

**Forum: Improving Service to Adult Literacy Learners***(Part 3 of 3)*

# Response to Amy Pickard's Article on Improving Service to Adult Learners

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Amy Pickard's insightful article on improving service to adult learners is both clear and compelling. She outlines many of the important challenges in adult foundational education and makes several timely and critically important recommendations for addressing some of the key deficiencies in the field. Her central concerns about improved training, certification, assessment, funding, and policy changes are "spot on" in terms of the areas in need of further attention. Her recommendations address some of the most important opportunities for practitioners and policy makers.

While Pickard makes an excellent case for needed changes, I disagree with some aspects of her initial assessment relative to the community based/volunteer sector. From my experience, it does not reflect the reality of most of today's CBO/volunteer programs. That said, there are, indeed, still too many "Daryls" in both volunteer and traditional programs who have had the same experience.

The portrayal of the well-meaning, poorly trained volunteer being matched with students who have extreme learning challenges and who flounder until both quit. I believe to be largely a practice of the past. It does occur but in general the programs that operate CBO/volunteer programs are significantly different from those of the past. Instead, today's volunteer programs provide and require pre-service training, student intake processes, progress assessments, and student support services. Additionally, my observations indicate they utilize both traditional and non-traditional assessments particularly for the lowest level learners many of whom make up their student base.

Excellent examples of the new paradigm in volunteer programs are evident in several states where there are formal state supported organizations that assist

local programs with developing effective training and management. In New York State, for example, Literacy New York oversees and monitors many volunteer-based programs and submits student progress reports through the formal state adult education accountability system. These programs have been among some of the highest performing in the state. Similar state offices in Florida, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Alabama, Arkansas, New Jersey, California, Illinois, Alaska, Oklahoma, and other states provide various services to local programs and are strong advocates for the same program quality standards suggested by the article. Many of the states allocate federal and state funds to volunteer-based programs that ensure they are appropriately assessing students and reporting on progress.

While I may differ with Pickard on the state of CBO/volunteer programs in the United States, what remains a far greater injustice is the fact that these programs are the least funded and least supported in the adult basic education field. Traditional programs often send the lowest literacy level and most challenged students to community-based volunteer programs because they are hesitant to serve learners who will make slow progress, given the current federal and state formulas for funding. Significant progress is being made with more extensive training, support services and assessment, but the fact remains that many of the students at the lowest levels are being sent to the least resourced sector in our field.

Policy makers and funders consistently neglect this important sector and continue to view some of these programs in light of the old perception of a "well meaning, untrained volunteer" being an appropriate match with a student. I believe that this false concept that is embodied

in the ideal of untrained volunteer is one of the most serious obstacles to expansion of this sector because it continues the belief that anyone, without any training can do this work. This then, leads to a loss of respect and/or additional funding, and that myth alone helps to restrict the potential for both program expansion and innovation in the field by discouraging new funding for programs.

While I believe that Pickard's profile of the volunteer programs may not reflect the reality of many programs today, I would agree that her recommendations are appropriate to both volunteer and traditional adult education programs. They offer a solid framework for improving instructional outcomes for learners and for the field.

New and more flexible assessments are critical to all sectors and would significantly improve the ability of programs to serve students and demonstrate progress. Assessments, however, need to take into consideration the varied student goals and allow for a pace of progress that is realistic. Most approved assessments are not very helpful for students at the lowest levels because they fail to show educational gain over shorter time frame required by state and federal guidelines and often do not take into account those differing goals.

Additional support for innovative training opportunities for both pre-service and in-service tutors would also be of benefit to all programs. While programs have long "certified" tutors and volunteer program standards have been a part of the field for many years, standards alone cannot assure better student outcomes. Formalizing opportunities to expand these efforts to the broader field would be welcomed as long as they are not designed to exclude a less formally credentialed volunteer.

Supporting more research that has practical application and is relevant to the broad field would be welcomed by the CBO/volunteer sector. There are several specific research areas that my interactions with many of the state offices suggest they have long wanted to encourage but lack support and funding. These include additional research-based guidance on the best methods for teaching and related student issues. More plentiful research that is applied to the real-life challenges of teaching and learning and made available to the field could ensure the most up to date approaches are included in pre- and in-service training.

Pickard's recommendation regarding the need for a broader view of student motivations and goals beyond the workforce is another critically and vitally important suggestion. The singular focus on specific workforce goals has limited both the ability to serve many students at the lowest levels and innovation in the field by preventing cross sector collaborations with other human service providers that are not directly employment-related such as those who work to address housing, domestic abuse, health care, nutrition, and similar community priorities. While employment is a strong motivator for prospective students, this sole emphasis ignores the fact that many students go to programs for a variety of non-employment related goals.

In conclusion, while I believe some of the description of volunteer-based programs is based on practices of the past, I commend Pickard for her thoughtful recommendations for what needs to be done across the field to ensure that there are far fewer Daryls who get lost in the system, their needs unmet. These recommendations would be helpful for the entire adult foundational literacy field and welcomed by volunteers and professionals.