

Organizing an Adult Literacy Program at Orleans Public Library

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For years, libraries in this country have provided guidance to adult learners. When, in the 1960's, it became evident to teachers, government officials, and librarians that a large number of adults in our population were having difficulty with reading, it devolved quite naturally that the library be chosen as the logical, non-threatening institution to establish a reading program for adult learners.¹ Numerous libraries started experimenting with literacy programs. Support was added by the American Library Association and the program has spread widely. In 1986, mini grants for literacy material were offered to small Indiana libraries. After encouragement by local teachers and guidance counselors in Orleans, Indiana, our public library applied for, and received, a mini grant. This was my introduction to library literacy programs. In this paper, I will attempt to outline some of the recommended steps we used in establishing such a program in our library.

In determining the feasibility of a literacy program, one must assess the needs of the community. It is recommended that one conduct a survey in order to better understand the needs of the population to be served. This was difficult to do in our situation, because of lack of finances and staff;

however, the assessment we took by work of mouth with local citizens, we felt was valid and helpful.

After the needs of the community were ascertained, it was time to bring the matter to the Library Board. Our board is dedicated to promoting library services and was eager to add this type of service. "Every Library in the country . . . has a role to play in the national literacy effort."²

Next, it is fitting to develop mission statement parameters for the program. A suitable mission statement we chose was: The library desires to promote a literacy program as a service to Orleans and surrounding area. Some of the objectives of the project were to develop selection policy, to select books and audio visual aids, to set up advertisements for staff volunteers, to train staff, to advertise the program in the community, and to establish regular tutoring sessions for literacy students. At this point, it was useful to use a Pert Chart to graph the timetable that was feasible for these goals. After charting, the activities were easily written down.

There are numerous bibliographies available for selecting material. One that I found most useful was "Selected Book List: \$1,000 Adult Literacy Collection," prepared by the Centers

for Reading and Writing, 444 Amsterdam Avenue, New York, New York 10024. When selecting material one must consider physical appearance, content, style, reading level, and inviting format.³

A large share of the material needed in this type of program is for study. Most of these materials are of the workbook type. They must include the various grade levels in math, language, reading, and social studies. High school equivalency study guides also need to be included. Life-style workbooks, job advancement study manuals, and citizen study guides are all necessary.

Because the low reader's information needs must be met, we felt it necessary to include consumer information, materials on health and health care, and law. We found that the community can be an excellent source for life coping materials. From the Attorney General's office, one can get pamphlets on consumer rights. From the county extension agent, come pamphlets on the home, family, and nutrition. From the employment commission materials on how to look for a job and how to participate in a job interview can be obtained.

Adult new readers should also have access to leisure reading materials. Easy-to-read materials (short fiction, comics, and high-interest, low-level nonfiction) must be included in the collection. Once this variety of materials is assembled the problem of cataloging it must be solved. We have found a shelf list to be sufficient, since the adult learners will not be using the card catalog at this point.⁴ Browsing stations make the material easily available for users. Interesting displays also help attract this type of reader.⁵

Staffing a literacy program can be a major problem for many small library

directors. In most cases small library funding does not allow the use of paid personnel. Volunteers from the community are needed. In Orleans we have found a number of people with teaching related backgrounds willing to volunteer as tutors. Diverse backgrounds and training make it important to schedule meetings and workshops. The Literacy Conference at Indiana University, May 19-21, will be helpful to staff and director alike. Following is a four-step plan for developing an effective staff. Step one, conduct a needs assessment. The director can help the less experienced volunteers evaluate training needs. Step two, design an overall staff development plan. After the staff has developed a plan, the director can establish priorities. Step three, implement training activities. A good technique is to send some of the more experienced people to workshops. They, in turn, can train the remaining staff. Step four, follow-up activities. Skills learned initially need reinforcement and re-evaluation. This step requires continual awareness of new techniques and in-service training.⁶

There can be no literacy program without community awareness of the service offered by the library. We advertised our program in the local newspapers and over the local radio station. We also notified social service agencies and clubs in the area. Posters were placed in prime spots in town and in the library. Whenever possible, I give talks about the program within the community. So far the most effective type of advertising has been the radio. The majority of applicants state that they heard about the program over the radio. Advertising must be an on-going activity, if the program is to be a success.

Once the literacy program is established, there are many basic needs that must be met to keep the program

in operation. This year there are again two grants available. One is from the U.S. Department of Education, the Library Services and Construction Act Library Literacy Program grant. The other is an Indiana State Library Mini grant.

Finally, we feel that if the literacy program is to be effective, progress assessment is a necessity. At monthly meetings these questions might be asked: Are the activities fulfilling the goals and objectives of the program? Are the goals and objectives still adequate to the program's needs or do they need updating? Only with continuing evaluation, training, and dedication will the program be a success.

NOTES

¹Bayley, Linda, *Open Doors for Adult New Readers; How Librarians can Select Materials and Establish Collections* (New York: New Readers Press, 1980), p. v.

²Lyman, Helen H. *Literacy and the Nation's Libraries*. (Illinois: American Library Association, 1977), p. 25.

³Bayley, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶Lerche, Renee S. *Effective Adult Literacy Programs: A Practitioner's Guide*. (New York: Cambridge, 1985), p. 223.