

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Adult education has long been an integral part of our nation's prosperity. Helping millions of adults with low basic skills earn a high school equivalency and increase their employability skills. The Coalition on Adult Basic Education, COABE works to inspire and help educators so adults succeed in communities thrive. Recently in Texas, I caught up with Sharon Bonney, COABE's CEO and Jacqueline Aguilera, project manager for the Houston Mayor's Office of Adult Literacy and a member of COABE. Bonney starts our discussion by explaining how the organization collaborates on local, state and national levels to help more adult learners attain economic mobility.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

COABE's mission is to inspire educators, so adults succeed and community thrive. At the national level, we work with many different partners, over a hundred national partners such as IBM Skills Build, Google, Amazon, Tyson Foods, but then we also have state partners. So there's 49 state partners that we work with called State Associations. And then we also work with local programs. We have over 2300 local programs that we work with. And then we also have 60,000 individual members. So we provide a number of different services. Everything from a national conference, it's the largest adult ed conference. We have a journal for research that is buy-in for the field of adult education, but also provides those data points that our field needs that they can use when they go and talk to mayors and governors and members of Congress. We also provide skills building opportunities for adult learners, and we have a whole adult learner initiative. It's not just the skills building piece, but it's also helping them to advocate for themselves or an award-winning ambassador program where we help them. There's over 500 ambassadors. They go on and talk to mayors members of Congress as well. We also have that leadership piece where we're helping through a state association leadership initiative, helping the state associations professionalize as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So when you talk about adult education, let's get a definition of that.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

Well, with adult education, really we're looking at life education, life literacy. So what different literacy skills do you need to succeed? So that can start out with basics of what people usually visualize when they think literacy. Reading, writing, numeracy, critical thinking. But then we go into applications like in health and financial. Looking at of course all of that being contextualized with digital literacy because everything we do now is forged forward with technology from work to family life. So adult education itself and adult literacy is all these skills that you need in order to function successfully for your life and career.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

It seems that in our country, I've looked at the numbers when you compare it to other countries, we do have a numeracy and literacy issue and that adults do need some additional education. So beyond getting a GED class, are you also offering just classes to get those skills honed a little bit more?

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

Sure. So with the adult education providers, there are different levels of those services. Some individuals come in, they need language skills, they need career prep, they need pre skilling, up skilling. There are different types of programs that actually help to connect the learners to career opportunities. Working with internships, working with apprenticeships. But then making sure that they have the basic skills levels they need to succeed in those partnerships. So of course a GED in language is the beginning, but actually contextualize learning. Contextualize in the ways that they can apply those basic skills within industries. That is very important because adult ed is a talent pool developer.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

That's right. When they have these integrated education and training programs, it's really accelerating their learning. So they might get out with their GED as well, as well as with a certificate. And then they also have a job with that employer. So that really is special and really helping with that talent pipeline that we've been talking about. But there's also digital literacy skills. We're here at Connected America talking about digital literacy and all of our local programs have this digital literacy component where they're helping learners to use a computer, use the Google applied digital skills programming, open up Gmail accounts, that kind of thing. And that's really important too because there's such a huge digital divide.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

And again, digital literacy in levels. Because again, a lot of times we think digital literacy is the basics. And traditionally we've thought, okay, that's what the computer class is for. But all classes now, everything in adult ed is infused with digital and we infuse it at different levels so that a person comes in with a very basic introduction, but they have to have contextualized digital skills for industries. It's not enough just to be able to turn on the computer or check an email. But many of the automation that's going on has to deal with keypad operation, understanding how that particular tool is going to function and to be able to troubleshoot sometimes. So again, there's higher level skills and let's not start talking about virtual reality because that's a whole other level of skilling that again, is an opportunity for adult ed preparing the workforce.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

And when we think about our local programs, about 75% of the Title II federally funded programs. So federally funded programs have to work with not just their own adult ed programs, but with the workforce sector. And the idea is we're helping to feed these learners into the workforce and into community college. And I just want to say that the local programs do an amazing job. So they typically get on average, about \$583 per learner. They're working with learners with the most barriers to life and employment, and they have a great success rate. Now that is compared to an elementary at \$10,000 per pupil. So when you see that disparity and yet these local programs are able to produce such results, that speaks to not just the heart of the educators that they really want to help the learner succeed, the ingenuity of trying to braid all these different services together for the learner, but also the grit of those adult learners that are coming to non-compulsory classes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So when you talk about adult learners, what age group are you talking about and what demographics are we looking at as most of those students?

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

So this is something I love to talk about because it's 16 and above, but we're talking about individuals who typically have had such trauma in their lives. So migrant and seasonal workers, aged out of foster care, homeless, formerly incarcerated, exhausting TANF, single parents, people who are highly impoverished. Those are the individuals who come into our local programs and also ESL. A lot of immigrants that come through our local programs. And so these local programs are some of the most inclusive and inviting programs you can go to, and they really help them to not only get the skills they need, but also to feel a part of a community that's supporting them.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

I want to add too, in that group of refugees and immigrants that are being served, a lot of them are professionals in their own countries. And so what they need are the contextualized language skills in order to move into work opportunities that will actually utilize their existing skill sets. So again, that's another way that adult education can support the training of potential talent and take them to different levels of performance.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

We've talked with EnGen, Katie Brown. I don't know if you know Katie, but Katie Brown, that's exactly what they do. They help people with that contextualized language skills so that they know how to speak on the job and they know how to then get promotions on the jobs. And then there's also Upwardly Global that does the work of helping those professionals in other countries make the connections here to get their own credentials and certifications so that they can also practice here what they could do somewhere else. This is all about economic mobility.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

And just as a side note, World Education Services, which oversees Upwardly Global, they're one of our strand partners. So we have over 32 strand partners. These are those national partners I was talking about. And so they bring the best of the best profession development to the COABE conference. So we have an entire strand. We've had it for decades called immigrant integration. And so this is not just about helping them learn how to read, write, and speak, but it's also about that cultural piece. Helping them to assimilate into the culture too.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Where does the funding for this come from?

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

I'll talk about at the national, state and local level. So COABE is not a federally funded entity. We're a non-profit. Our funding comes from many various sources, but grants and services and that sort of thing. But our local programs, they are federally funded, 75% of them. And so they're funded to really work with Department of Labor, that piece as well as Title IV, which is working with voc rehab. Right now, the way the current administration is, we've been really encouraging our local programs that funding might look very different in the future. Not that it'd be less, but it just might be in some different bucket. Right now it comes from the feds down to the state directors and there's a competitive grant of every three years. And so that might not be. It might now be going to the governors. That's something where we

have a state advocate fellowship that Jackie here participated. I don't know, Jackie, if you'd like to talk a bit about that.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

Absolutely. The state fellowship is like a boot camp coaching program if you want to take what you know and be able to contextualize it in a way that decision-makers can take that information and actually understand it and apply it to their decisions on policies. And again, we're taking what we do on a daily basis. Educating. The opportunity to educate our decision-makers, and that's what we get out of that particular fellowship. And when Sharon interviewed me, she asked me, she said, "What do you want out of this?" And I said, "I want people to listen to me." I can talk all day, but I want to be able to talk efficiently, targeted and productively so that I can impact decisions. At least get a person to think twice and have the type of data and information that they need to make a decision that can impact our learners lives in the best way possible and to support our teachers.

And I really want to say something about our instructors and our teachers. One of the great things that comes out of working with COABE is training professional development on national state levels, and then we can take those connections down to a city level where I provide most of our support through our office so that our teachers can be equipped for the evolving landscape. We're talking about the integration of digital literacy for work, for families, but let's talk about instruction. And we can't have prepared learners without prepared instructors .and that's why that funding is so important because we need to support the training needs of our teachers so we can continue to support the training needs of the learners, which supports the economic needs of our cities and our states.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What's the role of private companies and private philanthropy in these programs?

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

At the national level, I'll tell you, it's huge. This is really what helps to fund a lot of the work we've been able to do. Working with organizations like NCCER, the National Center for Construction Education and Research, and being able to provide grants to our local programs to help them help the learners in the CTE space. Really with that construction and trade space. Many, many of the grants that we've received, we've been able to just turn around and give them back to the field. So that's been one of our strategies. Also, our national conference has been huge as well to really provide professional development, but also that networking piece. So when you come to our conference, you're going to find a number of funders that are there that are looking for what they can fund next, and so that's also something that we love is to really help the field in that way as well.

A lot of the vendors have invested millions into the field. EnGen, for example. Providing software and materials that really helps the field of adult education. So that's something that people don't typically think of. But at the local level, they really have to braid the fundings. Yes, it's federally funded often, but then also it is at private philanthropy as well as working with those local employers. That's a huge piece. Every local program administrator should be meeting with employers in the area. They should be on the workforce development boards, they should be on the chambers of commerce, and they should be seen as that talent pipeline.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

One of the things that we have in Houston, and I get the great honor to serve as, is a provider liaison. A matchmaker. If I see opportunities for providers that we have a particular company, let's say Comcast, that is really interested in supporting digital skills, digital literacy in our area, then making sure that we have opportunities. Connect Comcast with the provider. So that they get a chance to pitch, to talk with each other. And we're not just talking about funding. A lot of times we can get opportunities to provide technology. We have partners that I've been able to leverage for different types of software opportunities on a pilot basis so that our learners and our teachers can get skills and access to programming they might not otherwise, get an opportunity to be acclimated to. And administrators get a chance to try before they buy. And a lot of times they're like, "Hey, this is really good. Let's look for potential funding." A lot of our guys in Houston are not federally funded, so they have to be creative. You have to get in those funding pockets, those corporate funders that are able to invest again in literacy as it applies and impacts our economy and of course the health of our families, which again is related to economic health.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

There are a lot of people out there who don't believe there is opportunity out there for them to advance economically, but when I talk to people like you, I know there are opportunities, people don't know about them. So what do you do to make sure that they know about them?

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

So at COABE, we have a two-time award-winning campaign called Move Ahead with Adult Ed. This is where we leverage Google Ads and we were able to help over nine million adult learners find local programs since 2020. This has been a big engine pusher pushing the learners into these programs using those keywords like find a job or workforce skills or GED. Those sorts of things. Using AI actually. It's really driven by AI. So we've done that. We also teach our state advocate fellows and our local programs through our Advocacy April, our adult ed and family literacy week initiatives to write press releases, op-eds, to talk to the radio stations to get out there and share their story.

We have Educate & Elevate, a national public awareness campaign as well that's won 600 National Davies. And that also is where we're showcasing success in the field of adult ed. So you've got to get out there and really let people know about the great work you're doing. And a lot of times what I've seen is people are understandably very humble. They don't want to toot their horn. But if you don't tell people, if you don't tell your mayors, governors, members of Congress, you don't tell the workforce sector what you're doing, they're not going to partner with you. You're not going to get funded. So this is where we're like, "Get out there and talk about it. Educate and elevate."

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

This is not if you build it, they will come. Nice in theory. We come the one major word, marketing. And that's one of the key pieces that we get not only with the fellowship but with the support like through COABE and being able to take that on local levels to help our providers start becoming more confident in telling their story and sharing not only the success stories, but being able to put together data that represents the impact on a quantitative level of what they're doing and then getting comfortable with sharing that. Now, that can be in meetings, it can be virtual, it can be the face-to-face phone calls, but more importantly, it's becoming more on a social media level. Being able to get comfortable with putting those messages together to be able to share those online, to use the keywords like move ahead with adult ed and adult education matters and make those connections so that you get those keywords identified and then it starts sharing out.

Share each other's stories. This is one of the biggest challenges that we do have, and this is advocacy. Advocacy equals education. Don't be afraid of the word. It's education. So if we're sharing each other's story and we share it out, we've learned that for government level, most of those guys are on Twitter. So you've got to also think about where is your marketing going and market to where you want that message. If you're shopping and recruiting for learners, you're going to use more of the social media pages that they're using the most. If we're going to look with decision makers, you're going to go there. But on the learner side, we're assuming digital literacy. So you still cannot forget to go into the community. You got to get back to the basics. Let's put these things in the washaterias again. Let's take them to the community centers. Let's put them at the bus stations. Let's make those community level amplifier connections. Go to the churches. We still have the human component that is so important for that touchpoint in order to let people know who we are and what we are.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

And it's so interesting you say that because still what is one of the biggest things we hear from the local programs, why someone came? Yes, social media for sure. But also it's that human touch. They went home and they told their brother or their father, whoever they told their neighbor, and so that's why their is now coming to the local program as well. It is that human touch.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Adult education matters and it makes a difference to the community.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

It sure does. There's a lot of statistics that support that, which I'll send you after this. That support how the great work that's being done at this local level, often times in an obscure location, not properly funded, and yet the results speak for themselves.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

Passion, commitment, and the dedication to the success of not only the individuals, but of the community and the families, and then the impact that they can have, again, returning to the economic health of the city, which benefits the states, which benefits the nation.

Sharon Bonney, COABE CEO:

Helping get people to work and helping to break generational curses, really. If I could be so bold as to share, my grandmother was a high school dropout and my mother lived in poverty and they moved around from place to place and she barely graduated. But my mother made sure literacy was huge in our home and three out of four of my siblings, we were [inaudible 00:18:23]. So my brother became a watch commander, my sister became a nurse practitioner, and my other sister's a nurse anesthetist. I am very thankful to my mother that she had such a huge emphasis on literacy because she saw what happened with her mom. Her mom went back and got her GED when she was 72, and then she went on to go to community college. True story. It's very near and dear to my heart. Having heard all the stories of what my mom went through, and we didn't go through anything like that, and my children, it's very different. So it broke that generational curse.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

We often talk about investing in the children, but the children go home, so we have to invest in the home and the parents so that we can support our children.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you both very much.

Jacqueline Aguilera, Mayor's Office of Literacy:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That was my conversation with Sharon Bonney, CEO of the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, and Jacqueline Aguilera, project manager for the Houston Mayor's Office of Adult Literacy. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.