

# Student Persistence Strategies

From the SABES 2009 Annual Summer Directors' Institute

summer 2009

## Helping Adults Stay in School

The following strategies were compiled from conversations with program directors at the SABES 2009 Annual Summer Directors' Institute. These strategies have proven to be effective in addressing the issue of learner persistence in their programs.

We appreciate the generosity of the directors who shared their experiences, with the understanding that these practices would be posted to the SABES website for sharing across the field.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, nor do we imagine that every program could or should adopt all of these practices. Rather, this is intended as a resource of ideas to stimulate discussions at your program for how to encourage and support learner persistence, as well as how to continue to support students when they must stop out of your program.

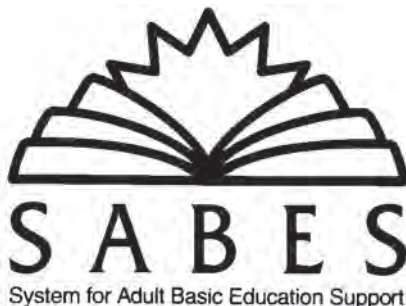
We welcome your additional ideas and comments. If you have materials or ideas that you would like to share, please contact Lou Wollrab at [lwollrab@worlded.org](mailto:lwollrab@worlded.org), or 617-482-9485.



### Start at the Beginning: Ideas for Intake and Orientation

Time is the key for both planning and doing. Much of the work for effective intake and orientation takes place before the student even walks through the door. Some of these suggestions are more appropriate to ABE, Pre-GED, GED or ESOL Classes in varying degrees depending on skill level.

*Read on!.....*



## Ideas for Successful Orientations

### Planning a Good Orientation

Get the whole staff involved in creating a new Orientation Process so that “Welcoming & Orienting” new students continues right into the classroom.

Conduct a focus group with current students about your program to discover what intake and orientation issues or problems can be uncovered. What do they remember? Did they know what they were signing up for? How helpful is your Intake & Orientation process?

For example, one focus group revealed that a learner thought he was signing up for a computer class because there were computers in the room.

Invite students to attend a general information session, or ask them to observe a class and meet with a current student before they attend an orientation. This gives them basic background information to take to the orientation so they will have more focused questions and a schema for absorbing new information.

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### Orientation Folder

At each orientation, provide each student with an orientation folder that contains:

- Student handbook of policies and procedures. Have handbook translated into the main languages of students in your area.
- Handouts with helpful information about the larger agency, telephone numbers, bus schedules, day care information, etc.
- Program brochures
- Counselor’s card with contact information

### Other Orientation Ideas

Do a complete review of the Student Handbook as part of the orientation. Use role playing to explain policies. Discuss issues that may come up and have students sign a release that says they fully understand the program and its policies as explained to them. Give each student a copy of the signed release and keep a copy in the program. Repeat this process with all students each year and give each student an updated copy of the handbook and the signed release form.

Use the orientation as a way to get students thinking about and looking at support systems that are available to them.

Explain to learners that the program is free to them but costs \$50.00 per day in their tax dollars, so if they do not show up, that \$50.00 is wasted.

Give program tours showing new students offices, classrooms, bathrooms, break areas etc.

Arrange furniture to indicate a welcoming space with an easy flow and clear indications of where to go for different tasks.

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### Stop Out Discussions

Include discussions up-front about the probability that many students sometimes need to “stop out” and how to deal with it. Determine in advance what your program policy will be about “stopping out” and be sure students understand how these situations are handled.

Make learners feel comfortable if they need to stop out so there is no shame or guilt and to better ensure that they do not just disappear underground. Remind them they can stay in touch and you can stay in touch with them. Create a sense of belonging.

### Tip: Index Cards

*Place index cards in the orientation folder so students can write down their burning questions, put them down, and better focus on the orientation. If their questions are not answered during the orientation they can ask them at the end of the session.*

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### Invite Students to Take Part at Intake and Orientation

Invite alumni to meet with students at I & O to provide testimonials, advice...

Use student ambassadors/student leaders to serve as translators for new non-English speakers.

Use current students as “ambassadors”—have staff leave the room so students can have a frank discussion about the program. Students can talk about what being in school is like:

- Writing every day
- Doing math every day
- Doing homework every day
- Scheduling time for class, travel and homework etc.
- Planning & budgeting for class and travel and child care etc.
- Making other appointments outside of class time etc.



### *Tip: Scripted Magnets: a Great Take-Away*

*Scripted magnets can be tucked into an orientation folder or given to students in class. They are used for calling in to the learning center or to report absences, and are especially useful for beginning level English learners. The script is printed out in the copy machine on magnet-backed paper.*

*The magnet contains the telephone number of the learning center and reads as follows:*

- *My name is \_\_\_\_\_*
- *I can't come to school today because \_\_\_\_\_*
- *My teacher's name is \_\_\_\_\_*

### How Long Should an Orientation Be?

Many orientations are one day. But you might institute a two-night orientation to screen out those who are not really committed. The process could use an interest & learning styles survey. Night 1 is mainly information out about the program and services and for collecting surveys from students. Night 2 could include 15 minute appointments with the counselor, Q & A sessions, and MAPT testing.

### Re-orientation

Consider a re-orientation for learners returning after summer hiatus, a stop-out, or just because it has been a long while since they had an orientation. Revisiting the student handbook, program policies and services is a great refresher.

**Tip:** Create a motto, like “Stay Until May” and introduce it at orientation.

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## After Orientation and Intake

A successful orientation and intake paves the way for students and increases retention. There are many other follow up steps to help support students as they begin classes.

### Placement Issues

Some programs do not place learners on the wait list until they have completed the orientation process.

Many learners balk at being placed in Pre-GED as opposed to GED classes. One idea is to rename the classes GED 1 & 2.

Use monthly thematic units and monthly MAPT testing to accommodate open enrollment. Enroll new students at the beginning of each month and have a MAPT test each month to accommodate new students and to catch those who may be ready to leave or just need post testing.

### On Ramp Class

An on-ramp class meets one day per week for four weeks and can be taught by the counselor as part of counseling duties. This class is designed to get new students up to speed while they wait to be put in class and covers things like study skills, time management, note taking skills and other support skills that help with student success. A learner will have to master these skills before placement in a class.

### Beginner Level ESOL

For VERY low level ESOL, have a starter class of small groups, perhaps taught by a volunteer, to do basics like the alphabet.

Use student ambassadors/student leaders to do follow-up with ESOL learners to see why they left the program. This information can be used to plan other supports.



## Teachers and Staff Can Help

Have directors, counselors and teachers greet learners at the door each evening and address as many as possible by name.

During staff meetings, remind teachers when new students are starting and what the counselor is telling them so everyone is on the same page.

Escort each new student to his or her class.

Follow-up with new learners one week and two weeks after starting class to head off any problems and just to check-in with them and make them comfortable.

All teachers should be notified BEFORE a new learner is brought to their class so they are prepared to make that learner feel welcome.

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## Ideas for In-Class Instruction to Increase Persistence

### In the Beginning

Setting clear expectations and guidelines at the beginning of each cycle can promote student success and persistence. Clear and consistently applied guidelines can prevent misunderstandings and confusion. Some programs suggest:

Be clear about when classes start and the consequences of tardiness. Use student contracts.

Create a visual pathway so learners can see where they are in their learning continuum. It can be titled “Steps to Achieving Your Goal.”

Discuss potential barriers with students from the start. Embed lessons in classes around the following questions:

- o What positive forces keep you here?
- o What forces keep you away?

Based on feedback, provide resources and suggestions to support students (what prevents you from coming) and incorporate positive strategies (what forces keep you here) in the classroom and throughout the program.

Invite former students back to talk about their successes, and urge students to surround themselves with people who want them to succeed.

Periodically do a “What’s New with You?” classroom activity. Update sheet with contact information,

### *Tip: Stretch Breaks*

*Allow for students to stretch and relax in between classes or allow for a break during long classes.*

life changes, etc. This has the added benefit of providing an opportunity to capture information on goals. Students could interview each other or this could be a writing activity.

Allow for students to stretch and relax in between classes or for a break during long classes.

Develop content based on common themes of interest. Carefully plan out several “episodes” throughout the year.

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## Stopping Out and Reengagement

Prevention and communication are the keys to maintaining a relationship with students when they leave. Working students should clearly understand what their options are if they need to stop out, and what the program policy is for returning. Work on this awareness from the beginning, from the first day at Intake and Orientation and consistently throughout classes when the student is enrolled.



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## Stopping Out and Reengagement

### Create Clear Policies

Consider forces that push students out, such as schedule changes, disabilities, substance abuse, who students associate with, multiple jobs, lack of support from family. How can your program support students in addressing these challenges? If there are common, ongoing issues, develop strategies and supports so the program anticipates and plans in advance to work with students on these challenges. Incorporate these discussions in the classroom on an ongoing basis.

Develop a program philosophy and protocol for responding to individual issues of each student. Does your program climate support a student with a problem or issue to come forward and seek support? Grant leaves of absence when needed. Create a policy that allows students to stop out if needed, and review it periodically to revise it if needed.

Provide students who need to stop out with options about how to return. Welcome them back when they return.

### Staying in Touch

Before students leave, establish a protocol for communicating with them. Additionally, students should know what options are available to them during the time when they are disconnected from the program.

Be proactive about keeping in touch so they know you care. Experience has shown that keeping in contact with students may increase chances that students will return.

### Involve the Whole Program

Establish an environment in which students bond with the entire program, not just one person (usually teacher.) If the teacher leaves, the student should still feel a sense of security and connectedness to the entire program.

Provide opportunities for staff to communicate about students. Provide opportunities for students to communicate with all staff. Build student cohorts. Engage/re-engage with family members of students.

Establish the practice of having administrative staff (Director, Counselor, SMARTT/Data Entry) greet students every day. All program staff should be connecting with students.

Write phone scripts for office staff to follow when a student calls to say he/she is not returning to gather as much information as possible. Develop talking points for teachers to follow when a student says he/she is leaving the program. Try to establish a schedule for when you can call them to touch base and see how they are doing.

### *Stay Connected Through Social Networking*

*Make sure students have ways to stay connected to the program and return if they need to stop out. Get as many contacts as possible---phone, e-mail, emergency contacts. E-mail addresses don't change as often as phone numbers.*

*Consider new technology and social networking tools. Use Facebook as a way to communicate---Facebook accounts don't change often.*

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## Counseling and Peer Support

Effective counseling services must be broader than just what the “program counselor” does. A program counselor cannot become an expert in all the areas where students might potentially need support. Therefore, it is critical for programs to maximize the use of “experts” in the community. Programs should take full advantage of all of the resources of their program and their community to meet the needs of students.

Have learners work with a counselor early on to learn to negotiate necessary appointments (doctor, etc) outside of class time.

To deal with chronic tardiness, send a student to the counselor before s/he can get back into class so that the issue can be addressed or offer the carrot of individual study and assistance from the teacher for the first class hour for those who are on time.

*Do you have ideas for helping students stay in class or for helping students re-enter your program? If you have something you would like to share on this Web site, please contact Lou Wollrab at <lwollrab@worlded.org>*



## Self-Study and Distance Learning

Consider providing options for self study, but remember that the issues that make students stop out may also make self-study difficult. The student may also require supports that are no longer there.

Develop study packets to give students when they have to leave the program.

Provide students with information about Distance Learning as an option while they are gone from the program.

Develop resources about web sites, on-line courses, and free resources that students can use.

## Consider Volunteers

Recruit and train volunteers and interns. Colleges with intern programs are a great resource. Ask for a minimum commitment then overlap outgoing interns with incoming interns for training and smooth transitions.

Use students as mentors, with careful attention and planning for how student/mentor matches are made.

Invite former students back to talk about their successes. Urge students to surround themselves with people who want them to succeed.

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## Additional Ideas for Success

### In the Classroom

• Pay attention to where people sit in your classroom. Make sure that no student is isolated.

• Recognition: Pay attention to benchmarks and achievements. Put a chart on the wall...achievements can be non traditional, and academic or not.

• Think of on-line options when students stop out—Like *English for All*, which is free.

• Put together optional reading packets with activities and a reading log for students who are enrolled so they can do additional work at home. These will also be useful when students need to stop out. Some programs who have used reading logs have found an increase in the number of student study hours as well as an increase in learner gains.

• Have teachers and counselors check in with students on a regular basis about their goals.

• Community Night: Connect learning to real life by asking a

supports for barriers to an entire class. Look for the types of issues that are likely to come up for multiple students and save one-on-one counseling time for individual/unique student needs and advising.



### Orientation

- Wear name badges.
- Give participants a quiz at the end of the orientation to see what they heard and didn't. You may be surprised at the difference between what you say at Orientation and what people hear. Modify your Orientation process based on what you learn.

panel of students to talk about how participating in the program has helped them meet their life goals.

• Save time through "Class Counseling." Look for common issues among students and introduce

### Program Policies

- Intervene early on...if your attendance policy allows three unexcused absences, intervene after one.

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## Remember!

If you have additional ideas to help student persistence, please add your thoughts to this page so others can benefit. Contact [lwollrab@worlded.org](mailto:lwollrab@worlded.org), or 617-482-9485.