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The basic skills requirements of the workplace are increasing; at the same time, women are entering the work force in larger numbers. Women's success in the labor force and their economic self-sufficiency depend upon both literacy improvement and employability training. This ERIC Digest, based on publications of Wider Opportunities for Women (WOW), portrays the extent of the problem of illiteracy among women, looks at the changing work force and its literacy needs, and describes a program model developed by WOW to address this issue.

THE LITERACY SITUATION FOR WOMEN

o An estimated 23 million adults in the United States lack basic literacy skills. o An estimated 23 percent of all adult females have severely limited literacy skills (compared to 17 percent of all males). o Seventy-five percent of female heads of households with less than a high school diploma are living in poverty. o Young women with below average skills and below poverty incomes are five and one-half times more likely to become teen parents. o Nearly 40 percent of female single parents and 35 percent of displaced homemakers have an eighth-grade education or less. o Literacy levels of children are strongly linked to those of their parents. o The greatest predictor of a child's future academic success is the literacy of the child's mother. o As the numbers of families headed by low-literate women increase, the cycle of illiteracy is perpetuated.

THE CHANGING WORK FORCE

o By 2000, 80 percent of women aged 25-54 will be in the work force. Women will comprise 47 percent of the paid labor force. Two out of three new entrants to the labor force will be women. o Minority women's labor force participation will increase--Hispanics by 85 percent and Blacks by 16 percent. o At least two-thirds of all women with children under 18 will be in the labor force. o One in eight women workers has less than a high school education--including one in two single mothers, 56 percent of displaced homemakers, one in three Hispanic women workers, and one in five Black women workers. o Almost all of the jobs created by the year 2000 will be in the service sector.

LITERACY NEEDS OF THE WORK FORCE

o A majority of all new jobs will require education or training beyond high school. o Only 27 percent of all new jobs will be low skilled. o People with less than a high school education will be able to fill only 14 percent of all jobs. o More jobs will require basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics; higher order critical thinking skills; analytical and problem-solving skills; listening, speaking, and other communication skills; basic computer skills; and teamwork skills. (Imel 1989; Watson 1989; WOMEN, WORK AND LITERACY 1988)

COMBINING LITERACY AND EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

The picture painted by these statistics--of the numbers of women (especially single mothers) with low literacy levels, of the increased labor force participation of women, and of the greater literacy needs of jobs--makes the case for the inclusion of a literacy component in employment programs for women. Linking literacy education to employment and training programs can be a significant factor in improving a woman's

basic skills and laying a stronger foundation for increasing her employability. Such programs should strive to be: (1) comprehensive--meeting the specific needs of low-income and single mothers; (2) learner-centered--recognizing individual abilities, experiences, interests, and goals; (3) flexible; (4) standards-based; and (5) policy-linked--incorporating advocacy activities for public policy issues that will help shape literacy services.
Wider Opportunities for Women, an organization that seeks to expand employment opportunities for women through training, placement, and advocacy, developed a program model (Beck 1988; Hirschoff 1988) based on case studies of five literacy programs that focus on the needs of low-income single mothers. (Most of the model can also be used with low-literate women who are not mothers.)

The model attempts to attack the many internal and external barriers faced by women in need of both literacy and job training. Among the internal barriers are (1) low self-esteem, including past unhappy encounters with schooling, lack of family support for education, and lack of positive role models; (2) self-doubt about one's ability to learn, perhaps exacerbated by actual learning disabilities such as dyslexia; (3) powerlessness, including denial of existing barriers and inability to cope with institutions affecting one's life; and (4) guilt about taking time from their families for self-improvement.

External barriers may include: (1) environmental instability (housing problems, domestic and community violence, health and financial difficulties); (2) need for support services such as child care, transportation, emergency funds, or personal counseling; (3) inaccessible or inappropriate services--due to location, schedule, enrollment requirements, inflexible testing methods, or cost; and (4) failure to set realistic goals.

THE PROGRAM MODEL

The steps of the model (assessing, shaping the program, getting started, delivering services, measuring impact, and advocating public policy changes) are influenced by research showing that the comprehensive needs of the woman and her family must be addressed in order to have success in both literacy and employment readiness. Assessment of current programs and the community environment is necessary to define the population to be served, determine available resources, avoid possible duplication, and begin building a referral network for the comprehensive services clients will need. Potential sources of funding for literacy/job training should be identified (for example, the Adult Education Act, the Perkins Vocational Education Act, and the Job Training Partnership Act).

Shaping the program includes (1) setting standards to guide activities and measure impact (especially important is defining literacy and integrating the notion of literacy as a critical part of employment training into the program); (2) defining the client population; and (3) establishing a budget.

When getting started, recruitment, intake, and assessment are the important first contacts women will have with the program. Community-based recruitment is recommended, using a wide variety of strategies that stress the messages that training can lead to a better job and economic future and that a mother's literacy improvement can help her children's achievements. Intake--determining if the program is right for the woman and vice versa--and assessment to determine placement within the program should be sensitive to past educational experiences and test anxiety. Clients should be assisted in setting realistic short- and long-term goals.

In delivering services, there are several considerations. Program design should be learner-centered and reinforce self-concept. Staff roles include literacy instructors, counselors, recruiters, employment specialists, and child care specialists. Support services should either be provided by the program or through referral to another agency. Evaluation through testing and staff and student input should aim at overcoming test anxiety while recognizing the existence of testing in employment situations. Rewards for student progress should be noncompetitive and nonhierarchical.

Content of a model program includes literacy components (individualized remediation plans, small groups, incremental goals, job-related reading, student-created materials, computer familiarity), employability components (job readiness, nontraditional skills training, job skills training, internships, on-the-job training, job search methods, job placement), and life skills components (program solving, decision making, and goal setting; personal and career counseling; support services).

Measuring program impact can be accomplished using standardized methods such as achievement test scores, job placement, and high school equivalency completion as well as nonstandardized methods such as participant questionnaires, focus groups, or exit interviews.

Another way to attack barriers is by advocating changes in public policy such as:

o Increased federal funds for literacy and basic skills initiatives

o Special efforts to ensure that women are equitably served in publicly funded programs

o Improved coordination among public systems of literacy service provision

o Expanded joint remedial programs for parents and children

o Authorized federal and state funds for the provision of support services

o Increased flexibility in eligibility criteria for service deliverers

o Provision of opportunities for welfare recipients to receive educational services in addition to employment and training activities

o Increased funding for research and demonstration projects in literacy instructional method.

Beck (1988) and Hirschoff (1988) address some additional issues related to program development that particularly affect women. For example:

o Funding sources such as the Job Training Partnership Act and the Perkins Act authorize literacy education for those receiving vocational training. However, their definitions of program completion or success (e.g., job placement) may be premature for women who may need further education and training.

o Some women in the target population will be uncomfortable in formal schooling and testing situations. Standardized tests often contain sex, class, and race bias.

o Instructional materials should recognize cultural differences, be sex fair, and take women's daily experiences into account.

o Flexible approaches to absenteeism are needed due to the barriers that may hinder women's participation.

o Differences between teaching adults and teaching younger students should be recognized.

Low-income single mothers and other low-literate women face problems so overwhelming that they usually cannot focus on literacy as an isolated goal. Therefore, literacy must be one component of a comprehensive strategy that provides support services and employment training as well--all of which are necessary to enable these women to break the cycles of poverty and illiteracy.

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