

**Remaining Puzzles and Opening Moves:  
Birmingham and New Orleans address adult literacy, language and numeracy**

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Our purpose in this presentation is to describe two efforts by whole communities to address the educational capacities of their citizens. Because they are in different countries and at different stages of development, comparison of the two efforts illuminates the challenges and opportunities facing communities attempting to address adult literacy comprehensively. We are grateful to Ursula Howard of NRDC for making us aware of the shared strategic vision guiding our respective efforts, and for encouraging and supporting this joint presentation.

**Remaining Puzzles: The Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership**

The Birmingham (England) Core Skills Development Partnership has been undertaking whole-city, large-scale development work since 1995. This ambitious drive to raise overall levels of literacy, language and numeracy (for all people, of all ages, in all contexts) from unacceptably low levels to levels well above national average was started in a different political context and predated the national school literacy and numeracy strategies; the Moser Report and national Skills For Life adult basic skills strategy; and the creation of Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus, Connexions Service in their present forms. The commitment to change was seen as long term i.e. at least 10 years, and requiring a refocusing of available development money onto literacy and numeracy developments.

Considerable gains have been made re school-age developments and there is an agreement between the major education and training agencies to work together to reduce the adult basic skills 'gap' by 50% in the ten year period 2000-2010.

This highlighted a number of managerial concerns about how best to bring about whole-system changes but also raised research and development issues concerning what counted as 'best yet knowledge'. Much of the understanding of 'what works' rested, at that time, on relatively contested evidence, from small studies, in other contexts. New, and better, insights were being developed within the wider research and development arena, at the same time as we were having to make large-scale investment decisions.

To get the momentum necessary for rapid widespread change there was a need to act rapidly and boldly 'in faith' on the basis of 'best yet' understandings, in the context of rapidly shifting national policy frameworks and in the context of urban, highly mobile, relatively diverse, high volume populations. We couldn't wait for everything to be clear before we committed large sums to widespread structural changes. We also couldn't easily use the developments as experimental test beds given the scale,

complexity, mobility issues involved – yet we had to learn and understand as much as we could as we went along. There was a sense of the tension between wanting to interpret the world and wanting to change it. The information available was often descriptive (these are the underachieving groups; these are some of the interconnecting factors etc) yet what was searched for was often prescriptive (here’s the things to do that will really make a difference for large numbers of underachieving 12-16 year olds etc).

Sometimes the ‘intelligence’ activity was to strip out what understandings there were from recent practical developments – a kind of archaeology of past insights – in order to rearrange these elements into new practical models to be tested out/refined and then pushed everywhere throughout the system. This brought issues of ‘scalability’. Yes something worked in a restricted pilot setting (e.g. with 30 families) but would it work on the scale of change needed in Birmingham (i.e. with 13,000 families)?

During the first few years we were able to feed into national developments in ways that meant whatever national strategy emerged was something that Birmingham felt comfortable with and could try to embed as quickly, deeply and widely as possible – at the same time freeing up our own development resources to tackle the next area for change.

There was a heavy reliance on ever more robust and ever more disaggregated data. At the schools level we had fine-level data that enabled development resources and energies to be redirected. At the adult level we had the national figures, at ward level, for low/very low levels of literacy and numeracy. In 2002 we commissioned a survey of adults across Birmingham that gave us a best-yet estimate of literacy/numeracy levels (with all the caveats about only being able to partially test particular skills) against the Skills for Life descriptors. This data was able to be disaggregated by gender, ethnicity, age, location, employment status, employment sector, etc etc and provided meaningful insights for local planners and funders. Comparison with previous data highlighted the improvements being made in overall literacy levels and the absolute lack of progress in numeracy. At the same time it confirmed that, whilst overall levels may have risen, the gaps between the lowest skills areas and the average remained as wide as ever. There was a need for very locally-focused acceleration of skills achievement in order to close these gaps

The indicative levels of literacy/numeracy skills across the various wards of the city, and the plan to significantly increase these levels to new heights by 2010, enabled us to agree a set of aspirational floor targets in terms of ‘no locality will be below a certain percentage by 2005, a higher percentage level by 2007 and will be above an even higher percentage level by 2010’, for Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2 literacy and numeracy.

Setting these aspirations alongside the current levels of skills and achievement rates in each locality highlighted the reshaping of provision that planners, funders and providers needed to agree upon.

In terms of development activity this is requiring a blend of insights and actions:

- An ‘end to end’ review interviewed learners who were not in provision, but who were highly likely to have basic skills needs, about the pattern of

organisations/agencies they regularly used. These organisations were interviewed about any possible role they might have in delivering routes to enhanced basic skills for such people. This demonstrated a number of areas of further development and a number of system holes to be plugged by organisational development.

- Reviews of performance across various systems is highlighting areas of effectiveness and ineffectiveness – enabling development plans to be drawn up for these programmes, which constitute the bulk of the learning infrastructure in the city.
- One determining factor was the mindset of key intermediaries within the systems. This highlighted the need for developments in the way ‘adult basic skills’ was interpreted by these key intermediaries, the way this was reflected back to learners/potential learners, and the impact on notions of what counted as ‘learning’ and ‘success’.
- Lessons emerging from national pathfinders and research activity were fed into the mainstream thinking and planning of partners as rapidly as possible in an attempt to shift the ways things worked, in order to deliver improved benefits to people in the city. These lessons, insights and support materials weren’t all available as ‘knowns’ at the beginning of the substantial drive to higher skills levels and developments had to be consistently readjusted to take account of them as they emerged. At one stage, as more and more theoretical and practical tools were available, practitioners were in danger of focusing on the ‘tool of the week’ rather than relating the fine detail back to the bigger picture of what it was all about any way (i.e. wholesale change across communities in Birmingham). ‘Big picture’ rehearsal became part of the necessary development activity.

The challenge was to see beyond the fragments, up to national strategy, tip back down to a local framework of how it all probably might work in practice; customise to take account of local variation but within a framework that kept some coherence across the city; remind organisations of their own responsibilities, but match this with an appropriate set of supports and challenges; keeping one eye on individual programmes and developments whilst training the other on a realistic future for Birmingham and the routes back from there to where we stand at the moment.

One key to all of this has been to keep long-term change the story and to not let other stories (‘the money’; ‘the ownership’ etc) take over. The other has been to take a pragmatic approach to balancing available knowledge and intelligence with taking realistic practical steps within that long term aspiration for change.

At the moment Birmingham believes itself to be around ‘half way there’ i.e. we have come an enormous way since 1995 but have about the same development distance still to travel.

### **Opening moves: The Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans**

Providing the conditions that permit all motivated citizens to acquire the educational competence necessary to provide for themselves and their families, and pursue a meaningful and constructive existence is not merely a personal, nor an educational, nor a research issue. It is all those, and also a profoundly political one. I use “politics”

here with a small “p,” in its Aristotelean sense: Politics happens when the adults of a community come together to see to the wellbeing of the community as a whole. A community that fails to offer educational opportunities to all its citizens equitably, has failed to exercise political responsibility.

For the past thirty years, community organizers and citizen leaders in the United States have built powerful, enduring, and diverse collectives that deliver funding and other resources consistently on issues that matter to their members, including affordable housing, community policing, public education reform, and workforce preparation. I characterize the form of community organizing to be highlighted here as “broad-based” because, at its heart, community organizing is a deliberate effort to cross lines of race, class, religion, and geography to build organizations with sufficient power to stand for the whole and address common-good issues in local communities. It does so not by bringing individuals together, but by connecting mediating institutions such as congregations, neighborhood associations, and other local voluntary groups.

“Broad-based” here has two interrelated meanings. First, such organizations are *diverse* because they are intentionally built across racial, religious, and class lines. Second, they are *multi-issue* because their diversity means that the various partner institutions will inevitably bring differing interests to the table. Within the generic realm called “organizing,” the broad-based approach has an unparalleled track record of initiating sustainable social change in communities around the United States. Broad-based community organizations in every region of the United States, and a number in the United Kingdom, have developed a reliable and replicable methodology for building relational power to act for social change on a wide range of public issues in their communities.

Beginning in 2001, the Lindy Boggs National Center for Community Literacy at Loyola University New Orleans took steps to initiate and coordinate an approach to the challenge of adult literacy in New Orleans based on the principles of broad-based organizing. The motivation for this effort was simple. The best available expert estimates indicate that approximately 250,599 adults in the five-parish metropolitan area of [Orleans](#) function at the lowest of five levels of adult literacy. We also concluded based on available research that fewer than 10% of adults with low levels of literacy are enrolled in a literacy program. Functioning at this level of literacy precludes the possibility of anything but minimum-wage employment, and severely limits people’s capacities to assist their children with their education, participate fully in their churches, and engage as citizens in their local communities. In addition to its direct and obvious impact on the life chances of the individuals mentioned above and their families, key leaders in business, religious institutions, public education and government have become acutely aware that this community’s adult literacy situation severely limits the entire region’s capacity to thrive economically, religiously, educationally and politically.

We began by convening local leaders in literacy and adult basic education as well as stakeholders from business, social services, religious institutions to form a broad-based collaborative and build a solid foundation of data and information on adult literacy. The initial literacy stakeholders collaborative organized itself into three working groups:

- The Market Analysis working group analyzed literacy needs in the New Orleans area by listening to providers, adult learners, community organizations, local government, funders and business and industry representatives. With the assistance from researchers from the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center and the Center for Nonprofit Resources, the group also gathered and reviewed all the relevant secondary data available on this subject.
- The Current Literacy Services working group inventoried and initiated the process of evaluating current programs offered by area adult literacy providers.
- The Best Practices working group identified and began to investigate national and regional literacy practices so that local providers might in due course adopt whatever is judged to be valuable to improve the services they provide.

The first fruit of this work was the creation of a broad-based collaborative, and the careful gathering of critical data and information on adult literacy. The principal recommendation to emerge from that initial effort and be implemented was the formation of the Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans, a non-profit metropolitan organization to coordinate and focus a multi-year campaign to raise the level of adult literacy in this region. The key tasks of the new literacy organization, as formulated by the initial group of diverse stakeholders, are:

1. [Supporting local literacy providers to assess their performance using national standards for adult literacy programs and make necessary adjustments to meet those standards](#)
2. [Coordinating the setting and implementation of annual local priorities by all concerned stakeholders in the effort to improve adult literacy](#)
3. [Seeking funds for participating literacy programs as well as for the creation of new approaches to building adult literacy](#)
4. [Creating community-wide ownership of and response to the issue of adult literacy in our community](#)

This new intermediary organization to promote adult literacy community wide has just celebrated its first anniversary. The Literacy Alliance of Greater New Orleans is now recognized regionally as the key institutional partner for organizations and institutions concerned about adult literacy from a variety of perspectives, including work, family, health and faith.

The main indicators of the success of this effort thus far, and the best indicators of its potential impact are three:

- The number and diversity of stakeholders that have seriously engaged with the work, and the level of trustful collaboration in which they have become engaged. This group includes adult literacy providers and students, employers,

faith-based organizations, local government, higher education, and philanthropy

- The quality of information gathered on which to base future organizational priorities and funding
- The partnerships with national and international literacy leaders and experts who have taken interest in our effort, and become involved in the development of the new literacy organization (including NCSALL and NRDC)

There have been two critical challenges to the Literacy Alliance thus far. The first is creating a climate of trust that allows literacy and other providers to focus on what they do best, thereby avoiding the typical destructive, competitive scrambling for limited resources among them. The second is the development of a broad community consensus as to the critical importance of literacy in shaping the future of metropolitan New Orleans and a shared sense of responsibility in addressing it. Both of these challenges have been addressed successfully thus far, but remain on the horizon of this effort.

A broad-based approach offers proponents of adult literacy a whole-community organizing strategy for making quality adult education available to all, regardless of race or class. This potential can be realized, however, only if adult literacy leaders begin to think and act not as a single-interest group with a righteous issue, but as members of larger collectives with a multi-interest agenda for social change. That orientation requires that local literacy leaders identify other institutions as potential partners with complementary interests, understand the particular interests of those partners, and forge a larger shared agenda that includes, but is not limited to or controlled by, the interests of any of them, including adult literacy advocates. Done properly, this does not mean giving up one's identity and primary commitment, but rather, finding powerful allies with whom we can craft a larger agenda that includes the interests of all participants.

We in New Orleans have been enlightened and inspired by the large vision, effective leadership and stunning track record of the Birmingham Core Skills Development Partnership. Among the lessons in creating and sustaining a whole-community response to adult literacy that we have drawn from our Birmingham colleagues two stand out. 1.) Such efforts must recognize, support, and strengthen the work of existing institutions responsible for various major pieces of the puzzle of education in a community. 2.) Such efforts must forge a strong link between those responsible for K-12 education and those working with adults. We wish our British colleagues continuing success, and look forward to the future of this transatlantic collaboration.