

August 10, 2018

The National Literacy Act of 1991 authorized funding for State Literacy Resource Centers, which were administered by the (then) Office of Vocational and Adult Education. Congress “recognized that high-quality instruction is the foundation of all education and that quality instruction is informed instruction, and that the State Literacy Resource Centers (could) help adult education practitioners across the nation find and access the most current materials in their specific issue areas.”¹

Although much of that original funding was subsequently rescinded, states and the federal government itself have acknowledged the usefulness and value of professional development centers for adult literacy, ESOL and basic education providers, funding research, materials development, conferences, websites and centers themselves in order to further adult education practitioners’ abilities to learn from and with one another, to access important research and materials and to communicate across programs and disciplines.

In 2006, Rhode Island’s then-director of adult education, Johan Uvin, realizing the importance of this work, developed a request for proposals to support professional development in a systemic and systematic manner. The proposal sought professional development designed to build community, knowledge and action amongst a diverse range of adult educators in order to strengthen their ability to provide quality instruction to adult learners across the board – from basic English language learners, to those preparing for work and/or secondary studies.

Since that time, the field has collaborated within and beyond the state through the efforts of the RI Adult Education Professional Development Center (PDC), in collaboration as well with the New England Literacy Resource Center and through varying other professional learning opportunities offered through LINCS, TESOL, COABE, ProLiteracy and other associations and entities.

Initiatives within and beyond the PDC have included development and use of data for program design and development, access to and expansion of technologies for classroom learning and practitioner education, conferences, professional learning communities of practice, cross-discipline and program communication and fertilization.

¹ <https://www2.ed.gov/pubs/TeachersGuide/slrc.html>

Most recently, the RI Department of Education revised the ways in which RIDE-funded professional development can occur and, in lieu of collaborative efforts across programs, have supplanted a professional development center with a single coordinator, acting as a monitoring agent to review professional development plans within funded agencies. This coordinator will not provide professional development, but will, instead, review plans and report to RIDE to ensure compliance with this directive.

Such a move is divisive, and communicates to programs that what matters is what can be counted and offers no visible or viable means of cross-fertilization, of collaborative learning or even basic communication between and among educators across programs. While it may purport to support in-house learning, aimed to support particular populations of learners within each program, what it does, in fact, is foster isolated and insular program professional development of uneven quality, while providing no support for sharing of anything other than reports from programs to be reviewed by a PD coordinator, who then communicates the plans' contents to RIDE. It is, in fact, precisely this uneven, decentralized system that Dr. Uvin was moving away from when issuing the 2006 RFP for the Professional Development Center, understanding such decentralized delivery of professional development to be ineffective at best, and counter-productive in its worst iterations.

We acknowledge the importance and usefulness of program-based professional development, we don't believe that practitioner education should be a question of either/or, but rather, both/and. As constructed, the request for proposals provides inadequate support for convening practitioners beyond the program level and risks recreating the very sorts of silos that earlier work had sought to reduce.

As people committed to professional learning that supports adult education and adult learners we write in the strongest possible protest against this move and against a direction of practice that values quantitative measures only, that provides no central means for practitioners to gather together and learn from and with one another.

We are deeply distressed by this shift in direction, particularly as prior professional development work has always occurred in support of programs, separate from monitoring and enforcement.

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