

Promising Practices for Adult Remote ESOL

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World Education, Inc., led a six-month landscape scan in the winter of 2021 to identify and describe promising remote ESOL¹ program practices for adults that sprung up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic — when remote instruction and distance education were the only possible learning modalities in many places. In response to our national call for participation in this Remote Adult ESOL Learning Project, **52 program nominations were received**, reflecting different institutional settings, organizations, student populations, geographies, and approaches. Of these, **35 programs were selected for interviews and an analytical review process**.

Our analysis made visible several key implementation areas that buoy starting, scaling, improving, or enriching current implementation:

- Student recruitment and orientation;
- Instructional platforms, materials, and approaches;
- Student persistence strategies;
- Student access to digital skills, devices, and internet;
- Support for students' basic needs;
- Professional development and support for staff;
- Partnerships and leadership.

Within each area of work, we identified several promising practices that programs have leaned on to support their success or development of remote ESOL delivery. The practices listed below are not a comprehensive list of requirements for remote ESOL implementation, nor are they a full list of all the work done across the programs we investigated. They are, however, notable practices worth considering as providers plan and enhance their programming.

Student Recruitment and Orientation

Recruitment

Adult learners respond well when they hear about ESOL classes from their peers or other trusted people at work or in their communities. Leveraging social media and outreach campaigns to spread the word can ensure that the 'word of mouth' referrals can happen.

Comprehensive Awareness Campaign and Social Media. New Haven Adult and Continuing Education (Connecticut) led a comprehensive outreach campaign through social media platforms, local and state TV stations, newspapers, and fliers in the community. Raising awareness of the need for literacy programming ensured that partners and community members took notice, which prompted more program referrals.

Multilingual Options for Outreach. Building Skills Partnership (California) relied on bicultural staff who reflected the student demographic to call or text and reach out through social media to check on how workers were doing during the pandemic, offer financial resources/referrals, share course information, and help them enroll. Recruitment was also done through employers and SEIU (Service Employees International Union) representatives of janitors and other building service workers. **Chinatown Community Development Center** (California) sent fliers to public housing building managers for them to print and hang up in their buildings. The fliers had QR codes for easy access to program information as well as contact information for bilingual staff to help building residents enroll with support in Arabic, Chinese, or other languages.

¹ We use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages, or ESOL, rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) out of recognition that many English learners already speak more than one language, just not English.

Intake and Orientation

Programs need to find a balance between making the intake and orientation process convenient and providing ample support. To do so, they can leverage digital technologies accessed online for sharing forms, orientation videos, and program information to extend the reach of the program through flexible and convenient strategies. At the same time, programs need to layer in ample support via telephone or in person.

Remote Intake. Many programs leveraged online forms to start the intake process. **Georgia Piedmont Technical College** (Georgia) puts all its intake resources on one comprehensive website, which students visited when they wanted to register. **New Haven Adult and Continuing Education** included a button on its form to direct learners to multilingual form options. **Mt. Diablo Adult Education ESL Program** (California) ran its intake and registration process using Zoom and a series of Google Voice numbers for students to call to communicate in their own language with an intake staff member. During the orientation, staff used visual tools, such as handheld flashcards and Google's built-in translation features. Teachers used Google forms incorporating visuals and embedded tools and surveys for registration. **Chinatown Community Development Center** used Remind to schedule and then nudge participants to phone intake interviews.

Placement Assessment. Offering placement assessments remotely was a challenge. Only a few of the programs interviewed attempted to provide national standardized assessments through remote proctoring. Others either invited learners to test in small, socially distanced groups in person or created their own placement assessment delivered remotely or in person. **Mt. Diablo Adult Education ESL Program** ran its in-house speaking and writing assessment aligned with course outlines using Google forms and surveys. The assessments were optimized for remote delivery by limiting the number of questions. Students also used Zoom break-out rooms to meet with a teacher who conducted the assessments.

Instructional Platforms, Materials, and Approaches

Programs need to focus on learner-centered design of remote learning, drawing on multiple modalities, resources, and technologies to reach a wide range of learners.

Centralized Learning. Most programs provided one centralized spot for students to access all learning content and resources. Many used learning management systems, such as Canvas and Moodle. **Georgia Piedmont Technical College** adapted their course structure in Blackboard to make it more accessible for ESOL students, stripping out features and excess language unfamiliar to students. **Carlos Rosario International Adult Public Charter School** (Washington, D.C.) and Lancaster–Lebanon Intermediate Unit (IU13) (Pennsylvania) had students access learning content through Schoology. **Clark College Transitional Studies** (Washington) relied on I-DEA, an open resource blended curriculum hosted in Canvas and developed by teachers in Washington state.

Use of Familiar Technologies. If learners did not face a steep learning curve with the technology used for learning, they could begin focusing on content sooner. **Chinatown Community Development Center**, **Literacy Pittsburgh** (Pennsylvania), and **Neighborhood House of Milwaukee** (Wisconsin) relied on YouTube to deliver instructional content. **Lancaster–Lebanon IU13** and many other programs used WhatsApp to share learning content.

Personalized and Relevant Learning. Remote learning opportunities needed to be highly relevant, given the demands on learners' attention from wherever they were connecting. **Mt. Diablo Adult Education ESL Program** developed a distance learning platform incorporating different platforms and lessons by level. Each self-paced lesson involved 10 hours of learning. Learners worked at their own pace with support of a teacher who met weekly to provide personalized instruction and feedback. **Chinese Community Center** (Texas) offered story-based instruction using texts featuring

highly relevant contexts and vocabulary. Many of the learners were parents who met on Zoom to read aloud, discuss stories, and share their thoughts. After the class they got a copy of the reading and audio so they could listen to it throughout the week; many read them to and with their children using EasyStories platform. Both programs drew on frequent formative assessments to ensure relevance of instruction and learning resources.

Student Persistence Strategies

Student engagement needs to be sustained by a web of strategies and resources to support persistence. These strategies might include peer support, meetings with advisors, and just-in-time digital literacy support and technical assistance.

Nudging. Staying connected through simple text messaging was a popular strategy. Programs relied on familiar technologies to support sending encouraging messages, reminders, and generally checking in. The ESOL program of Grand Family Fundamentals at **Queens Public Library** (New York) and the **Chinese Community Center** used WeChat, a texting app commonly used by Asian immigrants and refugees in the U.S., with Chinese-speaking learners. The Refugee Education Program run by **Pima Community College** (Arizona) and **Lancaster-Lebanon IU13** both used WhatsApp because their students were already familiar with it. The Home Care Aide Program at **Tamalpais Adult School** (California), **Fox Valley Technical College** (Wisconsin), **Central Wyoming College's ESOL Program** and the **Chinatown Community Development Center** all used Remind as a tool for communicating, sending texts, voice messages, and photos, and using the built-in translation feature.

Human Touch. Many programs integrated opportunities for connecting with other students, advisors, or teachers. **Literacy Pittsburgh** offered an optional “class with no teacher,” where learners could meet with peers to practice English and maintain community at a distance. **Building Skills Partnership** employs bilingual English/Spanish bicultural staff who reflect the student demographic. Many are the children of janitors or came from similar backgrounds, so they understand how to communicate effectively with the adult learners. Staff members called students if they missed a class, to check in on them, and provide wraparound support. They also promoted peer and volunteer support opportunities, and created a digital navigator model in which it trained high school- or college-age students on how to support their parents or younger siblings in using the Internet to attend classes and accomplish other goals during the COVID-19 pandemic. **Hubbs Center, St. Paul Adult Basic Education** (Minnesota) also encouraged student peer support and building community through a student engagement committee that looked at ways of increasing “fun” in the remote online classroom. **Fox Valley Technical College's** ELL Program recruited higher-level students as peer mentors to work with lower-level peer language learners. **Holyoke Community College** (Massachusetts) employs advisors who build a personal connection with each student. Throughout the pandemic, these advisors took attendance in classes, identified students who need technical support and provided comprehensive job search support in partnership with American Job Centers.

Cohorts. At-a-distance need not mean completely independent learning. Programs across the country found that learners did well when they see they are part of a group. **Tuscarora Intermediate Unit 11** (TIU 11) (Pennsylvania), a regional educational service agency and the State of Pennsylvania's distance education provider, sustained its cohort structure for distance education courses offered throughout the pandemic. Students found comfort working with familiar peers during and reached out to each other to support each other's attendance. **Missoula County Public Schools' Adult Education Academic Success Program** (Montana) also relied on cohorts to create community. These organically formed groups gelled because live remote classes happened at set times for learners at different proficiency levels. Missoula sustained the peer groups because the students enjoyed meeting together to learn. The **National Immigration Forum's English at Work** program also relied on managed cohorts at each of the programs connected to worksites across the U.S. The program

previously offered blended classes with 40 percent of instruction in person at worksites, but even when the pandemic resulted in remote classes offered 100 percent online and at a distance, the students saw themselves as part of a learning community.

Student Access to Digital Skills, Devices, and Internet

The most innovative ideas in the field are useless unless students can access learning content. Programs need to rely on diverse support strategies to provide access to devices and the internet or ensure mobile and lo-fi options, (resources not requiring large amounts of data or internet bandwidth).

Lo-Fi Options. Understanding that not all students have access to broadband internet, programs offered options for learning that didn't require high-speed internet and mobile data plans. **Missoula County Public Schools' Adult Education Academic Success Program** served its rural learners well by limiting the need to stream video; instead of offering video recordings of instruction, teachers took screenshots of their projected whiteboards or materials shared through a digital camera and added annotations to be sure that the images they sent to learners were useful for independent study. **Mt. Diablo Adult Education ESL Program** used 'video-workbooks' — available as either DVDs or digitally accessible by smartphones — that could be checked out.

Mobile. Because so many adult learners rely on smartphones for their internet access at home, rather than computers, constructing lessons and activities with a mobile-first mentality was key to access. Most programs vetted instructional content to be sure it was mobile friendly. **National Immigration Forum's English at Work** created its own mobile app that could be accessed both on- and off-line to help learners stay connected and study; the mobile-optimized curriculum includes many types of games for additional language practice. The **New York State Office for New Americans ESOL program** provided licenses for learners state-wide to access Cell-Ed, a mobile app that instructs through micro-lesson messaging and includes live and automated coaching available across any device — even feature phones without internet. **Literacy Pittsburgh** attended to the needs of mobile-dependent learners in its intake process by sharing documents via PandaDoc, a digital forms application, which made it easier for students to complete and sign the paperwork.

Chromebooks. Programs made use of any and all devices they could make available for their learners, but, by far, the most popular approach was to obtain Chromebooks to lend along with wi-fi hotspots. This strategy was employed by community-based organizations such as **ThinkSelf** (Minnesota), **Riverside Language Program** (New York), and **Chinatown Community Development Center**. Publicly funded adult education agencies, such as **Santa Barbara City College School of Extended Learning** (California) and **Missoula County Public Schools' Adult Education Academic Success Program**, did as well. A shared concern of the program leaders interviewed was the limitations of Chromebooks, students not being able to easily use Microsoft Office products, difficulty completing tasks that required creating audio or video, and the challenge of completing any activities if they didn't have access to the internet. Consequently, when possible, programs leveraged additional access resources. For example, **Hubbs Center, St. Paul ABE** used a combination of Chromebooks, school district iPads, and refurbished laptops purchased through an ongoing grant program.

Standardizing to Simplify. Standardizing use of robust devices and the look and feel of the desktop supported reducing technology challenges and simplifying provision of support. **Carlos Rosario International Adult Public Charter School** raised funds to purchase for each of their students laptops loaded with high-speed internet, the Schoology platform, and all learning software students would need in their classes.

Auxiliary Equipment. Programs noticed that if students lacked equipment like microphones or cameras, they might not want to speak up in a class, especially if their microphones picked up too much background noise in their home. **New Haven Adult and Continuing Education** and **Northwest Wisconsin Technical College** took pains to ensure that students had all the equipment needed to fully participate, and both purchased microphones for students. **Literacy Council of Montgomery County at Work** (Maryland) invested in cameras, area mics, and projectors, in addition to the computers needed to hold their socially distanced outdoor workplace ESOL classes.

Early and Continuous Digital Literacy Help. Programs offered a range of supports to help students build digital literacy skills both before and during their enrollment. **The Literacy Council of Montgomery County at Work** and other programs offer digital boot camps in which students receive basic computer skills training to help them participate in intake and early class activities. **ThinkSelf** and **National Immigration Forum's English at Work** personalized their digital literacy learning opportunities, working with students one-on-one to ensure they could engage in learning.

Support for Students' Basic Needs

Adult ESOL programs have long attended to helping learners overcome barriers they face working to resettle or integrate, attain work, and persist in learning. Much of this can be delivered through remote options, but programs need to tap into broader networks and new sources of funding to make it work.

Leveraging Partnerships. Relying on partnerships to make provision of wrap-around services possible for many programs during the pandemic, **Missoula County Public Schools' Adult Education Academic Success Program** and **New Haven Adult and Continuing Education** both turned to local universities (the University of Montana and Yale, respectively). **Literacy Partners** (New York) also partnered with two universities to secure social work interns who attended remote classes with students regularly to assess needs, offer referrals and advice. Literacy Partners also formed strong partnerships with local health care providers for student referrals and for meeting students' health care needs. **Chinatown Community Development Center** classes are usually located in a public housing site, so the organization was able to help students make connections to the supports available to them, including to food. **Building Skills Partnership** worked together with the SEIU union and via outreach at worksites to ensure that learners had access to community resources, such as food banks, information about relief from utility bills, and vaccinations.

Stipends to Students. A few programs even managed to provide stipends for their learners to engage in learning. **Riverside Language Program** (New York) secured funding from the Robinhood Foundation to create an emergency relief fund to help students with job loss, food, and medication. **Carlos Rosario International Adult Public Charter School** was also able to set up a permanent student emergency relief fund. **Santa Barbara City College School of Extended Learning's** Back to Work program, an IET (Integrated Education and Training) model program, targeted unemployed adults and paid a weekly stipend for them to study.

Making Use of Relief or Other Special Initiative Funding. Some programs were able to take advantage of CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act funding to ensure that students had the support they needed to persist in learning. The stipends **Santa Barbara City College School of Extended Learning** provided for ESOL learners in its IET programs came from a \$600,000 CARES Act grant and funded almost 800 students. Students enrolled in the CARES Act-funded IET courses were given childcare grants of \$100/week/child as well as career counseling and job search support. **Hubbs Center/St. Paul ABE** also leveraged CARES Act funds by participating in the Ramsey County Digital Navigator program. Through it, learners received refurbished laptops and free digital literacy skill instruction.

Professional Development and Support for Staff

Investment surged in professional development (PD) for practitioners and leaders across the range of roles represented in the field of adult ESOL. The pandemic showed that programs are better situated to weather disruption and embrace innovation when they proactively promote professional development (PD) and support teachers' participation.

Paid Time To Support Collaboration and Planning. Many programs provided paid time for peer-to-peer support and collaboration. At the **Holyoke Community College** adult learning centers, teachers shared promising resources and activities between the program terms and cultivated a collaborative culture and supportive environment throughout each term that encouraged experimentation and sharing. Similarly, the **Missoula County Public Schools' Adult Education Academic Success Program** and **Second Start** (New Hampshire) provided paid time for teachers to experiment to find strategies and resources, and then to regularly meet, collaborate, and support each other. Ultimately, teachers had more paid preparation time than they'd had in the past.

Mentoring. Peer leadership was an important element of professional development in many programs and buoyed the success of collaboration. **Literacy Pittsburgh** established a new position of a Digital Literacy fellow to increase digital capacity around learning. The organization also extended PD offerings to include volunteer tutors. **Hubbs Center, St. Paul ABE** created a new role called "Digital Literacy Lead." This teacher attended remote live classes and offered "push-in" digital literacy instruction aligned with the digital literacy skills needed for students to engage in the class. Through this effort, Hubbs was able to create a bank of technical assistance guides for all staff to relieve the burden on teachers of having to teach both digital literacy skills and content. At **Holyoke Community College**, two dedicated technology coaches supported students and teachers.

Ample Flexible Professional Development Options. Programs employed creative new models for PD to support the entirely new way of providing instruction. **Tamalpais Adult School's** Home Care Aide Program provided staff access to up to 10 hours of professional development on how to use technology; the PD was targeted to staff that were not very tech-savvy. This ensured staff members were familiar with the tools students use, further increasing learner engagement. **Lancaster-Lebanon IU13** created a training for teachers on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) as a course for them to take in Schoology so they could have the student experience and learn how to use the learning management system and other tech tools. The organization also created a Google Drive video library of resources on how to use tech tools. Many programs noted that they referred their teachers to the PD offered by national organizations such as the EdTech Center @ World Education's Distance Education Strategy Sessions and [Transforming Distance Education](#) self-paced online learning modules. **Santa Barbara City College School of Extended Learning** paid for teachers to develop their remote teaching skills through paid distance-education professional development.

Partnerships and Leadership

To innovate and then scale innovation, programs need to embrace a vision of change, nimbly reallocate use of existing technology infrastructure, advocate for resources and policies that support implementation, and then find partner organizations (e.g., community-based organizations, employers, unions) to provide support.

Making use of Existing IT Systems and Staffing. Programs associated with community colleges and K-12 systems were able to get the support of systemwide structures to get access to devices and technology tools. **Holyoke Community College** leveraged the community college library's device lending program for adult ESOL students to provide devices and hot spots. **Mt. Diablo Adult Education ESL Program** had a limited number of laptops and hotspots and made strategic decisions about making them available to support specific staff who needed them.

Leveraging Existing Partnerships with Employers. Quite a few programs were able to innovate and sustain their work-based learning because of strong employer partnerships. **Building Skills Partnership** had proactively worked with client employers to orient them to the learning needs and cultural/educational backgrounds of the janitors they employ and to create customized curriculum to ensure learners' education is highly relevant in the workplace. The non-profit labor-management organization was able to sustain this approach during the pandemic and extended it to cover basic needs, such as vaccinations and additional health and safety training on infectious disease. **Literacy Council of Montgomery County at Work** has long created customized curricula to meet the learning needs of the ESOL learners at different worksites and provides teachers to hold classes focused on academic skill development, embedded digital literacy, and, if possible, an industry certificate. During the pandemic, this ESOL programming happened nearly completely online with teachers working with groups of learners on the worksite but remotely. The employers, eager to sustain the program, provided space where workers could be socially distanced but access the teacher through remote instruction delivered to the group through video conferencing.

Advocacy. Strong leadership in support of advocacy was noted as a key element of success in many programs. As noted above, some program leaders were successful in advocating for access to the federal CARES Act funds that then enabled them to purchase laptops and other supplies for students. For example, the **Central Wyoming College ESOL program** secured CARES Act funding through the college to purchase devices for students. The **Santa Barbara City College School for Extended Learning** used these funds to pay students weekly stipends to attend their intensive IET programs. The **Queens Public Library** secured funding and permission from the library to create a program for elderly grandparents during the pandemic.

Leading Collaboration To Reinvent Programming. A shared characteristic of programs that sustained or even boosted enrollment during the pandemic was the presence of a leader who embraced a collaborative approach to program redevelopment. At both **Carlos Rosario International Adult Charter School** and **Hubbs Center, St. Paul ABE**, administrators redistributed intake and support tasks beyond the traditional administrative staff to include teachers. This gave all staff a bird's-eye view of learner needs. At **Holyoke Community College**, the administrators themselves got involved in intake to gain a better understanding of student needs and challenges. **Lancaster-Lebanon IU13** also drew on a collaborative leadership style. Prior to the pandemic, staff teams had been divided by county. With the shift to remote instruction, the staff teams became cross-county and brought everyone together to co-create and problem-solve. They found they were better able to develop the remote intake and orientation program and communication processes with the input from multiple sites. At the **Riverside Language Program**, the leadership team created an environment where there was flexibility and room to make mistakes and learn. Riverside intentionally facilitated the sharing of experiences/solutions and the creation of shared documents and resources. The director emphasized the importance of being transparent and encouraging a "course correct" culture to let staff try new things and learn as they went along.

Conclusion

The disruption of the pandemic meant that remote instruction was the only option for most programs, giving them no choice but to innovate in order to operate. The promising practices described above provide a sketch of how diverse ESOL programs across the U.S. arrived at similar strategies, resources, and practices to sustain instruction and support learners during the pandemic. Within this work lie clues about how to leverage technology in the months and years ahead to better support migrant, immigrant, and refugee adult learners in the U.S.