

Reinventing a Basic Literacy Program

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Abstract

At Literacy NJ, the decline in our basic literacy services has caused us to reevaluate and reinvent our program. The cornerstone of our new plan is to offer an 8-week vestibule program called Steps to Success for new basic literacy students, focused on goal setting, crucial digital skills, and the development of independent learning strategies. We intend to implement Steps to Success statewide as a way to rebuild our capacity to serve basic literacy students. Ultimately, we believe this will allow us to serve many more students and increase their retention in the program by improving their learning experience.

Keywords: basic literacy, adult basic education, tutor training

Literacy NJ is a statewide network of volunteer-based adult literacy programs. Most serve a combination of ESOL, basic literacy, and high school equivalency students. We are the statewide organization within this network and provide direct service in 12 of New Jersey's 21 counties as well as partnering with affiliate programs throughout the others. We consider basic literacy students to be those whose primary goals are to improve their reading and writing and who are not ready to prepare for a high school diploma or who may already have one. Originally formed in 1979 with a mission specifically to serve these students and with a current student prioritization policy that brings them to the top of our waiting lists, our organization has nonetheless found itself in recent years with a diminished capacity to do this work.

The decline in basic literacy students happened gradually over many years and mirrors the national trend of decreased participation in federally funded adult literacy, particularly in the adult basic education student population (Pickard, 2022). For over 10 years leading up to the pandemic, basic literacy instruction had been a small percentage of our total statewide student population, typically between 20-25%. Our number of basic literacy students declined even more significantly between 2017 and 2019, by then accounting for only about 14% of our statewide services. After the pandemic

began, and services temporarily became virtual, all of our student numbers declined, but whereas our ESOL student numbers shrunk by 25%, we lost almost 50% of our already small basic literacy student population.

Challenge

Our volunteer-based programs are well-suited to help basic literacy students succeed. Like many volunteer-based programs, we have flexible schedules, small group sizes, and use student goals to inform instruction. In most communities there are no other programs to which we can refer basic literacy students, and we are typically the referral destination for our partner agencies. Because our basic literacy student population has decreased, however, we have had a smaller corps of tutors trained to help them, and therefore fewer spaces available for new basic literacy students. As this trend continued, we trained fewer basic literacy tutors, and eventually incorporated fewer basic literacy tutoring strategies in our training for new volunteers.

This downward cycle gained momentum in a funding climate that increasingly creates pressure to produce short-term student gains and places a high value on standardized test scores and employment-related

outcomes. By focusing our efforts on the short-term outcomes required to maintain funding, we became less adept at serving students who both need the most time in the program and face the greatest external barriers to participation. We were training fewer tutors to do this work and becoming an organization less and less prepared to do it well.

Although our diminished capacity may be related to national trends of declining enrollment, we still see a greater need than we are able to meet, a condition pervasive throughout the nation and linked to each state's investment in adult literacy (Waldman et al., 2022). New Jersey's system consists largely of WIOA Title II programs. Our most recent investigation into the need for services found that our system may be serving as few as 3% of those in need (Jacobson, 2013). While this data is now out of date, there is no evidence that there has been any further investment since, nor has there been further inquiry into the problem. Steps to Success is part of a strategic effort to respond to both a funding climate that encourages programs to de-prioritize ABE students with low literacy levels and a system that lacks the capacity to offer adequate levels of service.

Steps to Success

In order to address the need, and position ourselves to welcome new basic literacy students, we had to rebuild our organization's expertise. We refocused our efforts on the needs of our basic literacy students by organizing the first eight weeks of tutoring into a discrete program. This organization of the curriculum allowed us to create a focused training session that prepares all new volunteers to offer it. As that corps of tutors grows, we will be able to conduct more outreach to basic literacy students.

Steps to Success is intended as a vestibule for new students. These first eight lessons give both tutors and students guidance as they establish a foundation for further teaching and learning. The lessons were created by our staff in Literacy NJ Burlington, one of our county-wide local programs. We have now adopted an organization-wide initiative to offer it in each of our local programs.

The curriculum gives basic literacy students strategies and techniques they can use independently and while working with a tutor. In Steps to Success, we have packaged these

strategies, many of which were already included in our tutor training and will be familiar to most in the field, into a cohesive curriculum. This allows us to provide clear direction to tutors and an additional focus on these strategies during tutor training. Tutors work with students to identify goals, establish daily reading habits, and assess digital resources. Each 2-hour lesson includes: reading, writing, and technology strategies; an exploration of online and community resources; and conferencing to reflect on which strategies and resources the student will adopt for use. The purpose of the lessons is to build confidence in students' ability to reach their learning goals by helping them to establish their priorities and create a realistic plan for their learning process.

The eight initial lessons are tailored to the specific students' skills and interests, but they provide clear guidance, even for a tutor or staff member new to this work. We recognize that there is no pre-service training given in a few hours that can make a volunteer an expert in all the varied needs of our learners, but these lessons give tutors, as well as students, a solid place to start. Because the curriculum engages students in an ongoing evaluation of resources and reflection of their goals, it leads them to readjust their strategies as they learn, and to be more cognizant of the learning strategies they will use. This helps to create a partnership between the tutor and the student in which they are more able and likely to share the responsibility for student achievement.

Supporting and retaining basic literacy tutors is key to our effort to rebuild our capacity to provide basic literacy services in two ways. The curriculum provides direction to new tutors, helping us grow the corps of tutors ready to work with basic literacy students. We believe that students who complete Steps to Success are also more likely to stay in the program, helping us to avoid losing tutors who may become frustrated and leave when students stop out. Because they are setting attainable expectations for themselves, and continuously evaluating those expectations, students are more likely to persist. It also allows students to experience success quickly as they experiment and add specific strategies to their personal toolbox, avoiding the discouragement that can come from tackling an overwhelming task such as learning to read or getting a high school diploma. Finally, it motivates students by encouraging them to make connections between what they are learning each week and their long-term goals.

To prepare tutors, we added a 2-hour session to our training course for new tutors. The training includes a review of reading, writing, and goal-setting activities, an overview of the eight Steps to Success lessons, and more in-depth practice with key instructional strategies, such as language experience approach. It also includes testimonials from students in the program that speak to the role these lessons played in their skills and their self-confidence.

Goal Setting

Steps to Success starts and ends with an in-depth goal-setting exercise using language experience approach, during which students' responses to questions about their short-term and long-term goals are recorded. This is coupled with a survey that helps students assess how literacy and digital skills are part of their everyday lives and how those skills are connected to their goals. Students set goals that range from the practical (e.g., "I just want to be able to read my own mail, fill out my own forms," "I want to get my GED," and "I wanted to write birthday cards to my kids") to goals that tell us about their needs for personal transformation, confidence, and independence. For example, during goal setting, students told us:

"My struggle is to be able to express myself and maybe say a speech. I feel that I don't speak well or with confidence." MM

"I want to be more sociable. I want to conquer my anxiety. I want to be able to have fun again, to see life for what it is and keep moving forward, keep being who I am, and helping as much as I can where I'm needed." RP

This initial goal setting is the core piece of the curriculum, providing the road map for both tutors and students. The lessons that follow are geared towards both specific literacy tasks students want to accomplish and building their independence as learners.

Reading and Writing

Students use recorded stories about their goals as material for building sight word knowledge and fluency. They read and write each week and practice strategies including modeled writing, text annotation, and various before/during/after reading comprehension strategies. Additionally, students read articles, discuss them, and answer comprehension questions.

Technology

Students also create email accounts, do internet searches, learn to use Microsoft Word, and how to type. They use these skills to accomplish learning activities during the lessons and for using online news sites and online software.

Resources

Accessing and exploring resources is an integral feature of the curriculum. Students visit the library to get library cards and to learn about other library services, including online software and the library's apps for downloading books, the events calendar, the adult literacy and high school equivalency materials, dictionaries, laptops, and the reference desk.

Study Skills

Students spend time developing a realistic plan for studying outside of tutoring sessions. Each lesson has homework, including keeping a reading log and using the online resources explored during the sessions.

During each lesson, students are asked to think about which resources are useful to them and whether their plan for studying outside of tutoring is realistic or needs to be revisited. They are encouraged to identify a support person who can help them stay on track with their learning plan.

Reflection

In each lesson, students reflect on their experience. They analyze which activities, learning strategies, and resources are helpful so they can adopt them to use independently and in further tutoring. They also reflect on their goals and learning progress. Because they are revisiting their goals and evaluating their progress along the way, we can see how what they are learning is influencing their experiences outside the classroom. Our students have said:

"The help my tutor gives, like how to sound out words, has really helped me read more. Now I can write paragraphs. I'm more motivated and not shy or scared of the world but I can understand it better." RP

"Finally, every night I read to my grandbaby. That makes me feel so good. My daughter was surprised when I started reading to my granddaughter. She said, 'You never read to us when we were little.' I feel so much better about myself because I can read to my granddaughter. My tutor helps me find a book at the library and practices reading it with me." JJ

Early Results

Student numbers are still too small to learn lessons about retention or long-term student success. However, the first program to consistently use Steps to Success now has twice as many basic literacy students as any of our other programs, relative to their size, returning it to their pre-pandemic numbers. Though the program has not significantly increased outreach efforts, staff have been able to identify, support, and retain more basic literacy students. This shows us that we can use this program to reverse the downward cycle and create momentum towards growth by starting with training on Steps to Success for a group of new volunteers. As of now, we have five statewide trainers who can offer the 2-hour Steps to Success workshop and over 60 tutors recently trained.

Regarding the efficacy of the program itself, we are encouraged by the number of goals reached by the students who complete this curriculum. They have an average of four, which is more than double the average number of personal goals reached by the rest of our basic literacy population. Some of the goals include reading to their children, voting, getting a job, or being able to fill out a job application; the most common goal achieved is being able to use a computer and the internet. Testimonials from students suggest that the program's focus on independent learning is linked to their experience of success:

"I feel nervous and I feel good at the same time. I feel like I'm taking the first steps... I think I'm capable of a lot of things I just didn't have the opportunity to be taught. I think once I'm taught these things I'm able to really flourish and show others, not just myself, what I can really do." BP

"Reading teaches me a lot about what I could do in life.... There's a big difference after working with my tutor. My confidence is higher. I'm more open and not afraid to do what I want to do. I'm ready to live life where I'm feeling ok. I'm ready to start more relationships with people.... I've read seven books so far since I started this program. I never finished a book before this program." RP

"I feel great. I used to feel bad, degraded.... I used to be shy when I went out. A lot of the time I used to ask my family to do something for me. If they were not around, I couldn't do anything like sending texts or emails. I always had to wait for someone to help me. I don't have to wait now. My son said, 'Mom, you're doing great! You read a lot and know a lot of things.' My kids are very proud of me.... I'm just happy about this program. I wouldn't be in the position I'm in today without it." MM

Next Steps

One advantage of our statewide structure is the ability to replicate successful local programs, and when a program is implemented widely, to generate enough data to make informed decisions about how to improve it. We will continue to expand the use of Steps to Success, learn from the results, and revise it as we continue to learn what works. As new tutors continue to work with students using this material, the results will inform future training and support for basic literacy tutors. We look forward to having enough students participate so that we can analyze student retention, use that information to develop further internal measures of success, and be able to conduct more outreach to potential students.

We expect that this program may help us to redesign intake and the initial tutoring sessions for our ESOL and high school equivalency students as well. This program may be a good model for integrating digital literacy assessments and personal learning plans into the intake process for all students. Already, after first including the curriculum in our pre-service tutoring training as an optional component, the potential benefits to all students became clear, and we recently began offering it to each new volunteer tutor we train.

Ultimately, to be successful, we will need to grow funding sources that are amenable to the timeline and resources required for students to make significant progress, so that we can continue to adapt to the needs of our students and the changing demands on literacy programs.

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