



Serving Customers with Low Basic Skills

By definition, the Welfare-to-Work (WtW) grant program focuses attention and resources on helping individuals who face multiple challenges to employment. This issue and the next of *Ideas that Work* will examine options for addressing different kinds of work barriers.

Building Skills While Emphasizing Work

In today's workplace, few jobs are available for those with low basic skills. A recent study of employers in four large cities estimated that 90% of all jobs require reading, writing, arithmetic, or use of computers. Only 4% require no high school diploma, occupational training, experience or references.¹ Yet in 1991, almost two-thirds of welfare recipients age 26-33 scored in the bottom quartile of the Armed Forces Qualifying Test, an indication of very low basic skills.²

Before the 1996 welfare reform law, employment strategies for low-skill welfare recipients emphasized classroom Adult Basic Education and GED attainment. Welfare reform and its imposition of time limits shifted the focus to "labor force attachment" through job search and other "quick employment" methods.

Recent research has shown the shortcomings of operating at either extreme of the continuum between basic education and quick employment. People with GEDs have not consistently outperformed other high school dropouts in the labor market.³ Many clients in traditional adult education classes, e.g., reading and math, have poor motivation, poor attendance, and low success.⁴ Job-search-

only programs produced only minor, short-lived earnings gains; they helped participants work more but did not lead to better jobs.⁵

These findings highlight the need for more flexible WtW approaches that balance quick employment and skill development by integrating job search, education, job training, and work. This issue presents principles and examples of three such approaches.

Incremental Approach: Project Match and Pathways

Project Match has developed a non-traditional, developmental WtW model for serving extremely disadvantaged customers through a long-term, highly flexible, individualized approach. Project Match began in 1985 as a small, voluntary, community-based program in Chicago's Cabrini-Green public housing project. It has since been adapted for use elsewhere, including at Head Start in Baltimore, in a Chicago welfare office, and at six sites in five states where it is called Pathways.

The Project Match/Pathways approach is guided by four principles: (1) There must be an appropriate starting point for each participant, from one who is already working to the least-job ready. (2) Each participant can take a different route to self-sufficiency; she must be given choices and flexibility. (3) Failure and setbacks should be treated as opportunities to learn; participants in the workforce will continue to need help with retention, reemployment, and advancement. (4) Progress should be established via realistic, incremental benchmarks.

Project Match/Pathways uses an Incremental Ladder to Economic Independence to illustrate and explain its approach to staff and policymakers. The Ladder establishes discrete benchmarks to measure progress and arranges activities so that they are progressively more demanding. The "upper rungs" include paid employment. The "middle

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rungs” include education and training activities. The “lower rungs” include activities not traditionally viewed as work related: involvement with children (e.g., taking children to extracurricular activities and medical appointments, attending a mother/child class); volunteering (e.g., in day care, school, church, or neighborhood/tenant groups); and self-improvement (e.g., counseling, treatment, or support groups).

A five-year, in-house study of 470 participants from Cabrini-Green⁶ found that an increasing percentage of participants worked in all 12 months of the year, from 26% in Year 1 to 54% in Year 5. The study concludes, “Although the process is gradual, over time many Project Match participants do become steady workers.”

Project Match has developed a set of concrete tools and protocols for purchase (with training) and replication by government agencies. These include a monthly activity diary, a computerized tracking system, a set of

A customer’s family involvement, e.g., volunteering at her child’s school, can be a stepping stone to work activities.

rules and procedures, and a monthly group meeting.

Contact Toby Herr, (312) 755-2250, x 2296.

Literacy-Based Job Training: Brooklyn College Child Care Provider Program⁷

Brooklyn College, a City University of New York campus, operates a literacy-based training program that prepares about 150 welfare recipients per year for employment in child care. The average student enters with a 4th or 5th grade reading level. In order to be accepted into the program, applicants must pass tuberculosis screening and background checks for child abuse and criminal convictions.

This four-month program is structured to accommodate the different learning styles of adult students, particularly those who were inadequately served by “traditional” education. The classroom component is team-taught by instructors with adult literacy and early childhood expertise. Its curriculum and assignments are tied closely to the work context, e.g., creating a two-week menu plan within a given budget to apply math and nutrition concepts. The program alternates weekly between classroom instruction and work site internship experi-

Serving Customers with Learning Disabilities⁹

Learning disabilities (LDs) are a hidden cause of many WtW customers’ skill deficits. An estimated one-third of welfare recipients has LDs. Most have never been formally assessed, and many welfare, adult education and literacy programs are ill-equipped to meet their particular needs.

A March 1998 Executive Order from President Clinton clarifies that programs working with welfare recipients must incorporate “reasonable accommodations” for disabilities, including LDs, into their education, training, and employment activities. Accommodations do not require educators, testers, or employers to lower standards for the disabled person. To be covered by civil rights protections such as the Americans

with Disabilities Act (ADA), the disability must be diagnosed through a certified procedure.

Examples of LD accommodations include presenting course material in formats other than classroom lectures or textbooks; giving tests or job instructions orally rather than in writing; allowing more time for test taking, and giving tests in isolation to reduce distractions. Tailoring job placement efforts around individual customers’ strengths and weaknesses will minimize the effort required to accommodate disabilities. WtW programs and customers should also know how to address employers’ misperceptions and concerns about LDs and direct them to resources to aid workplace accommodation.

ences. The College chooses its work sites based on how well they model appropriate and professional child care practices for students. There are weekly group discussions about students' internship experiences.

Each student chooses whether to pursue employment in center-based or home-based child care. Students who wish to pursue self-employment as home-based child care providers apply for certification during or after the program. Their internships are supplemented by visits to program graduates' home-based child care businesses.

Many graduates are offered paid positions at their former internship sites. The program's overall job placement rate is 88%. Its cost of \$4,711 per job placement is funded entirely by the New York State Education Department.

Contact Cheryl Harewood, (718) 722-3462.

Supported Work: Kandu Industries

The "supported work" training model teaches appropriate work behaviors and job skills through specially designed, closely supervised work assignments. As participants progress, these programs gradually increase performance and productivity standards and withdraw counseling and other supports to better resemble a regular job. The programs then help their graduates find unsubsidized private-sector jobs.

The largest evaluation of this model was the 13-city National Supported Work Demonstration in the late 1970s. Three years after entering supported work programs, participants were 10% less likely to be receiving AFDC than control group members and earned an average of 23% more. Although supported work cost over \$20,000 per person, it saved more in welfare payments than it cost the taxpayers.⁸

Kandu Industries in Ottawa County, Michigan currently applies the supported work model at a manageable cost. This private not-for-profit corporation provides vocational training and placement services for people with disabilities or other barriers to employment, such as limited English skills. In its WtW program, funded by a contract with *Michigan Works!*, supported work augments "quick employment" activities.

New participants begin in the Job Club, where they prepare resumes, conduct practice interviews, review and respond to job openings and advertisements, and work with job developers who know the local employers. Staff members assess their potential barriers to employment and refer them to other community agencies as needed. Most participants are placed into jobs quickly; 65–70%

find employment within two weeks.

Participants who have not found jobs within two weeks enter Kandu Industries' Work Center to do packaging, assembly, and light manufacturing work for 25 hours per week at minimum wage. While continuing their job search efforts, they practice basic work skills such as being on time, dressing appropriately, and getting along with co-workers and supervisors. On average, TANF referrals spend about six weeks in the Work Center. Approximately 70–80% obtain jobs after this training and work experience.

Kandu Industries also helps workers who wish to change or upgrade their positions. Participants who lose or quit their jobs continue receiving follow-up services until they attain self-sufficiency and their TANF cases are closed.

This shorter, targeted version of supported work may gain importance as a model for providing limited training and work experience for welfare recipients who have usually been exempted from past mandates.

See <http://www.kandu.org> or contact Peg Beall, Director of Services, (616) 396-3585.

NOTES

- ¹ Harry Holzer. *What Employers Want: Job Prospects for Less-Educated Workers*. Russell Sage Fdn, 1996. See http://www.russellsage.org/publications/titles/what_employers.htm or call 1-800-666-2211 to order (\$32.50, ISDN #0871543915).
- ² Krista Olson & LaDonna Pavetti. *Personal and Family Challenges to the Successful Transition from Welfare to Work*. Urban Institute, Feb. 1997, <http://www.urban.org/welfare/report1.htm>.
- ³ Richard J. Murnane, et. al, "Do High School Dropouts Benefit from Obtaining a GED?" *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Summer 1995): 133-47.
- ⁴ Edward Pauly. *The JOBS Evaluation: Adult Education for People on AFDC—A Synthesis of Research*. U.S. Dept of Health & Human Services, OASPE, 1995, pp. 61-65.
- ⁵ Julie Strawn. *Beyond Job Search or Basic Education: Rethinking the Role of Skills in Welfare Reform*. Ctr for Law & Social Policy, April 1998, p. iii. <http://www.clasp.org/pubs/jobseducation/beyond.pdf> or (202) 328-5140.
- ⁶ Toby Herr, et. al, *Making the Shoe Fit: Creating a Work-Prep System for a Large and Diverse Welfare Population*. U.S. Dept of Housing & Urban Development, Dec. 1996. See <http://www.spc.uchicago.edu/~spcwehnu/projects/public.html>.
- ⁷ *What Works: Integrating Basic Skills into Welfare-to-Work* by Garrett Murphy & Alice Johnson, Nat'l Inst for Literacy, Sept. 1998. <http://www.nifl.gov/whatworks.htm> or 1-800-228-8813.
- ⁸ Dan Bloom, *After AFDC: Welfare-to-Work Choices and Challenges for States*. MDRC, 1997, p. 70. See <http://www.mdrc.org/Reports/After%20AFDC/After%20AFDC.htm> or call (212) 532-3200 to order (\$10).
- ⁹ Sources: "Learning Disabilities and Welfare-to-Work" (Policy Update), Nat'l Inst. for Literacy, Aug. 10, 1998, <http://www.nifl.gov/policy/98-8-11.htm>; *Serving Welfare Recipients with Learning Disabilities in a "Work First" Environment* by Rebecca Brown & Evelyn Ganzglass, Nat'l Governors' Assn, 7-28-1998, <http://www.nga.org/Pubs/IssueBriefs/1998/980728Learning.asp>.

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For More Information

- Other “Innovative Practices” in combining skill development with work are listed in the March 1998 Welfare Information Network *Issue Notes*, “Education and Training Under Welfare Reform.” See <http://www.welfareinfo.org/edissue.htm> or call (202) 628-5790.
- Read “Work-site Accommodations to Consider for People with Learning Disabilities and/or Attention Deficit Disorder” by the Job Accommodation Network (JAN) at <http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/english/pubs/OtherPubs/LD.html>. Call JAN at 1-800-526-7234 regarding job accommodation or 1-800-ADA-WORK (232-9675) regarding ADA compliance, or e-mail jan@jan.icdi.wvu.edu.

About *Ideas That Work*

Ideas that Work is a series of issue briefs designed to provide practical and innovative technical assistance to the local practitioners who are implementing the U.S. Department of Labor’s Welfare-to-Work grants.

The ideas presented in this series are intended to spark innovation and to encourage peer networking. Replicability may depend on individual state and local guidelines. Any activities carried out by a State or local Welfare-to-Work program, using WtW grant funds, must also comply with the Federal WtW law and regulations.

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