

Contextualized Literacy in the Context of Cash Assistance

Comparing Implementation Findings across
Program Models in NYC

Office of Evaluation and Research

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Overview

- Background
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Background

- Contextualization integrates the learning of basic skills with content relevant to a particular occupation—or to another “real world” topic of interest to the learner.
- Research done on college-based programs has shown promising results.
- In early 2013, HRA launched a contextualized literacy program to help CA recipients learn skills relevant to specific industries while removing literacy barriers to employment.
- Employment services are currently undergoing reform in the context of overall HRA service redesign.

Background (Cont.)

HRA's contextualized literacy program was launched within the context of existing employment services contracts, which are currently undergoing substantial changes through a new RFP. Vendors are currently paid for performance in job placement and job retention.

Pre-reform, contextualized Literacy program requirements are:

- Enrollment voluntary (then participation mandatory)
- Target clients lacking a high school diploma or equivalent
- Minimum of 2 industry sectors per vendor
- Maximum program length: 12 weeks
- Accommodate undercare client schedule (typically 2 days/week at vendor).

Background (Cont.)

In early 2014 (2nd year of the contextualized literacy program), the new HRA administration placed greater emphasis on education and training as an important option for cash assistance clients.

- *Within context of pre-existing contract*, encouraged vendors to increase literacy enrollment and improve outcomes:
 - Established “**Literacy Strategic Employment Target**”: financial incentive for vendors to improve outcomes for literacy-track clients, but pre-reform payments are still tied to *job placement* – not *educational attainment*.
- *Outside of these contracts*, the new HRA administration is pursuing multiple short- and long-term avenues for increasing access to education. New approach will include robust up-front assessment, tracking clients directly to education where appropriate.

Research Questions

GOAL: Inform ongoing efforts to increase access to education and training for cash assistance clients.

Research questions:

- How do vendors describe contextualized literacy goals?
- What were the key components of the contextualized literacy programs implemented by the vendors? Similarities and differences across models?
- What challenges did vendors face and what strategies did they use to address them?
- How did enrollment, retention, and job placement vary across models and over time?

Method

- Baseline key informant interviews conducted **between July and September of 2013.**
- Follow-up interviews and class observations conducted in **May of 2015.**
- Analysis of HRA administrative data:
 - Year 1 (May through October 2013)
 - Year 2 (May through October 2014)

Enrollment, Program Retention, Job Placements.

This report focuses on contextualized literacy as implemented pre-reform by four geographically-targeted employment services vendors.

Program Models

Vendor 1

Vendor 1's goal is to “remove literacy barriers that prevent employment.” This vendor has traditionally had the strongest work-first approach among vendors.

Initial launch included:

- Food Protection and Customer Service tracks. Early on, management at Vendor 1 noted that their customer service track allowed them to train recipients for a broader range of jobs.
- Both tracks 2 weeks long, with classes taking place two afternoons per week--the shortest among vendor programs.
- Clients instructed on how to sign up for related certifications (e.g., National Retail Federation, NRF, certificate).

Vendor 2

Vendor 2 described the goal of their literacy program as contributing to their effort to “find jobs.”

Vendor 2 launched with:

- Tracks in Food Protection (leading to NYC Food Protection credential); Customer Service (following NRF curriculum); and ESL contextualized to Customer Service.
- Courses were 12 weeks long, 2 full days per week. An early concern of instructors was whether participants with reading levels below the 4th grade level could make substantial progress in this time period.
- “Rolling” enrollment policy, with clients able to join the sessions at any time.

Vendor 3

Vendor 3 has traditionally emphasized educational opportunities for clients. Their contextualized literacy program goal is “to help students become more independent.”

Launched with three tracks:

- Food Protection, Home Health, and ESL (initially envisioned as “customer service” but quickly broadened to a “general workplace” context).
- Classes took place 2 full days per week for one month.

Early on, Vendor 3 re-branded its contextualized literacy program as “The Academy” in an attempt to distance the program from the idea of low literacy and address stigma.

Vendor 4

Vendor 4 was the only vendor to subcontract its contextualized literacy services.

Initial tracks offered at program launch included:

- Home Health Aide (HHA) and Computer Repair, provided by a city college branch; and Hospitality and Retail, provided by a workforce and training consulting firm.
- Both providers offered a certificate of completion at the end of the course.
- Courses were designed to be 12 weeks long, *2 full days* per week. Subcontracting meant clients did not participate at the vendor site during the course duration, but were expected to return at session completion for employment services.

Program Comparison

Generally Similar	Generally Different
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• All offered at least 1 track with credentials/certificates – some offered for course “completion;” others linked to industry credentialing exams.• Most (3 of 4) used a cohort class structure (vs. rolling enrollment).• Most (3 of 4) provided literacy services themselves (vs. subcontracting).	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A range of sectors were offered across vendors.• Course length varied notably from 2 half-days/week for 2 weeks to 2 full days/week for 12 weeks.

Challenges Identified in Year 1

- Low enrollment
 - Term “literacy” perceived as stigmatizing
 - Clients concerned about delaying job search
- Churning
 - Clients “falling through the cracks” before the next session start
 - Drop-out after enrollment, before completion
- Difficulty serving participants with very low literacy and other barriers

Vendor Strategies

Improved Messaging

To address the low literacy stigma and address client concerns about delaying job search:

- Vendors 1, 3, and 4 stopped using “literacy” when introducing the program.
- Vendors 3 and 4 created program brands, one of which emphasized “skills.”
- Vendor 1 introduced the program as “another avenue to employment.”
- Vendor 4 presented the program as a tool to “become more marketable.”

Shorter Courses with Rolling Enrollment

Vendors altered course structure to address churning and respond to client concerns about delaying job search:

- Vendors shortened 12 week courses to 3-4 weeks. (Only one track at one vendor remained 12 weeks long in year 2.)
- Rolling enrollment model implemented by 3 of 4 vendors (all except by vendor that subcontracted services). Clients could begin the sessions at any time, and return to the session after a period off of the vendor's rolls.
 - Vendor 3 reported feeling “forced” to make this change by the high levels of client churn.

Enhanced Link to Employment

To address concerns about delaying job search and enhance enrollment levels:

- Vendor 1 integrated job search activities within class time—while one instructor taught the class, the other took individual students to the back of the class for 15-minute resume sessions.
- At Vendor 2's site, job developers came to class for 15-20 minutes to present on job openings.
- Vendor 2 offered paid internships as temporary job placements, exclusively for contextualized literacy participants.

Support for Very Low Literacy

To support participants with very low literacy levels:

- Vendors 1, 3 and 4 set aside time to provide individualized support or support for smaller groups.
- Vendors 1 and 3 allowed participants to repeat the course sessions until they were able to pass related credentialing exams.
- At Vendor 3, candidates scoring 4 or less on TABE are offered the option to attend an ABE class through referral to an outside course.

Sector-Related Adjustments

- More difficult courses dropped: An A+ technician course proved to be too hard for participants because of its content (only one client graduated).
- Emphasis on “soft skills” – e.g., customer service – generalizable to multiple industries: 3 of 4 vendors offered tracks in customer service, retail, and/or hospitality.
- New sectors added in response to client demand: Vendors 1 and 3 introduced security and OSHA tracks.

Trends in Enrollment, Retention, and Job Placement Outcomes

Participant Characteristics

(n=5,288)	
Female	71.5%
Age (average)	35.8 years
Recipient under 18 in Household	58.1%
English as Primary Language	89.9%
Math TABE Score (average)	4.9
Reading TABE Score (average)	5.2
Borough of residence	
Bronx	11.5%
Brooklyn	58.9%
Manhattan	5.0%
Queens	22.3%
Staten Island	1.7%

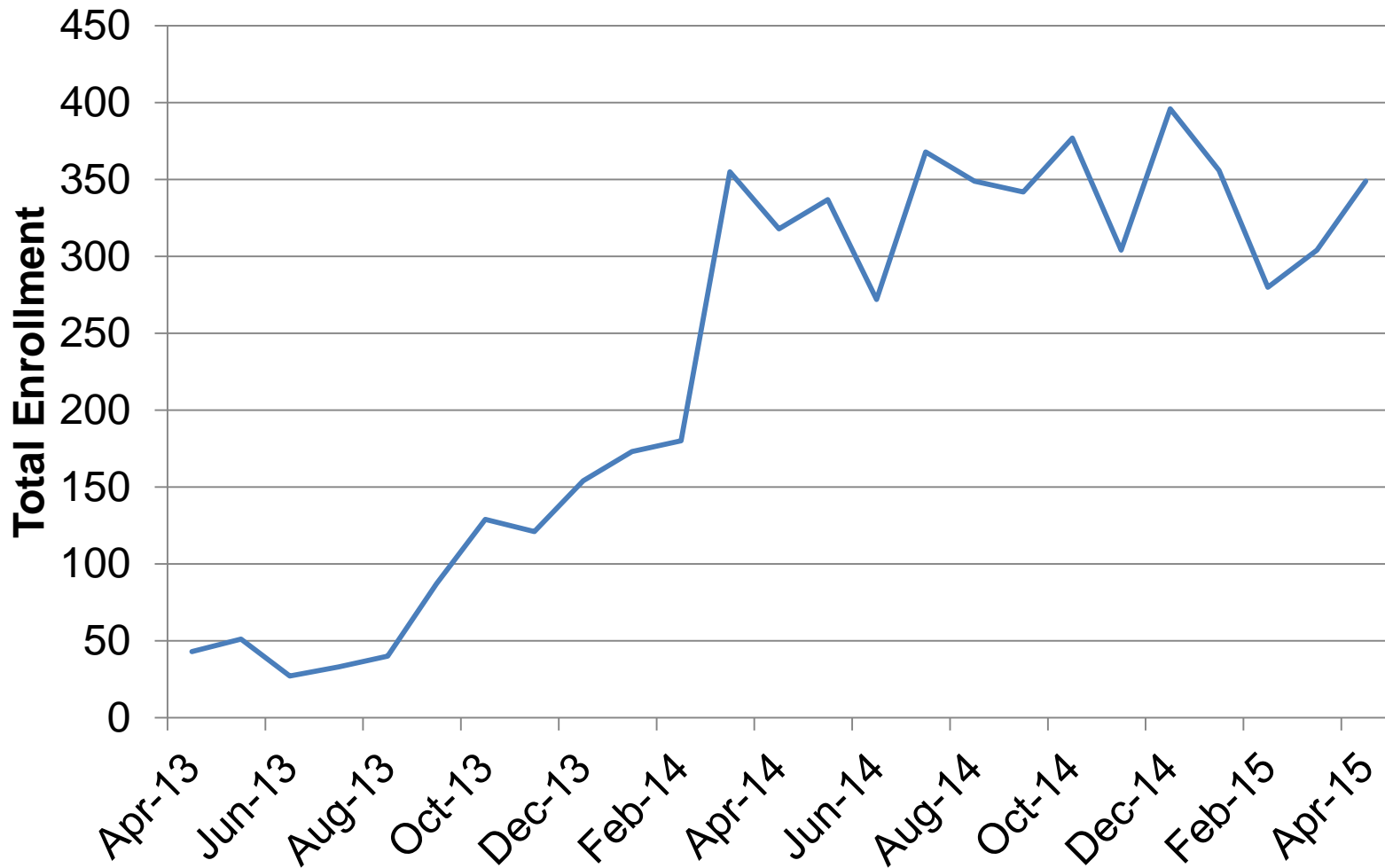
Sources: WMS and NYCWAY data. Borough data retrieved from HRA's data warehouse by OER in July 2015; other data provided by HRA's Office of Planning and Performance Management OPPM in June 2015. Calculations by OER.

Average Monthly Enrollment

Vendor	Average # First Enrollments per Month		% Change from Year to Year
	Year 1 (May - October 2013)	Year 2 (May - October 2014)	
Vendor 1	9	164	1,796%
Vendor 2	8	14	84%
Vendor 3	43	132	208%
Vendor 4	2	31	1,236%
Overall monthly average	61	341	457%
Total enrollees	367	2,045	457%

Source: NYCWAY data provided by HRA's Office of Planning and Performance Management (OPPM), June 2015.
Calculations by OER.

Monthly Enrollment, April 2013-2015



Enrollment by Industry

Industry	Average # First Enrollments per Month			
	Year 1 (May - October 2013)		Year 2 (May - October 2014)	
	#	%	#	%
Computer Technology	4	1.1%	0	0.0%
Construction (OSHA)	0	0.0%	8	0.4%
Customer Service*	45	12.3%	1,033	50.5%
ESL (Contextualized)	94	25.6%	170	8.3%
Food Service	133	36.2%	291	14.2%
Healthcare-related**	91	24.8%	519	25.4%
Hospitality	0	0.0%	24	1.2%
TOTAL	367	100.0%	2,045	100.0%

Source: NYCWAY data provided by HRA's Office of Planning and Performance Management (OPPM), June 2015.
Calculations by OER.

* Includes retail.

**Includes Personal Care Assistant (PCA) course.

14-Day Retention

Vendor	Year 1		Year 2		Percentage point change
	(May - October 2013)		(May - October 2014)		
	#	% of enrollees	#	% of enrollees	
Vendor 1	28	53.8%	560	56.8%	2.9
Vendor 2	32	71.1%	67	80.7%	9.6
Vendor 3	206	80.5%	610	77.3%	-3.2
Vendor 4	11	78.6%	139	74.3%	-4.2
Total	277	75.5%	1,376	67.3%	-8.2

Source: NYCWAY data provided by HRA's Office of Planning and Performance Management (OPPM), June 2015.
Calculations by OER.

Job Placements (30-Day Verified)*

Vendor	# 30-Day Placements <i>among All Enrolled</i>			# 30-Day Placements <i>among 14-day Participants</i>		
	Year 1	Year 2	Percentage Point Change	Year 1	Year 2	Percentage Point Change
Vendor 1	13.5%	13.9%	0.4	14.3%	21.8%	7.5
Vendor 2	15.6%	22.9%	7.3	12.5%	26.9%	14.4
Vendor 3	7.8%	15.1%	7.3	7.3%	15.7%	8.4
Vendor 4	7.1%	20.3%	13.2	9.1%	23.7%	14.6
Total	9.5%	15.3%	5.8	8.7%	19.5%	10.8

Source: NYCWAY and PaCS data provided by HRA's Office of Planning and Performance Management (OPPM), June 2015. Calculations by OER. Follow-up analyses will examine 90- and 180-day retention rates. As part of HRA's reforms and the City's Jobs for New Yorkers Task force recommendations, even longer retention will be enforced through new employment vendor contracts.

Concluding thoughts...

- Study highlights the challenge of developing quality education tracks within the context of employment-focused contracts.
 - Tension between **quality education practices** and **cash assistance program dynamics**; over time, saw “dilution” of models to accommodate client churn and client/vendor short-term employment focus, rather than developing skills for longer term career growth.
 - Increased agency attention/financial incentive spurred increased enrollment and job placement rates; program retention not improved.
- HRA client population includes *very* low literacy clients (including <4th grade level) who need differentiated instruction even within low literacy context → “Bridges” to bridge programs!

Concluding thoughts... (Cont.)

- Going forward, HRA is implementing robust client assessment at intake with direct referral to education/training where appropriate – and with tailored services to meet differentiated need.
- The relationship between churn and program design identified in this study supports HRA's current administrative process reforms.

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