

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION AND REHABILITATIVE SERVICES  
REHABILITATION SERVICES ADMINISTRATION  
WASHINGTON, DC 20202

INFORMATION MEMORANDUM  
RSA-IM-01-30  
DATE: March 27, 2001

ADDRESSEES: STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES (GENERAL)  
STATE VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION AGENCIES (BLIND)  
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REGIONAL REHABILITATION CONTINUING EDUCATION  
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AMERICAN INDIAN VOCATIONAL REHABILITATION  
PROGRAMS  
RSA SENIOR MANAGEMENT TEAM

SUBJECT: Results of the RSA Longitudinal Study: The Potential Value of Basic  
Skills Training Among Consumers of Vocational Rehabilitation Services

CONTENT: The purpose of this Information Memorandum (IM) is to report some  
interim results of the Rehabilitation Services Administration's (RSA's)  
Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services  
Program which indicate a positive impact of basic reading and math  
achievement on earnings levels. RSA's Longitudinal Study was  
commissioned in 1992 and conducted by the Research Triangle Institute.

RSA's Longitudinal Study

The study's overall purpose is to examine the performance of the State-  
federal VR program in assisting consumers to achieve long-term economic  
and non-economic outcomes. The study abstracted information from  
samples of VR case files, questionnaires completed by VR staff, and  
interviews of past and present VR consumers. Thirty-seven local VR  
offices were randomly selected, along with a sample of 8000 applicants  
and current and former VR consumers. Each individual chosen for study  
was followed for three years and interviewed annually; one purpose of

following each consumer was to document the average two-year timeframe spent in receipt of VR services, along with a period of post-VR employment or other outcome.

The final report will not be available for some time, but the interim results, particularly those of a sub-study of individuals in supported employment, bring into sharp focus what VR professionals have long suspected. This study bears out the belief that the higher a consumer's level of achievement in reading and/or math, the higher their earnings level is likely to be.

This IM utilizes three documents for primary source material. The first is the RSA Longitudinal Study "Third Interim Report: Characteristics and Outcomes of Former VR Consumers with an Employment Outcome," completed in August, 1998, and submitted to RSA by the Research Triangle Institute of North Carolina. The second is the article, "Basic Skills and Labor Market Success: Findings from the VR Longitudinal Study," appearing in the 1999/2000 American Rehabilitation. The article was co-authored by Holly Schmidt-Davis and Becky J. Hayward of the Research Triangle Institute and Harold Kay of RSA. The last is a summary of interim findings of the National Evaluation of Welfare-to-Work Strategies (NEWWS), conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and funded by the U.S. Departments of Health and Human Services and Education. If you wish to refer to these items, contact Dr. Kay using the information provided at the close of this document.

### The Relationship of Earnings and Achievement

According to the Longitudinal Study findings, consumers earning \$5 per hour or less averaged a reading achievement level of just over seven grades and a math achievement level of nearly 6.5 grades. In contrast, those consumers earning \$7.01 - \$9.00 per hour average a reading achievement level of 9.9 grades and a math level of 9.0 grades. For those consumers whose hourly wage exceeds \$9.00 per hour, the levels of reading and math achievement are even higher: 10.3 and 9.9 grades, respectively. Reading and math achievement levels appear to be more important to earnings success than the number of years completed in formal education. The number of years of education completed for those consumers earning \$5 per hour or less averages 11.4 and the years of completed education for those consumers earning between \$7.01 and \$9.00 per hour is 12.3 (less than a grade level difference). For those consumers earning more than \$9.00 per hour, post-secondary education seems to be a factor, given that the average number of years of completed education for this group is 13.1.

### The Relationship of Earnings and Access to Private Health Insurance

In addition to basic earnings paid to VR consumers, the availability of health insurance for those individuals is often critical. Again, earnings level seems to be a direct corollary to the availability of private health coverage. Only 13 percent of jobs that pay \$5 or less per hour offer health insurance. Making more than minimum wage, however, is not enough to assure access to insurance. Nearly 31 percent of individuals who are placed in competitive employment by a VR agency make more than \$5 but less than \$7 per hour, and only 35 percent of jobs that pay more than \$5 but less than \$7 per hour offer health insurance. For slightly higher paying jobs, the percentage that offers health insurance increases significantly. For example, 52.1 percent of jobs that pay more than \$7 but less than \$9 per hour offer health insurance.

### Reading and Math Achievement Among VR Consumers and the Use of Adult Basic Education

Adult basic skills programs in literacy and math are, in general, much less expensive than most of the other post-secondary education options paid for by State VR agencies. The next step in the VR program's effort to improve earnings among consumers could be partnerships with adult basic education programs. These partnerships could present both entities with value-added products and services. For adult basic education programs, the "plus side" is an improvement to their programming for individuals with learning and other disabilities. Adult basic education programs are already serving these populations through their work with transitioning welfare recipients and others. For the VR program, there is the benefit of being able to take advantage of existing programs.

Significant attention must be paid to evidence that suggests that there is no measurable change in reading skills for program participants who receive adult education services for less than one year. The NEWWS found that the most significant gains in reading skills were achieved in a 12 to 18-month service period. Math skill improvement took only one to six months, according to the study findings. It appears that, while adult basic education seems to have an impact on earnings, both the VR agency and the consumer must commit to at least a one-year course of study in order to increase the likelihood of skill enhancement.

### Adult Basic Education and VR: A Mutually Beneficial Partnership

This memorandum has focused, up to this point, on the benefit to the VR program in utilizing adult basic education programming. However, it is also important to note that the VR program can provide significant assistance to adult education programs that are struggling to make their programs accessible to individuals with disabilities.

Already, one State's welfare program has been found by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to be in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (as amended). DHHS found in favor of two welfare recipients with learning disabilities who could not achieve employment within the two-year timeframe allowed by law, in part because they failed to succeed in adult basic education. DHHS' Office for Civil Rights admonished the program for failing to provide adequate reasonable accommodations and appropriate adult education options to welfare recipients with learning disabilities. In addition to insisting that the welfare office address its own lack of disability awareness and appropriate service models, DHHS also directed the State program to train and assure the compliance of its adult basic education vendors and contractors.

This State's difficulty should be a cautionary tale for most if not all welfare offices and adult basic education programs nationwide. VR personnel are an excellent source of information and technical assistance regarding disability assessment and evaluation as well as reasonable accommodation and appropriate training and education methods for individuals with disabilities. Welfare and basic education offices might find the expertise of their VR counterparts valuable.

### Why Basic Education for Some VR Consumers?

In building partnerships with adult basic education programs, certain factors need to be taken into account to increase the likelihood of success among VR consumers utilizing these services:

- Adult basic education is not viewed by most VR counselors as beneficial for individuals with mental retardation and other cognitive disabilities; however, if the skills training is provided in relationship to the job functions being performed by the individual, there is a greater potential for skill improvement. In other words, the basic education programming might be approached as another component of on-the-job training.

- Many VR consumers who request education assistance do so in the context of post-secondary education and training. If VR counselors explain adult basic education programs and the kinds of services they provide, it seems likely that utilization would increase. Some consumers could stop with the basic education program after achieving the desired levels in reading and math, while others might use the program to obtain their General Educational Development (GED) certificate and go on to post-secondary education options.
- In general, adult basic education programs are not designed with individuals with disabilities in mind, as is evidenced by the action taken by DHHS. There are several ways that this barrier can be overcome. On the accommodation side, there needs to be physically accessible teaching space, alternate format materials and interpreter services available, specialized diagnostic and assessment capabilities, and a recognition of differing learning and test-taking styles, among other accommodations.

#### Probable Characteristics for VR Consumer Success in Adult Basic Education

In terms of programmatic understanding and incorporation of basic approaches to serving individuals with disabilities, the following characteristics appear necessary within adult basic education programs in order to facilitate success of VR consumers and other individuals with disabilities:

- Association of the material learned with the functions performed in the work setting;
- Building on the student's existing knowledge base, rather than approaching learning from a remedial perspective;
- Fostering the student's self-esteem and giving regular and frequent feedback;
- Providing assistance in realistic goal-setting; and
- Accepting differing learning and test-taking styles.

Conclusion

It is the purpose of this memorandum to provide State VR agencies with the information they need to make contact and form lasting partnerships with their counterparts in the Adult Education arena. Attached to this document is a list of State Directors for Adult Education for your use in developing these relationships.

If you require more information regarding the RSA Longitudinal Study and its findings, please contact Harold Kay at 202-205-9883 or via e-mail at harold\_kay@ed.gov. For assistance in contacting Adult Education programs or developing strategies to build partnerships, or if you wish to share information with other State VR agencies regarding your relationship with Adult Education programs, contact Jenn Rigger, VR Program Specialist, at 202-260-2179 or via e-mail at jenn\_rigger@ed.gov. RSA staff are available to assist you in various aspects of this process, and we look forward to learning from your experiences.

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## Attachment

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*Revised December 28, 2000*

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