

# BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: MANAGED ENROLLMENT AND EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

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The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL), is working to infuse evidence-based reading instruction into state professional development delivery systems and adult basic education (ABE) classrooms. STudent Achievement in Reading (STAR) began as a pilot project designed to improve classroom instruction through the use of a toolkit that translates reading research into practice, as well as systematic training and technical assistance. The pilot project engaged six states in designing and implementing systemic reform to deliver evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI) for intermediate-level adult learners.

The STAR pilot revealed that, for EBRI to be successfully integrated into classroom practice, it must be supported by changes in organizational practices and policies. Study circles, cyber chats, and site visits were conducted throughout the pilot to assist state and local programs in making these systemic and organizational changes. STAR instructors and program administrators used each of these activities to learn about and apply the best available research on adult reading instruction to their daily practice.

The following four topics were selected for the study circles and for this series of issue briefs because they are critical to STAR implementation: professional development, diagnostic assessment, supports for classroom teachers, and managed enrollment. This paper highlights key findings on managed enrollment and provides guidance to state policy makers and adult education providers seeking to implement managed enrollment in ABE programs.

## WHAT IS EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION (EBRI)?

Evidence-based reading instruction (EBRI) is based on practices that have been shown to be successful in improving reading achievement. Success can be demonstrated in different ways. One way is through research studies where data are collected according to a rigorous design. Another way is through consensus among expert practitioners who monitor outcomes as part of their practice. Regardless of how success is shown, the results on which success is established must be valid and reliable, and should come from a variety of sources.

In adult basic education, there is a report that summarizes the research studies on reading (Kruidenier, 2002) along with one that provides the consensus among experts about the implications of this research for instruction (McShane, 2006). From these reports, we can conclude that evidence-based reading instruction for adult learners includes the following practices:

- assessment of learners' strengths and needs on each component of reading;
- use of assessment results for instructional decision making, at the program level and in the classroom;
- systematic and explicit instruction, consisting of teacher explanation and modeling and student opportunities for guided practice and application;
- instruction that maximizes learners' active engagement;
- instructional activities and materials that learners recognize as relevant; and
- continuous monitoring by teachers and learners of instructional effectiveness.

## OVERVIEW

Adult basic education (ABE) is the only part of the U.S. education system where open enrollment (also referred to as "continuous enrollment") is the norm, with 80 percent of U.S. programs reporting its use (Tamassia, et al., 2007). Although open enrollment takes various forms, it usually means that learners can enroll or drop out of ABE classes at nearly any time in the term. In addition, open enrollment often means that there are few serious consequences for learners with poor attendance or excessive tardiness.

In contrast, across the rest of the U.S. education system, students are not free to drop in and drop out without serious consequences: enrollment is managed to varying degrees and in different ways. In K-12 schooling, students have to meet minimum standards of attendance in order to pass to the next grade, receive a high school degree, and to be in compliance with state compulsory education laws. Similarly, in postsecondary education, course enrollment is usually limited to the first few weeks of a term, tuition is not refundable after a certain point, and minimum attendance requirements are set for many classes.

Since most ABE learners are not compelled to attend classes by law, and are not charged tuition, these means of compelling attendance and completion that exist in K-12 and postsecondary are not available to ABE programs. Other factors also contribute to open enrollment. Until recently, many ABE providers viewed open enrollment as an effective way to cope with poor attendance and persistence, reasoning that small and sporadic doses of education are better than none at all. In addition, some states fund ABE classes on a per-seat basis, which drives programs to keep seats full to maintain funding. But the perceived need to keep enrollments up at any cost can lead programs to over-enroll learners creating large initial classes that dwindle as time progresses, to fill seats on a revolving door basis throughout the term, and to carry learners on the roll despite very poor attendance.

## WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SHOW?

Although open enrollment was once viewed by some as a way to reach more of the population in need of ABE instruction, the reality is that open enrollment in ABE is a major contributor to what Sticht et al. (1998) termed “attendance turbulence.” Not surprisingly, attendance turbulence can undermine adult learners’ sense of classroom community (Beder & Medina, 2001). Turbulence also affects how instruction is delivered, most notably in the widespread use of individualized instruction, which programs view as a way to cope with poor attendance and completion (Robinson-Geller & Lipnevich, 2006).

Two key principles of EBRI are systematic and explicit instruction and ample opportunities for practice with feedback. In theory, individualized instruction could be effective if teachers had the time and resources to prepare dozens of one-on-one tutorials. But the reality of individualized instruction in ABE is often closer to “butterfly instruction,” where the teacher floats from learner to learner, barely able to spend more than a few moments with each one and unable to do more than check learners’ workbook answers. At best learners are getting practice, but not much direct instruction.

In contrast, EBRI can be delivered effectively to groups of learners with similar patterns of strengths and needs in reading. Compared to individualized instruction as it is currently practiced in ABE, group instruction has the potential to have many advantages:

1. It allows teachers to concentrate on planning a smaller number of high-quality, interactive lessons that provide multiple opportunities for all students to receive practice and feedback.
2. It makes it easier for the learners to analyze and discuss what they are learning.
3. There is evidence that adult learners profit from the synergy of group instruction and the support they receive from others (Beder & Medina, 2001; Beder, et al., 2006).

EBRI is also premised on the need for systematic instruction in the components of reading: alphabets, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Systematic instruction gives learners the opportunity to master reading skills in an optimal sequence, with the mastery of earlier skills facilitating and supporting the acquisition of those taught later. It is difficult to imagine implementing systematic instruction when attendance is sporadic or when learners are free to drop in or out at any point in the semester. Under these circumstances, teachers face the dilemma of presenting material for which the new enrollees have no foundation, or endlessly reviewing what has already been covered and thus short changing previous enrollees (Strucker, 2006).

## CONSIDERATIONS FOR PRACTICE

It makes intuitive sense that no instructional approach, regardless of how carefully designed and executed, can be expected to produce successful student outcomes under conditions of open enrollment and attendance turbulence. Owing to the scarcity of research in ABE, there is little direct evidence that managed enrollment by itself leads

automatically to improved instructional outcomes for learners - although it would be surprising if it did not. The case for managed enrollment rests on the following logic: teachers need to deliver reading instruction that is systematic, and the success of systematic instruction depends on good attendance by individual learners and a relatively stable classroom environment with minimal turnover and turbulence.

Total managed enrollment in K-12 or postsecondary terms may not be possible or even desirable for all ABE programs in the U.S. However, research by Comings, Parella, and Soricone (1999; 2000) suggests that programs can take several meaningful steps toward managing enrollment that may help their learners to improve their attendance and rates of completion. Comings et al. (1999; 2000) and Reder and Strawn (2001) stress that most ABE learners do not have poor attendance or lack persistence for frivolous or trivial reasons. Instead, they face an array of conflicting responsibilities and challenges that are part of adult life, including fluctuating work schedules, chronic illness, and the need to care for their children.

Based on this insight, Comings et al. (2000) argued that if ABE teachers and counselors are able to discuss the challenges posed by these conflicting adult responsibilities frankly with potential enrollees, it may be possible to problem-solve with learners to head-off or mitigate the negative effects of these challenges. With regard to fluctuating work schedules, learners should be asked as a matter of course whether they are able to get to class on time easily after work and how often they are asked to work overtime. If a student's work responsibilities cannot be reconciled with the available class schedule, then perhaps that student may want to consider enrolling at another time.

Adults who either have chronic illnesses or care for family members with chronic illnesses should be asked how often disabling episodes occur and how they cope with them. In the case of those who are care-givers, is back-up care available so that the student will not have to miss classes? Can doctors' appointments be scheduled so as not to interfere with classes? If these scheduling problems cannot be at least partially addressed, then these adults may also want to consider enrolling only after solutions can be arranged.

With regard to childcare, parents of young children should be asked what childcare arrangements they have made for their class times and what their back-up plans are available if those arrangements occasionally break down. If they are unable to address these contingencies, they too may want to consider enrolling only after they have worked through these issues.

Of course, ABE programs are not permitted to deny enrollment to any qualified learners. But they can encourage potential enrollees to be aware of the life challenges that can prevent them from succeeding in their classes. Programs may balk at counseling learners to think carefully about whether this is the right time to enroll, since this might lead to smaller initial enrollments. But programs may be harming learners if they encourage them to enroll at points in their lives when they have little chance of persisting and succeeding. ABE learners often blame themselves for their educational failures (Snow & Strucker, 1999; Zachry, 2006). If they enroll and end up dropping out, learners may interpret this as one more failure of their own intellect or will when the reality is that they

may have enrolled at a time when their responsibilities interfered with their chances for success.

Note that the above examples of managing enrollment through counseling and problem solving do not necessarily involve imposing stricter attendance rules or drastic changes in policy. They simply involve taking the time to discuss frankly with adults how to organize their lives to make school success more likely and, when that is not possible, to postpone enrolling until a more opportune time. The message is that simply changing attendance rules may not be successful by itself unless learners engage with programs to solve these problems faced by all adults.

#### Pilot Perspective: Canton City, Ohio: Scheduling and Enrollment

Prior to STAR, learners in Canton City, Ohio were enrolled in ABE classes where one teacher delivered both math and reading instruction. The program administrator decided to shift two classes to a managed enrollment structure to implement evidence-based reading instruction. Two teachers divided their responsibilities so that each was responsible for only one subject, and the class schedule was revised so that each subject was taught for one hour, four days a week for the duration of a 16-week semester. Learners were grouped so that one half of the learners would have reading instruction while the other half of learners was in math class, and then the two groups would switch after one hour.

Enrollment is managed under this new schedule: learners are only allowed to enroll in the math and reading classes every four weeks, and are not allowed to miss more than three days during each four-week period. The program administrator reports that learners and teachers are pleased with the new format; it has decreased attendance turbulence and increased instructional time.

#### Pilot Perspective: Huron, South Dakota: Enrollment and Attendance

Prior to their involvement in STAR, Cornerstones Career Learning Center (CCLC) in Huron, South Dakota offered adult education services on an open-entry/open-exit and individualized instruction basis. In order to implement evidence-based reading instruction, CCLC staff decided to adopt a managed enrollment policy. In January 2006, CCLC introduced sixweek, classroom-based instructional sessions that are preceded by a mandatory orientation period. Orientation is offered one week prior to the start of each class session, and includes an overview of the program expectations and attendance policy, a learning styles inventory, and diagnostic reading assessments.

CCLC's attendance policy, together with the set entry and exit points for learners, is an important component of the program's effort to support a structured learning environment that is conducive to systematic reading instruction based on learners' identified strengths and needs. All CCLC learners are required to have an 80 percent attendance rate for each six-week class session. When learners have five or more excused or unexcused absences, they must withdraw from the class and wait until the next session to reenroll.

CCLC's Education Coordinator reports that many benefits have accrued to both teachers and learners as a result of the new enrollment policy. Learners now receive more direct

contact hours and teachers have gained additional time for instructional planning, assessment, and individual consultations with learners. What is more, preliminary data indicate that learner retention and GED-completion rates may be increasing as a result of CCLC's new enrollment and attendance policies.

## PAVING THE WAY FOR EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION

The STAR pilot experience strongly suggests that changes in enrollment policies and practices require leadership and action at the state, local program, and classroom levels. The pilot also yielded important lessons that may be valuable to policy makers and adult education providers. The following guidelines are based on those lessons.

### Guidelines for State Administrators and Policymakers

- Where they exist, waive attendance-based funding policies for programs that want to pilot managed enrollment.
- Deploy qualified state professional development staff to local program sites to facilitate and monitor the implementation of managed enrollment.

### Guidelines for Local Program Administrators

- Provide access to professional development that enables teachers to understand, critique, and apply research findings to their classroom practice.
- Provide teacher release time, paid planning time, or stipends to encourage teachers to actively engage in on-going professional development.
- Expand access to on-going professional development that facilitates collaboration, follow-up, and the application of learning to practice.

### Guidelines for Professional Developers

- Plan job-embedded professional development that facilitates collegiality and collaborative learning among participants.
- Ensure that professional development is individually customized and differentiated based on teacher knowledge and learning style, and include a diverse array of activities, such as: presentation of theory, demonstration, practice, feedback, and classroom application.
- Structure professional development activities such that new information is presented systematically and with ample opportunity for guided and independent practice.

### Guidelines for Program Administrators

- Establish a mandatory orientation session prior to the start of each enrollment period. Use the orientation period to 1) discuss with learners possible obstacles to good attendance and program completion and how to surmount them; 2) conduct diagnostic reading assessments; and 3) explain program expectations and attendance policies.
- Establish an attendance policy. Consider the length of the class session and the amount of instructional time required for learners to achieve set learning goals.

- If there are going to be exceptions to attendance policies, decide in advance what they will be (e.g., documented serious illness, etc.) rather than letting exceptions evolve on a case-by-case basis and thus undermine the policy.
- If you are unable to implement managed enrollment program-wide, try piloting managed enrollment in the classes that serve the intermediate-level learners.

### Guidelines for Teachers

- Model high expectations for good attendance:
  - Be scrupulously on time yourself.
  - Start and end classes on time.
  - Don't "enable" tardiness or absenteeism by holding up the progress of the rest of the class to conduct reviews for those who have missed the previous class or arrived late.
- Take your own roll and track attendance carefully, even if students also have to sign in at a central location.
- Be proactive: telephone or speak privately to learners who are beginning to exhibit patterns of tardiness or absenteeism. Remind them when they are in danger of being dropped from your class.

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, implementing managed enrollment will require a holistic approach that may include making changes in orientation, intake, diagnostic assessment, counseling, attendance, and scheduling practices. Even if only a few classes in a program are able to pilot managed enrollment, the teachers and learners in those classes will need the full support and encouragement of all administrators, counselors, and teachers.

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