

THE USES OF LITERACY

The uses of literacy have to be considered in any discussion about the subject. Mark Twain said that someone who can read and won't is considerably worse off than someone who can't read, because the latter can be taught to read, while the former is stuck in ignorance. It is the use of a skill that matters: there may be many athletes with the potential of a Michael Jordan, but only one of them developed his basketball skill to the point where he was considered the best in the world.

So what do adults want to use literacy skills for? Sondra Stein, of the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL), conducted a nationwide survey and reported the results in "Equipped for the Future." Adult learners in literacy programs, asked why they were pursuing literacy skills, gave three equally important reasons:

- *They wanted to improve their employment situations.* Whether that meant gaining more responsibility on their jobs, becoming more competent at what they did, being promoted, finding a better job or career, or just being able to work at all, most learners felt that improving their skills could lead to improving their work life and finances.
- *They wanted to be better parents, spouses, and family members.* Reading to children or helping them with homework, keeping better contact with faraway relatives, even writing love letters to husbands or wives were all cited as reasons for learning to read and write better.
- *They wanted to be better citizens, and to participate in the political life of their communities.* Learners wanted to be able to read about and understand the issues in political campaigns or local controversies, so they could make their own reasoned decisions, and wanted to be able to work in their communities to influence or change the things they cared about.

As you plan an adult literacy program, you need to consider what learners want and need. Their motivation comes not from what you think they should have, but from what they see as necessary in their lives. Often, as learners gain competence and confidence, learning itself may become one of their goals, and that is certainly to be encouraged. But don't lose sight of the fact that their lives dictate the uses of their newly acquired skills.

COMMUNITY NEED

Communities can assess and interpret their own needs in a number of different ways. Once you've determined to start a program, it's necessary to take a careful look at the community and determine how many people need what kinds of literacy services. But before you look at numbers, you have to listen to the community to understand how it views the issue of literacy,

and what kinds of needs resonate with its residents. Some community reasons for establishing a program may be:

- **Economic concerns.** Do local employers have difficulty finding qualified and competent workers to keep their businesses and industries competitive? Is the local unemployment rate high? Is the area depressed? Literacy could be closely related to all of these conditions.
- **Immigration.** A community may experience growth in its immigrant community, creating a need for ESOL services. Employers, merchants and service industries, and health services may have difficulty communicating with immigrants, often because of cultural as well as language differences. The local schools may also be seriously affected.
- **Children's education.** It is often mentioned that the one clearly significant literacy statistic that applies under virtually any circumstances is that mothers (i.e. primary caregivers) with low literacy levels have children with low literacy levels. If the community and its schools are concerned about the literacy of children, one component of addressing the issue may be literacy services for parents, or a family literacy program that works with parents and children together.
- **Health issues.** Literacy is often a factor in health issues, particularly preventive health and health maintenance. Do parents understand the need for good prenatal and infant care? Are elderly residents aware of how their medication is to be taken and stored? Does everyone understand the instructions to be followed if the water treatment plant breaks down? Concern for public health may be a motivator for literacy services.
- **Quality of life.** In many communities, raising the quality of life for all citizens is a priority. Thus, a community may decide that literacy services are important simply because there are community members who need them. More often, this concern links with one or more of the others mentioned to strengthen the determination of the community to support a program.

A LITERACY PROGRAM AS PART OF A LARGER INITIATIVE

Literacy programs may be seen either as integral to the achievement of the goals of a larger community initiative (one on education, for instance), as one part of a multi-pronged approach to a community problem, or as a component of an all-out assault on poverty and other conditions that produce unwanted consequences in the community. Some initiatives that might include adult literacy services:

- Violence prevention
- Substance abuse prevention

- Community health (either a general push toward a healthier community, or a campaign aimed at a specific health problem or concern)
- Voter registration
- Economic development
- Job training
- Education (an effort to fulfill President Clinton's promise to assure that every child is reading by third grade, for instance)
- Specific early childhood or school-based initiatives (Head Start, Even Start Family Literacy)
- Anti-poverty (comprehensive initiatives including many of the above areas and others as well, designed to address the issue of poverty from many different angles)