

Engaging Communities in Lifelong Learning and the Pursuit of Economic Self Sufficiency

by Jon Engel

The catalytic agent for engaging communities in the important work of adult literacy education is passion. If you want to build partnerships to effectively address the significant issues that confront educationally disadvantaged adults and their families, you, the adult education professional in your community, must supply the passion. Your passion will animate the partnership agenda and forge the commitment of the necessary partners. Passion provides the energy to take the next step which is to do your homework.

Let the data speak. In order to be successful, it is probably essential to demonstrate that there is a critical need for adult education in the community. Ten years ago, I was instrumental in forming a partnership for literacy and lifelong learning in the small central Texas community of Kyle. Utilizing the 1990 census, we were able to demonstrate that: 52% of the people over 25 years of age in Kyle did not have a high school diploma; 100% of female headed households with children under the age of six lived in poverty; median per capita income was \$7,066; and 33.6% of Kyle residents lived in poverty. People found these data compelling. The data got their attention, and local people knew that the problem was more severe outside the city limits. Good data and other methods of demonstrating needs such as testimonials by educationally disadvantaged adults generate a sense of urgency to create a critical mass for action.

Identify the Leadership Team. Once you have demonstrated your passion to meet a demonstrated need, the next step is to find your fellow visionaries and future partners. They may come from anywhere. In the case of Kyle, the Hays County Judge and an Assistant Superintendent played key leadership roles. In a few short months, a leadership team began to meet regularly. Our sole objective was to create a place to provide meaningful opportunities to educationally and economically disadvantaged families.

Leadership team meetings were strategic in nature. They focused on the "how" of partnership building. Important decisions were made and commitments reaffirmed. One critical decision of the leadership team was to expand our mission beyond the creation of partnership for adult literacy education. Although adult literacy education would be, and continues to be at the core of our work, we felt that a more global mission was needed to gain the necessary commitment and resources to establish a learning center. We became "dedicated to the provision of opportunities for family education, workforce and personal development, technological development and lifelong learning for all members of the community in a positive caring environment." Each member became finely attuned to this vision and began to look everywhere for the opportunity to realize it.

Seizing the Opportunity. My Dad had a favorite quotation that he often shared with me when I was growing up. He often told me "luck is the residue of design." In other words, good things often happen to those who make good plans and who are committed to actualizing them. Every partnership needs a little of this kind of luck early on, before the passion and commitment burns out. But the leadership team

cannot sit and wait for the luck to come. They must actively seek it, often in unexpected places. In the case of the Kyle Family Learning and Career Center, we seized two early opportunities. One was a unique grant opportunity to develop an initiative to address the literacy and employability issues of Head Start parents. The award of this grant provided important "seed" and operating funds for the partnership. Only 25 of these grants were awarded nationwide that year. I am convinced we would not have submitted a successful application, if we had not already completed the work described above.

The second opportunity was one that, at first, not all leadership team members had the vision to see, including me. It was a very old and dilapidated building in the center of Kyle, and it had "fallen" on the tax rolls for delinquent taxes. This meant, of course, that the building could be "had" for free if it was dedicated to a public good. Fortunately, the Assistant Superintendent was able to envision a way to totally renovate the building and was able to convince the leadership team that this would be the permanent home of the Kyle Family Learning and Career Center. The center opened its doors on November 1, 1993. Those doors have remained open ever since.

A colleague of mine led a similar process in the community of Marble Falls a few years back, and the "luck is the residue of design" principle held true there as well. In that instance, the local public housing authority director was able to utilize HUD funds to build a state of the art adult learning and child development center. You never know where the "luck" will come from. You just have to be prepared to see it coming.

The Nuts and Bolts. Once a community partnership has been successful in establishing some form of a lifelong learning center, the partnership then has to find ways to operate it and nurture its growth. This can happen in different ways. Due to the limited amount of adult education funding available in Texas, it is almost a certainty that adult education contractors cannot operate a state of the art full-time learning center without significant outside support or collaboration. In the case of Kyle, it has always been the collaborative approach that has sustained the center, and the nature and numbers of collaborators has changed significantly over the years. At its peak, the Kyle Center had fifteen active partners that provided financial, professional, or other support to the operation of the center. Simply put, a community learning center must accomplish at least a piece of the mission of each supporting partner at all times. The minute the center fails to accomplish its piece of a partner's mission, that partner will pull out of the partnership. To prevent this from happening too often, it is important to have what might be termed a *collaborative method*. The method that has been reasonably successful for us can be expressed as follows. *The collaborative method leverages the maximum amount of educational resources and supports to the point of contact with the customer/student/family through collaborative effort that is shaped by the priorities, constraints, and mandates of the operating partners and their funders.* A mutual understanding of these various priorities, constraints, and mandates is absolutely critical to the success of the partnership, and this understanding must occur at all levels, from the administrative to the front line.

Going the Distance. In my experience, the most significant outcome of a community partnership for adult learning is to create a physical center that is dedicated to serving educationally and economically disadvantaged individuals on a

full-time basis. Such an outcome adds value to a community. At the same time, it strengthens the position of the center in the community. This is important because maintaining community partnerships over the long haul is difficult, to say the least. In a very real sense, the partnership that created the Kyle Family Learning and Career Center ten years ago no longer exists, but its legacy lives on. As a result, hundreds of area residents engage in lifelong learning every year, and each one of them makes Kyle a better place to live.

About the Author

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