relative (and absolute) earnings of lower-skilled individuals comes from the same process: a workplace that on average requires higher skills. This interpretation suggests to some that increased public support for programs that would raise the cognitive skill levels of the least educated individuals, particularly school dropouts, would be an effective way to improve their economic outcomes. Policymakers and the public could be surprised, however, and actual benefits of such programs could fall substantially below the expected benefits. This would happen if shifts in the production technology used in low-skilled jobs have “deskilled” those jobs, unlike what has happened for more highly skilled jobs in the economy.

As a simple example, consider how technological advancements have altered the job requirements for a typical entry-level type job: check-out clerk. The adoption of optical recognition technology and computerized cash registers has meant that the ability to know basic math in order to calculate change is no longer required for counter clerks. Technological innovations may mean that the ability to smile while working on your feet all day is more important for many low-skill entry-level jobs than knowledge of basic math. If this is an accurate depiction of the kind of entry-level jobs open to dropouts, then there could be an overemphasis on cognitive skill development as a means of improving the economic conditions of low-educated individuals. My research, however, indicates that this is not the case — in the types of entry-level jobs that first employ young dropouts, basic cognitive skills matter. ❖



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FINDINGS

for students, schools, and adult education programs is clear. Schools should pay attention to skill formation for all their students, including those who seem destined to drop out before earning their diploma. Adult education programs should not sacrifice skill formation at the expense of strategies aimed more toward GED test-taking skills. Students should work hard while they are in school or in GED preparation programs to acquire the types of basic cognitive skills required for them to function fully in a modern democracy and economy. Individuals drop out of school for all kinds of reasons. It is inescapable that the accumulated set of cognitive skills they possess as they step into the labor market play a major role in determining their economic future. 

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## Note

The study described in this article will be published in the *Economics of Education Review* and will eventually be a NCSALL Research Brief.

## About the Author

John Tyler is an Assistant Professor of Education, Economics, and Public Policy at Brown University in Providence, RI, a faculty research associate at the National Bureau of Economic Research, and a NCSALL researcher. His work examines the economic returns to a GED, the importance of cognitive skills in the labor market, and the impact of working while in high school on academic achievement. ❖

# Youth in ABE: The Numbers

by Jennifer Roloff Welch & Kathryn Di Tommaso

***Is the number of youth enrolled in the adult basic education system (ABE) on the rise? It's hard to say. A July, 2003, article in The New York Times reported growing numbers of students being pushed out of high school, as an unintended consequence of policies designed to hold high schools accountable for educational outcomes. In October, 2003, Focus on Basics editor Barbara Garner posted this question to the Focus on Basics electronic discussion list: "Has the number of youth (16-24) as a percentage of your enrollment increased in the past two years? By how much?" A handful of people responded, mentioning large — but not necessarily increasing — numbers of youth in their programs.***

This article summarizes our attempt to answer the question: Is the number of youth in adult basic education on the rise? And if so, why? According to Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE) statistics, the percentage of youth ages 17 to 24 remained steady for a few years (1991, 1995, 1999) and then, in 2000, increased by about six percent. The increasing number of youth in ABE is a difficult trend to document for two reasons. One is that the organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental, that compile relevant statistical data use different age ranges to define youth. For example, the US Census uses the broad age range 16 to 24 years old. In 2000, OVAE changed its cate-

gorization, dividing the category 16- to 24-year-olds into two more specific groupings of 16- to 18-year-olds and 19- to 24-year-olds. Another challenge is that adult basic education is not always identified as an independent category differentiated from other forms of continuing education.

Despite these challenges, in this article we examine the data that document the number of people enrolled in ABE by age group. We then look at related data that provide possible explanations for the slight rise in percentages of youth in ABE programs.

## Definitions

Scholar Elisabeth Hayes investigated the phenomenon of youth in ABE for NCSALL's *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy* in 2000. For the purposes of this article, we have used the same definitions for components of adult literacy education as Hayes did in her article. ABE includes basic skills training at the pre-high school level. Adult secondary programs (ASE) typically assist students in earning an alternative high school diploma such as a certificate of General Educational Development (GED). Hayes did not address youth in classes in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) courses; we touch on ESOL briefly.

We started exploring this issue using a definition of youth as 16 to 17 years of age, as Hayes did. She chose that range because "they seemed to present the most distinctive issues and challenges while also representing the group with the most significant increase in number. These young people are likely to be enrolling in adult literacy education with little or no break after leaving high school. There are societal and familial expectations that they

should be in school.” We found this age range to be unwieldy, however. Recent statistics by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) use 16 to 24 years of age as their youngest age group. Thus, although in some cases (OVAE data since 2000, for example) we can provide information by ages as specific as 16 to 18 years, we broadened our definition of youth to encompass ages 16 to 24 years because this seems to be the age range most statistical reports commonly use for younger people.

## OVAE

OVAE compiles statistics for state-administered, federally funded adult basic education programs. These numbers do not include state or locally funded programs, but they do represent the bulk of ABE funding. According to OVAE, the percentage of enrollment in state-administered adult education programs that consisted of participants ages 16 to 24 years dipped between 1996 and 1998, and then rose from 1998 through 2000 (see chart below). At the same time, however, that the percentage of overall enrollment was increasing, the numbers of young people enrolled dropped. In 2000, when OVAE changed its categorizations to 16 to 18 years old and 19 to 24 years old

rather than 16 to 24 years old, the number of more youthful youth, 16 to 18 year olds, was 465,967, or 16 percent of the total.

## Adult Education Program Data

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), participation of students ages 17 to 24 years in all forms of adult education in the United States has increased steadily since 1991. NCES defines “all forms of adult education” as adult education, including ABE, English as a second language (ESL), and apprentice programs; part-time postsecondary education; career- or job-related courses; and personal development courses. Program participation categories changed from 1991 to 1995 and again in 1999, from “in any program,” which is explained in a footnote as “any participation that includes adult basic education, English as a second language, and apprentice programs not shown separately” in 1995, to the more specific categories of “basic education,” “English as a Second Language,” and “apprentice programs” in 1999. The level of 17- to 24-year-olds participating in these three categories within the “any program” category in 1995 was 47 percent. In 1999, this percentage increased to

49.9, with 4.9 percent participating in ABE and 1.1 percent participating in ESL. Part-time postsecondary education participants increased from 12.6 percent in 1995 to 13.6 percent in 1999. The population of 17- to 24-year-olds in all adult education programs increased from 10,539 individuals in 1995 to 23,372 individuals in 1999 (NCES, 2001).

In another NCES publication, *The Condition of Education* (2003), participation of individuals aged 16 to 24 years in some form of adult education (work-related courses, personal interest courses, or other activities, including basic skills training, apprenticeships, or ESL) is documented as having steadily increased. In 1991, 37 percent of individuals ages 16 to 24 years participated in some form of adult education; this number increased to 42 percent in 1995 and 51 percent in 1999. In 2001, the percentage of those ages 16 to 24 years who participated in some form of adult education was 53. This age group had a higher rate of participation in adult education activities than the rest of the population. Participation of youth ages 16 to 24 years specifically in adult literacy education has also increased. In 1999, 13.9 percent of persons ages 16 to 24 years participated in basic skills training, apprenticeships, and ESL courses, which is an increase from 8.9 percent in 1991. Since 1999, participation of youth ages 16 to 24 years has remained fairly constant at 13 percent in 2001 (NCES, 2003).

## US Census

In the United States, the number of youth ages 16 to 24 years overall has continued to increase since 1988. From 1992 to 1996, their numbers grew from 3.4 million to 3.6 million. According to the Census Bureau, the number of 16- to 24-year-olds grew in 2000 to 3.9 million. The overall increase of youth in the population may be one reason that there seems to be an increase of youth in ABE. In addi-

### Enrollment of 16- to 24-Year-Old Participants In State-Administered Adult Basic Education

Year	Number	% of Total Enrollment
1996	1,485,917	36.7
1997	1,428,385	35
1998	1,385,165	34
1999	1,271,126	35
2000	1,193,599	41

Data for this chart taken from [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultED/](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ovae/pi/AdultED/), retrieved on March 24, 2004.

tion, perhaps the desire to drop out of their traditional high schools in conjunction with their lack of employment opportunities may cause increasing numbers of younger students to enroll in adult literacy education programs (Robinson, 2000).

## Drop Out Rates

We wondered whether an increase in drop out rates had a relationship to the increase of youth in ABE. As indicated by the graph below, from 1992 to 1999 the percentage of students earning a high school diploma showed a slight decrease while the percentage of students earning an alternative credential increased. While it can not be assumed that everyone who earns an alternative credential was enrolled in an ABE program, it seems safe to say that some proportion of those earning alternative

credentials are enrolled in ABE programs in order to study for the GED.

## GED Trends


We also wondered if trends in GED test-taking showed more 16- to 24-year-olds taking the test since 1992. Although youth taking the test are not necessarily enrolled in GED preparation programs, we hypothesized that the anecdotal information about an increase in youth in ABE may relate to the percentages of youth taking the GED. We found that the percentage of persons 19 years old or younger who took the GED increased steadily from 1992 to 2000 (age is categorized from age 19 or younger to age 20 to 24, hence the difference in age brackets from what we have been using previously). The percentage of GED-takers ages 20 to 24 years decreased during those years and only slightly increased in 2001. Overall,

the average age of GED test-takers has gone down since 1992. See the table and chart on page 21 for details.

## Conclusion

According to statistics compiled by OVAE, the participation of youth in ABE has increased slightly over the past few years. The US census data show an increase in the number of people ages 16 to 24 years in the overall population. At the same time the percentages of the 16- to 24-year-old population earning traditional high school diplomas decreased and the percentage earning alternative credentials has increased. While this does not mean that young people earning alternative credentials attended ABE programs, one can hypothesize that a certain percentage of them did. Also, GED testing statistics show that the average age of those taking the test is increasingly younger. These three factors combined may be contributing to the slight increase of youth in ABE.

To understand trends such as this one, standardization of the age ranges used to demarcate youth is necessary. This would allow trends to be followed more easily, and research into the causes and effects of these trends could be conducted more easily.

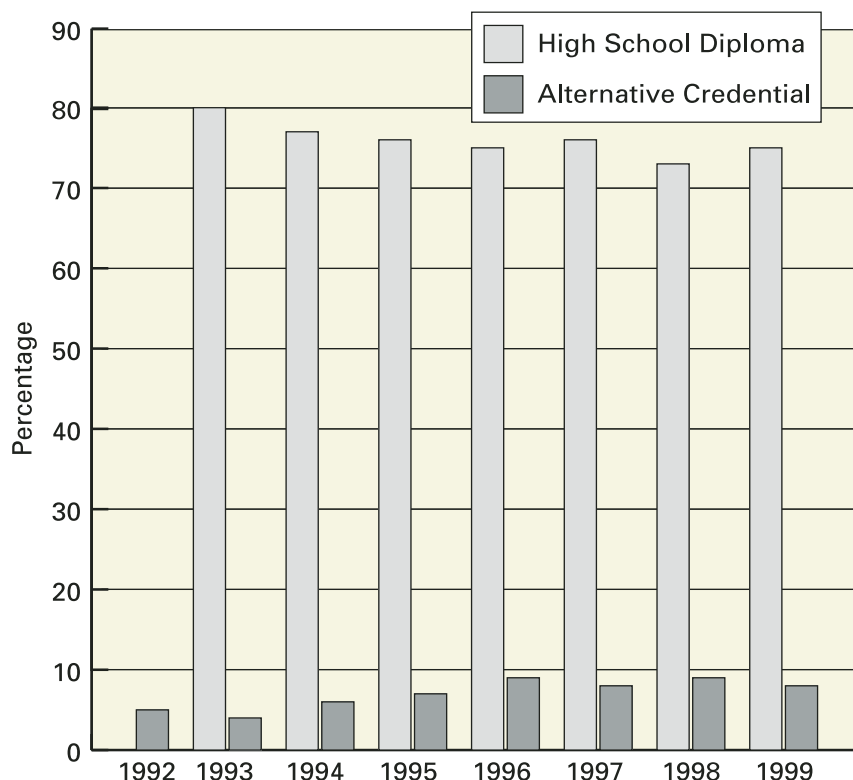
Perhaps the most important lesson we can take from these data is not that the numbers of youth in ABE seem to be increasing but that the percentage of youth in ABE is quite large: 41 percent in 2000. That is 41 percent in one age bracket; the other 59 percent are spread between students aged between 25 and more than 70 years. These are demographics that should not be ignored. 

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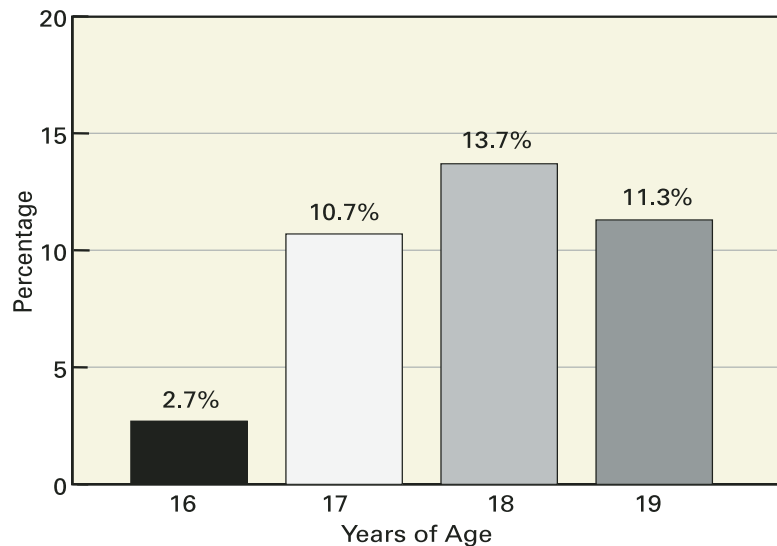
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## Ages of GED Test-Takers

Year	Percentage of GED test-takers 19 years old or younger	Percentage of GED test-takers 20 to 24 years old	Average age of all GED test-takers (years)
1992	32	28	26.6
1993	33	27	26
1994	34	26	25.6
1995	37	25	25.3
1996	40	25	25
1997	41	25	24.7
1998	43	25	24.6
1999	43	25	24.6
2000	43	25	24.7
2001	38.4	26.9	25.2

## 2001 GED Test-Takers Ages 16-19



The information for age brackets changed in 2001. Instead of being categorized in the age bracket of 19 or younger, the statistics began to be reported in 2001 by specific ages: 16, 17, 18, 19 years individually. All information in this chart was compiled from three sources: "Trends in GED Testing 1949-2001," "Digest of Education Statistics, Tables and Figures 1999," and "GED Testing Service."

## About the Authors

Kathrynn Di Tommaso is a doctoral candidate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She has taught developmental reading and writing at community colleges in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Boston area. Her research interests include past and current risk and protective factors and their relation to educational outcomes for adult basic education students.

Jennifer Roloff Welch is a doctoral candidate at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. She has taught middle school ESOL and high school English in Illinois and, most recently, in Cambridge, MA. Her research interests include adolescent and adult literacy, learning, and development. She is currently working on research related to adult women immigrants' experiences of learning English. ♦

# What Is the Magic Mix? Teens in Adult Education

by Virginia Tardaewether

**W**hile the adult learning community struggles with how to include teens in adult education, the teens are here in the classrooms teaching us how to include them. Ask and they will show you how. When the adult education classroom focuses on creation of a learning climate of mutual respect and fairness, a way to include youth and adults can be negotiated. This involves creation of an open and equal interaction between and among youth and adults. Based upon my experience, I don't favor a separation of the two populations. I also enjoy multilevel classrooms and students learning English mixed with native speakers. To me the joy of teaching is the mix. The more diverse the mix, the better.

Is this a radical approach to adult education? No, it is a realistic approach, one that links life outside the classroom to life in the classroom. Our communities are multiethnic and multilevel mixtures of Americans, and our classrooms should reflect that mixture. Our classrooms should model classroom standards and expectations that help our students understand and apply the standards set by the wider society. Our students need to know about change, about the process of changing attitudes, and ways in which they can go about aiding that change process. Our classrooms should teach

tolerance so that it transfers from the classroom to the community. What better place to teach tolerance than to model it within the class? Often youth are left out of thinking and planning, so the resulting programs are often less than stellar. What can we do about it? We can easily include youth within classroom structures for planning curriculum and activities. This gives us an opportunity to model tolerance and equity on a daily basis for all attendees.

While some suggest that youth need different things than adults, such as rules and attendance policies, I think we all need ground rules to live by within our community and within a classroom. If the students develop these rules, it helps them to "see" the rules of society and the workplace, that rules change through time, that rules are not always easy to discover and uncover, and that each of us must ultimately take responsibility for the rules. Students need opportunities for creative and critical thinking processes around their discovery of "the rules."

Members of gangs may not think they have "rules" binding their behavior, but they do, and those rules have an impact on people outside the gang. Dialogue about rules and enforcement of them may open doors for solutions within the classroom, the workplace, and the community. These communication strategies can often carry over into parenting discussions as well.

## Linkages

Linkage between the workplace and the classroom can begin the reality shift for teens as they engage in the real-life application of skills learned in the classroom. Adults bring the gift of skills gained through life experiences and teens bring the gift of challenging and questioning the usefulness of those skills. Clarifying real-life situations can acknowledge the "collective wisdom" of a class and solicit solutions from all students, no matter their age or experiences. Open communication teaches the group that all have something to offer, all are learners, and all can learn from each other. Expectations should not differ for teens, but should be consistent across programs. Adult



education students should be held accountable to the college community as a whole and abide by the same set of expectations.

Adult students bring personal learning experiences that enrich all our lives. Teens can use help in developing their short- and long-term goals, in understanding budgets, in learning how to drive. Older adults can use

help from teens in computer applications, Internet use, cell phone operation, and enthusiasm for life. Teens tend to question the system and the instruction they receive; adult students may be complacent about learning and so focused on goals that they forget to have fun. Teens rarely put up with anything boring for long without saying something about it. Complaints or low attendance rates are our prompt as educators to do something about it: change our structure, change our content, explain ourselves, connect, enjoy.

## In Conclusion

Since teens and other adults are our customers, it is our duty to deliver good service to all of them. If this means that we need to change our delivery system so our customer satisfaction numbers improve, well, that's what we need to do. If I were a car dealership, I would ask my clients how I was doing, and change my delivery to get higher numbers on the evaluation. Our programs may need to adjust times, formats, delivery, context, content, to better serve our clientele, but isn't that what a good adult education program does already? Our challenge continues to be implementation of the best possible basic skills instruction within the current environment of limited resources, changing economics, and ever-increasing student diversity. 📖

## About the Author

Virginia Tardaewether is the Watershed Education Coordinator for MidCoast Watersheds Council and the Learning Center Coordinator for Chemeketa Community College Outreach Campus in Dallas, Oregon. Her current teaching position includes watershed and environmental education, adult basic education, preparation for the tests of General Educational Development, developmental classes in reading, vocabulary, spelling, phonics, writing, and mathematics. Approximately 50 percent of the students enrolled in her classes now are 16 to 18 year olds. She also has taught and coordinated family literacy and English as a Second Language programs. ❖



# No Longer for Youth Alone: Transitional ESOL High School

**M**ost of the articles in this issue of Focus on Basics deal with issues that arise when younger students enter adult basic education programs. Many programs — a whole system, in fact — are set up specifically for youth. One such program was originally established to serve young newcomers to the United States who were still eligible for high school but whose family situations required that they work. Over time, the age range of the students has widened; now many of the students in the Transitional English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) High School in Fairfax, VA, are more than 24 years old. FOB asked the school's principal, Shelley Gutstein, about the program, its origins, and its life today.

**FOB: Tell me about the Transitional ESOL High School.**

**SHELLEY:** In Virginia, residents have the right to free education until they are 22 years old. However, although many recent immigrants who are not yet 22 remain legally eligible for regular high schools, they

just don't fit into the school system. Some are working during the day. Others are uncomfortable in public school because of the disparity between their age and the academics expected at that age level.

In 1991, Fairfax County Public Schools created a transitional ESOL high school (THS), which provides instruction for older ESOL students (18 and older) who wish to earn their high school diplomas. The goal of the program is to raise the English levels of these students to the intermediate level of ESOL so they can continue their studies at one of four adult programs in the county.

Fairfax County is one of the biggest school districts in the country, with 165,000 students. THS offers ESOL, sheltered science and social studies content classes, and mathematics: basic math, an introduction to algebra, and algebra 1. Credits earned for these courses transfer to the adult high school.

**FOB: Where did the idea for the school come from?**

**SHELLEY:** In the early 1990s there was an influx of Central American youth [to Northern Virginia], to get away from war, from poverty. They were underage but independent.

Our assistant superintendent for instruction at the time, Nancy Sprague, who had foresight and brilliance, was at a 7-11 [convenience store] between meetings. She was get-



ting coffee and saw a group of young men. She asked them, “Why aren’t you in school?”

They explained that they had to work. She countered, “Would you go to school if you had school at night?” At least, that’s the local story. She convened a task force to review the problem, and then put plans for the school into motion. We opened our doors to students in the fall of ’91, with a couple of teachers and a counselor.

**FOB: And the program?**

**SHELLEY:** We have always served only ESOL beginners. Fairfax County has three levels of ESOL. We take level one students at THS. Their English ranges from no English of any kind to maybe a second- or third-grade reading level. When our students reach entry proficiency for level two, we move them to one of four alternative or adult high schools. Three of the alternative high schools are fully accredited high schools and they have programs during the day and at night. They take high school juniors and seniors who need a smaller class environment, but also adults. We also have an adult high school that only offers night classes. So our students can go on to earn a high school diploma.

Our academic program provides the same instruction as that taught in Fairfax County high school ESOL programs. We’ve made some adaptations to the age and interest of our students with an eye towards the courses they will be taking and the needs they will have in their next school. It’s an academic program, with math up through algebra 1 and classroom-based instruction. We do offer sheltered science and social studies, to support students as they prepare to go into biology and world history in adult high school.

**FOB: You don’t offer the GED [tests of General Educational Development]?**

**SHELLEY:** Fairfax County public schools offers a GED through the

adult high schools. THS is in the high school world, not the GED world. The GED, from what I gather, is a fairly difficult test that requires a substantial level of English ability. It does exist in Spanish and could work for some of our Spanish-speaking students who reach 10th or 11th grade before they drop out. For the vast majority of our students, however, by the time their

*“...a true measure of our worth is the number of students who move on to the next school.”*

English ability is built up to a sufficient level to take the test, they would have enough course credits to graduate.

**FOB: Does that usually happen? Do students usually go on to get their diplomas?**

**SHELLEY:** We lose some in the transition from studying with us to going on to their next school. On the other hand, we have some who discover and enroll in the daytime program, realizing that they can earn the diploma in less time. They are able to adjust their schedules to do so.

**FOB: How is the Transition ESOL High School funded?**

**SHELLEY:** Part of Nancy Sprague’s vision for the program involved removing fees as an additional hurdle that youth would have to overcome in going back into school. Getting them in the door was the objective. By the time they would need to pay fees, they would already have some momentum. I’m not sure how she made that happen, but the transition program is run almost totally on local funds. Students in THS don’t have to pay for anything. If they’re over 22, they have to pay fees when they matriculate to their next school.

**FOB: What sort of data do you have to show to the school department to justify the program?**

**SHELLEY:** The local government hasn’t asked us for data yet, but if they do, we would show them our transition rate. Everyone asks how many people who start with us graduate from high school. That’s a difficult number to track. I think a true measure of our worth is the number of students who move on to the next school. About 30 percent of the students enrolled each year move on. How long they stay with us can be as short as the semester, or as long as a couple of years. We have literacy beginners who stay longer.

**FOB: What is the next program, the adult high school, like?**

**SHELLEY:** When the students get to their next school, they continue through Levels Two and Three of the ESOL program. They are also partially mainstreamed into content classes. Sometimes their content teachers have an ESOL co-teacher; different schools have different models. The classes they attend at their next school tend to be smaller, more focused, with lots of international students in them.

**FOB: Let’s talk about the students. Where are the students from?**

**SHELLEY:** We’re heavily Hispanic, at least 50 percent, and at one of our sites the enrollment is 90 percent Hispanic. We do have quite a variety of backgrounds, representing up to 15 other native languages. We’ve got students from Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Viet Nam, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Algeria, lots and lots of different countries.

Some of the teachers speak Spanish. I have a very international staff. About a third are originally from another country. We span the globe: Ethiopia, Lebanon, Syria, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Thailand, Ireland. We have had Puerto Rican staff as well.

**FOB: Ages?**

**SHELLEY:** The majority of our students are between 18 and 25 years old, but adults of any age are welcome.

16- and 17-year-olds can't attend THS because in Virginia, school attendance is compulsory until age 18. If we admitted 16- and 17-year-olds, we would be required to monitor their attendance in the same way that a daytime high school does. While we do take and submit attendance according to Fairfax County regulation, we aren't staffed for the level of monitoring required when students are legally required to attend.

**FOB: And gender?**

**SHELLEY:** Most of our students are male. From what we understand, some of the men are up here by themselves. Child care is an issue; we are not able to offer childcare at this time. If we could, we'd have a lot more women in our schools.

**FOB: What are the biggest problems or issues faced by the program?**

**SHELLEY:** For me, the biggest challenge is dealing with those factors in the students' lives that get in the way of their coming to school. We ask them to make a tremendous commitment. At a minimum they're with us Monday through Thursday, from 4:15 p.m. to 9:45, in addition to having worked a full time job. Just maintaining the students in school, so we can build continuity and momentum, is hard. The bottom line: if the boss says you have to work overtime, you have to. They lose that momentum and there is nothing I can do about it.

**FOB: How about the program's biggest strengths?**

**SHELLEY:** I'm lucky to have a very talented staff. Some of the best teachers I've ever seen have come our way. We have biweekly faculty meetings; I pull everyone in to a central location. Some Fridays are dedicated to staff development, while on others we hold meetings or work on recruitment of new students. Our teachers and counselors are public school employees; they have full time jobs with benefits, the same as the other teachers and counselors in the county. Our teachers are fully certified in whatever

they're teaching. The only difference is that our faculty work a seven-and-a-half hour segment of the day.

We're developing our own curriculum that is tailored to our students but remains in line with county high school ESOL requirements. It takes a content-based approach centered around themes, with standards-based testing, which is always in the back of our minds. Our students in algebra 1 and algebra 2 take [the required high school] end-of-course tests.

**FOB: So when your students finish level one ESOL and leave you, they can go either to the adult high school or the alternative high school? How do they decide which to pursue?**


**SHELLEY:** For some it's a matter of location. Older students may be drawn to the adult high school because fewer credits (20 or 21) are required to graduate than from the alternative high school, which requires 24 credits for the standard diploma. Some of the younger students intent on going to college tend to go to alternative schools. Diplomas from both the adult and alternative high schools fulfill college entrance requirements.

**FOB: You share space with regular high schools. What are the pros and cons of that?**

**SHELLEY:** For the most part it works well. We've worked with the administrations of the various schools where we are so that we have a dedicated office for our guidance counselors; the teachers share classrooms with day-time teachers. The configuration is slightly different at every school: in some cases the teachers have a file cabinet and book case in the classroom they share. At one location, it's a bit more spread out. It depends on the building and the size of the classrooms. But the high schools are quite accommodating for the most part. I order paper and other items for our schools and we buy supplies for our roommates when we can. We own some of our own computers. Our teachers come in at 2:30, Monday through Thursday,

and at 10:30 on Fridays. Depending on the site where they're working, they may or may not be able to work in their classrooms when they arrive. At sites where they can't, they work in a computer lab in the building until their teacher-roommates have left for the day.

**FOB: Do you have any problems having young students together with older students?**

**SHELLEY:** For the most part we don't have problems with the broad age range, since our students tend to be fairly mature for their ages. The older students tend to demand maturity of the younger students. We have very few discipline issues. They're there because they want to be. 



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# Sudan to South Dakota

## Helping Youth Make the Transition

by **Lara Ann Frey & Yvonne Lerew**

**W**hat can you do to assist young adults who are newcomers to the United States? Is it best to serve them alongside older adults in English as a second language classes? When might a specialized program best meet the needs of younger adults? Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota, Refugee and Immigration Programs (LSS/SD) struggled with these questions and undertook a mixed approach: immigrant adults of all ages learn English together and an additional Young Adult Orientation class is offered to meet the specific needs of younger adult students.

English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) classes at LSS/SD Refugee and Immigration Programs include adults from many countries and from ages 18 to 80. Students are placed in classes based on their English proficiency level and the times of day that they are available to attend school. The variety of lessons included in the life-skills-based classes meet most students' needs regardless of their countries of origin or their age. However, some young adults need more attention.

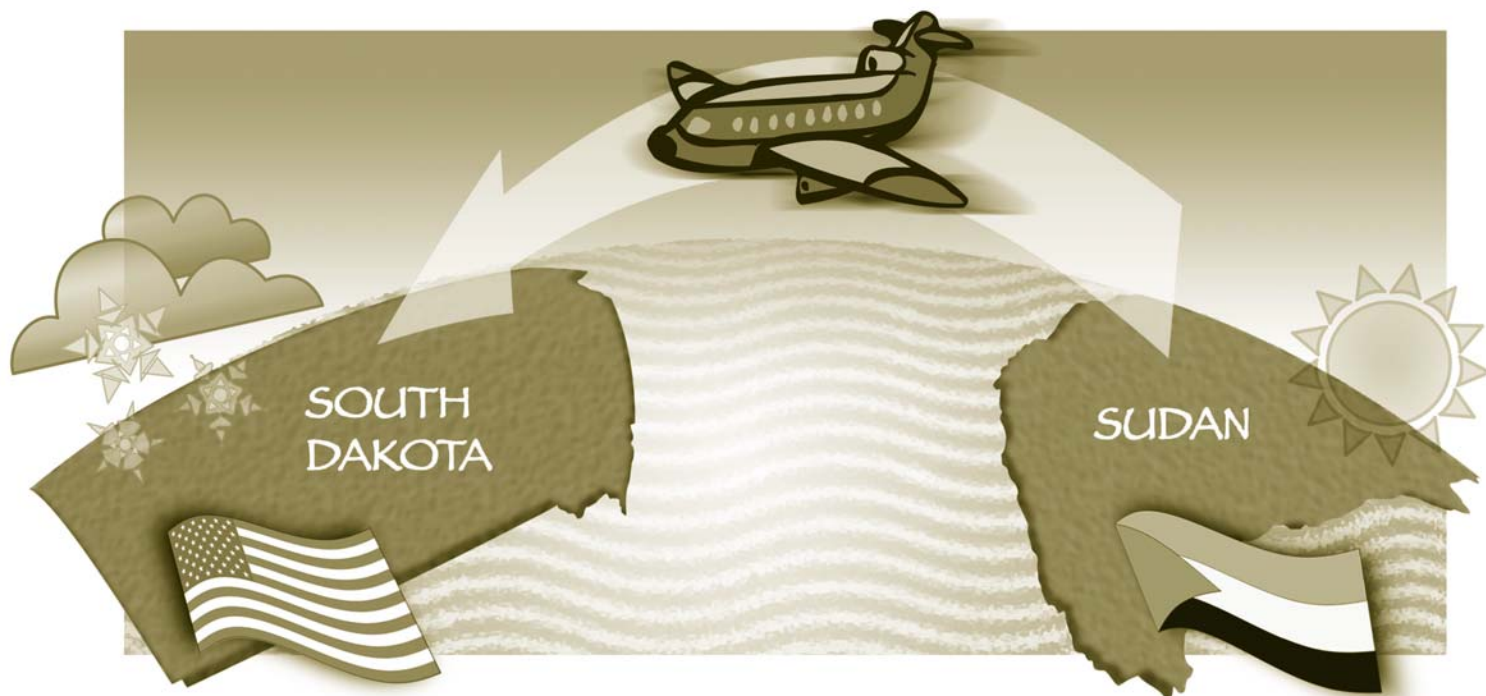
### Special Needs

A few years ago, LSS/SD realized that a group of young adults from Sudan needed specific information and training beyond what was offered in the general ESOL classes. These young men had been displaced from their families and eventually found shelter at the Kakuma refugee camp

in Kenya. Called by some the "Lost Boys of Sudan," they had survived from childhood in displaced communities made up of children and youth. Beginning in 1999, some 4,300 were accepted for resettlement in the United States; about 250 came to South Dakota.

The young men (very few young women were resettled with this group) from Sudan arrived in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, eager to begin their lives anew. They knew some English and entered ESOL classes for adults at the high beginning to intermediate levels. In addition, LSS/SD offered them the help of refugee resettlement case workers, general orientation classes, and pre-employment training. Nevertheless, this group of young men continued to struggle to adjust.

Case workers at LSS/SD, as well as community members such as landlords and employment supervisors, reported that these young men behaved inappropriately in social settings. We worried that these young men, who had arrived with such high hopes, were engaging in behaviors that endangered their health and might cause conflicts with law enforcement. Many were impatient and impulsive, behaving more like





teenagers than adults. They were faced with adult responsibilities to support themselves, manage money, follow the local laws, and interact with others in the community; however they did not have the skills or experience to do so successfully. Some of them indicated that they wished for parents or other adults to direct and guide them, and in some instances volunteers stepped forward to fill that role. In general, however, they were legally of age and needed to learn to function as adults in American society.

## Special Class

In response to the need for a specific, direct instruction to help this group of young adults to make a successful adjustment to life in the United States, LSS/SD created a Young Adult Orientation class. The class content was prepared by an adult ESOL instructor in consultation with refugee resettlement case workers, some of whom were themselves from Sudan; nurses and other health professionals; and a professional public school refugee family liaison. The class was offered for two weeks, for three hours each day: a total of 30 instructional hours. Afterwards, the curriculum was adjusted and compiled into a written instructor's manual to allow others to replicate the program with subsequent groups.

To supplement the instructor-led lessons in the Young Adult Orientation class, guest speakers with specific expertise were invited to present information from their particular perspective. The local police department's community education officer spoke about law enforcement concerns; a counselor who had himself crossed cultures spoke about culture shock and cultural adjustment; nurses or advanced nursing students presented information about safe sexual practices and about good nutrition; and consumer credit counselors spoke about money management. Since some of the potential instructors at

## "Lost Boys" of Sudan

The story of the "Lost Boys" began in 1987, when thousands of young boys were separated from their families as a casualty of the long-running and deadly civil war in Sudan. In many cases, boys as young as seven years old were away from their villages tending the cattle and were separated from their families during the fighting. In other cases, young men and boys were targeted for kidnapping by various factions to become combatants in the war and therefore escaped to refugee camps to escape that fate.

Over the years, the Sudanese youth fled to refugee camps in Ethiopia, then fled again back to camps in Sudan, and finally to Kakuma, in Kenya. Along the way they were stalked by lions, attacked by militias, crossed crocodile-infested rivers, and suffered from hunger and thirst. Finally, in 1999, the US Department of State designated 4,300 of the "Lost Boys" to be permanently resettled in the United States. The majority of these young men arrived in 1999-2001. Some 200 to 300 now live in South Dakota; some were initially resettled there and some decided to move to join friends and to obtain employment.

### Sources

<http://www.churchworldservice.org/betterworld2/lost-boys2.html>

Crawley, M. (2000). "Lost boys' of Sudan find new life in America," *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 7. <http://search.scmmonitor.com/durable/2000/11/07/pls3.htm>

LSS/SD were case workers, who are not trained as teachers, we wrote the instructor's manual in a detailed, scripted manner. See the box on page 28 for a sample of the manual.

While the Young Adult Orientation curriculum was created to meet the specific concerns of young adults from Sudan, LSS/SD has adapted it for use with other populations. We are planning to offer the class for young adults who have recently arrived from Liberia. The class is best suited to the needs of young adults who are new to the United States and without the guidance of elder members of their families or communities.

## Impact

We did not conduct quantitative research to evaluate the results of the Young Adult Orientation class. However, qualitative evidence demonstrates its positive result. As in any

adult education program, attendance and participation are indications that the class is meeting participants' needs. Overall, attendance was high at the Young Adult Orientation classes and 61 percent of the students who started the class completed it successfully. Anecdotal responses from case workers, law enforcement personnel, and other community members confirmed the value of the class.

At the end of each two-week class session, participants filled out class evaluation forms. The comments were instructive and validated the purpose of the class. Comments from student evaluations include:


- "The orientation is nice and I learnt a lot of things that I was not expecting to learn: How to communicate with the people in the city; going well with girlfriends, boyfriends and be friend to people openly, not keeping away from people."
- "What I have learned is to pay

attention to American's cultures and adapt [to] it. Follow the laws of America and respect them so that I can not fall into problems with the government and to make me be successful in my studies and work."

- "It can let me understand how I will live with my new community

and how I will survive in my new country."


Many of the topics of cultural adjustment are faced by immigrants of all ages, older as well as younger adults. Many topics, from managing money to being successful on the job, are covered in the life-skills-oriented

classes at LSS/SD as well as in many adult ESOL programs across the country. The Young Adult Orientation class provides a special educational opportunity, however. Some topics, such as underage drinking and social interactions between unmarried young adults of the opposite gender, are of specific interest to young adults. Other topics may be of general interest, but young adults may feel constrained by the elder members of a mixed class or older adults may become impatient with the questions and concerns of the younger adults in the group. At LSS/SD, we have found that the specific concerns of young adults can be addressed most effectively with groups comprised of young people, and especially single-gender groups from the same culture. 

For further information or to obtain a copy of the Young Adult Orientation Curriculum created by Lutheran Social Service of SD, please contact: Yvonne Lerew, Education Program Coordinator, Lutheran Social Services of SD, Refugee and Immigration Programs, 218 W. 13th Street, Suite 110, Sioux Falls, SD 57104. [ylerew@lsssd.org](mailto:ylerew@lsssd.org).

## About the Authors

Yvonne Lerew is Education Programs Coordinator for the Refugee and Immigration Programs of Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota. She has an MAT from Colorado College and a BA from Oberlin College.

Lara Ann Frey is an ESOL instructor for the Refugee and Immigration Programs of Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota. She has an MDiv from North American Baptist Seminary and a BS from St. Cloud State University. 



## Lesson Format

This excerpt from a Social Skills lesson demonstrates the level of detail presented in the instructor's manual:

Say, ***We have talked about culture and cultural adjustment. We want to talk about and demonstrate some important social skills. These skills are important if you want to be successful in your job. These skills will also be important as you spend more and more time with American people.***

Say, ***We are going to role-play. A role-play practices what you are learning. For example, we are going to show you how to start a conversation. First we will tell you how to start a conversation. Then we are going to demonstrate how to do it. And then you are going to practice it.***

Say, ***The first activity we will practice is greeting people. How do you greet people in Africa? Allow time for student response. How do you greet people in America? Allow time for student response. Say, In each country it is important to greet people but each country has a different way to greet people. It can be confusing to remember what to do. Today we are going to practice American greetings.***

## Curriculum Topics

- Goal setting: short-term and long-term
- Budgeting
- Time management
- Options for education: GED and postsecondary
- Using the public library
- Cultural adjustment
- Sexual harassment
- Discrimination issues
- Law enforcement issues: driving laws, curfew and underage issues, family law and abuse, sexual conduct
- Social skills
- Basic nutrition
- Sexually transmitted diseases and sexual health
- Employment skills
- Bicycle and car safety and insurance

# Separate Yet Happy

by Barbara Garner

**Y**outh have always been a big presence at Dona Ana Branch Community College (DABCC) in southern New Mexico. In fact, the college solicits lists of dropouts from neighboring school districts. They send letters encouraging these former high schoolers to go back to high school, but remind them that if they do not, they should consider adult basic education. Over the past few years, instructors of General Educational Development (GED) preparation courses were reporting that the adult/youth mix in their classes was difficult to navigate. The younger students were interested in technology, wanted activity-based and hands on learning, and were moving at a faster pace than the more mature students; the older students were more traditional. Last summer, the adult basic education instructional (ABE) team

*discussed ways to enhance the program. They decided to separate the younger and older students by creating an additional GED class specifically for 16- to 21-year-olds who had stopped out of school no more than three years before. Focus on Basics talked with the instructors who are teaching the new class and the original class, which now has only older students.*

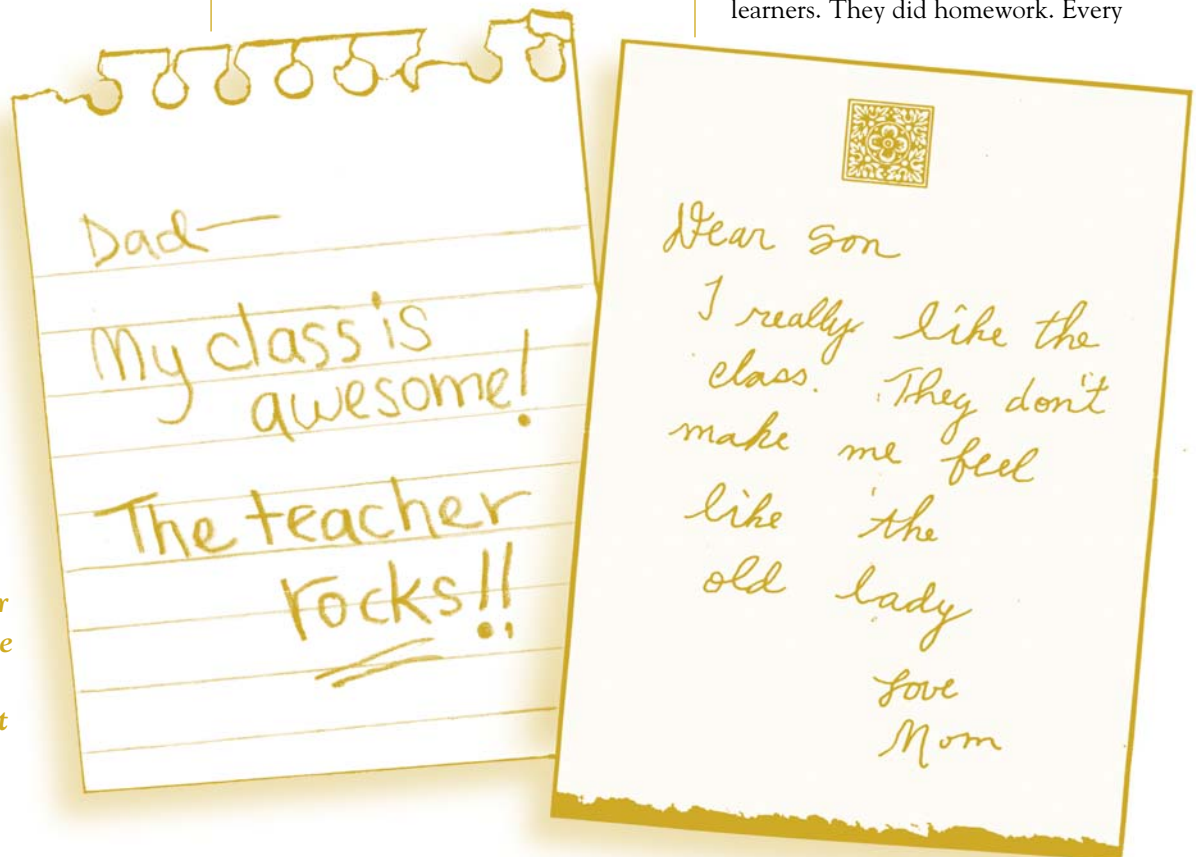
In the fall, 2003, DABCC started a GED preparation class for younger students with 26 students enrolled. The first accommodation they made to meet the needs of this age group

was scheduling. The class started at 10 a.m. rather than 8 a.m. because most of the students arrived late when the class started at 8. It was held twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, for four hours a day, 10 to 12 and 12:30 to 2:30.

Lilia-Rosa Salmon taught the class. The age range of students was 16 to 22. She has only good things to say about it. "I had heard that most of the instructors were complaining about the younger students because of discipline issues," she explained. "When we decided to form a youth-only class, people asked, 'Who would teach it?' I said I would.

"I don't know why, but I never had a discipline problem at all. Since they're surrounded by [students] their own age, they didn't act up. They were more comfortable joking around and saying silly things and we would all laugh. I told them to watch their language and respect others, and not laugh at others asking questions. And that was it.

"Most of them were very fast learners. They did homework. Every





one of the [13] students who completed the semester moved up a level [one went on to college]. I wouldn't be scared to send these students to college. I know they would be ok."

## Using AMI and Internet

Having recently participated in a study circle on adult multiple intelligences (AMI), Lilia-Rosa decided to integrate a lot of AMI techniques into her class. The activity-based instruction gave the students more time to move around the class and suited their energy level. She also split class time into group activities and individual time. This was especially necessary because despite the narrowed age grouping, the students' academic levels were diverse. This semester, she is using similar techniques with the class. She has also arranged to have the class spend part of each week in the computer lab. Lilia-Rosa was surprised to learn that although her students could do anything on the Internet, their word processing skills were very weak. The students work on their GED essay-writing skills and computer skills in the lab. "We did the IQ test that is available for free on the Internet," she remembers. "I was amazed that only one of my students was average: the rest were above. I even had two in the genius category. Of course, this is the Internet. But I was surprised. This is a group of young adults who are not very informed about the world, and who were not successful in schooling. The IQ information was very encouraging for them."

Lilia-Rosa is 22 years old, and admits that her youth is probably a contributor to her success with this age group. "I need instructors to keep me active and focused. I try to give the same to them," she explains. "I do think it [her age] has an impact. I can probably relate more to their stories, to what they have to say [than older

teachers]. They are comfortable telling me things. It's a huge responsibility to me because they see me as a young person like them, but yet I can work and be in college, so I'm a role model. They see that perhaps they can do it."

She feels that the students feel themselves to be part of adult basic education now. In the mixed age-group class, she says, she thinks they felt out of place: neither part of the public system or the ABE system. And they felt that as dropouts they couldn't do the same work as others. This

*"...separating the age groups has been working out well for both groups."*

semester, Lilia-Rosa took them on a field trip to New Mexico State University; they have been doing a lot of talking about how they can get into college with GEDs.


When other teachers ask her if she is having any problems, she responds that she's sorry they had such a hard time, but "I haven't had any problems at all. I can't even say I'm such a good instructor. I didn't even have to work to make a community in the classroom: they all started talking to each other and found their common interests. During the break, they all sit together and have lunch. Now they are all friends."

## The "Elders"

How did the "elders" do without the younger students? Anastasia Cotton is teaching the older students. She feels that separating the age groups has been working out well for both groups. Her students know they need their diplomas, she explains, and "they know they don't want to be stuck at \$5.50 an hour. They want to work. They're focused. This year, I

have had a lot fewer complaints from students about other students. We could focus in on certain area, for example in reproductive health, AIDS, and homosexuality. Before, the older students didn't want to talk about potentially taboo topics. The younger students made some [older students] very self-conscious. Now, the older students are a lot more open. But, again, I don't have really older people in there; probably the oldest is 38.

"Nevertheless, the interests of a parent with two or three kids is very different from the interests of a 16-year-old who is still trying to date. For example, their music is different, so if you want to use music in the class, it's easier to do with the students separated by age.

"I've never seen a class participate more than this semester. I don't know whether that's because the "kids" — under 18 — are not in there, or what." 

## About the Author

Barbara Garner is the editor of *Focus on Basics*.

## Resources

Please visit the NCSALL web site at <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu> (see Teaching and Training Materials section) for the Adult Multiple Intelligences (AMI) Study Circle Guide. Intended for professional developers and practitioners who want to organize and conduct study circles that help practitioners read, discuss, and use research to improve their practice, this nine-hour, three-session study circle introduces teachers to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and its application in adult basic education. The study circle incorporates findings from NCSALL's Adult Multiple Intelligences Study, the first systematic effort to examine how multiple intelligences theory can support adult literacy education. ❖



# BLACKBOARD

## The Youth "System"

- For information on what have been judged to be promising and effective practices with youth, go to [www.nyec.org/pepnet/enhancement\\_project.html](http://www.nyec.org/pepnet/enhancement_project.html). PEPNet is a project of the National Youth Employment Coalition. The web site includes effective practices with youth, criteria for those practices, and a great list of links.
- The National Youth Employment Coalition (NYEC) is a nonpartisan national organization dedicated to promoting policies and initiatives that help youth succeed in becoming life-long learners, productive workers, and self-sufficient citizens. Their web address is [www.nyec.org](http://www.nyec.org).
- The mission of the Youth Development and Research Fund, Inc., is to improve programs, policies and opportunities for youth through research, training and culture. Their web site is [www.ydrf.com](http://www.ydrf.com)
- NCWD/Youth is a source of information about employment and youth with disabilities. Their web site can be found at: [www.ncwd-youth.info](http://www.ncwd-youth.info).
- The Search Institute is an independent

nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide leadership, knowledge, and resources to promote healthy children, youth, and communities. They have a number of research publications about developmental assets that are useful for practitioners working with youth. Their web site: [www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org).

- Adolescent literacy is the topic of the most recent issue of *Voices in Urban Education*, a publication of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform. Find it on the web at [www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/](http://www.annenberginstitute.org/VUE/).

## Youth in ABE

- Reading experts Mary E. Curtis and Ann Marie Longo describe a four-stage reading curriculum they developed to reverse reading failure in young adults in *Focus on Basics*, Volume 1, Issue B. Go to <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/1997/curtis.htm>.
- For information on a college transition program designed to serve out of school youth, see "EdCAP: A Transition Program in Transition," in *Focus on Basics*, Volume 6, Issue D, available at <http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/fob/2004/johnson.html>.

- The findings of a year-long research study carried out in Ontario to deepen understanding of how violence affects learning are now available. "The Challenge to Create a Safer Learning Environment for Youth," and "The Impact of Violence on Learning for Youth: What Can We Do" by Jenny Horsman focus on youth's suggestions about what we can do to improve education. "You have to Believe It to See It: Safer Learning in Dangerous Times," by Nicole Ysabet, is a brief booklet aimed at youth. They can be downloaded from: [www.jennyhorsman.com](http://www.jennyhorsman.com).
- University of Wisconsin's Elisabeth Hayes examined the phenomenon of youth in adult basic education for Volume 1 of NCSALL's *Annual Review of Adult Learning and Literacy*. Published in 2000, the full article is available at [http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/ann\\_rev/vol1\\_3.html](http://ncsall.gse.harvard.edu/ann_rev/vol1_3.html).
- Go to [www.cete.org/acve/docgen.asp?tbl=digests&ID=132](http://www.cete.org/acve/docgen.asp?tbl=digests&ID=132) for the ERIC Digest "Youth In Adult Basic and Literacy Education Programs" by Susan Imel, published in 2003. ♦

## All About NCSALL

- NCSALL works to improve the quality of practice in adult basic education programs nationwide through basic and applied research; by building partnerships among researchers, policymakers, and practitioners; and through dissemination of research results. A joint effort of World Education, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Portland State University, Rutgers University, and the Center for Literacy Studies at The University of Tennessee, NCSALL is funded by the US Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

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Materials section) to download these publications for free.

**Study Circle Guide: Adult Multiple Intelligences (AMI).** This nine-hour, three-session study circle introduces teachers to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and its application in adult basic education. It incorporates findings from NCSALL's Adult Multiple Intelligences Study, the first systematic effort to examine how multiple intelligences theory can support adult literacy education.

**Mentor Teacher Group Guide: Adult Multiple Intelligences (AMI).** This 12-hour, four-session guide introduces teachers to Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) and its application in adult basic education. The guide includes two classroom observations, in addition to the four meeting sessions. Like the study circle guide of the same title, this mentor teacher group guide incorporates findings from NCSALL's Adult Multiple Intelligences Study.

**Seminar Guide: Establishing an Evidence-based Adult Education System.** This three-hour, one-session seminar engages participants in reading and discussing NCSALL's proposal for creating an evidence-based system for adult education, and then understanding and judging the relevance of such a system to their work. This seminar is based on NCSALL's *Occasional Paper* entitled "Establishing an Evidence-based Adult

Education System," by NCSALL Director John Comings.

### NCSALL Books

New — Spring 2004

**Review of Adult Learning and Literacy, Volume 4: Connecting Research, Policy, and Practice** edited by John Comings, Barbara Garner, and Cristine Smith. Published by Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Volume 4 is the newest addition to a series of annual publications that address major issues, the latest research, and the best practices in the field of adult literacy and learning.

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