



## SHOP TALK # 24: Pathways to Partnerships

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The National Coalition for Literacy, Texas LEARNS, the Texas Council of Adult Basic Education, and Literacy Texas joined forces on May 29, 2008, to convene *Pathways to Partnerships* in Houston. Sponsored by Dollar General Literacy Foundation, the program focused on the state of literacy in Texas, its impact on the state's workforce competitiveness, and the need for businesses, adult education professionals, and policy makers to join forces in meeting the challenges.

### **Successful Employer / Adult Education Partnerships.**

A highlight of the day was a panel of employers presenting their perspective on adult literacy and its impact on their businesses. Three of the four panelists had benefited from long standing partnerships with adult education to meet employees' educational needs. Eusebio Franco, Facilities Director for Custodial and Grounds Services at **Rice University**, described the successful eight-year long partnership with Houston Community College's Adult Education program. Mr. Franco worked with Houston Community College's Beverly Miller to establish the first ESL classes for Rice University's custodial and grounds maintenance employees. A key to the ongoing success of the partnership: the employer views the classes as on-the-job technical training, with a significant return on investment:

- ✓ reduced turnover among employees
- ✓ recruitment tool
- ✓ pursuit of career path opportunities within the institution

ESL classes are held during the day during work hours; those who pursue a GED do so on their own time but are reimbursed for the GED testing fees; and those who pursue post secondary education are reimbursed for 75% of related costs.

Mike Hausig, Director of **Mission Pharmacal's** Operation Excellence described the San Antonio company's multi-ethnic employee population (Hispanic, German, Korean, Vietnamese) and credits onsite ESL instruction with employees' increased self esteem, a safer work environment, and less equipment abuse. Raw materials in a pharmaceutical setting are very costly and equipment is sophisticated. Employees must be able to read and use applied math. To advance from entry to master and lead positions, employees must master the paperwork. ESL classes began in 2006 in partnership with Adult education provider Seguin Independent School District, which currently provides adult education services in Comal, Guadalupe, and Kendall Counties. During start up, Mission Pharmacal provided instructional staff with environmental print for incorporation into the classes.

Another success story involves **Pilgrim's Pride** in Pittsburgh, Texas. Donna Kuykendall, manager of Partner Development and Community Relations, shared the challenge from top company management: improve the quality of life of their employees (referred to as partners). Kuykendall acknowledged that such company policy is of course tied to the bottom line because satisfied employees exhibit loyalty, better understanding of safety issues, and the company's commitment to the community. Adult education provider Northeast Texas Community College first initiated a workplace literacy partnership with Pilgrim's Pride in the late 1990's through a U.S. Department of Education federal grant. The grant provided seed money, after which the company picked up the tab to maintain the program up to the present.

Pilgrim's Pride offers training in Spanish on compliance-related matters; otherwise, the language of the workplace is English, with incentives for "partners" to improve themselves and take advantage of company career and community opportunities. Some of the company's 71 locations (with 55,000 employees) have learning labs on-site, refer employees to community services, and employees volunteers as tutors, library helpers, and mentors. Employees are reimbursed 100% for all educational activities in which they earn a C or better. Employees who recently met the requirements of another grant-funded initiative at the company were guaranteed interviews for open positions to which they could advance. One exciting success story: a 20-year employee is completing her studies to become a certified bilingual teacher!

Northeast Texas Community College has also been awarded a Self Sufficiency grant through the Texas Workforce Commission to provide adult education services to the Sweet Shop, a company relocating from Fort Worth.

In a question and answer session following the panel of presenters, the following points were shared:

- An educated workforce attracts employers to your community
- Data is key; everyone needs to know what they are getting for their money

- Providers, how successful are you in providing services? What kind of statistics and testimonials can you provide?
- Pre and post assessments provide key data
- Providers must take a serious look at alternative learning opportunities
- Networking is key to serving the numbers needing adult education services
- Employers need help understanding what providers can offer and how they can address employers' and employees' needs
- Get to know local employers, their services and products
- Be willing to take your services to the workplace
- Are employers fully aware of the workforce crisis Texas is facing? If not, how do we build awareness among employers?

Afternoon sessions focused on the following tasks:

- educating business representatives and legislators
- awareness-raising leadership and infrastructure
- empowering partnerships

<http://www.national-coalition-literacy.org> NCL website for links to current reports, literacy facts, and public policy updates

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**SHOP TALK** is a series sponsored by Texas LEARNS to highlight promising practices and address issues, concerns, and questions related to meeting the adult education needs of Texas' emerging, incumbent, and displaced workers. For additional information or to request that a particular topic be addressed, contact Barbara Tondre at [btondre@earthlink.net](mailto:btondre@earthlink.net)