Pennsylvania's Distance Learning Project 2004-2005

A Report on Stakeholder Focus Groups
Conducted by the Project IDEAL Support Center, July 2005

Leslie Petty, EdD

Executive Summary

Background. In 2004 – 2005, Pennsylvania made a dramatic change in the way it delivered distance education to adult learners. The Commonwealth moved from a multi-year pilot program, in which local agencies were provided with funds to explore the use of distance education with adult learners in their service area, to a centralized delivery system in which local agencies could either refer students to a centralized distance teaching agency or provide distance education directly to students in their area, but without additional funding. To understand how key stakeholders felt about the new form of distance delivery the Project IDEAL Support Center conducted telephone focus groups with five groups: provider agency administrators, provider agency teachers, referring agency contacts (both teachers and administrators), centralized distance teachers and students. Reactions of each group are summarized below.

Centralized distance teachers. Teachers at the Centralized Distance Teaching Service (CDTS) work with students sent to them by the referring agencies. They expressed frustration that students were not adequately prepared by the referring agency for the distance education class they were enrolled in. They also suggested that students who are poorly prepared for distance learning may be less likely to stay with the program. The centralized teachers feel confident in their skills in instructing and supporting distance students and have developed a variety of strategies to do so effectively.

Referring agency contacts. This group consisted of both teachers and administrators at referral agencies who were responsible for making the connection between their students and the CDTS. Many of them were new to distance learning, but a few represented agencies that had been involved in the distance learning pilot project. Their agencies opted to become referring agencies in order to provide additional services to their students without significant funding or staffing demands. The referring agencies had some concerns about how to most effectively recruit, orient and refer students to the CDTS and suggested it would be helpful to have an informational packet to send home with the referred students. They were interested in remaining involved with the students they referred and were generally pleased with the communication with the CDTS. In addition, most were willing to accept referrals from the CDTS to their agencies.

Provider agency administrators. Most of the provider agencies participating in the focus group represented agencies that had participated in the distance learning pilot program. Pilot agencies that opted to continue as provider agencies did so because they felt it was a valuable option to offer their students and they had a system in place for delivering distance education. However, the change in the funding system resulted in a major shift

in how they delivered distance learning to students. In the pilot study, these agencies actively attempted to recruit students not currently served in existing classroom programs. Under the new system they did not have the financial resources to support these efforts and instead offered distance education as an option to students who came to the agency for services. All of the administrators recognized that the current system made it more financially advantageous to be a referring, rather than a provider, agency. Administrators suggested that it was important to determine if students gained greater benefits from having distance learning offered locally, rather than through a centralized agency, in deciding whether or not to continue as a provider agency.

Provider agency teachers. Provider agency teachers were primarily focused on meeting the needs of their distance learning students. Most felt that distance learning was a valuable resource for their students, particularly those with life circumstances that made attending classroom programs difficult. The provider agency teachers had developed a variety of successful teaching strategies and felt confident in their abilities to teach at a distance. All of them noted that they added distance teaching to an already full work load, and did a considerable amount of work from home and on their own time. Despite this, most of them were interested in continuing to teach at a distance, noting that it provided them an opportunity for growth as well as offering another option for their students.

Students. Students described their distance learning experiences as generally positive, although they also expressed some frustration about the process. Most of them felt that distance learning was better than they had anticipated it would be. They were surprised by, and valued, the extensive teacher interaction. None of them, however, felt that they had been adequately prepared for distance learning. Several expressed frustration with the amount and level of the work assigned, problems with accessing the online materials and not having access to the videotapes that were part of their curriculum. Most were interested in taking additional courses at a distance.

Conclusions. All of the adult educators recognized that this was a transitional year for distance learning in Pennsylvania and indicated awareness that it would take some time to smooth all of the details. Notably, they demonstrated a sincere concern about meeting students' needs and a willingness to extend themselves, and their agencies, in an effort to do so.

The changed approach for funding distance learning impacted on how provider agencies provided distance learning. Without dedicated distance learning funds, provider agencies reported that they could no longer attempt to recruit students not being served in classroom programs, as they had done in the pilot phase. Instead, they now offer distance learning as an option for students who are enrolled in classroom programs or have contacted the agency about services.

There is a need to refine the logistics involved in referring students to the CDTS. Referral contacts need additional guidance on recruiting, screening and orienting distance students, so that students have a better idea of what distance learning entails. Referral agencies also need handouts about the distance education process to provide to students

they refer. The centralized teachers need assessment and diagnostic information about the students who are referred to them.

Students are generally pleased with the distance learning experience. Providing a clearer understanding of the distance learning process and the effort that distance learning requires might ease some of the frustration they express and help increase retention.

Finally, focus group participants are unclear about how the Commonwealth plans to proceed in terms of providing distance learning and are concerned about the implications of those decisions for students, teachers and agencies.   It will be important for the Bureau to clearly articulate a vision for the future of distance learning in Pennsylvania.

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Pennsylvania is one of the pioneering states in offering distance education to meet the educational needs of adult learners. Starting in 2000, they implemented a series of experiments in which distance learning was made available through specially funded and trained pilot agencies across the state. These efforts indicated that distance education was indeed a viable option for adult learners in the state and the Bureau of Adult of Basic and Literacy Education ("the Bureau") expressed interest in expanding the potential of distance learning to reach more learners in the state. To accomplish this, in 2004 – 2005, Pennsylvania implemented a major shift in how distance education was delivered to adult learners throughout the state. The state moved from funding pilot sites to a centralized delivery system, with the goal of making distance learning available to more students in the state.   Under the new system, adult education agencies had three options concerning distance learning:

1. They could become a Provider Agency and provide distance education options directly to their students, although they would no longer receive additional funds as the pilot sites had.

2. They could become a Referring Agency and refer students interested in distance learning to the newly established Centralized Distance Teaching Service (CDTS). The Referring Agency and the CDTS would share credits for students served in this fashion. .

3. They could choose not to offer a distance learning option to their students.

The Centralized Distance Teaching Service was established under the leadership of TIU11. It was charged with providing distance instruction for students referred by the Referring Agencies and with providing training statewide to agencies interested in assuming either the Provider Agency or Referral Agency roles. In addition, students could self-refer to the CDTS and be assigned a distance learning teacher. The CDTS hired distance education instructors throughout the state to serve students referred to them.

In an effort to gain a better understanding of this new delivery approach, the Project IDEAL Support Center conducted telephone focus groups with key stakeholders involved in distance education in the state: provider agency administrators, provider agency teachers, referral agency contacts (both teachers and administrators in one group), CDTS teachers and distance education students. TIU11 staff recruited the participants for all of the adult educator groups. Students were recruited by both TIU staff and teachers at provider agencies. Teachers at provider agencies who recruited students and students

who participated each received a $20 gift card. Confirmation emails, including information on how to access the call, were sent by Project IDEAL staff. Leslie Petty, Associate Director of Project IDEAL, conducted all focus groups. Calls were not recorded, but the moderator took extensive notes on the discussions. Since there is no actual recording, no direct quotations are included in this report. The following table presents details on the number of participants in each of the groups:

Group	Number Recruited	Number Participating
CDTS teachers	7	7
Provider agency administrators	10	8
Provider agency teachers	9	8
Referral agency contacts	7	7
Distance learning students	8	6

Topics Explored

Protocols for each of the groups were developed by Project IDEAL and approved by TIU11 and the Bureau. Although each protocol reflected the issues of concern to the individual group, there were some areas of discussion in common across groups. Detailed protocols are included in the Appendix. The table below lists the major areas covered in each of the groups.

Focus Group	Key Topic Areas for Discussion
Centralized Distance Teaching Service Teachers	--student screening and preparation --getting to know the distance learning students --distance teaching skills and strategies --communication with the referring agency --communication with the distance learning project --balance of classroom learning and distance learning
Referring Agency Contacts	--the decision to become a referring agency --identifying distance learning students, intake and orientation --logistics of referring students --supporting students after referral --accepting referrals from the CDTS --professional development
Provider Agency Administrators	--the decision to become a provider agency --funding for distance learning

Focus Group	Key Topic Areas for Discussion
	--integrating distance learning into existing course offerings --professional development --balance of classroom learning and distance learning
Provider Agency Teachers	--distance teaching --benefits of distance learning for students -- balancing distance teaching and classroom teaching --professional development --balance of classroom learning and distance learning
Students	--reasons for choosing distance learning --curricula and course of study --your distance learning teacher --positive aspects and frustrations of distance learning --customer service --interest in taking additional distance learning courses --balance of classroom learning and distance learning

Findings from Groups

Because each of the groups had a unique perspective, results from each group will be presented separately.

Centralized Distance Teachers

The centralized distance teachers are located throughout the Commonwealth and work with students referred by the referring agencies. They expressed some frustration with the preparation that the students receive prior to referral and with both the quality and quantity of information they initially receive from the referring agency. They have developed methods to get to know their students and to provide instruction and support at a distance for those students.

Student screening and preparation. The centralized distance teachers were asked to reflect on how well prepared for distance learning their students were. They indicated that there were some weaknesses in the testing done, the communication of testing results and orientation that made it more challenging to begin instruction at the appropriate place for the student. Many centralized distance teachers had concerns about the testing done at the referral agencies. In some cases, the centralized teachers received incomplete or partial test results and in other cases they received test scores but no diagnostic information. While the overall score is useful in determining if the student is a good candidate for distance learning, the diagnostics are important for instructional planning. If the centralized teachers did not have this diagnostic information, it slowed down the

instructional process; the centralized teachers then needed to conduct their own assessment before they could start instruction with the students. In addition, a few centralized teachers commented that the referring agencies tested using the CASAS, while they were only familiar with the TABE. They suggested that it would be helpful to either provide instruction for them on how to interpret the CASAS results and diagnostics or require the referring agencies to also administer the TABE.

The centralized teachers also perceived some weaknesses in the orientation that students received prior to beginning distance learning. They felt that students often did not understand the amount of work involved in distance learning, noting that many students mistakenly thought it would be easier than studying in a classroom. Few of the students had been exposed to the curriculum they would be studying at their orientation, so they had no idea of what to expect. One teacher suggested that it would be useful if the referring agency had the student work through a sample lesson as part of the referral process. Some of the centralized teachers also commented on the need for the students to have strong academic skills, with several recommending that students should have at least a ninth grade reading level to succeed.

Moreover, teachers suggested that these weaknesses in screening and orientation had an impact on student retention. They commented that they lose a lot of students in the first two months if the expectations are not clear and believe that better screening might alleviate that problem. They also suggested it would be useful if the students were screened to ensure that they had appropriate computer skills to study online at a distance. One teacher recommended that the referring agency should spend two to three days getting students involved for distance learning, including conducting standardized tests, determining best media for learning and the assessing students' technology skills.

Getting to know their students. The centralized distance teachers reported that it was relatively easy to get to know their distance students. Most teachers made a personal connection with the student, in addition to the academic connection. They engaged the students in conversation and made notes about each student that they could later mention in communication with them. Some teachers revealed more information about themselves to their distance students than they tend to do in a classroom setting. A few mentioned that they feel closer to their distance students than they do to classroom students, because they have more one-on-one conversations with them.

Distance teaching skills and strategies. The centralized distance teachers reported using *WES, GEDC, Pre-GED Connection* (*Pre-GEDC*) and *GED Illinois* with their students, but did not mention any difference in teaching strategies based upon curricula. The teachers identified several skills needed for distance teaching, including strong written communication skills, organization and flexibility. Others noted that the distance teacher needed to be a "cheerleader" or an "enticer" to keep students motivated and engaged in the distance learning program.

Teachers worked with their students to help them meet their goals. Some indicated that they received goals from the referring agency, while others obtained this information in

their initial contact with the student. Most reported they helped the student set short-term goals that they could achieve en route to their larger goal.

The teachers also discussed the practical aspects of their distance teaching. Many of their students are working with workbooks and/or videotapes. The teachers commented on the amount of their time spent on preparing and mailing materials to students, as well as the costs associated with these mailings. Another suggested it might be more efficient to have a centralized mailing center to get materials to students. One teacher no longer has her students return the workbooks, but instead provides them with an answer sheet to return to her. This allows the student to keep the reference material and provides the teacher and student with something they can discuss in a phone call. Still another teacher includes a summary sheet in the materials she sends to her students. Students return it with details about what they worked on and questions for the teacher. The teacher uses that information for phone calls with the student and completing the seat time log.

Communication with the referring agency. The centralized distance teachers felt that it was important to maintain communication with the referring agency. Some reported that they had established good communication, most frequently through email. Most teachers indicated that they tended to initiate the communication, but that the referring agency contacts were receptive and responsive. Several stressed that when they worked together with the referring agency to communicate with the student and keep them focused, it was more effective than if only the distance teacher was in touch with the students.

Other teachers suggested ways in which they would like better interaction between the referring agency and the distance teacher. One teacher indicated that there was a need for greater communication with the referring agency around issues such as scheduling GED practice tests. Noting that the Official Practice Tests for the GED can not be done via mail, they suggested that the referring agency might administer these for the student, until a way is found for online tests to be made available to distance learners. Another teacher suggested that the referring agency should include a list of GED testing dates in the student's local area to help the distance teacher understand what the student may be aiming for.

Communication with the distance learning project. Centralized distance teachers were overwhelmingly positive about their interactions with distance learning project staff at TIU11. They reported frequent communication with them, noting that the project initiated the majority of the contacts. Teachers noted that project staff responds quickly and finds out answers if they do not readily know them. Teachers also commented that the project staff was open to questions, no matter how crazy they appeared to be, and sent them needed materials promptly. Teachers felt that this was one of the strongest features of the distance learning program.

Balance of classroom learning and distance learning. Centralized distance teachers reported that their students varied in their use of classroom and distance learning. More than half of the teachers reported that all of their students used distance learning only, at least initially. One teacher reported that her students with lower level math skills sought out some additional face-to-face support. Another noted that she had "seasonal" distance

students, who moved in and out of distance as circumstances dictated. The other teachers reported that their students were studying both at a distance and in a classroom and noted that this arrangement could be suggested by either the student or the teacher. One teacher reported that her students' patterns depended on the curricula they were studying. Her GED students all worked only at a distance, while her *WES* students were split between those studying only at a distance and those combining distance and classroom programs.

Referring Agency Contacts

This group consisted of both teachers and administrators at referral agencies who were responsible for making the connection between their students and the CDTS. Many of them were new to distance learning, but a few represented agencies that had been involved in the distance learning pilot project. Their agencies opted to become referring agencies in order to provide additional services to their students without significant funding or staffing demands. They were interested in remaining involved with the students they referred and were generally pleased with the communication with the CDTS. However, they wanted additional training in how to orient and refer students, as well as materials to provide directly to students selecting distance learning.

The decision to become a referring agency. The referring agency contacts reported that their choice to become a referring agency was based on their desire to offer distance learning to their students and the realities of their funding and staffing. Several agencies who had participated in the distance learning pilot program opted to become referral agencies, rather then provider agencies, because it was financially advantageous for them to do so. One agency is in the unique position of being both a provider and referral agency, and uses those options to best meet students' needs. Some of the providers new to distance learning reported that they were small agencies which would not have the resources to provide these services on their own. They appreciate that distance learning is available to students in rural areas who may lack transportation to an adult education center, helps students develop technology skills and provides flexibility for students who wish to study but have complicated lives. One agency also noted that although their program closes down in the summer, the CDTS continues throughout the year, allowing students to continue their studies.

Identifying distance learning students, intake and orientation. Referring agencies used different approaches to identify potential distance learners. Some used the information gathered during intake, including test scores and goals as one guideline, while others were more likely to refer from their classroom programs. Several agencies commented that they looked for students who were motivated, wanted to do more work and were independent learners; they usually assessed these characteristics from their experience with the student in the classroom. One agency indicated that they expected students to let them know if they had difficulty with transportation or other circumstances that would make it difficult to attend a classroom program; these students were then referred to the distance learning program. One agency based their referrals on students' technology competence and another had a successful distance learning student act as an unofficial, but enthusiastic, recruiter for the program.

The logistics of referring students to the CDTS. One of the most challenging aspects of being a referral agency is the process of referring a student to the CDTS and having that student assigned to a teacher. Particularly at the beginning of the program, the referring agencies were not confident they understood who was a good candidate for distance learning. They recognize that not all students are likely to succeed studying at a distance and would like some clear guidelines on which to base their referrals. The referral agency contacts reported confusion about the necessary skills students need to have to participate in distance learning. One agency said that they had received conflicting information about the minimum reading level as well as some suggestions that it might be acceptable to refer a student with a lower reading level, but high motivation.

The referring agencies also seemed to be somewhat unclear on what they needed to do to adequately orient a student for distance learning. Most include their potential distance learning students in the standard orientation for all of their students, although some add a quick computer assessment. None of the agencies had orientations geared specifically for distance learners, but one participant indicated that due to staff complaints about additional work, she was now conducting individual orientations for potential distance students. None of the referring agencies mentioned that their orientation covered an introduction to the curriculum that the student would be using, with several commenting that they did not know what curriculum their students would be studying. Additionally, none of the orientations included a component on skills needed for successful distance learning.

They also voiced concerns about the length of time it takes for their student to be assigned a distance learning teacher and their inability to provide the student with adequate information about the distance learning process. Referring agencies report that it typically takes a minimum of two weeks after they make a referral for their students to be assigned to a distance learning teacher. They all feel that this is too long, particularly when students are excited and want to begin to study. This is compounded by their lack of knowledge of what to tell the student about the process and the fact that they have no written materials about the program to give to the student. Referring agency contacts indicated that when students enroll in their classroom programs, they receive a packet of information. Students who are referred to the CDTS are told that someone will be in touch with them, but leave the agency with no additional information. The referring agencies would like to have a packet for these students, including a tentative timeline, information about distance learning and the curriculum to be used, and contact information for the CDTS. They also requested that the CDTS contact the student more promptly, if only to let the student that their information had been received and that they were being matched with a teacher. A few referral agency contacts mentioned that all of the students they had referred had been assigned to the same teacher and wondered if it would be more efficient if they contacted that teacher directly.

Supporting students after referral. The referring agency contacts were very interested in remaining in contact with both the referred student and the distance learning teacher, commenting that this would provide the best support for the student. Some reported that they had extensive and excellent communication with their students' distance learning teacher and were able to work with them to coordinate support. This interaction typically

occurred through phone or email contact every week or two. The distance teacher provided information on what the student was working on and where they might need additional support. The referring agencies indicated that this information helped them encourage the students. Others reported less frequent communication with their students' distance learning teachers. One agency noted that they received monthly reports, but that they did not receive the reports for February, March and April until near the end of May. Another participant who had only infrequent contact with her students' distance learning teacher noted that increased involvement of the referring teacher would likely benefit the student.

Accepting referrals from the CDTS. Most of the referral agency contacts reported that their agencies had received referrals from the CDTS for students seeking classroom programs. While this initially surprised some of them, most of them were comfortable with this relationship. They commented that this showed that the focus was on the students' success and that the various agencies were working together to that end. One agency said that referrals could be problematic if they came at the end of their contract year when their classroom programs were not running and one was frustrated to receive a referral at the start of the summer even though their agency did run programs through the summer. They recommended that the CDTS have a list indicating at what times agencies would be open to referrals. In addition, one participant expressed concern that at one time the number of referrals to her agency was overwhelming and suggested that the CDTS might spread out the referrals among different agencies.

Professional development. Referral agency contacts who received training in the early phases of the centralized delivery model felt a need for more, or continued, training. Because the program was in its infancy, procedures and expectations were not fully articulated. Now that agencies and the CDTS are more experienced, they think it would be helpful to conduct additional trainings. Some participants suggested that additional training might focus on screening and orienting distance students. One referring agency contact indicated that two different types of training were needed: one for direct service staff, such as recruiters and receptionists, who dealt directly with potential students and one from an administrative perspective. Participants who attended more recent trainings conducted by the CDTS offered very positive feedback about these sessions. They commented that the trainings were well organized, covered necessary content and presented a wealth of information. All referring agency contacts reported that the CDTS staff was extremely helpful and responsive in dealing with their questions and concerns. They received prompt responses to their questions and felt that CDTS staff went out of their way to locate information or find answers for them.

Provider Agency Administrators

Most of the provider agencies participating in the focus group represented agencies that had participated in the distance learning pilot program; two participants in the focus group had not been involved in the pilot program. The participants who had been part of the distance learning pilot program were accustomed to receiving additional funds for offering distance learning. This new approach was a major shift in how they approached distance learning and impacted how they delivered distance learning to students. The

agencies that had not been involved in the pilot program saw this as a way to extend their reach and provide additional options for learners.

The decision to become a provider agency. Participants were asked to explain why their agencies decided to act as Provider Agencies to deliver distance education to their adult learners. For most of those who had participated in the pilot program, it was a way for them to continue to deliver services they felt were valuable to their learners. In addition, they noted that they already had trained teachers and systems in place for delivering distance education. Some commented that this was an important option to offer their learners. Others noted that it provided their students an opportunity to build their technology skills as well as their academic skills. One program new to providing distance learning reported that they saw this as a good fit, as they already offered a considerable amount of computer-based learning. The other novice provider agency hoped that distance learning would allow them to expand their borders and increase enrollment.

Funding for distance learning. Agencies that had received funding for distance learning as part of the pilot program indicated that the change in funding parameters for distance learning forced them to make changes in their distance learning programs. Several participants commented that the lack of funding made it difficult to retain skilled distance education teachers, noting that it created additional work without additional support. Most agencies reported that the teachers were expected to do the distance instruction in addition to the other job requirements. They also noted being unable to have a dedicated teacher meant that there was no one at the agency to act as an advocate for distance learning or actively promote it, both within and outside of the agency. Participants also noted that the change in funding had caused them to change how they recruited students to participate in distance learning. In the pilot programs, they had actively recruited students who might not be likely to come to traditional program, often forging relationships with other social service agencies or recruiting in non-traditional venues. Under the current system, their agencies are offering distance learning as an option to those students who come to agency seeking services, but they do not feel they have sufficient resources to continue the active recruiting done in the pilot program.

The financial benefits for referring students, rather than directly providing distance learning, were evident to these participants. One administrator noted that they will not continue to be a provider agency because of financial concerns; several others plan to continue for at least one more year but can not project beyond that. A few administrators reported that they want to remain providers because they advocate distance learning and feel it is a key to life long learning. There was some concern that the current funding approach was removing the focus of distance learning from the local agencies. Administrators suggested that it was important to determine if students gained greater benefits from having distance learning offered locally, rather than through a centralized agency, in deciding whether or not to continue as a provider agency.

Integrating distance learning into course offerings, delivery models and curriculum.
Most of the administrators did not find it difficult to integrate distance learning into their adult education offerings. Several administrators indicated that without funding

earmarked for distance learning, it was necessary to use a blended approach in which distance learning students were drawn from classrooms students for whom teachers thought this might be appropriate. While only discussed briefly, the blended approaches ranged from providing the opportunities for distance students to come into the agency for work with the teacher as needed to using distance learning approaches as a supplement to classroom learning.

All of the provider agencies either present distance learning as an option to students who come to their center or have teachers recommend distance learning for students in their classes. There is little, if any, active marketing of distance learning to students who have not already made contact with the agency; administrators report that they do not have the financial resources to do this.

The provider agencies are using *GED Connection* (*GEDC*), *Workplace Essential Skills* (*WES*) and *Madison Heights/Lifelines* (MH/LL) with their distance learning students. Administrators reported that they used supplemental materials with all of these curricula. One agency has also been exploring the use of *GED Illinois.* There was some concern about counting supplemental time, as well as counting both classroom and distance time for students in blended models.

Professional development. The amount and type of professional development in which provider agency administrators had participated varied based on whether or not they had been involved in the pilot project. All of the pilot project administrators participated in extensive training at the start of the pilot program and/or had taken the online introduction to distance learning--DL101. Some had also participated in DL102 classes focusing on either *GEDC* or *WES*. One administrator reported attending the University of Phoenix and receiving a master's degree online in adult education and distance learning. Another had taken advantage of professional development opportunities through a national social service organization and one mentioned online classes for instructors on Blackboard.

Administrators viewed professional development as playing a key role in helping their agencies improve recruitment and retention of distance learning students. One suggested that DL101 should be required for all new instructors. Another stressed the need for distance teachers to be extremely knowledgeable about the distance curriculum, and pointed out the need to set aside time for that training. Other suggestions for professional development included encouraging distance teachers to have experience as distance learning students and building a virtual learning community to allow distance educators to support each other.

Balance between classroom and distance learning. Provider agency administrators had differing perspectives on the balance of classroom and distance learning among their students. Some indicated that it was not possible at their agency for students to dual enroll – that is, to take two classes at the same time – if the classes were supported by the same funding source. One commented that her agency did permit students to be enrolled in both a distance learning class and a classroom program simultaneously. A few administrators noted that many of their students "float" between distance learning and

classroom programs; they felt some of these students were happy to be off-site while other students would have been willing to learn in a classroom. Distance learning was seen as one of several possible tools to help students reach their educational goals.

Suggestions for improving distance education in Pennsylvania. Not surprisingly, many of the suggestions offered by the provider administrators centered on financial resources. Administrators suggested providing funds specifically for distance learning, so they could continue their efforts to reach new populations, in addition to providing additional services for students who come to the agency. They also requested that the state continue to pay for licenses for distance learning curricula and provide free texts for students. But the provider administrators had other recommendations that went beyond the monetary issues. They asked for continued staff development, echoing the earlier emphasis on the importance of professional development. They also raised issues about technology, asking for an educational platform that could be used with students and for professional development and suggested increasing the selection of acceptable distance learning curricula. Finally, some administrators took a broader view and reflected about the philosophy of the Bureau and different approaches to distance learning. There was a sense that the current approach is focused on individualized and self-paced distance instruction and less on building local distance learning communities. They also raised questions about the use of pure distance versus blended distance approaches. Administrators wanted a greater understanding of what direction distance learning in the state was headed and how this would impact both learners and adult education providers.

Provider Agency Teachers

Provider agency teachers were primarily focused on providing services to their distance learning students, while noting the challenges of adding this task to their jobs. Most felt that distance learning was a valuable resource for their students and felt confident in their abilities to teach at a distance.

Teaching at a distance. Provider agency teachers were asked to reflect on the skills necessary for distance teaching. Flexibility, being able to individualize instruction for each student and being well versed in the curriculum, were seen as critical skills. Teachers also mentioned being able to create a sense of continuity from one assignment to the next, making assignments meaningful to students and being aware of available resources as skills distance teachers need to cultivate. They also talked about being able and willing to use multiple approaches to meet students' needs.

Most of the provider teachers indicated that their agency recruited distance learning students through their intake process, from students who call the agency and from word of mouth. Some had contacts with welfare-to-work programs and one received referrals from a local prison when men were released. A few commented that they had advertised and done more aggressive recruiting as part of the pilot project, but those activities were no longer continuing.

Teachers varied in how they planned for their students, communicated with them and supported them. Several use the TABE as a starting place for developing an educational

plan. Several commented that they mail or drop off materials for their students to work on, while others rely more on phone and online communication. One teacher reported that most of her distance students contacted her through the LiteracyLink websites, so she has little information about them to use in planning instruction. Another commented that much of her communication and support was accomplished through "trial and error," as she attempted to find what worked best for an individual student. Teachers also reported that the overwhelming majority of their distance students used a blended approach, combining distance learning with opportunities for face-to-face support.

Balancing distance teaching and classroom teaching. The amount of time that the provider teachers work as distance teachers varied, but for most distance teaching was a small portion of their work load. Their estimates of paid distance teaching time ranged from approximately two hours per week (based on a 40-hour week) to between six and ten hours a week. One teacher estimated that although about 1/9 of her paid time was designated for distance learning, she spent considerably more unpaid time supporting her distance students.

Most of the teachers were fairly comfortable balancing their distance and classroom teaching responsibilities. Those who had been involved in the pilot project reported that over time they discovered a rhythm to juggling the two responsibilities. Teachers did note however, that they did a considerable amount of their distance teaching from home and on their own time. Teachers voiced some frustration in trying to stay current in responding to students' work, particularly if they had a large roster of distance students.

Benefits of distance learning for students. The provider agency teachers were in agreement that distance learning was a valuable option for their adult learners. They commented that teaching at a distance has made them feel as if they have made a difference in peoples' lives. It was seen as particularly beneficial for students whose work schedules made it difficult to attend classes; one teacher reported that she had several students, who would not have attended classes, earn their GED at a distance. In addition, teachers noted that distance learning served to motivate students and keep them interested in learning, helped students gain technology skills and built their confidence.

Professional development. The provider teachers who had been involved in the distance learning pilot program had extensive professional development opportunities including the initial training session, DL101, DL102, DL103 and other courses offered by the Bureau. Other provider teachers attended training sessions offered by the CDTS over the last year. One teacher was unable to attend the courses because of work schedules and obtained the materials from a colleague. Teachers expressed an interest in having a workshop that allowed them to explore the various curricula so they could decide what would be best for their students and their agency.

Balance of classroom learning and distance learning. Teachers reported variations in how their students chose to balance distance study and classroom study. Some indicated that once students started studying at a distance, they usually chose to continue with that option. Another noted that her students either worked 100% online or attended class 100% of the time. In contrast, some teachers noted that their students were able to, and

did, enroll in both a classroom and distance learning program at the same time. Others reported that their distance students frequently used it as a means to continue their education when they were no longer able to attend a classroom program.

Interest in continuing to be a distance learning teacher. Almost all of the provider teachers were interested in continuing to teach at a distance; the one teacher who was not interested indicated that her agency would no longer offer this option to students. Teachers felt that distance teaching helped them grow professionally and had the potential to change the way they teach. They also were interested in continuing because they felt it was useful for their students and provided another way for them to help students achieve their goals.

Suggestions for improving distance education in Pennsylvania. Provider teachers were asked for their ideas on how to improve distance education in the state. Suggestions included making more people in the state aware of the availability of these programs, providing continued professional development opportunities to encourage more teachers to try distance teaching and exploring the use of additional curricula. In addition, teachers expressed interest in expanding the use of technology used for distance learning, including a webcam for demonstrating math problems, using programs such as Yahoo Scribble and other means to more effectively communicate with students.

Students

Students described their distance learning experiences as generally positive, although they also expressed some frustration about the process. Most of them felt that distance learning was better than they had anticipated it would be, largely because they had not expected so much teacher support and instruction. Frustrations centered on the amount and level of the work, problems with accessing the materials and feeling unprepared at the beginning of the program.

Reasons for choosing distance learning. Several students reported opting to study at a distance because of the flexibility it offered and the fact that they could work at their own time and at their own pace. Others selected distance learning because they wanted more instruction than was available at their local adult education provider; these students often enrolled in both a classroom and a distance learning course. Students also noted that because distance learning was geared toward the individual, it offered them a greater chance for interaction with their teacher.

Students were asked if their distance learning experience had been what they had expected. Almost all of them indicated that it was better than they had anticipated. Many students had expected that they would simply be sent instructional materials and expected to work largely on their own; they were pleasantly surprised with the amount of teacher support they received. They were pleased that their teacher regularly contacted them to keep them focused; a few commented that the combination of support from the distance teacher and the local agency was effective in keeping them working.

However, most of the students reported that they did not feel well prepared for studying at a distance. They would have liked to have had clearer expectations for the course before beginning. A few students did comment that they did not receive all of the materials related to their curriculum (usually videotapes) and that this made it more difficult to complete the work.

Curricula and course of study. Most of the students reported that they were studying for their GED, with a few specifically mentioning the use of *GED Illinois*. Others identified particular academic areas (e.g., poetry, reading comprehension, social studies, math) and one student indicated he was studying *WES*. Some were working online and others used print materials sent by their teacher.

The distance learning teacher. Students were generally very pleased with their distance learning teacher. They felt they were highly qualified in the areas they were teaching and that they did an excellent job of explaining information. They reported that they had frequent contact with their teacher, either by phone, email or materials sent through the regular mail. A few noted that their teachers were motivators, who helped to keep them focused on their studies.

Positive aspects of distance learning. The ability to work when it fit their schedule was one of the strongest elements of distance learning for these students. They also commented on the support their teachers provided and the encouragement they received to continue their studies. Students also liked the fact that distance learning allowed them to work at a pace that was comfortable for them and with materials geared to their individual needs.

Frustrations of distance learning. For several students, the biggest frustration was the amount and difficulty of the work assigned. One student suggested that it would be better to send less material at once so that it was not so overwhelming. Another felt he needed lower level materials than his instructor had provided. A few commented that they thought there was too much reading involved. Another student commented that he had difficulty accessing the online program and that it was frustrating to work through the technical aspects of using it. Still another talked about the need to change distance teachers because the first teacher to whom she was assigned did not communicate effectively with her.

Customer service provided by the distance learning program. Students gave high marks to the customer service they received from the distance learning program. They felt they had good communication with their teachers and that every effort was made to provide the help they needed. They also commented that the distance learning program did everything the students asked them to do to help them meet their goals.

Interest in taking additional distance learning courses. All of the students were interested in taking additional distance learning courses, although a few specified that it would depend on the level of the particular course. One student planned to enroll in college in January and was interested in taking a college level distance class after she had

acclimated to the college work load. Another student commented that this approach would let her continue learning throughout her life.

Balance of classroom learning and distance learning. Students varied in how they balanced their use of classroom and distance learning. About half of the participants reported that they were taking a GED prep class in addition to the distance learning class and that their time was split roughly evenly between the two. The others reported that they were doing more distance learning than classroom learning at this time, although they had been classroom learners in the past.

Conclusions

All of the focus groups among adult education professionals recognized that this had been a transitional year for delivering distance education to adult learners in Pennsylvania. Not surprisingly, perceptions of that transition varied by group. However, all groups demonstrated a sincere concern about meeting students' needs and a willingness to extend themselves, and their agencies, in an effort to do so.

The provider administrators, and to a lesser degree, the provider teachers, expressed the greatest degree of frustration. This frustration was not a simple reaction to the loss of funding, but rather was focused on how the funding change impacted their ability to serve their learners. Although these agencies continued to offer distance learning, there was a dramatic shift in the target audience for their distance efforts. The pilot efforts had emphasized the potential of distance learning to reach students not currently served by traditional classroom programs; this focus encouraged agencies to actively and creatively form partnerships and look for new ways to attract potential students. In contrast, under the current funding system, provider agencies report that their distance learning efforts have become primarily another option for students who have already identified themselves as ready to learn, rather than as a way to expand their reach. This change was necessitated by the inability to pay for sufficient teacher and/or recruiter efforts needed to reach new learner populations. Therefore, an unintended outcome of the change in the funding structure was a change in who agencies attempted to reach using distance learning.

The relationship between the referring agencies and the centralized distance teachers is still in its infancy. Both groups recognize that they have been experiencing "growing pains" as they learn about each other's needs and expectations. Referral agencies express some confusion about what they are expected to do in screening and orienting students. The centralized teachers express some frustration about the preparation of the students who are referred to them and the information about the students they receive; they suggest that these weaknesses may be related to problems with student retention. There is an opportunity to improve the communication between the referring agencies and the CDTS and a need to refine the logistics of the referral process. Both groups express optimism that the processes can be clarified and smoothed out over time.

Students focused on how well distance education was able to meet their individual needs. Most of them had very positive reactions to the experience, indicating that it was better than they had expected. They were surprised by, and valued, the extensive teacher interaction. None of them, however, felt that they had been adequately prepared for distance learning. In addition, some expressed frustration with the amount and level of work assigned. These difficulties might be alleviated with better orientation of students to the distance learning program and better coordination between the referring agency and the CDTS in sharing diagnostic information about the student.

Finally, the groups suggest that there is a need to articulate a clear vision for distance learning in the Commonwealth. Focus group participants are unclear about how the Commonwealth plans to proceed in terms of providing distance learning. Decisions about funding for distance education and delivery models frame other decisions, including the target audience for distance education, curricular choices and professional development. Adult educators in the state are looking for clear direction so they can use distance learning effectively to meet their students' needs.

Appendix

The protocols used to guide each of the conference calls are included in the Appendix. These protocols create a framework for the groups and identify the primary topics to be covered, although the moderator may need to adapt them depending upon the responses of the participants.

Focus Group Protocol: Students

Introduction

Introduce moderator and participants, explain purpose for group, set ground rules (e.g., talk one at a time, not looking for consensus, disagree respectfully, no names will be used in reporting), inform them that moderator will be taking notes and writing up a report

Reasons for Choosing Distance Learning

- Why did you select DL rather than a traditional classroom for this course?

- Was it what you expected? Why or why not? How well did it fit your needs?

- How well prepared were you to study at a distance? What, if anything, might have helped you to be better prepared?

- In the last school year, did you also enroll in a classroom program? Why or why not? If so, how much of your class work was done at a distance and how much in a classroom?   Why did you decide to arrange your studies in that way?

Curricula and Course of Study

- What (e.g., GED, workplace skills) did you study at a distance?

- What types of materials were used in your distance education program? (e.g., videos, computer, workbooks).

- How easy or difficult was it for you to work with these materials? To get the materials to use?

- How well do you think these materials covered what you wanted to or needed to learn?

Your Teacher

- How often did you have contact with your DL teacher? What form did that contact take (phone, face-to-face, email, etc.)

- How well did your teacher: respond to your questions, explain things about which you were confused, stay in touch with you, help you reach your goals for the course?

Overall Reactions

- What were the most positive aspects of the DL experience?

- What were the most frustrating aspects of the DL experience?

- How well did your DL experience meet your needs as the "customer?" What type of "customer service" did you receive? What changes, if any, would you suggest to help improve the "customer service?"

- Are you in taking additional DL courses? Why or why not? If not, what might make you willing to try DL again?

Thank students for their participation.

Focus Group Protocol: Provider Agency Administrators

Introduction

Introduce moderator and participants, explain purpose for group, set ground rules (e.g., talk one at a time, not looking for consensus, disagree respectfully, no names will be used in reporting), inform that moderator will be taking notes and writing up a report

The Decision to become a Provider Agency

- What were the key factors in your agency's decision to become a provider agency? How did your experience (if any) in the DL Project's Pilot program inform that decision?

- How has DL benefited your students? Agency? Teachers? Has it met the students, agencies' and teachers' needs?

Funding for DL

- Funding for DL changed in PA this past year. Did those funding changes influence your decision to offer DL directly to your students? If so, how?

- Have the funding changes affected your DL services? If so, in what ways?

- How do you financially support your DL program? How well do you feel this is working? What changes, if any, would you like to see for the future?

- If the funding approach remains the same, how likely are you to continue to serve as a provider agency for DL? Explain your response.

Integrating DL into your Existing Course Offerings

- How is DL offered at your agency? Who handles recruitment, screening students, orientation and teaching? How are these tasks done? What are the biggest challenges you face?

- What model of DL do you offer (e.g., total distance, blended)? Briefly describe this model. Why did you select this approach?

- Can your students enroll in DL and a classroom program at the same time? Why or why not? Do many students choose to do this?

- What do you think would be useful to increase enrollment in DL at your agency? What do you think would be useful to increase retention and improve achievement?

Professional Development

- What professional development have you attended? Has the professional development met your needs? What was beneficial? What could be improved or strengthened?

- What additional professional development would be helpful to you as a provider agency?

Suggestions for Improvement

- What suggestions do you have for improving the delivery of DL in PA next year? What can be done to strengthen the program for students and teachers?

Thank teachers for their participation.

Focus Group Protocol: Referring Agency Contacts

Introduction

Introduce moderator and participants, explain purpose for group, set ground rules (e.g., talk one at a time, not looking for consensus, disagree respectfully, no names will be used in reporting), inform that moderator will be taking notes and writing up a report

Becoming Familiar with the DL Project

- What prompted your agency to become a referring agency? What other information or support was useful in that decision making process?

Initial Steps: Identifying Distance Learners, Intake and Orientation

- How does your agency identify potential distance learners? Are you satisfied with your approach? What might be helpful?

- What does your intake procedure cover? Is that adequate? What, if anything, might help DL students?

- What do you include in your orientation for DL students? How comfortable are with doing this? Why/why not? What other resources would be beneficial?

Logistics of Referring Students to the CDTS

- How easy or difficult do you find it to refer students to the CDTS? What works well for your agency? What are the challenges?

- What changes, if any, would you like to see made in the referral process itself?

Supporting DL Students after Referral

- How much contact do you have with your DL students after you refer them to the CDTS? What form(s) does that contact take?

- How easy it is to continue to support these students?

- How valuable do you think that support is?

- How often to you have contact with your students' distance teacher? What form(s) does that take? What could be improved?

- What proportion of the students you refer for DL is also enrolled in a classroom program at your agency? How that does dual-enrollment approach work?

- What suggestions, if any, do you have for making this more effective for both the teacher and the student?

Communication with the CDTS

- How often do you have communication with the CDTS? About the students you referred? About the DL Program itself?

- How satisfied are you with that communication? What could be done to strengthen those lines of communication?

Accepting Referrals from the CDTS

- Has the CDTS made referrals to your agency? If so, how often has this occurred?

- What is your reaction to these referrals? How would you like them to be handled in the future?

Professional Development

- Has the professional development met your needs? What was beneficial? What could be improved or strengthened?

- What additional professional development would be helpful to you as a referring agency?

Suggestions for Improvement

- What suggestions do you have for improving the referral system for delivering DL for next year? What can be done to strengthen the program for students and teachers?

Thank teachers for their participation.

Focus Group Protocol: Provider Agency Teachers

Introduction

Introduce moderator and participants, explain purpose for group, set ground rules (e.g., talk one at a time, not looking for consensus, disagree respectfully, no names will be used in reporting), inform that moderator will be taking notes and writing up a report

Distance Teaching

- What do you see as the most important skills for teaching at a distance?

- How do approach what your students will work on? How do you develop your students' learning plan (i.e. goals, activities, syllabus, etc)?

- How do you communicate with students, provide feedback to them, keep them motivated, assess their work?

- What proportion of your time is devoted to distance teaching? Classroom teaching? How easy or difficult is it to balance those roles?

- How has DL benefited your students? Has it met their needs?

Integrating DL into your Existing Course Offerings

- What are the biggest challenges you face as a distance teacher?

- What do you think would be useful to increase enrollment in DL at your agency? What do you think would be useful to increase retention and improve achievement?

Balance of DL and Classroom Learning

- What proportion of the students work is done at a distance? Who determines the balance of DL—the teacher or student?

- Do you think this balance between DL and classroom is appropriate? If not, what would be a better balance and why?

Professional Development

- What professional development have you attended? Has the PD met your needs? What was beneficial? What could be improved or strengthened?

- What additional professional development would be helpful to you as a teacher at a provider agency?

Suggestions for Improvement

- What suggestions do you have for improving the delivery of DL in PA next year? What can be done to strengthen the program for students and teachers?

Thank teachers for their participation.

Focus Group Protocol: Centralized Distance Teaching Service Teachers

Introduction

Introduce moderator and participants, explain purpose for group, set ground rules (e.g., talk one at a time, not looking for consensus, disagree respectfully, no names will be used in reporting), inform that moderator will be taking notes and writing up a report

Student Screening and Preparation

- How well *oriented to DL* are the students who are referred to you? What, if anything is lacking? What is helpful?

- What academic skills do you feel are important for success? Do the referred students have the necessary *academic skills* for DL with the selected curricula? If not, what would you like to see done to better screen students?

Distance Teaching

- What do you see as the most important skills for teaching at a distance?

- How do approach what your students will work on? How do you develop your students' learning plan (i.e. goals, activities, syllabus, etc)?

- How do you get to know your students? What works best for you? What are some of the challenges/frustrations of getting to know your students?

- How do you communicate with students, provide feedback to them, keep them motivated, assess their work?

- What do you think would be useful to increase retention and improve achievement?

- What additional training or resources would be useful to you? Why?

Balance of DL and Classroom Learning

- What proportion of the students work is done at a distance? Who determines the balance of DL—the teacher or student?

- Do you think this balance between DL and classroom is appropriate? If not, what would be a better balance and why?

Communication with the Referring Agency

- How often do you have contact with the referring agency?

- What is the purpose of these communications?

- Do you see a need for more or additional types of communication with the referring agency? If so, what?

Communication with the DLP

- How often do you have contact with the DLP?

- What is the purpose of these communications?

- Do you see a need for more or additional types of communication with the referring agency? If so, what?

Suggestions for Improvement

- What suggestions do you have for improving the delivery of centralized DL for next year? What can be done to strengthen the program for students and teachers?

Thank teachers for their participation.