

Lessons Learned: Montana's LD Initiative

By Becky Bird, State Director Adult Basic and Literacy Education; NAASLN Board Member; and Executive Committee Member of the NAEPDC

The Changing Landscape

In the fall of 1998, I started as Montana's state director of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE). Right off the bat I was approached by local program staff concerned about the new kind of adult education student they were seeing in their programs. This new student was more challenging, encountered more barriers, and was suspect of being learning disabled. As a newcomer, I was very interested in the perspectives of local teachers and administrators about what they saw as needs and challenges. I was also intrigued by the notion that if adult education was in fact serving more special needs adults, how was that going to be managed and were we equipped to do the job?

Not only was the federal funding for adult education now a part of the Workforce Investment Act, but welfare reform was taking shape and taking prisoners. Individuals were seeking out services or being referred to adult education that had not been traditionally active in programs in large part before. And if they had been part of adult education programs in the past they were not as readily identified as recipients of other social services. The open-entry, open-exit nature of traditional ABLE programs was not as focused on or required to know where students were coming from and why.

The field was genuinely concerned about how to offer services to students whose ability to learn seemed to be in some way compromised. Another concern was if a learning barrier was identified, especially one indicating a potential learning disability, how would that be handled with such limited resources and expertise? There was tremendous conflict over the need to know and the responsibility to follow through. Money, time, liability issues, and other significant questions entered the conversation. It was overwhelming and needed to be addressed.

Diving in Head First

In the early winter of 1999, Montana sent a team of six to the Bridges to Practice training in Washington D.C., and so began the Montana ABLE LD Initiative. The following spring, Margaret Girkins, Director of the Adult Learning Center at Flathead Valley Community College in Kalispell introduced me to *PowerPath*. Margaret's belief was that the combination of *Bridges to Practice* and *PowerPath* seemed to provide the complete package for next steps for the initiative.

In the summer of 2000, Montana's LD Initiative began with a small cohort of interested programs. Bridges to Practice was the foundation for research and information and *PowerPath* was the tool for screening for learning differences. The approach was not to label students learning disabled (legally not possible without formal diagnosis), but to focus on improving instruction.

During the Montana legislative session of 2001, the state ABLE program was appropriated \$320,000 from the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families Program (TANF). The charge was to go full scale with the LD Initiative with an emphasis on

service to TANF recipients. Since that time the state has invested heavily in time, resources, training and developing leadership in an effort to provide long term support for maintenance and technical assistance to the system.

The state's ABLE LD Initiative went full scale in 2003. A sequential series of training was provided to staff from each of Montana's 23 adult learning sites. Training and the required materials was also offered to each of Montana's seven Tribal Colleges. For the next two years the goal was to have a trained and certified *PowerPath* screener in each program, and each program invested in embracing a different approach to teaching students with learning differences, learning difficulties, and perhaps, learning disabilities.

It has been as challenge. From a leadership perspective it was the absolute right thing to do, though it has not been easy in terms of ongoing availability of resources, infrastructure and the very slow pace at which change occurs. The same holds true times ten for local program providers.

Lessons Learned

Having vision is not quite enough. The vision needs to be supported by a plan and frequently articulated. There is no room for assumption.

Commitment comes with a price tag. The ongoing resources needed to provide regular training, technical assistance and ongoing support needs to be thoughtfully considered. The original plan may change several times dependant on the stability of resources and infrastructure. Note the plan may change, that doesn't mean fail.

Stay focused. It's very easy to get distracted by the possibilities and quickly get sidetracked from the goal. Keep your eye on the goals that lay the foundation. Without the foundation, the extras become irrelevant.

Identify and nurture your champions. The key to Montana's success with the LD Initiative was in the identification of local staff early on as showing the interest and enthusiasm to commit to the principles and the process. The power of peer influence should never be overlooked or underestimated, and is the heartbeat of the Montana Coaches Network. The Montana Coaches network provides support, technical assistance and training to peer programs and others interested in using *PowerPath* to improve instruction and service to adults with special learning needs.

Change is ongoing. Implementing changes takes time, repetition and consistency. It requires flexibility in thought and action. Persistence is paramount. There are times when blowing it off would have been easy. But, the goal to improve service to the special needs population is unquestionable. Turning a blind would be unprofessional, unethical and fraught with moral implication.

Patience is your best ally. The only thing you might control is the process. You will

never have carte blanche with people, places and things that seemingly get in the way of progress.

Celebrate your successes. Small steps toward improving services to adults with special learning needs are to be commended. The effort required to make small changes is immense, don't take it for granted.

Reflection

Would I do it again? You bet! Would I do it differently? Maybe, maybe not. In Montana we are trying, and trying very hard to address the special learning needs of adults in our programs. As one of Montana's former program directors indicated during a statewide conference call almost three years ago, we may not be meeting all of the needs of our students, or employing all of the strategies recommended for improving instruction. But, if we can find just one thing that makes a difference, that's more than we were doing before.

That perspective will stay with me forever.

If you would like more information about the Montana ABLE LD Initiative you can contact Becky Bird at the Montana Office of Public Instruction, 406-444-4443, or via email at bbird@mt.gov.