

# Innovations in Digital Learning: How the Pandemic Changed the Way We Serve Learners

a report by



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# INTRODUCTION

## Purpose of Report

Adult education services were halted in March 2020 as a result of the safer-at-home orders due to COVID-19. In a few short weeks, many adult education providers moved (seemingly overnight) from in-person service delivery to a virtual model. The messaging work group of the GOAL Collective commissioned this report in July 2020 based on the identified need to document the changes and ongoing findings about adult education service delivery. The focus of this report is to summarize a qualitative research study conducted with GOAL Collective partners in 2020.

## Overview of the Research Process

In July 2020, we facilitated an exploratory activity with GOAL Collective members, asking them to type on virtual sticky notes what they had learned about five topics since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in the following areas: technology, teaching online, learner access to technology, working with teachers and volunteers, and the members' respective organizations. These brief responses were reviewed, and high-level themes of



lessons learned since March 2020 were identified. After reviewing these themes, we developed a series of interview questions. About half of the interview questions were probing questions that sought more details into the lessons mentioned in the virtual sticky note activity, and the other half of the questions prompted interviewees to look to the future of adult education. Ultimately, we wanted interviewees to not only reflect on what they had learned, but on how these lessons could impact the future work in adult education. Once interview questions were developed, we began inviting members of GOAL Collective to participate in 45-minute video or phone interviews. The goal was to have every organization in GOAL Collective represented in the report.

# INTRODUCTION

Six interviews were conducted in September 2020. Several people were unavailable to meet for interviews, but still wanted to participate in the project. To accommodate, we emailed them a questionnaire that mirrored the planned interview questions. Five individuals completed the questionnaire, and those responses were used alongside the interviews to inform this report.

In total, nine organizations in GOAL Collective were represented in interview/survey responses. Their responses reflect the learnings and program changes made in the first four to five months of COVID response (March-August 2020). It is worth noting that several partner organizations who are not involved in direct service delivery for adult education opted out of the interview process.

After all interviews were completed and questionnaires were submitted, responses were reviewed to identify themes and subthemes. Once themes were determined, a separate analysis of interview transcripts and questionnaire responses was conducted for each theme. Evidence of each theme was noted, and the collection of evidence for each theme was then synthesized into this report. The interviews and findings were gathered, coded, and analyzed by a third party researcher who is not a member of GOAL Collective. This was a deliberate choice to maintain neutrality in the final results of the study.



Note: All quotations in the report are direct quotes from GOAL Collective members, as stated during the interview process.

# INTRODUCTION

## How to Use This Report

This report is organized into **7 key themes** designed to capture the major changes and creative innovations that the Nashville adult education landscape experienced in response to COVID-19. Each theme begins with a **short summary** and 2-3 **key takeaways**. Most themes include findings as they relate to the experience of **learners** as well as **educators**. At the conclusion of each theme, there is a list of **challenges** and a summary of **future implications** for the field. (One exception to this format is the theme of digital literacy, which completely outlines the challenges in all aspects of that area.) While this report is not exhaustive, it offers a useful snapshot of the adult education landscape in Nashville during 2020.

With that in mind, we encourage readers to examine these findings through 3 lenses:

1. Personal: How do these findings compare with my own experience?
2. Historical: What has changed in the past year?
3. Systemic: What implications does this work have for our adult education system?

## Correlations to National Trends

Many of the findings of this report are consistent with national studies conducted in 2020. When a local data point correlates with national findings, it is indicated by a number in superscript format (<sup>1 2 3 4</sup>) immediately following the relevant text. Four sources, which correspond to the numbers, are listed and linked in the appendix at the end of the report. Click the number to view the national study referenced.

# FLEXIBILITY OF ONLINE TEACHING & LEARNING

Initial emotions regarding the change to virtual teaching/learning included much uncertainty about access, functionality, and educational impact. However, for many students and educators, online education has provided opportunities that did not exist in exclusively in-person programs.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Virtual teaching/learning eliminates barriers for many adult learners, such as issues of childcare, transportation, geography, and work schedules.**<sup>1</sup>
- **Virtual teaching allows adult educators to take advantage of a variety of already available digital content and engagement tools.**

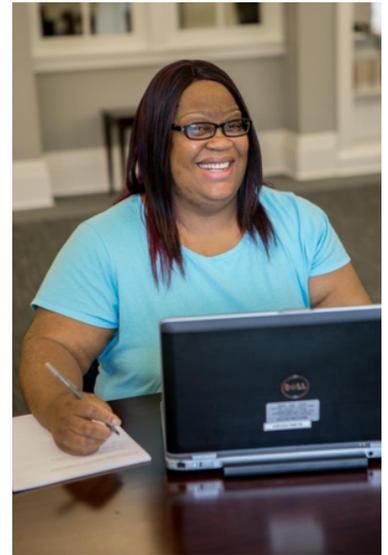
## FLEXIBILITY FOR LEARNERS

**“We engaged students in whatever manner they chose to show-up.”**

Although student access to technology is still a concern, an internal survey conducted by a GOAL work group shows that many adult learners do have access to at least one device. For learners who have limited technological access, it is critical that they be able to utilize any device they already have in order to continue their education. Fortunately, online learning can be achieved on nearly any smart device. Educators have reported working with students participating via smartphones, tablets, personal computers, laptops, and Chromebooks.

For learners, the greatest benefit of online education is the elimination of many barriers that often impede learners' ability to attend in-person classes. In a virtual setting, learners do not have to find and pay for childcare, as they can participate in class or review material from their own homes.

Similarly, time and money that might be spent on transportation to and from classes are no longer required. Geography can often be a barrier for learners when classes are too far away from their homes or places of work. However, online classes are accessible from any location with connectivity. Elimination of these geographical and transportation barriers also means that students can participate in the classes that best fit their needs, even if the class is offered in another county. Other obstacles to adult learners' education include: work schedules, family responsibilities, and other commitments, which impact learners' availability to attend classes regularly.<sup>2</sup> Online classes can be recorded, and the material can be posted for viewing at a later time or date, providing students who are unable to attend class access to the instruction and content.



## FLEXIBILITY FOR EDUCATORS AND STAFF

Just as virtual education removes some barriers for learners, it erases barriers for educators, staff, and volunteers as well. Educators do not need to spend time driving to classes, and they are not limited to serving students during a building's office hours or at a specific location. While the change to virtual teaching resulted in loss of volunteers and educators for some programs, a few saw an increase in volunteers between March and September of 2020, as people were more willing to teach virtually and avoid spending time traveling.

**“Many students have benefited from remote learning opportunities, as is displayed by increasing attendance and higher levels of enrollment for our online learning program than we normally have in person.”**

Virtual teaching affords the opportunity to utilize engaging digital tools, such as polling, games, music, applications, and more. Program leaders have mentioned a variety of programs and platforms through which their educators are facilitating learning.<sup>4</sup> While some interviewees mentioned that the transition to virtual was a struggle for lower-level English-learners, one staff member described her successful experience using telephonic interpretation, a digital tool, to assist her English-learners.

## CHALLENGES

- **Some learners and educators struggle with limited access to technology and connectivity.**
- **Cell phones are a popular device used by students, and generally allow students to participate in classes when instructors use compatible instruction techniques, but cell phone functionality is limited. Small data plans also create limitations.<sup>2</sup>**
- **A certain level of digital literacy is required to navigate an online educational experience.**
  - **Adult educators are often retired teachers with limited technological experience.**
  - **Too many programs, platforms, applications, etc. can be difficult for students to learn.**
- **It can be difficult to check-in with and/or directly engage individual participants in an online classroom.**
- **For some, preparing for virtual classes requires more time than preparing for in-person classes.**

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Distance education appears to offer some undeniable benefits to adult learners and educators. Many programs in the collective recognize these benefits and intend to continue offering online options for students after COVID-19 subsides. Additionally, there is some interest in developing hybrid instruction, in which students would participate in a combination of in-person and online experiences. Digital tools will continue to be incorporated in the classroom and staff meetings, trainings, etc.

**“I think the fact that so many agencies are now versed on virtual learning will put us ahead in the end! We can now reach students who prefer to learn in two ways and reach students from a larger geographic scope.”**

While there are benefits to virtual teaching/learning, issues of access and digital literacy remind us that it is neither a solution for everyone, nor an adequate replacement of in-person learning. There is work to be done before virtual learning is an equitable option for all learners.<sup>1</sup>

# PROGRAM CAPACITY

Although many programs experienced a halt in learner enrollment and/or an interruption of classes due to COVID-19, changes spurred by the pandemic have uncovered opportunities for greater capacity and impact.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For a few programs, the flexibility of online teaching has mobilized a new pool of volunteers.
- Technology offers efficient onboarding and an increase in potential learners reached per educator.
- Centralized tools and lines of communication are fundamental for maximizing capacity.<sup>2</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES

As described in a previous section, online teaching offers educators a certain flexibility with regard to time, geography, and transportation. Due to the newfound conveniences of virtual teaching, a few programs are experiencing an increase in volunteers.



**It has been hard to recruit tutors for certain areas, so offering a virtual option for learners and volunteers expands the amount of work that can be done.**



This new demographic of volunteers generally has a higher level of digital literacy than the typical pool of adult educators, and therefore is more prepared to serve students online.

In several ways, the increased use of technology has translated into efficiency. The pandemic incentivized several programs to transition to online enrollment and orientation for students. This contributes to a streamlined process of connecting students with the classes that best fit their needs and creates a digital profile for each student that serves as a record of their educational progress.

**The reason you build systems and lines of communication is because when something big has to be solved and you learn it together you have more capacity to solve it. We don't have all the answers, but we are doing our best to solve it.**

Another example of efficiency is the increased potential in students served. Virtual classes and recorded lessons have a greater potential to impact more students per educator and per lesson than could be achieved via in-person classes.



Lastly, program leaders have cited the efficiency of digital communication with students, as opposed to making individual phone calls or communication via word-of-mouth. The confusion and disarray that ensued in the early stages of the transition to virtual education revealed a need for centralized tools and communication. The programs that were most successful in the transition to online services were those that already had an online component and/or utilized centralized curricula, records, and resources.

For some programs, Learning Management Systems were implemented so that educators and learners could access all the tools and programs they needed in one place.<sup>1 2</sup> Additionally, established lines of communication proved fundamental to the collective's ability to respond to the pandemic with swiftness and competence.

## CHALLENGES

- The transition to entirely virtual communication halted enrollment in many programs, particularly among English learners. In many rural areas, programs have ceased indefinitely.<sup>2</sup>
- Low digital literacy among educators and staff can limit the impact of online education.
- Many programs experienced a budget crisis during this time, which translated to layoffs, slowed hiring, and/or increased class prices.<sup>2</sup>
- Many programs experienced a loss in educators and volunteers.
- Lack of access to the technology and connectivity required to participate in online learning might offset some of the increase in potential learners.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

**I am hopeful that the push to implement online programs makes [GOAL's mission] more achievable.**

Once COVID subsides and enrollment begins to grow, programs will be prepared to serve more students than before. Newly developed online processes will assist with efficient enrollment of new adult learners and re-enrollment of those who are waiting for the return of in-person classes.

Some aspects of GOAL's plans have been impeded due to the pandemic; however, this increase in potential impact directly aligns with GOAL's ultimate mission to triple the number of adult learners pursuing their educational goals by 2025.

# DIGITAL LITERACY

The abrupt transition to technology-based communication and education revealed the low levels of digital literacy among adult learners, adult educators, and staff. The pervasiveness of low digital literacy is cause for concern and has spurred many adult education leaders to more strongly emphasize digital literacy within their respective programs.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Digital literacy has proven to be an inherent challenge for all parties involved in adult education.<sup>1 2</sup>
- Digital literacy levels of students and educators were lower than expected.<sup>2</sup>
- Onboarding students and educators to technology is challenging and time-consuming.
- Digital literacy should be a higher priority in adult education.

## LEARNERS' DIGITAL LITERACY

**Using the technology, rather than access to technology, is the issue.**

Initially, educators and program leaders feared that learners would not have the necessary technological devices to participate in online education. While it is true that some learners have struggled with access, most learners do have access to at least one device. Instead, the major challenge has been the level of technological proficiency among adult learners.<sup>3</sup>

Because many students are struggling with technology, students can become overwhelmed by having to learn multiple platforms and digital tools.<sup>2</sup> Programs have made an effort to provide instruction for learners on how to use their devices, navigate programs, etc., but onboarding students to technology has been challenging and time-consuming.

Some learners have been hesitant to move online, particularly older students. This hesitance speaks to the discomfort many adult learners have with technology. However, some adult learners have been encouraged by their children's online education experience, and have learned from them how to persevere in the virtual classroom.



## DIGITAL LITERACY AMONG EDUCATORS AND STAFF

Many interviewees reported that preparing educators to facilitate classes virtually was a considerable challenge. In many cases, responding to educators' levels of digital literacy required more time and effort than assisting learners.

**We see a real need for digital literacy classes for instructors as much as students.**

While training has been offered, the low digital literacy levels of many educators conflicts with their desire and ability to serve adult learners. Some educators have been hesitant to transition to online teaching, and many did not have devices or connectivity when the shift to online education occurred. Adult educators are often retired K-12 teachers who may not have the digital literacy skills needed to teach and support learners in a virtual environment. The challenge of supporting educators in their own digital literacy development has alerted some program leaders of the need to prioritize digital literacy when recruiting new educators and volunteers.

Several interviewees cited the pandemic as a catalyst for their program to transition to digital resources and tools, a change many programs had intended to make over the past several years but had not implemented until COVID-19. Despite challenges, most educators and staff are now at a point where they are comfortable facilitating classes and communicating online. They now feel more comfortable with Zoom and other digital communication and education tools.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This pandemic has highlighted a change in recent decades: access to technology and basic digital literacy have become essential for all people to succeed. Interviewees acknowledged the need to reprioritize digital literacy in adult education.

**We didn't realize how ill-equipped we were to move things online. The pandemic showed how much we needed online classes, even without a public health crisis.**

They are committed to implementing more digital literacy support for learners in the future. Although the transition has been difficult for some students, program leaders are hopeful that this experience will encourage more adult learners to communicate digitally and consider online classes in the future.

Because most programs intend to continue offering online classes after COVID-19 subsides, consideration of digital literacy skills will need to be a priority during recruitment of new educators and volunteers. Additionally, many programs are committed to providing more regular digital literacy training to their educators and staff, understanding that this is key to offering effective online educational experiences for students.

Despite some setbacks caused by low levels of digital literacy, educators and program leaders are optimistic that the skills learned during this time will ultimately empower them to provide better education to more adult learners in the future.



# TRAINING

Because of the sudden shift to virtual communication, digital literacy training was immediately necessary for staff, educators, and learners. The rush to provide educators and students the skills needed for a successful online educational experience exposed opportunities for improvement.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- For students, training has focused on the educational tools and programs needed for classes, not on basic use of devices themselves.
- Often, technology training trickled down from program leaders to staff, staff to educators, and educators to learners. There was little time to master skills before teaching them to others.
- There is a need for more consistent digital literacy training for educators and volunteers. [2](#) [2](#)

## FOR LEARNERS

“  
**Since we don't know what the future holds, we are trying to be better prepared.**  
”

Most adult education programs have offered some form of trainings to their learners since March 2020. In some cases, trainings were created and facilitated entirely by the programs and educators themselves, but some programs directed students to trainings conducted by other organizations. Additionally, many service providers took advantage of existing training videos for particular curricula and software. Some videos were offered in multiple languages for English language learners.

Technological training for students usually focused on the educational tools or programs that would be used for classes. Many interviewees noted that basic knowledge about how to use devices was often lacking and served as a barrier to students' education.

Some programs have begun to include basic technology training in the orientation experience for new adult learners. This measure both empowers learners in their educational and professional careers, and safeguards against future crises that may once again demand exclusively virtual interaction.

## FOR EDUCATORS AND STAFF <sup>2</sup>

Because of the abrupt transition to virtual interaction and teaching, training opportunities for staff and educators were immediately needed and quickly actualized. Just as with learners, some programs offered their own trainings for educators and staff and/or relied on existing videos from online resources.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, many organizations within GOAL leaned on centralized training. In many cases, program leaders learned from these trainings, and then trained their own staff.<sup>2</sup> In turn, staff trained educators, who trained students. There was an expectation to rapidly master online communication and education and then promptly relay that knowledge to others.<sup>2</sup>



Some educators have gained many skills from trainings and are thriving in the online environment. For many educators, digital literacy training and support have not been adequate, and they have struggled to serve their students virtually.

**“As staff and teachers learned new skills, we have skill-shared to help others.”**

The learning experience for staff and educators was somewhat rushed, and considering the low levels of digital literacy among many, program leaders recognize a need for more thorough training in the future.

## CHALLENGES

- Many adult learners needed training on how to use their devices before receiving training about specific educational programs and digital tools.
- Some students and educators were overwhelmed by the various programs and tools they needed to master. Programs may need to consider individual capacity for learning new skills.
- There has not been sufficient time for educators to practice their new digital literacy skills before implementing them in actual classes.<sup>2</sup>
- Training both learners and educators costs time and money, which is often not calculated into program budgets or working hours of educators.<sup>2</sup>

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

For students, programs will need to consider more training focused on basic use of devices. Additionally, educators will need to prioritize the digital tools and programs they wish to use in online classes so that students can master specific skills rather than trying to learn to navigate multiple programs and tools.

**To do basic things in life students need to have digital literacy.**

This crisis has highlighted the need for digital literacy training for educators and staff. Program leaders are committed to providing more consistent professional development opportunities to their educators and volunteers in the future. Ideally, educators will also have opportunities to collaborate with each other and practice new skills before using them in their classrooms. Because training costs time and money, an investment in professional development for educators may require adjustments in program budgets or new sources of funding.<sup>2</sup>

# SHARING RESOURCES

The pandemic has left many adult learners unsure of how to access the essential and educational resources they need. With little time and immediate action required, adult education agencies collaborated, sharing information and best practices to ensure they were supporting staff, educators, and learners.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Service providers used class time to share information about essential resources and community services with learners.**<sup>2</sup>
- **Some programs distributed devices to learners.**<sup>2 4</sup>
- **Organizations efficiently shared data, funding information, innovative ideas, and best practices for online teaching with each other.**<sup>1</sup>

## WITH LEARNERS

**The extraordinary nature of their circumstances caused students to focus on current emergencies over their education. We learned to become a resource for students in helping them meet immediate needs in an effort to help students stay engaged.**

In order to assist adult learners in accessing the resources they need, educators have used class time to share information about community services and essential resources. This practice has increased classroom engagement by ensuring that the material is relevant to learners during this crisis. Some programs are supporting adult learners' children in their online educational experience as well, attempting to meet the needs of the whole family.

Some service providers have made an effort to equip learners with the resources they need to succeed in their online educational experiences. Many programs have worked to distribute laptops and have shared information about digital connectivity options for learners. Programs have adapted their practices in order to provide students a worthwhile online learning experience.

Some adaptations include recording lessons and posting them online to be accessed by students at any time, enrolling students across county lines to match them with classes that meet their needs, and offering at-home testing options.

## AMONG ORGANIZATIONS



Collaboration among adult education organizations was key during the initial stages of the transition as agencies rushed to continue offering educational services and to support staff, educators, and learners virtually. Overall, interviewees described a successful collaboration experience among agencies in response to COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

Organizations shared information about learner access to technology, grants and funding, successes, and failures in order to quickly find the best solutions to the slew of new challenges. Programs that developed successful processes for online enrollment, laptop distribution, and scaffolded onboarding to technology for learners were willing to share these practices with other organizations to increase the impact of the collective during this pandemic.



**In a time where there is a crisis that is moving so quickly, you have to be able to rely on other people to get work done because there is so much to learn and be done quickly. Collaboration in times of crisis is just essential.**



Additionally, organizations shared best practices for teaching online. Centralized training was provided for program leaders and educators in order to relieve that burden from individual programs, and digital literacy resources were distributed to educators and learners throughout GOAL. Suggestions for which educational programs and digital tools to use circulated quickly. Some programs allowed others to observe their virtual classes to gain insight into successful online teaching practices.

## CHALLENGES

- Many adult learners are still without the necessary technology or connectivity needed to participate in an online education. Additionally, simply having access to devices is not sufficient for students with low digital literacy levels.<sup>3</sup>
- Many adult learners are still struggling to access essential resources.
- Programs do not have adequate data on students' and educators' needs.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

COVID-19 exposed the severity of existing gaps in digital literacy and access to technology and connectivity. Considering that technology has become a fundamental resource in all areas of life, the issue of access needs to be addressed. Organizations need to collect more data on adult learner access to technology and digital literacy levels in order to respond to this problem.

“

**I learned to lean on the knowledge of others in order to share the burden of rapid change.**

”

Because collaboration among adult education agencies was successful in response to COVID-19, it is essential that these organizations maintain strong relationships, refine their communication processes, and continue to build collaborative behaviors in order to be prepared for the challenges of the future.

# RELATIONSHIPS

Despite initial concerns that relationships might suffer after the sudden transition to online communication, some relationships between educators and students, as well as across agencies, have thrived over the last several months. As communication and collaboration required more effort to sustain, appreciation of established relationships grew.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Because COVID-19 has limited human interaction, the social connection offered via online classes is essential to the well-being of many learners and educators.<sup>2</sup>**
- **The transition to virtual classes revealed the barriers to education that many adult learners experience.**
- **Established relationships among organizations were key to successful adjustments and innovations.<sup>1</sup>**

## WITH LEARNERS

Building relationships with learners is at the core of many adult education programs' service models. While there was some pause in communication and relationships with students as service providers and learners grappled with the learning curve that was inherent in the transition to online teaching/learning, a clear effort was made to rekindle and foster previous relationships. Many program leaders were unsure whether relationships with students could be preserved online, but they have been pleasantly surprised by and appreciative of the connections that have been sustained virtually.

**I've been able to stay in touch with students that might have slipped away if I had just been waiting for them to show up.**

Service providers have learned to adapt and make the most of the variety of digital communication and engagement tools. The increased effort required to maintain connections has led to more meaningful relationships between educators and learners.

Throughout the pandemic, many people have experienced a deficit in social interaction. Educators have recognized that their learners are simply appreciative of the opportunity to interact with other people.<sup>2</sup> Many programs have continued to offer one-on-one sessions between learners and tutors, as well as small group classes, prioritizing personal connection in students' educational experiences. Educators and learners transitioned to a virtual world together, creating a shared experience of learning to navigate an online education.

The transition to online has exposed many barriers to education that some adult learners experience. A better understanding of these learners' needs has encouraged programs to use classes to provide essential and community resources in order to keep classes relevant and strengthen relationships, particularly for those students who had difficulty accessing in-person classes.

## AMONG STAFF, EDUCATORS, AND ORGANIZATIONS

**So many people  
just want to  
login to connect  
with others.**

The crisis that ensued during March of 2020 affirmed the importance of strong relationships across organizations. These enduring relationships served as a foundation for the adjustments and innovations that needed to occur quickly in order to continue to serve learners.

Because of the unprecedented challenges many people have faced as a result of COVID-19, many interviewees noted the importance of ensuring colleagues' wellbeing and responding to their needs before concentrating on professional tasks. Preserving relationships has been the priority.

Within programs, the pandemic prompted more professional development opportunities and social-emotional support for educators and staff. Programs made an extra effort to express their appreciation of staff, educators, and/or volunteers during this time.



## CHALLENGES

- **Maintaining relationships virtually requires time and effort. Communication with some learners was lost in the transition to online learning.**
- **Engaging students in a virtual classroom can be challenging.**
- **In a moment of crisis, it can be difficult to prioritize fostering relationships.**

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

A renewed focus on relationships spurred by COVID-19 has provided more insight into the resource gaps that some adult learners face. This improved understanding of learners' needs will inform future educational practices as programs continue to provide virtual class options post-COVID and explore other ways to improve their services. Educators' needs were revealed in the transition as well, and program leaders have recognized that a more consistent support system for teachers and staff is needed in the future.<sup>2</sup>

**Our partners will continue to grapple with supporting the humans we are working with while still achieving the outcomes.**

The critical role of established relationships in the rocky but successful transition to virtual communication and collaboration may encourage more consistent effort to create and sustain stronger relationships among organizations in the future.

**Putting people first and the relationship first is key, especially during a time of crisis.**

# REFLECTION AND INNOVATION

In March 2020, COVID-19 triggered a sudden halt in operations as many adult education programs hurried to make the necessary adjustments for a transition to online education. During this time, adult education program leaders, staff, and educators have discovered creative ways to continue meeting the needs of students.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **The temporary halt in services spurred by COVID-19 allowed time for reflection on current processes and practices in adult education, as well as development of ideas for improvement.**
- **Adult education program leaders, staff, and educators demonstrated resilience and creativity in order to continue serving their learners.**<sup>2</sup>

## OPPORTUNITIES

**Sometimes necessary change can only happen when in times of crisis, when the change itself is your top priority and continuing services requires it.**

Although the onset of the pandemic disrupted adult education services briefly, the forced pause in activity granted time to reflect on current processes and practices, not only to determine modifications during the pandemic, but also to consider their overall impact and value. This opportunity for reflection led to some suggestions for change in adult education services. Some ideas include a reprioritization of digital literacy in adult education, increased professional development for educators and volunteers, and continuation of online course offerings post-COVID (or hybrid options).<sup>1,2</sup>

As mentioned in previous sections, COVID-19 served as the necessary incentive to push some programs and individuals to employ digital communication and tools. When services were functioning smoothly and successfully pre-COVID, it was difficult to convince people to commit time and energy to such a transformative and pervasive adjustment. Although the shift to virtual communication and education proved challenging for many, newfound skills and improved efficiency will likely increase capacity and impact in the future.

**“We had to start to rethink how we have always done things.”**



The pandemic certainly brought on unprecedented challenges, but through collaboration, research, and trial and error, adult education programs adapted to the virtual world and innovated in order to continue serving their learners. Program leaders, staff, and educators have consistently demonstrated creativity and resilience. They have succeeded in continuing to offer students an educational experience, mastering digital engagement tools, and redesigning processes previously conducted in person, such as new student enrollment and orientation.

In some cases, organizations have adjusted their infrastructure and systems of communication and collaboration to respond to the ever-changing realities of the current world. Perhaps the greatest success: As a whole, organizations have maintained a positive outlook about the future of adult education.

**“[Innovation] will push you to do better for your agency and the learners you serve. Be thoughtful and scalable in your approach – these interim solutions will become long-term solutions. Don’t be afraid to TRY and plan to improve as you go.”**

## CHALLENGES

- For some, the pivots in priorities and demand for quick mastery of new skills felt overwhelming and challenging.
- With so much uncertainty in the beginning, some programs delayed modifying services for virtual education.
- While most programs are now conducting classes online, there is still resistance from some learners and educators towards online education.

## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Ideas for improvement that emerged during the initial pause in operations will continue to develop and impact the future of adult education services. These insights emphasize the value of routine reflection on established behaviors and processes.<sup>2</sup>

“

**A lot of the lessons that we've learned during this time will carry on and truly make adult education stronger.**

”

The difficult, but mostly successful, transition to online education now serves as evidence of what can be achieved, even amid a crisis. Many interviewees expressed surprise about what was accomplished in such a short period of time. These successes have changed the outlook of adult education and what is possible. The skills and knowledge that have been gained since March 2020, as well as innovations that have been implemented, will empower organizations to better serve more students in the future.<sup>2</sup>

# CONCLUSION

Because programs were driven to move their usual practices and processes online, staff and educators are now experienced with technology in ways that will empower them to more effectively serve adult learners in the future. Online enrollment and orientation processes can offer more efficient pathways for getting students to the classes they need. The experience teaching virtual classes during the pandemic has prepared adult educators to facilitate classes online in the future, providing adult learners with more flexibility and increased access to education.



Over the past several months, adult education organizations have observed the benefits an online education can provide, and most programs are committed to offering virtual or hybrid class options for learners post-COVID. Additionally, this experience has revealed the need for a greater focus on digital literacy in adult education programs. Many service providers are considering ways to better support the digital literacy development of both learners and staff in the future.

Despite the undeniable challenges that the transition to online education presented for adult education staff, teachers, learners, and organizations, the lessons learned since March 2020 will only help to improve adult education services. The considerable amount of

knowledge and skills gained during this time has prepared organizations to better serve adult learners and will shape organizational and instructional decisions in the future.

**We believe that by engaging in a reflective data-driven practice, we can build a stronger network of support for the adult learners in Nashville. If you're interested in joining GOAL Collective in our mission: to triple the number of adults achieving their educational goals by the year 2025 and build a network better able to serve more people, contact Megan Godbey at [megan.godbey@nashville.gov](mailto:megan.godbey@nashville.gov).**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## GOAL Collectives Partners that participated in this report:

- Begin Anew of Middle Tennessee\*\*
- Martha O'Bryan Center\*\*
- Mid-Cumberland Human Resource Agency\*
- Nashville Adult Literacy Council\*\*
- Nashville Community Education\*\*
- Nashville International Center for Empowerment\*
- Nashville Public Library\*\*
- State Department of Labor and Workforce Development\*\*
- Tennessee Higher Education Commission\*
- Tennessee Language Center\*\*
- Workforce Essentials\*\*
- YWCA Nashville & Middle Tennessee\*\*

\*Indicates participation in initial exploratory activity.

\*\*Indicates participation in both exploratory activity and follow-up interview,  
via phone or email

## This report produced by:

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# APPENDIX A

## Sources - National research about impact of COVID-19 on Adult Education

1. American Institutes Research, Coalition for Adult Basic Education, Evidence-Based Adult Education System, Open Door Collective, Rutgers University, Research Allies for Lifelong Learning, Newsome Associates, Outreach and Technical Assistance Network, ProLiteracy, & Texas Workforce Commission Adult Education & Literacy and TCALL. (2020, August). *WHAT WE LEARNED: Adult Education's Response to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning*. World Education. <https://edtech.worlded.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/WEI-for-BMGF-Adult-Ed-COVID19-Response-8.2020.pdf>
2. Belzer, A., Leon, T., Patterson, M., Rhodes, C., Salas-Isnardi, F., Vanek, J., Webb, C., & Willson-Toso, B. (2020, July). *COVID-19 Rapid Response Report From the Field*. Open Door Collective. <https://www.literacynewyork.org/documents/Covid-19/COVID-19-Report.pdf>
3. Patterson, M., Nesheim, E., Vanek, J., Belzer, A., Rosen, D., (2020). *How is the Adult Education Field Responding to COVID-19* [PowerPoint Slides]. COABE National Conference, June 29-July 7 2020. [https://www.dropbox.com/s/w92q219rogqfoto/%20Adult%20Learner%20Transition%20Survey%20June%202020\\_.pptx?dl=0](https://www.dropbox.com/s/w92q219rogqfoto/%20Adult%20Learner%20Transition%20Survey%20June%202020_.pptx?dl=0)
4. Vanek, J. (2020). *Pandemic Shifts: Initial Download* [Slides]. COABE National Conference, June 29-July 7 2020. [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ypCl\\_-Cq0Trqs9XOnq1Wx8CY7DoRkbbf/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ypCl_-Cq0Trqs9XOnq1Wx8CY7DoRkbbf/view?usp=sharing)

# APPENDIX B

## Virtual Interview Questions

1. Do you believe that your organization has gained skills or information throughout its response to COVID that can impact future education services?
2. What technical/practical/hard skills or information do you believe your organization has gained regarding adult education services since March?
  - a. How was (each skill/information) learned?
  - b. How has (each skill/information) been used during this time?
  - c. How will (each skill/information) impact future practices in adult education (after COVID)?
3. What has COVID-19 and your organization's response to the pandemic taught you about your organization regarding adult education services?
  - a. How did you learn this?
  - b. How can this knowledge inform future practices in adult education (after COVID)?
4. Do you believe your organization has gained/learned from partners in AECL since March? What do you believe your organization has gained/learned from partners in AECL since March?
  - a. From which partners?
  - b. How/when did you learn this?
  - c. How did you USE what you have learned?
  - d. How can this knowledge inform future practices (after COVID)?
5. What do you believe is the most important thing you, personally, have learned during this time regarding adult education?
6. What do you believe is the most important thing your organization has learned during this time regarding adult education?
7. Looking back, what advice would you give your organization regarding adult education services in March when there was a pivot in priorities?
8. AECL's mission is to "triple the number of adults achieving their educational goals by 2025 and create a network able to better serve more people." How has COVID-19 impacted the progress toward this goal?
9. What next steps do you hope for or would you recommend to your organization with regard to adult education services?
10. Other comments about lessons learned during COVID-19 or future outlook of adult education?