

## Executive Summary

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# **Learning for Life**

## **A Longitudinal Study of Pennsylvania's Adult Education Success Stories Recipients**

by

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December 2001

A Pennsylvania Department of Education Bureau of ABLE  
Leadership Grant #98-00-0007

## SUCCESS

*I went to [the] Literacy Council to learn how to read. The case-worker at the Welfare had told me about it ... I didn't plan on doing a lot of the things that I am active in now. But it opened so many doors for me that it's unreal ...*

—AGNES

*Having goals that you try to strive for — the attempt is important, even if you don't get there. Being a contributing member of society — doing my part in the community — raising decent young people to do their part in the world. Setting a good example. My daughter went back to school as an adult with a child to become an RN. I think my example helped her.*

—WILMA

*For myself, I feel successful in how I was given the tools to learn to read and build on my self-esteem that I can grow and be helpful to my family first and through that then be able to go out and help others.* —PETER

*Actually, being successful is about completing things, doing things, and just doing the best you can, and being the person that you are supposed to be. Myself, raising my children and teaching them the right things to do, I consider that being successful. Bringing up my children and to continue to work with other children who are less fortunate, that's being successful.*

—ED

## LEARNING FOR LIFE

### Executive Summary

As the national emphasis on adult learner performance accountability shifts from basic skills gained in the classroom to literacy functions exhibited in daily life, we need to establish meaningful benchmarks by which to measure participants' growth. What better yardstick to use than the life experiences of successful ABLE participants? *Learning for Life* provides this perspective by studying the life experiences and attitudes of 70 adult learners who participated in ABLE programs between 1968 and 2000 and were recognized as Pennsylvania's Outstanding Adult Students of the Year.

By studying this population, we can illuminate outcomes experienced by successful adult learners over time; outcomes such as attitudinal and life style changes that produced lasting impacts upon participants, their families and their communities. We can inform practitioners of program strategies, instructional methods and mentoring styles that appear effective. We can apprise stakeholders of appropriate standards and time intervals for measuring participant success. We can identify roadblocks that even the most successful participants have difficulty in surmounting. Furthermore, we can offer models of excellence for adult learners to relate to and emulate.

### Research Instruments

*Learning for Life* employs four distinct research instruments. A *Review of Success Stories Booklets* dating from 1978 to the present imparts information about sample members' motives for participation, educational levels at program entrance and sponsors' descriptions of their nominees' attitudes and accomplishments. *Informal Interviews* supply participants' answers to broad open-ended questions that address life changes and attitude transformations without specifically focusing on ABLE participation, advanced education, employment, family and/or community activities. Thus, any comments offered on these specific subjects are a matter of participants' choice rather than researchers' direction.

The *Impact Survey* reveals participants' demographics, family status, current activities, employment and benefits, financial and economic factors, educational attainment, major life occurrences, results of exemplary student recognition and personal well being. The *Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI)*, a brief but comprehensive standardized test, measures

## BAGGAGE

*I went to 11 different elementary schools ... You wouldn't learn times tables and go on to the next school and they already learned them ... You just have to start all over, so that was a real struggle ... Eight years of going from a GED student, to Associate's student, to Bachelor's Degree, and then to a Master's Degree. It is very fast. It's continual. You're still learning."*

—ANNA

*I had two kids and I was on Welfare. That was the only life I knew since I became pregnant. I was working on my own but I wasn't making any money. I was living with some elderly woman, cleaning her house for room and board. I was only making \$5 a week but that was enough for me at the time. I became pregnant. I had two boys at the time and the father and I weren't going anywhere. I decided to go back. I didn't want Welfare. I wanted to take care of my own. —GINA*

*My daughter, when I first started school, she was only 18 months old. It was hard. Hard on her, hard on me. At the time, I was a single mother. I worked so many hours trying to keep a roof over her head, trying to put food on the table, trying to get my education. —VU-LIN*

respondents' levels of satisfaction with their lives.

### Data Analyses

The use of multiple instruments allowed researchers to gather data that could be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively and measured against a standardized instrument. The structure devised for reporting the qualitative findings was arrived at by the "grounded study" approach of identifying and classifying themes, topics and subtopics that emerged from the Informal Interviews. The *Statview* software program was used to complete the Impact Survey's statistical analyses. Much of the data available from the Impact Survey were descriptive rather than quantitative and there was considerable variability in data reporting due to participants' failure to make entries in all applicable areas. A thorough review of data available from the Informal Interviews and Success Stories Booklets succeeded in filling in sufficient past and present data to provide descriptive information about the study sample and quantitative statistics in limited areas. These findings were then compared to participants' scores on the standardized QOLI and found to correlate.

### Participant Demographics and Background

Sample members were similar (gender, ethnicity, entrance level, sponsoring agency and location) to adult learners enrolled in Pennsylvania's ABLE programs. The age of study participants (24 to 80 with the medium of 40-59) was the one atypical factor. This age span was consistent with the range of years between program enrollment and study participation; the shortest time period being two years; the longest, 32 years; with an average time span of 13 years.

However, participants carried far more "baggage" at enrollment than the average adult learner. In addition to the risk factors of learning differences, lack of schooling, an inability to speak English, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, prejudice and divorce, study participants had endured severe physical and mental handicaps, abuse, addiction, death of loved ones and even torture. Conversely, their achievements and degree of life satisfaction years after program completion were exceptional compared to the standard ABLE population. What happened?

### Adult Literacy Findings

#### 1. Success begins with the individual learner.

Despite the "shame" of illiteracy, despite the fear of failure, despite the lack of self-esteem, these men and women selected adult education as the vehicle for changing their lives. They brought to adult education programs the resilience of survivors along with the resolve to improve their lives. Resilience and determination appear to be basic elements that

## IMPORTANCE OF ADULT EDUCATION

*I always felt successful after I completed my GED. The GED for me was the climax of my life. It was difficult because I didn't speak English very well and I couldn't even write. I worked very hard and I was a very stubborn person ... I thought if I have my GED, I'm not going to stop. I'm still going strong because I still take courses now. Every summer, I will take at least one or two courses. I don't need the credit, but I need the knowledge.*  
—STACY

*It goes back to how I got changed around by going back to school. How it changed not only my life, but I would have to say it changed everybody around me because they began to see somebody totally different, somebody who went from carefree, didn't care about nothing, to caring about everybody and everything ... able to work on the inside and the outside.*

*I would make the suggestion to anybody that wants to try adult basic education to go ahead and do it because even if you don't learn to be a mathematician and even if you don't learn all of your geography and history and all of the fundamentals that we were supposed to learn when we were younger, you'll learn to be a better person, you'll learn you've got something in you that you never knew you had.* —HENRY

respond to the yeast of adult education by enhancing self-confidence, increasing self-awareness, fostering self-determination and illuminating latent leadership.

Participants entering a tutoring or classroom situation were not yet successful adult learners but they had been tested in life's fire and not found wanting. Some had strong support systems, some stood alone and some battled spouses trying to bring them down. Nearly all had been wounded in their struggle for literacy and educational advancement. The scars they carried left them unsure of their ability to learn and thus build a better future for themselves and their families. Each participant approached adult education in his or her individual way.

### 2. Adult education is a catalyst for change.

Over two-thirds of the participants completed their program goals within a two-year time span. Ten of 20 Basic Literacy, six of seven ESL and all ABE and GED enrollees attained a GED, an Adult High School diploma or a higher education degree. What happened in the classroom that enabled them to emerge from the chrysalis of prior problems to the enlightenment of intentional change? Participants speak of a continuum that leads to empowerment. They describe a respectful, safe environment and offer examples of individualized curricula and collaborative learning strategies that address their weaknesses and encourage them to share their strengths.

Whatever participants' self-perceived flaws, practitioners and peers accept them as valuable individuals and provide socialization as well as instruction and support. Teachers and tutors suggest alternative learning strategies and assure participants' they can accomplish their goals. Help is available. As participants succeed, what was once thought impossible becomes a comfortable reality. New students turn to them for assurance, advice and assistance. They reach out to help others. As role models, participants have reached the first step on a leadership ladder. Confidence in their new-found abilities grows. They discard old myths, begin to build positive self-images, question previous goals and open themselves to new possibilities. Leadership begets recognition. Success supplies satisfaction. Education offers opportunity. And nothing is ever the same again.

Participant Life Style Outcomes:

#### 1. "The GED is a beginning not an end."

With new attitudes toward life and new credentials, participants discuss their surprise and delight at being propelled into new "adventures" in careers and in community affairs. Despite the extent of their achievements after ABE completion, successful adult learners regard the GED as the turning point in their lives. It was the first goal they set for them-



## NEW READERS

*I was just fooling myself because I couldn't read and I couldn't write. To just step out and just have the courage to let the job go and to work on my career education-wise. At the time when I was going to the education program, I was working two jobs. So it was very difficult working the two jobs plus trying to do the schooling. —FRANK*

*When I got into the GED class it was really remarkable how I started out from a beginner reader and where I am now. Now I feel very good about myself because I can do things. Before, I had no self-esteem. I felt stupid, like a little kid. Now I feel proud of myself ... —DANNY*

*We need to have someone that is caring and understands and listens to us because for the first time in our lives, we are admitting to another person, we don't read. We need to know that in the beginning of our tutoring, we are actually touching base with the tutor of trust. We need to know that if we can trust that person, we can learn from that person. —MARCIA*

*It really felt good to sit in the classroom because I was there with other adults and we were all there because we wanted to learn. There wasn't somebody making us be there. We wanted to learn. —CONRAD*

selves. It provided their first taste of success. From then on, they set out to reshape their lives in accordance with their dreams.

These dreams are not new to the American scene — the security of a home for their families and steady employment at more than minimum wage so their children will have the chance for “a better life” than they had experienced. With fulfillment of these dreams came satisfaction and a desire to “pay back” by helping others in their families, their schools, and their communities.

### **2. Participants engage in continuing education as time and money permit.**

After ABLE program completion, 79 percent of participants engaged in formal or informal education or training. Informal education ranged from attending literacy conferences to computer and driver's education courses. Several participants selected continuing education as a less expensive, less time-consuming alternative to higher education.

Forty percent of the study sample enrolled in college and 20 percent completed a higher education degree. Ninety-three percent of higher education graduates entered college immediately after getting their GEDs. Half of all participants who enrolled in college but did not earn degrees are still taking credit after credit as time and money permit. Participants with learning differences and participants with funding difficulties may take ten years or more to complete college degrees. An interlocking web of obstacles including health, employment, family and finances compete for control of the participant's world which explains why so few GED graduates complete college degrees. All participants who earned degrees received financial assistance in the form of pensions, scholarships or internships or they belonged to families with two incomes.

### **3. Employment changes reveal a drop in assistance and an increase in “helping” jobs.**

The Impact Survey reveals a dramatic drop (from 30 percent to three percent) in Welfare and Food Stamp usage after ABLE participation. A corresponding employment pattern suggests that working participants left part-time or minimum wage jobs to engage in ABLE programs with a subsequent 20 percent increase in salaried employment after program completion. Of 23 participants receiving public assistance prior to ABLE participation, 18 (78 percent) are now self-sufficient. Of these 18 former welfare recipients, eleven (61 percent) attended college. Of the 11 individuals who enrolled in college, four are still taking courses and four completed doctoral, masters, bachelors or associate degrees.

The qualitative study further delineates changes in the quality of employment pre- and post-program participation. Prior to ABLE enroll-

## RESULTS

*After I got my GED, I went to a secretary class. I went over there for a year. I really learned a lot there. It was called a modern technology secretary class. Before I went over there, I couldn't even type. I learned a lot of computer skills there. I would be able to help my kids with homework and how to set up the margins. Even now, I use the Internet at home. I am able to communicate with my relatives from Taiwan. —BELLA*

*It's probably going to take me another five years to get my BS. You know, that's okay because I work at the plant in town and I've been there 24 years; so in 8 years I get to retire. So what I'm doing is I'm educating myself so when I do retire, I would still have a life. It's like I'm going to start my whole working life over again. I'm going to be doing something I enjoy doing. —URSALA*

*The achievement that I'm most proud of is probably graduating from college. I'm the first male in my family that I know of who even got a GED; everyone just quit school and went to work, I'm the only one I know of who graduated from college. —BRUCE*

ment, 22 participants (31 percent) were unemployed homemakers or students. Currently, 15 participants (21 percent) are not in the workforce; these include three college students; four individuals on employment disability, two homemakers and six retirees with an average age of 69. Of the 55 participants (79 percent of sample member) currently employed, five (nine percent) own or manage businesses; 37 (67 percent) hold professional or service positions in “helping” areas and 13 (24 percent) are working in blue collar or entry level jobs. The “helping” professions and service areas were participants’ overwhelming choice for new careers. Jobs were valued for the self-image and satisfaction they imparted as much as for the financial resources they provided. Regardless of current position or level of job satisfaction, participants under 50 years of age continue setting goals for future advancement; older participant set goals for future learning.

### 4. Participants’ children respond positively to the examples set by their parents.

Nearly 75 percent of participants own one or more homes and regard home ownership as a significant achievement. While indicative of “middle class” status, participants whose home life was largely dysfunctional value home ownership as an important symbol of family “safety” and “togetherness.” To guarantee that their children will not suffer from a lack of education, participants have set examples for their families and established rules about studies and school. The statistics for participants’ children suggest that their examples are viable: of 245 children, nine have advanced higher education credits or degrees; 31 have college degrees; 43 are in college or have taken college courses, and 76 are high school graduates. There are 12 GED graduates, 14 high school dropouts, 22 children in high school, 33 who are pre-high school and 5 for whom there is no information.

### 5. Self-esteem leads to community service and adult education advocacy.

When asked to rate how important self-esteem was to their happiness and how satisfied they were with this area of their lives, participants ranked it highest of the 16 life areas measured by the standardized Quality of Life Inventory (QOLI). Over the course of five, 10, 20 or more years from the time of participation to the follow-up study, participants report that the self-esteem they experienced as successful adult learners impelled them to improve themselves and to help others.

After a history of self-doubt, the joy of achievement and the recognition of their competence serve as a springboard for transference and lead participants to volunteer and advocacy roles in their families, communities and in the field of adult education. High QOLI satisfaction scores in the areas of “helping” and “children” are indicators of the fulfillment they

## OBSTACLES

*You start the program to say you want to help the people that have fallen through the cracks; but if you keep going the pace you're going, the people that fell through the cracks, they're going to still be there because you're moving too fast. Patience is what we need because I think the world is running out of patience. We are just hurting each other with not being patient.*

—CORA

*Every student should have the right to attain what their level allows and we have to recognize that some students will never ever attain a degree of any kind—not even a high school diploma. But that does not mean they cannot attain what they need to be a functioning member of society which is a form of learning. It's learning life skills and a needed process of life for them. Putting our value on education and having the diploma and degree and all of that onto a student who is not capable is an injustice to that student. The students are important and need to be treated as such.* —YETTA

*Coming from the background that I have with a learning disability, trying to be full-time mother, a full-time employee and go to school at the same time, it's like juggling apples. I feel I'm very successful at what I'm doing.* —FLORINE

receive from raising children, siblings, grandchildren, nieces, nephews and foster children.

Service to others which often begins with taking in needy relatives expands to include leadership in their churches and schools. Nearly 60 percent of participants are involved in church activities and 46 percent are active in education. In addition to serving on PTA and Salvation Army committees, retirement and community development associations, municipal boards and cultural arts foundations, fully 33 percent of the participants in this study are involved in ABE programs as volunteers, tutors, trainers, staff members and advocates. Their contributions to the community as responsible citizens are certainly as noteworthy as their contributions to the economy as taxpayers.

### Critical Issues

#### 1. ABE Programs

ABLE participants identified three critical issues that present serious problems for adult learners. In spite of participants' new self-image, practitioners and programs must be sensitive to the use of the word "illiteracy," in the presence of adult learners who become distressed by the label "illiterate," even when indirectly applied.

After years of frustration, participants who experience success in learning are anxious to persist in their studies. Fifty-five percent of basic literacy participants and 14 percent of participants who enrolled at ESL, ABE or GED levels spent between three and 11 years in ABE programs. At the same time, stakeholders are pressuring adult education programs to provide participants with educational upgrading in a minimal amount of time. Participants from literacy, ESL and GED programs pleaded for patience — patience on the part of tutors, teachers and stakeholders.

Participants identified problems inherent in the present push for professionalization. They were troubled by a persistent lack of counselors and the replacement of part-time experienced non-credentialed teachers with full time novices who had teaching degrees but little experience in adult education. Furthermore, one former student and current social worker expressed concerns regarding the need for specialization in order to provide more equitable education to all adult learners. Inherent in this line of reasoning is the concept that adult education should not be merely about diplomas and credentials. It should be learning for life.

#### 2. The Problem with Higher Education:

ABLE participants also identified three critical issues inherent in higher education. First of all, it is not suitable for everyone. Yet, GED teachers often raise successful learners' expectations and encourage them to go on in the face of external pressures despite a lack of prevailing

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

*I'm still struggling with thinking about going on for my Master's ... Financially, if someone would say here is the money to get your Master's, I may be able to fit it in. I think about financially and time-wise, I'm not able to do that right now, but that is a goal I may consider in the future. I do continue to get education anywhere I can; anytime workshops come up in our agency and it's something that sparks my interest. I am always working on continuing education because education is very important to me. —SARAH*

*Now that you have gotten us adults to get back into education, is there some sort of funding that we can use to continue our education? Sometimes what can be frustrating is we get these awards and then you start going to school and then you find out the money is not there or that you can only go so far and then you have to stop.*

*And it's not just for me but for all of those who have come before me or will come after me. From what I gather, they want us to further our education, but how far do they want us to go? Maybe someone can talk to the government to ask if there is some sort of funding that can be generated to help the adults that are really trying to make a difference, not only with their own lives, but even to help others out there as well. —ED*

personal goals. Secondly, most entry level “helping” careers require higher education credentials. Participants who are highly successful in their jobs are often locked out of raises and even forfeit their positions without the validation of formal credentials. The major problem with higher education is that it's expensive and there are few financial resources available to participants. Federal and/or state funding designated for GED graduates who have shown the determination and the ability to do college work would make a big difference in their higher education participation and completion statistics not to mention their lives.

### Conclusions and Implications

*Learning for Life* illuminates educational, employment and social outcomes over time that impact upon participants, their children, and their communities. Such outcomes cannot be assessed in the here and now by grade level measurements. While the acquisition of basic skills is a starting point for some participants, it represents the attainment of a lifelong goal for others. No two learners are alike and all learners are valuable.

*Learning for Life* places self-esteem in its proper perspective. It is not a mere by-product of adult basic and literacy education; it is the spark-plug that ignites self-efficacy and social action. Having acquired basic skills and self-esteem, participants strove for practical goals that included higher education and vocational training, secure employment and enhanced financial status. The educational attainments of participants' children as well as successful adult learners' satisfaction with their lives, social awareness and community involvement reflect personal impacts that have relevance for all of us as educators and as a nation. As Beder (1999) posits: “It may well be that the power of adult literacy education lies not in its function as an end that produces immediate gains but in its function as an enabling means to a wide range of other benefits that, when obtained, yield still more benefits.”

*Dr. Sherry Royce  
December 15, 2001*

This Executive Summary is a result of a project developed by Royce & Royce, Inc. It was supported in part by funding provided through the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education from the Federal Workforce Investment Act, Title II, 2000–2001. However, the opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of the U. S. Department of Education or the Pennsylvania Department of Education, and no official endorsement should be inferred.