Promising Practices for Integrated Education and Training Programs That Serve Beginning-Level Learners

Integrated education and training (IET) programs combine adult education and literacy activities with workforce preparation and workforce training. By integrating these three components, IET programs have the potential to accelerate learning and support adult learners as they advance along their career pathways, transitioning to postsecondary education and obtaining good jobs. By definition, good jobs provide workers with important benefits such as job security, good working conditions, empowerment and representation, and opportunities for skill development and career advancement.[1] To support career advancement, IET programs should directly connect to career pathways.

Beginning-level learners represent a significant portion of students enrolled in adult education and English language acquisition programs. Fifty-four percent of learners in Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) programs are at adult basic education (ABE) levels 1–3 or English as a second language (ESL) levels 1–3 according to National Reporting System (NRS) data from the 2021–22 program year.[2] Learners with emerging literacy and/or beginning proficiency in English (NRS levels 1-3) need additional support to successfully transition to and complete IET programs, often designed for intermediate- and advanced-level learners who meet qualifications such as advanced language and math skills.[3]

> The **ADVANCE IET** project provides training and resources to assist adult educators in developing, strengthening, and scaling IET programs that effectively support adult learner pathways to high-quality careers.
>
> This is the second publication in a six-part series, **IET Strategies in Action**, intended to provide adult educators with a snapshot view of the ways in which some IET programs have implemented promising IET practices to serve diverse student populations in a variety of settings.

Strategies for Serving Beginning-Level Learners

This summary describes how two strategies—bridge programs and stackable credentials—are implemented by local providers to serve beginning-level learners intentionally, and how state-level guidance and support can enable these efforts.

IET Strategies for Serving Beginning-Level Learners

Provide bridge programs to prepare beginning-level learners for an IET program and emphasize the required workforce preparation as well as language and literacy skills. Bridge programs can link beginning-level learners directly to IET programs and support their successful transition into those programs by focusing on college and career readiness skills, including sector-related academic skills such as language or mathematics needed for coursework in the IET and career exploration opportunities like job shadowing, internships, and self-assessment of fit in a career pathway.[4]

Embed stackable credentials to enable learners to gradually and incrementally demonstrate skill attainment. These stackable credentials and milestones build on learners' knowledge, competencies, and skill development at every level and provide a sense of progress and mastery that can encourage persistence for beginning-level learners.

Strategy 1: Bridge Programs That Prepare Learners for IET

Bridge programs can support beginning-level learners in moving from traditional adult education, such as English and ABE instruction, to opportunities for career growth and contextualized instruction and training, including IET activities.[5] Bridge programs are common in the field and align with the emphasis of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act on transitions to postsecondary education in particular.[6] What we will refer to as bridge programs may also be called on-ramps, preparation courses, pre-IET programs, or boot camps.[7]

In this section, we share examples of how one local program provider has developed bridge programs to prepare beginning-level learners for IET programs, and another example of how state-level support and guidance has shaped local bridge programs.[8] Bridge programs offer a flexible approach, and the format of these programs will vary depending on factors such as organizational and programmatic constraints and the occupational sector.[9] Like IET activities more generally, the bridge programs featured in this document address workforce preparation in many ways, including study skills, hands-on job training, digital literacy, career navigation, and the academic and language skills to support beginning-level learners' transition to IET programs.

Designing Bridge Programs for Beginning-Level Learners

The following example highlights how one local program provider in Georgia has designed bridge programs to support their beginning-level learners.

Georgia Piedmont Technical College

Georgia Piedmont Technical College (GPTC) designed the Ready? Step. LEAP! program because 92% of their students enroll with a beginning level of literacy at NRS ABE level 3 or below. These students are not ready to succeed in an IET program without the front-loaded support and academic and workforce preparation the bridge program provides.

GPTC found that its adult education students were struggling with the industry training courses in which they were co-enrolled for the IET pathway. These students needed additional support with career and college readiness such as study skills and knowledge of how to navigate the college learning management system, seek help, or apply for financial aid, among other workforce preparation skills. To support beginning-level learners, GPTC developed the bridge program using a process of ***backward design*** beginning with input from employers and vocational trainers about the targeted knowledge and skills requirements for several career pathways. Figure 1 highlights how participants move from a bridge that is directly linked to several IET programs. Staff designed the curriculum to prepare students to enroll in an IET program and work toward attaining industry-recognized credentials and employment in their chosen occupation.

Figure 1. GPTC student pathway: Ready? Step. LEAP! (2023). Georgia Piedmont Technical College. https://www.gptc.edu/adult-education/truist-grant-career-pathways/. Reprinted with permission.

Currently, GPTC offers bridges to the certified nursing assistant (CNA), commercial driver's license (CDL), and manufacturing IET programs. The college offers the bridge to CNA IET for students at NRS ESL levels 5 and 6. In the future, staff aims to expand access to the CNA bridge class for NRS ABE level 2 students. The **CNA bridge** content focuses on the language skills and vocabulary for anatomy needed to continue to the CNA IET program. The bridge also includes healthcare career exploration so that students understand what the job entails and can make sure it is a good fit before they continue to the IET. The four-week **CDL bridge** class is focused on preparing for the learner's permit, contextualizing the key vocabulary from the CDL training manual. The **manufacturing bridge** program uses virtual reality technology as an instructional tool to familiarize students with manufacturing tasks, concepts, and vocabulary. In all of these examples, GPTC staff connect bridge participants directly to the IET programs that are linked to in-demand careers within the local labor market.[10]

GPTC's career pathways programming aims to serve beginning-level learners and is committed to ensuring that students can access credentials and employment opportunities. It is a challenge, given limited staffing, to seek and braid funding sources and continually find the appropriate match between students and occupational training offered, the effort is necessary to achieve these goals, even for smaller numbers of students. For this reason, GPTC staff has focused on delivering high-quality IET programs, even if this leads to fewer offerings at one time.

Implementing State-Level Support and Guidance for Bridge Programs in Illinois

The Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) is Illinois's AEFLA grantor. ICCB has long supported bridge programs with AEFLA funds. They define the bridge program model as an approach to "provide adult education learners with contextualized occupation-specific basic skills needed to successfully transition to job training programs in high-growth industries,"[11] including to IET programs. Over the past fifteen years, bridge programs in Illinois have been growing in number, and there are now **bridge programs representing the top sixteen career clusters** across the state. The ICCB makes recommendations for learner NRS levels for bridge programs, but the programs make the ultimate decision about eligibility based on a variety of factors, including student demographics and needs.

ICCB supports program providers in identifying, developing, and implementing bridge programs. To that end, they offer relevant **professional development** through their professional development network which includes the Southern Illinois Professional Development Center and Illinois Center for Specialized Professional Support. Professional development support includes a Toolkit, a bridge program teacher video series, and bridge curricula. In addition, through the ICAPS site, the professional development network supplies on-demand support and facilitates learning communities.

Women Employed

Specified bridge program funding from the ICCB supported the development of bridge Lesson Plans at Women Employed (WE), a Chicago-based nonprofit that provides tools and resources to connect adult learners to the workforce. Working closely with the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC), WE recognized that the majority of the adult education students served through the CCC network were ABE or ESL *students who needed preparation programs before they could enroll in occupational training* and postsecondary programs, including IET programs. In response, WE developed the bridge lesson plans, which can be used in preparation and on-ramp classes for IET programs.

The bridge lesson plans represent top sectors and target intermediate literacy levels. Written for adult education/bridge practitioners who are partnering with the City Colleges of Chicago, this resource is a template, and other states and local programs can adapt the materials (free of charge) to their own contexts. WE also developed the *Career Foundations Curriculum*, which prepares learners for the next steps along their career pathway and helps them to make informed choices about the bridge sector and the subsequent IET program they will transition into.

Heartland Community College

ICCB guidance and professional development have been instrumental in helping Heartland Community College develop its bridge and its IET programs (called Integrated Career and Academic Preparation System or ICAPS in Illinois). Heartland staff participated in bridge workshops and state conference sessions offered by the Southern Illinois Professional Development Center and Central Illinois Adult Education Service Center, part of the professional development arm of the ICCB.

Heartland staff credit the guidance that they received on the state-defined bridge model with pushing them to reassess and redesign their curricula and instructional practices. Subsequently, they *integrated workplace and digital literacy skills, as well as civics competencies* into the curricula at all levels of the program, including beginning and intermediate levels. As a result of this redesign, they were able to prepare beginning-level and intermediate-level learners for the demands of the ICAPS programs. Now, students enrolled in bridge programs receive contextualized ESOL and workplace-preparation instruction, gain academic readiness skills, and receive support in transitioning to ICAPS programs or college courses. Currently, HCC offers Bridge to Workplace Technology 1 & 2, Bridge to Education Careers in English as a Second Language program, and Bridge to Technology in the Workplace for students at NRS levels 2–5 in ESOL and 3–5 in HSE, as a pathway to ICAPS programs available to students at NRS level 7 in ESL and levels 5-6 in HSE.

Strategy 2: Embedded Stackable Credentials

Stackable credentials are "building blocks for industry-informed career pathways that maximize learners' skill acquisition, investment of time and financial resources, and employability."[12] Stacking credentials including licenses, industry certifications, and certificates can support learners along the continuum of a career pathway. Moreover, implementing credentials can support multiple exit points for learners who may need to return to additional programming in the future. This is particularly relevant for beginning-level learners, as time to completion toward certain credentials and degrees may require more time.

In this section, we highlight how St. Paul Public Schools Adult Basic Education - Hubbs Center embedded stackable credentials in their pathway for paraeducators, ultimately meeting a local labor market need and providing students with entrance into employment in the field of education. We also explore how Wisconsin State Technical College's support encouraged Literacy Services of Wisconsin to integrate their HSED and IET programs. In both cases, embedding credentials throughout the IET programs relied upon strong partnerships with employers, leading to stacked credentials that can lead to employment upon completion.

Embedding Stackable Credentials for Beginning-Level Learners

The following example showcases how one local program integrated stackable credentials into its IET programming to prepare learners to obtain employment within the local school district.

St. Paul Public Schools Adult Basic Education–Hubbs Center
After noticing both a need in the local workforce for educational assistants and adult learners' growing interest in education careers, St. Paul Public Schools Adult Basic Education (SPPS ABE)–Hubbs Center developed a career pathway and IET program for paraeducators. Because certifications are recommended for employment in this pathway, the IET program is designed in partnership with the area school district to support learners in fulfilling those recommendations and requirements one step at a time. By passing the industry-recognized certification exam, IET participants can forego the alternative associate degree requirements for employment as a paraeducator.

As illustrated in Figure 2 below, the educational assistant (EA) pathway integrates several certifications in order to prepare students for employment in the school district: CPR certification for adults and children, the personal care assistant (PCA) certification for those who are interested in working with children with disabilities, multiple program-related certificates to share digital literacy gains, and finally, upon passing the exam, the paraeducator certification. The costs for all certificates including the paraeducator certification are free to IET participants through additional grants.

The program design draws extensively on ***experiential learning*** and embeds career exploration within the IET program. EA candidates participate in job shadowing in which they are paired with an EA currently employed in the school district within the specialty of their choice (e.g., administration, elementary, special needs). Additionally, guest speakers such as representatives from the school district's HR Department come to the course to discuss employment opportunities. This program leverages online instruction, with the vast majority of coursework taking place remotely and only the job shadowing occurring in person.

The paraeducator certification earned in the IET program leads directly to wage gains, with many graduates finding employment in the local school districts. Due to the need for EAs, some districts are hiring individuals pending their paraeducator certification at $15 per hour. However, students in the EA pathway often obtain positions at $17 per hour to $22 per hour as a result of their education and experience. Not only does this approach address the local labor market shortage for EAs within the school district but it also enables the district to provide EAs that represent the diverse and multilingual student body. Students at the Hubbs Center and K-12 students in surrounding school districts share common languages of Somali, Spanish, and Hmong.
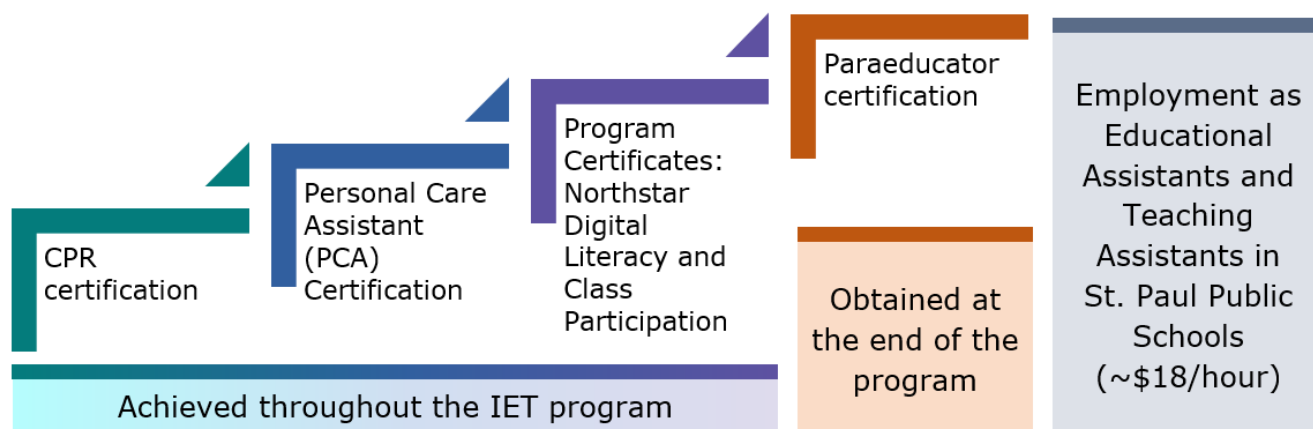

Figure 2. St. Paul Public Schools Hubbs Center career pathway and IET program for paraeducators.

Graduates are introduced to a ***scholarship program*** for school district employees who are on the pathway to becoming teachers, offered in partnership with a local university and the school district. Staff credits their high levels of participation and employment in this IET program to students' interest in the education field and the need in the local labor market. Through their strong partnerships within the school district and responsiveness to community needs, they can ensure program graduates have a high probability of employment.

Implementing State-Level Support and Guidance on Embedding Stackable Credentials in Wisconsin

Just as ICCB has provided state-level guidance and support for bridge programs, the Wisconsin Technical College System (WCTS) assists local program providers in developing stackable credentials within their career pathways and IET programs through state-level guidance and professional development opportunities.

Through a grant from the Wisconsin Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training program, the WTCS established *embedded technical diplomas and career pathway certificates* and hired leaders to build these credentials into associate degrees. In addition, WTCS's AEFLA programs must complete a [proposal](#) for embedding technical diplomas or pathway certificate(s) within their proposed IET program. This form requires not only a visual representation of the stacked credentials but also a rationale and relevant salary information linked to the selected credentials. In addition to policy guidance, the state-level staff provides professional development on stackable credentials and related topics. In the past, they have supplied individual coaching and hosted conferences dedicated to how to embed credentials within career pathways.

Literacy Services of Wisconsin

Adult learners who participate in Literacy Services of Wisconsin's [Multi-Craft Core Curriculum (MC3) IET](#) are able to *obtain both a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) and an industry-recognized pre-apprenticeship certificate*. Staff at the CBO Literacy Services of Wisconsin realized that students pursued occupational training with local workforce development partners after completing their high school equivalency with the CBO. They determined that the IET model may reduce the time students need to complete these trainings and acquire these credentials. Ultimately, with the assistance of state-supported professional development and effective community partnerships, they developed the [MC3/HSED IET program](#).

The MC3/HSED IET program incorporates multiple certifications, including the industry-recognized MC3 Certificate, the Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) certificate, the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) certificate, and the High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED). The OSHA and CPR certifications are offered early on in the IET program, both as a pre-requisite to the hands-on activities that follow and as a way to ensure that *students who exit the IET program prior to completion do so with meaningful certifications*. Literacy Services of Wisconsin also employs a *bridge program to support learners' entrance* into HSED coursework and the MC3/HSED IET program. Called the HSED Pathway class, this six- to eight-week course provides targeted preparation on foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and writing skills, and

addresses workforce preparation topics such as digital literacy and basic soft skills. Upon completion, students can enter the MC3/HSED IET program equipped with the skills to succeed.

State-sponsored professional development encouraged staff at Literacy Services of Wisconsin to consider innovative ways of serving beginning-level learners. Through attending a state-sponsored conference, staff at Literacy Services of Wisconsin sought solutions for matching the IET curriculum with the needs and capabilities of the majority of the students arriving to the program at NRS levels 2 or 3. Here, they learned about the notion of a boot camp – or what is referred to as a bridge program in this document – to prepare learners for more rigorous study. They subsequentially designed a boot camp of their own that preceded the IET program and offered a direct pathway for students from NRS levels 1 and 2 to access the credentialing programs.

Staff at Literacy Services of Wisconsin also attribute their ability to support beginning-level learners to strong community partnerships. They collaborated with the Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership/Big Step to design and implement this construction-focused MC3 IET, both lessening the time needed to meet requirements for these credentials and contextualizing the HSED content in the MC3 curriculum. Additional community partnerships have helped to address important challenges that IET participants face, such as lack of childcare or transportation and housing insecurity. Meeting these basic needs for students in career pathways programming is crucial: it can reduce the cognitive load and make space in learners' mental bandwidth to focus on academic goals.[13]

Before COVID-19, between seventy to one hundred percent of learners who participated in this IET program obtained an HSED and an industry-recognized certificate.[14] Additionally, an average of fifteen to twenty-five percent of participants who complete the program move directly into apprenticeships upon completion. Given that a majority of the MC3/HSED IET participants are testing at NRS Level 3 and ten to twenty percent are testing at NRS Level 2, this IET program illustrates how, with the help of state support, beginning-level learners at Literacy Services of Wisconsin were able to successfully and efficiently obtain employment and academic credentials.

Conclusion

As the examples here highlight, local program providers can develop solutions that support beginning-level learners in accessing and succeeding in IET programs. Bridge programs and stackable credentials are two promising program models for opening pathways to IET programs. Bridge programs provide a flexible approach for learners to develop the academic, workforce preparation, and career awareness necessary to succeed in an IET, while stackable credentials enable learners to accumulate the certifications required to enter and progress in their chosen career pathway. State-level policies, guidance, and professional development help to foster the conditions in which these strategies can be applied successfully. These promising practices rely on strong partnerships between the IET provider and employers, workforce development providers, state-level agencies, and community organizations, and ultimately aim to increase the level of flexibility in adult education programming to best meet beginning-level learners' needs.

Questions for Reflection

- How can these promising practices help your program meet the career goals of beginning-level learners?

- What partners and resources would you need to build bridge programs and stackable credentials that align to your IET programming?

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Endnotes

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