

Guidelines for Working with Students with Special Learning Needs — Solving the Dilemma of Working with Students with Special Learning Needs in Illinois Adult Education Programs

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The dilemma of effectively addressing the ever-increasing population of students with special learning needs is one that has touched adult education programs in Illinois as well as in the entire country. In Illinois, instructors from various programs throughout the state expressed concerns about students with learning difficulties in their classrooms and also their ability, or lack thereof, to address the diverse needs of these students. Instructors indicated their need for staff development that would not only give them insight into the characteristics and special needs of these students, but also provide instructional strategies they could use in the classroom. They also saw a need to assess strengths and weaknesses, and help students use this knowledge to be successful in the classroom as well as in all aspects of life.

Thanks to the Institute to Credential Special Learning Needs Resource Specialists (ICSLNRS), Illinois now has a working means to solve the dilemma of working with students with special learning needs.

In 1998, when Adult Education in Illinois was under the direction of the State Board of Education, it recognized the need for long-term training. Although it would take time to get the state and programs aligned with the needs of adults with special learning needs, it was apparent that the number of adults with learning difficulties was increasing. The state board, along with adult education director Dan Miller, targeted “training in the trenches” as an immediate need for teachers of adult education programs. The state chose ICSLNRS with Neil Sturomski and Nancie Payne, due to both its content and its delivery method of train-the-trainer, which works to the advantage of the state’s vast geography and ensures its continuation.

In the interest of promoting learner success, instructors now study characteristics that might be present in adults with special learning needs. They have tools that can be used to assist in developing a rapport with all students, including the administration of learning styles checklists to determine appropriate teaching strategies, and other effective instructional tools that have been research proven. Instructors learn to use the Payne Learning Needs Inventory to further ascertain students’ strengths and weaknesses, as reported by the learner.

ICSLNRS is a year-long training in which participants meet four times, for a total of 13 days. After each of the sessions, participants return to their students to practice what they have learned. Trainees then receive feedback and guidance. Before receiving a credential as a Special Learning Needs Resource Specialist, all participants must demonstrate their knowledge and grasp of each of the areas covered in the Institute.

It is especially noted in the training that instructors may not, in any case, diagnose an individual with a learning disability. Instead, they work with the student as an equal partner and co-investigator, finding strategies that will be effective for the learner, giving explicit instruction, and assisting with external to rule out other possible causes of learning difficulties.

Payne's Washington State Screening Tool is used to determine if students should be referred for further examination, such as vision or auditory screenings, or any medical conditions that might have an impact on learning. Within the Institute, participants learn the importance of both vision and auditory issues. Each participant develops a resource and referral list specific to their own area of the state that includes developmental optometrists and audiologists, as well as other professionals. This serves as an immediate quick-list of services for students who need specific help.

When the first ICSLNRS convened in 1998, 49 adult education instructors participated. Following a successful year, the state decided to work again with Sturomski and Payne to provide training to additional instructors. Fifty instructors were credentialed and six trainers from the Illinois Service Center Network were trained as trainers of the institute. Each of the Service Center Network staff conducted an institute within their own regions as part of this training, enabling 21 adult education instructors to participate. Since 2000, when Illinois Adult Education and Family Literacy came under the Illinois Community College Board and the direction of Jennifer Foster, the state has boosted its special learning needs assets to include nine trainers and 346 resource specialists.

In 2003, Illinois participated in the LD Summit held by OVAE, where Sturomski served as the LD consultant. Following this summit and a visit by the federal government, the LD Guidelines were updated and the decision was made to continue building our current path using the Payne Learning Needs Inventory and the Resource Specialist Institute. A new addition has been to offer previously credentialed instructors the opportunity to participate in a Woodcock-Johnson III, Tests of Achievement training, in order to facilitate the documentation of previously diagnosed students who needed accommodations on the GED. Resource specialists also have been offered an opportunity for additional training in Irlen Syndrome, Wilson Reading Program, and other topics pertaining to adults with special learning needs.

In 2006, all adult education programs in the state received the updated LD Guidelines to promote compliance to federal regulations. All state administrators were trained to include the rights and responsibilities of both students and adult education programs under the ADA. Each program selected an ADA coordinator and a training for the coordinators will be held in 2007, each receiving an ADA coordinator manual to facilitate compliance. The State of Illinois has and continues to keep updated in LD issues, research and trends, as well as maintain communication with Sturomski and Payne.

Thus, Illinois developed its first guidelines for working with students with special learning needs. Having been afforded the opportunity to break from conventional adult-to-adult, instructor-to-learner interaction patterns, instructors have been able to address diverse learner levels and needs in the same classroom. This is accomplished by engaging adult learners without treating them like children. They become active co-investigators and equal partners in their own learning.

Although it has taken 9 years to develop and implement our current Guidelines for Working with Students with Special Learning Needs for Illinois Adult Education and Family Literacy, we are proud of the progress in training instructors and improving instruction for our students. This simultaneous growth at the local and state levels has been the key to success. Through it all, the ones who have benefited the most are the adult education students with special learning needs in the State of Illinois.

For more information about this program go to: <http://excellenceinadulthood.com>