



SHOP TALK # 6: Promising Practices

Planning, Delivering, and Sustaining Workplace Instruction. During the November 2005 Texas Council for Adult Basic Education Leadership Conference in Galveston, a number of programs identified themselves as having launched successful work-related instructional initiatives. As programs shared their experiences, it quickly became obvious that no two programs are the same, and that no one individual has all the answers. But sharing successes and describing obstacles overcome is invaluable to others facing similar challenges. SHOP TALK # 6 is the first of several releases showcasing some of the excellent efforts occurring out in the field. Texas LEARNS invites programs to share their promising practices in responding to workforce needs in their communities.

ESC Region 1, Edinburg, which serves a large portion of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, recently met with Cameron Works, the local workforce development board serving Cameron County. Cameron Works maintains five workforce centers – two in Brownsville, two in Harlingen, and one in San Benito. Harlingen falls within the service delivery area of Region 1. Recently Echostar, an outbound satellite sales company that also provides technical support for a dish network, approached the local workforce development board (LWDB) for assistance in hiring employees for its Harlingen location. The dilemma: the company's hiring policy requires all employees to have a high school diploma. Dismayed at not finding potential employees with these credentials in Harlingen, Echostar turned to Cameron Works.

Cameron Works contacted ESC Region 1 to request a short presentation for Echostar, describing the delivery of GED instruction and more importantly, the personal and economic benefits to attaining a GED. Adult education director Elva Garcia, and instructional coordinator Alma Doffing, explained that attainment of the GED boosts individuals' self esteem and can pave the way to career and employment opportunities. Their presentation captured the attention of the company, which then requested corporate approval to waive the high school credential requirement for employment with Echostar. New hires without a high school credential will be required to enroll in GED preparation at Cameron Works' Career Center in Harlingen, with ESC Region I providing instruction. In addition, Echostar is designating an area of its worksite as a tutoring pod where employees can access computer-based instruction and tutoring.

Echostar's change in its hiring policy is for the Harlingen site only. However, corporate headquarters is watching this change in policy closely as a model for possible nationwide replication. The company's mantra: *Employers must find ways to engage the worker; members of today's workforce have choices. Companies that invest in their employees and are committed to promoting from within can have a tremendous impact on a community.* The Harlingen management team hopes this initiative will enable the company to tap into the vast local labor force that lacks English proficiency, the GED certificate, and vocational training. Echostar wants no differentiation between employees with and without high school credentials. The company plans to establish a mentorship program to assist employees in qualifying for the variety of on-the-job training opportunities that will allow them to advance as well as make lateral transfers from call center functions to office administration and technical support positions.

Another service ESC Region 1 may be asked to provide is job readiness / employability skills. Echostar is searching for ways to strengthen employees' commitment to an industry that traditionally experiences high attrition where regular attendance and punctuality are critical, as are strong communication skills.

Northeast Texas Community College, Mount Pleasant. A successful initiative that has been around since 1994 is the partnership between Northeast Texas Community College (NTCC) and Pilgrim's Pride (a poultry processing plant). Since the majority of Pilgrim's Pride employees are non-native speakers of

English, ESL and basic skills instruction have long been part of the foundation of this partnership. Over the years, Jeannie Pruitt and Sue Barker have met with Pilgrim's Pride management personnel to ensure that instruction focuses on the skills and knowledge employees need to keep or advance in their jobs, meet demands for productivity, and ensure safety.

Ongoing communication between the adult education provider and Pilgrim's Pride, plus a financial commitment from the company to underwrite the costs of the program, have played critical roles in sustaining this workplace initiative for over ten years. An educational team meets twice monthly to identify ways to further customize instruction to meet the specific needs of the company. NTCC also recognizes the vital role frontline supervisors play in the success of a workplace initiative. They are usually the first to notice positive changes in employees' workplace performance and behavior as well as increased productivity. NTCC will pilot the manufacturing component being developed in response to Rider 82 with Pilgrim's Pride employees.

NTCC recently applied for a Self Sufficiency grant from TWC. With this grant, the adult education program hopes to target the specific hard and soft skills Pilgrim Pride's entry level workers need to gain access to promotion and career path opportunities, since the company has a tradition of promoting from within. NTCC's long standing relationship with the employer and the grant will enable them to focus on the specific math and writing skills required to move to the next job in line. 75 employees will participate.

Another contributing factor to NTCC's success in workplace literacy over the years: flexible scheduling. The employer's production deadlines, changes in processes, and equipment upgrades can all impact the delivery of instruction and employees' availability to attend classes.

ESC Region 6, Huntsville, recently applied as a subcontractor in a third application for a Self Sufficiency grant from TWC. The adult education program has a history of successful partnerships with applicants eligible for these funds. Instructional Coordinator Kristi Hayman is confident that past experience with Self-Sufficiency funds will enable Region 6 to provide more focused services to the local workforce and to sustain the strong employer and training provider relationships now established. The first grant focused its efforts on recruiting employees from the many independent school districts served by Region 6. But when only four school districts responded by referring food service employees and bus drivers to the program, Region 6 expanded its recruitment efforts to local employers and regular adult education classes. The first and second grants served approximately 300 participants over a two year period.

If awarded a third grant, Region 6 will focus on preparation for three in-demand employment opportunities in the region: certified medication aide, certified nurse's aide, and certified childcare provider. Enrollment in the program will be open to ABE/ASE level learners as well as those with limited English language skills. Kristi acknowledges, however, the reluctance of many adult learners enrolled in ESL classes to share personal information, which is required in order to determine eligibility for the program.

The program has always offered a six hour pre-employment skills orientation. This provides participants with essential preliminary information about the targeted occupations and certificate programs, and helps prepare them for a serious commitment to the program. Since childcare and transportation are provided, participants must understand the expectations regarding their enrollment and retention.

Postsecondary institutions, Blinn and Angelina Community Colleges and Sam Houston State University, have partnered with Region 6 to provide the necessary occupational training, and it is expected that employers will continue to provide on-the-job training and/or internships for participants. Grant funds will be used to pay for tuition, needed equipment, uniforms, etc.

Interested in learning more about Self Sufficiency and Skills Development Grants available through the Texas Workforce Commission? Go to <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/svcs/funds/sdfintro.html> and <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/svcs/funds/ssfintro.html> . Eligible applicants are public community or technical colleges, the Texas Engineering Extension Service, or a community-based organization working in partnership with one of these institutions.