

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're 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. Joining me today on Work in Progress is Sharon Bonney, Chief Executive Officer of Coalition on Adult Basic Education, also known as COAB. Sharon, thank you very much for joining us.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Ramona, thanks for having me. I'm excited to be here with you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I'd like to approach the podcast as someone who may be not familiar with all the ins and outs of what an organization does such as COAB. Tell me more about your mission and then we'll go into some detail.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

I'd be glad to. So our mission is to inspire educators, so adults succeed and communities thrive. And we work primarily with the teachers and administrators who then work with the adult learners. So there's roughly 65,000 teachers and administrators in the workforce education system specifically focused on adult education, and there's over 1.5 million adult learners that are also participating in the Wheel Workforce Innovation System. So that's really our goal is to work with the teachers and administrators, provide them with the tools and skills that they need, to then work with the adult learners.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

We do this through a variety of ways. We have a national conference that brings in about 3,500 teachers and administrators. And we also have over 75 webinars that we host annually. So we're providing professional development that way. We also work very closely with our state advocate fellows who then talk with legislators, such as governors and members of Congress, and really try to help them understand what adult education is and how it's really helping people to get back to work, off of benefits and make them into tax-paying citizens.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

So we have the state advocate fellowship. We also provide research. We have a journal that's published two to three times per year and focuses on topics, everything from workforce literacy, to prison literacy, to digital literacy, to leadership, lots of really exciting topics like that., But then also racial equity and immigrant integration because of the 1.5 million adult learners in our system, over 940,000 of them are immigrants. So helping them to get the skills that they need so they can get to work as well. So our goal really is an adult education, it's that handoff to helping adult learners to get into community college or to get into jobs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are you working with teachers at the community college night schools? Where are the teachers that you're working at performing their teaching?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

With adult education, [inaudible 00:02:51] adult education, it's interesting where we operate out of. So when I look at first of all, suburban versus urban versus rural, we're primarily, well, we're all over the place, but we have over 40% of our schools are operating in an urban setting, which I just think is interesting. We're also operating out of community colleges. So of the more than 2000 local programs, 499 of them are community colleges. And we also are operating out of community-based organizations, over 250 of our more than 2000 local programs are out of community-based programs, universities, faith-based organizations, correctional education, as well as local education agencies that are standalone LEAs.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So you're partnering with a lot of different groups. You're partnering with nonprofits, you're partnering with post-secondary education and the government to provide these services.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Right. So the organizations that are in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act are federally funded. In a number of these community-based organizations, they've figured out how to braid funding and how to bring up the standard of the services that they're providing to certain standards so that they can continue to receive federal funding, or they can hit that marker because there's a number of quality markers, they have to be able to hit in order to receive that funding. But the vast majority of our programs, over 850, operate out of LEA. So they're standalone, adult education organizations or companies that this is what they do. They are not partnering specifically with a community college or a standalone organization.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I see there's a big emphasis on computer use digital skills. What kind of teaching methods are you talking about?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

What we're trying to do is help adults either learn to speak the language, to re-skill for a job to get their GED or equivalent. Those are the basic skills we're trying to provide. And of course, digital literacy is huge because of where we are right now with the pandemic. What we do is we try to equip the teachers through a number of different ways, but primarily each month we'll have a topic that we're teaching. And let's say it's numeracy. We're giving those teachers the skills they need in the area of teaching numeracy. For perhaps one month it's on writing skills. So helping the teacher, now that we are working remotely, primarily, we want to make sure, how do you teach that? How do you teach an adult learner, how to write remotely? So, that sort of thing. There's different tips and skills that we need to be able to teach the teachers to then work with the adult learners so that they receive the highest instruction possible.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I also see that you're putting a new emphasis on credentialing. What does that program look like?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

So there's a lot of great programs out there. I'll share a couple of them. The IBM Skills Build Initiative is one that I'm really excited about because there's over 11,000 credentials and badges that our adult

learners and our teachers and administrators can participate in. This gives them the skills that they need, so that they're more employable. For example, they learn how to write their resume, that's one of the credentials they can get. They can learn how to Present with Purpose, it's called, so these adult learners can learn how to present to an employer, present themselves and what the employer might find the most tangible in terms of wanting to hire them.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

But at the end of the day, what we ended up doing was we put together a pilot program that was specifically customized this platform for adult learners. And this was through a special grant with IBM. And the goal is to get as many adult learners as possible participating in taking advantage of these badges. They can then publish the badge on LinkedIn, on their transcript, on their resume. It really does help with that IBM visibility behind them, that it gives them more recognition and helps put them to the top of the pile, when employers are looking to bring them on board.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are you seeing that employers are recognizing these credentials in badges and it's helping the hiring process?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

This is fairly new. We've just been working with IBM now for a few months and started rolling this out May 3rd to our members. But I can tell you that our teachers and administrators are really excited because many of them are already working with the workforce. They're on Chambers of Commerces, or they're working with their workforce development boards, and they know having done this sort of work, they know that this is something that employers will find really beneficial. So I think that as we roll this out, we're going to see some great results. I also really think that there are so many badges in there, like cybersecurity or customer service. I mean, these are things that once you are able to demonstrate that you have this, it really does make you more employable. So I really think it's going to be something that's going to take the field to that next level.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And as you look for the skills that you want to help the teachers teach, are you looking at the jobs that are available now, the future, how are you making that determination?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Well Ramona, we have a pretty interesting way of doing this. We run our national conference, which when I came on board years ago, if we had 900 people at our conference, we thought that was a great conference. So it's really grown quite a bit. We have 17 strands at that conference, everything from workforce development to civic engagement, to numeracy and those sorts of things. And what we do is we look at those sessions that are the most popular that we see our teachers are really interested in. What presenters and presentations rise to the top? We also have a number of business partners we work with and we take a close look at what sessions are they attending or sponsoring or really engaged in? And that's really how we continue to move the field forward, as well. Sometimes we get requests from Department of Education or others asking us to hold specific webinars.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

And we always are happy to do that as well, because we know that, that's really important and will help the field move forward. But the ways that we determined are actually more by consensus from the field, but the field is showing us is an area that they need a little bit more training in. I did want to mention that when the pandemic first hit, our webinars used to have 2 or 300 on them. We went through a period where we'd have 1000, 1500, 2000 people on.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

And what we tried to do is we knew that the field had always been sort of, for lack of a better way to say it, recalcitrant to being online. Everybody would say, teaching in person, especially think about ESL learners, right? Teaching in person was the only way to go. And so that was something we heard, but then it came to a point where we no longer could, we had to find another way to do this.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

And I'm just really excited because we were able to take those lemons and make lemonade out of it and really figure out a way to give these teachers and administrators, the tools that they needed to work with the adult learners, so that they would be able to get the skills that they needed virtually. We worked closely with Google. They're one of our business partners. And we had a program in place where we were providing training at the local level to local programs specifically, on Google applied digital skills, so that they could in turn work with their adult learners to implement this.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

And so that their adult learners would have the applied digital skills that they needed. How do you set up a Gmail account? How do you have an online budget? Those sorts of things. That really took off and the field really embraced that. We also had set up Google Classrooms and helped the field to learn how to set up a Google Classroom and trace how their adult learner was moving through the system that way.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Is there any type of training or any type of opportunities that you see out there for 40 plus adults to retrain, re-skill?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Absolutely. That's what our programs do. We help to retrain and re-skill it. And from any age, from 16 on up. So when I look at our statistics, for example, we're serving those 16 to 60 plus, and we have of the 1.5 million, over 400,000 of those adult learners are those that are coming through our program specifically for that, they want to re-skill. Let's just say, for example, the company they were working at shut their doors or that sort of thing. And they would come to us and we would help them and maybe train them on Microsoft Office so that they would be able to work in an office setting or give them the training that they need to work as a customer service rep, that sort of thing. So our adult ed programs are absolutely open for that. That's part of our grant funding as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, Sharon, can you tell us who the people are that you're serving? Who are the adults that are taking advantage of the programs that you're helping facilitate?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Well, Ramona, a couple of things. First of all, 74% of our adult learners are people of color. So we feel very passionately about racial equity and that adult education increases racial equity. We recently published a journal on racial equity and immigrant integration, which was really well received in the field. And we will continue to have a focus here focusing on increasing equity for the adult learners. But also many of our adult learners are parents. A mother's education level is the greatest determinant of her children's future academic success, and that outweighs every other factor, such as neighborhood and family income.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

So when we're helping a parent to learn to read, we're helping those children in the home to learn to read as well. We really feel like adult education breaks those cycles of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy, and really helps to improve the economy. So primarily, we're working with people of color, but also a lot of single parents that are trying to change the trajectory of their life and thus the trajectory of their family and of their children

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Are there specific recommendations in your report on how to approach this all?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

What we do is we provide training for those that are anywhere from 16 to 60. Plus we have launched, A Move Ahead with Adult Ed campaign, where we are working with Google and with Google Ads, to try to bring in potential adult learners, those who need our services, but maybe have never thought of themselves as an adult learner. So we're really trying to help bring in as many out there that need their GED or need to re-skill or need to get into community college and just need that extra bump up, need to learn the language, that sort of thing. So our specific recommendations are that we are reaching out to as far and as wide as we possibly can to bring in as many potential adult learners as possible.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, for example, the Move Ahead with Adult Ed is a campaign that's to make potential adult learners aware of what programs are available to them?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Exactly. So over 2000 local programs across the country. They can go onto our website and they can choose what sort of services that they need. And they can find out if the program takes place in person virtually, or as hybrid. Through that, they're able to then find a program that suits their needs. We also are working with the US Chamber of Commerce on this as well. So we have it on our website, but then also the US Chamber of Commerce does as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And we will have those links on our website as well, so anybody listening to the podcast can click through. Have you seen a bigger demand in the field for the kind of work that you guys are doing?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

It's really interesting Ramona, but we've seen is that the adult learners that have been able to take advantage of the virtual classroom setting, have loved it, and we've seen a real shift in terms of attendance. So those who maybe couldn't attend before, because they had childcare issues or transportation issues, they're now, as long as they have a device, they're able to get on and participate. We also in all transparency have lost some adult learners who are unable to navigate that digital divide.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Maybe they don't have the device, which we've been really working with the National Governor's Association and members of Congress on this, and I feel that the additional funding is going to help. But it's either that or it's that they need skills and how to navigate around on their computer. So it's been both. I mean, we've definitely seen in some areas where it's helped quite a bit, because it's taking care of those transportation and childcare issues. On the other hand, there's those who really do struggle with digital literacy, and so getting them the skills that they need is as a top priority.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

When you look at this digital divide, and I know you're a part of the Digital US Coalition organization, which WorkingNation is also a member of, you're looking at, how do we address this? I know you say you're working with governors, et cetera. What are you hoping to achieve? Are you trying to get laptops in? You're trying to get broadband? Where do you see the biggest needs?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Oh, well Ramona, it's both of those things, but it's also training. So let's say you get a computer and I'm just thinking, for example, let's say my mother. She would need, if she was given a laptop, where does she even start? How do you turn it on? And how do you then once you've turned it on, how do you make sure you have Chrome on there? And where do you navigate to go to class and how to get in and out of your classroom? There's basic training that needs to happen for those that even do get, once we finally do get all the devices that we need and the broadband access that we need, I feel like it's those three things. And interestingly, we had to equip our teachers first to then help the adult learners, right? Because so many of them, they're fantastic teachers in the in-person setting. Now let's equip you so that in the virtual setting, you also can provide that same level of instruction.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So, what's next for COAB? What is on your next six months agenda? What do you want people to know about that it's available out there?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

We have a lot of things coming. We've of course just started rolling out this IBM Skills Build Initiative. We also have a workforce symposium that's going to take place in the fall. We'll be working with a number of the national business partners that we have, but also equipping, like I've been talking about, equipping these local programs as well. So, that's coming up. We also have the Adult Ed and Family Literacy Week. That's the third week in September, where we'll be celebrating successes in the field. That's a week long celebration, and it's exciting.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Last year we honored a mayor, two governors and two members of Congress. And of course, made sure that we had adequate representation from both sides of the aisle, because there are Republicans and Democrats that are providing support and funding for adult education. But we also, last year we had a virtual job fair that we hosted with Amazon, the world's largest employer, and we helped adult learners to get jobs, so that was exciting.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

We also worked with Google and hosted a really exciting chat that was with five different players in the field. National Governors' Association was one of them. The US Chamber of Commerce was another. IBM Skills Build and at the Barbara Bush Foundation, and just talked with thought leaders about what's taking place and where they see the future of the field and how they see business working with adult education. That was an exciting event that we hosted.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

And so during this upcoming Adult Ed and Family Literacy Week, we'll be doing the same sorts of programming with maybe a different twist this year, but of course just celebrating the successes of the field. So, that's coming up. We'll be releasing the digital literacy edition of the COAB Journal. So that will be coming out as well. I believe that's coming out in September or October. So that's what we have on the docket for the next few months.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Would you define success for COAB? What is your ultimate vision of success for your organization?

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

I have often felt that the field is so severely underfunded because there's such a lack of recognition and visibility for the great work that's being done on the front lines, if you will, by the teachers and administrators, and how they are truly impacting the lives of the adult learners. So to me, success would be that visibility was there, that the members of Congress, the funders, the general public understood what these local programs are doing, the sorts of individuals that they're working with and how they truly are helping to transform their lives through literacy. That to me would be success.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Sharon, thank you very much for joining us.

Sharon Bonney, Coalition of Adult Basic Education:

Thank you, Ramona. It's been a pleasure.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Sharon Bonney, Chief Executive Officer of the Coalition on Adult Basic Education. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.