

Best Practices in Workforce Preparation: A Case Study



What Are Best Practices in Workforce Preparation?

- Contextualize instruction based on student career goals and local labor market needs. This practice can help students see the connection between what happens in the classroom and their goals and the immediate utility of what they are learning.
- Manage the classroom like a workplace and fully integrate workforce preparation skills* with basic skills instruction. This provides opportunities for learners to practice and demonstrate workforce preparation skills each time they are in the classroom.
- Work collaboratively with program and partner staff to provide supportive services that align with students' goals. Developing and maintaining effective program partnerships can increase the availability of resources to help students reach their goals, in part by ensuring that appropriate referrals and follow-up become a consistent component of the adult education program.

**Workforce preparation skills means the knowledge, skills, and competencies that, when developed and demonstrated, prepare individuals for success and retention in the workforce. These skills include interpersonal and communication abilities such as teamwork, collaboration, and customer service; and workplace competencies including demonstrated professionalism, critical thinking, and systems thinking within their specific work setting.*

Implementing Best Practices at Tulna Area School District Continuing Education Center

This program provided adult education classes and one-on-one tutoring to 300–500 adults annually at several locations in a primarily rural area of central Pennsylvania. The locations of classes and tutoring sessions changed often to meet the needs of the community. Adult education staff met as a large group quarterly to discuss which educational functioning levels, subject areas, and CCRS standards would be addressed by teachers at specific locations. Labor market needs also were discussed to determine if bridge classes represented a good option or if specialized classes were needed.

Some classes focused more on workforce preparation than others. Prior to enrollment, all learners attended a group orientation and completed one-on-one interviews to help them figure out which classes would best meet their needs. In addition, staff shared monthly class schedules with workforce system and community-based organization partners and, when appropriate, held combined program orientations.

Jacqueline Allen, an adult education instructor, taught classes at the Community Education Center. The center was easily accessible by bus or foot for many low-income families. Jacqueline taught a mathematics class focused on levels C and D, which included adult learners preparing for the GED® or HiSet® examinations and learners working to improve their mathematics skills to enter postsecondary education or training. The class met four mornings weekly. Jacqueline taught a reading and language arts class directed to individuals across various NRS levels. Individuals who attended this class were preparing for a high school equivalency examination, to enter postsecondary education or training, to directly enter the workforce, or to improve their English language proficiency.

The Best Practices in Action

1. **Contextualize instruction based on student career goals and local labor market needs.** Learners completed various self-assessments, such as those found in the *Integrating Career Awareness Into the ABE and ESOL Classroom Curriculum Guide*, <https://www.sabes.org/content/integrating-career-awareness-abe-esol-classroom-ica>, to build self-awareness of the skills they had acquired through past experiences—both personal and work. Learners completed the O*NET Interest Profiler, and the instructor reviewed the results of the completed inventories and the Holland Code alignment to occupations. Learners chose two occupations to explore based on the results of the O*NET Interest Profiler, local labor market needs, the length of training to which they were willing to commit, and their financial needs. The teacher explained to learners what basic skills they would be practicing while comparing and contrasting two occupations. Learners had access to career pathway maps that showed job progressions with wages and responsibilities that they could incorporate into their compare-and-contrast analysis of the occupations. The teacher provided learners with a Venn diagram to organize information and modeled completion of the diagram before asking the learners to research their chosen occupations. Learners were encouraged to use onetonline.org and career videos and to interview people currently in their chosen occupations to gather relevant information.

After learners completed their assignments, they were instructed to use questioning skills and analyzing information skills while sharing their results with classmates. The teacher modeled questions for students to consider asking classmates when they shared their assignments. Sharing the occupations they were considering helped the learners to connect with others who had similar Holland Codes or were interested in further education or training. After students shared in pairs, the teacher modeled to the large group how to write SMART goals and create action steps. Learners created at least two SMART goals related to one or both of their chosen occupations.

The teacher reviewed learners' occupation choices, the results of their self-assessments, and their SMART goals and action steps. In addition, the teacher met individually with each learner and used motivational interviewing techniques to help the learner finalize action steps and determine the support needed to be successful. She then found opportunities to provide contextualized instruction and work-based projects and verbally told learners when



and how certain learning activities aligned with their personal goals. Learners were provided with an assembly-line activity that included asking clarifying question and using questioning techniques when deciding which techniques they would use in the assembly line. The teacher focused on addressing CCR standards; informed learners that they would revisit the self-assessments, inventories, goals, and plans as they developed their basic skills to determine if their needs or aims had changed; and provided learners with timely and appropriate referrals to support services. This activity provided opportunities for students to practice **communication, processing and analyzing information, and self-awareness skills**.

2. **Manage the classroom like a workplace and fully integrate workforce preparation skills with basic skills instruction.** As in many workplaces, learners received an orientation before they started attending class, and they were told how to inform staff of absences, late arrivals, and early dismissals. The attendance policy and possible consequences of violating it also were reviewed during the orientation. All class sites had designated smoking and parking areas. Learners had to sign in and out and write down the exact times they arrived and left class each day. A space outside the classroom was designated as a break room where learners could gather until the classroom was unlocked, have snacks or drinks during break times, and eat lunch. The area and its purpose were very similar to many workplace break rooms and provided space for signs and information boards, a microwave oven, vending machines, and other amenities.

Learners were expected to meet with the teacher or support staff outside of instructional time at least once monthly to review goals and supportive services. Several times each year, with help from the teacher, learners organized potluck lunches; they developed sign-up sheets, broke activities and responsibilities into categories, provided diverse lunch menus, and discussed the costs of lunch items. The teacher provided opportunities to complete some assignments in groups and guided learners in group work expectations. When the teacher proposed changes to classroom structures or routines, large-group discussions were conducted, and learners were given opportunities to state why they agreed or disagreed with the changes. For example, some learners wanted all cellphones to be turned off during class, while others used their cellphones and apps to help them learn and complete assignments. The entire class had to work through these changes, agree on solutions that were best for the group as a whole, and consider how their decisions mirrored workplace guidelines related to cellphone use and other issues. Students were expected to check their e-mail at least once weekly and to submit some assignments to the teacher as e-mail attachments. In this way, the teacher promoted **self-awareness, interpersonal, and critical thinking skills**.



3. **Work collaboratively with program and partner staff to provide supportive services that align with students' goals.** These classes were provided in the one-stop, so the teacher had direct contact on a daily basis with core WIOA partners and other programs that interacted with the one-stop. By working closely with other teachers and partner staff, including WIOA partners, TANF, and community-based organizations, the teacher was able to provide a variety of supportive services and work with learners to locate and use resources to promote and enhance their learning.
- a. *Supportive services to promote learning.* The teacher helped learners access other programs that addressed basic learning needs, recognizing that if their basic needs were met, they would be better able to regularly attend class, focus, and learn. Supportive services included housing, utility support, transportation, food, clothing, mental health support, counseling, career preparation services (e.g., preparation of résumés and cover letters and assistance with interview clothing, haircuts, steel-toed boots, or scrubs), help with obtaining photo identification, legal assistance, and financial assistance for testing and other work-related needs.
 - b. *Supportive services to enhance learning.* Guest speakers from local employers and higher education institutions were invited to the classroom. Learners gathered information and developed questions prior to guest speaker presentations. Following these events, the teacher facilitated large-group discussions to help learners process the information they received and to determine if further exploration of occupations, higher education, financial aid, and other issues was needed.

These are examples of supports we give learners so that they can engage in effective **communication, navigating systems, and communication skills.**

Reflection Questions

1. How can the teacher promote the transfer of the **Skills That Matter** (communication, processing and analyzing information, navigating systems, and interpersonal skills) into other areas of students' lives?
2. What additional activities or classroom structures can be incorporated into the classroom environment so that it more fully resembles a workplace? Which **Skills That Matter** are highlighted, and how will the transferability of those skills be addressed?
3. This teacher emphasized the importance of including partners in planning and instruction. What partners do you have who enhance your instruction and can provide additional context for teaching the **Skills That Matter**?

