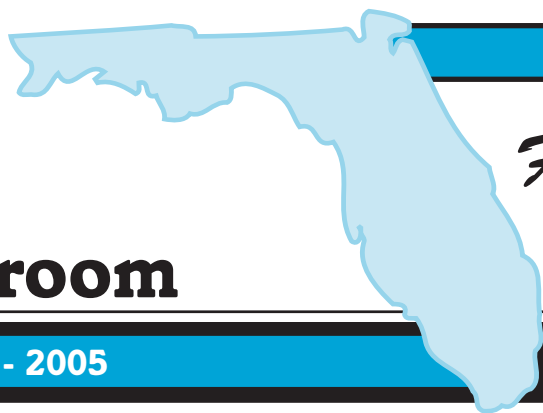


The

Adult Basic Classroom



*For Florida Adult Basic
Education Practitioners*

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What do I do with the younger learners in my classroom? What are the learning needs of 16 – 18 year olds and how do they differ from the needs of older adult education students? Should these younger learners be integrated into my classrooms with adults?

The faces in Adult Education classrooms have been getting younger over the past few years. Anecdotal classroom evidence and some research suggest that the percentage of Adult Education students under the age of 18 enrolled in Adult Education programs is increasing. There are various reasons for this. One may be that employers are less willing to hire young high school dropouts for full-time positions, so dropouts return to school earlier. Another may be that the more rigorous testing required for promotion has created more over-aged middle schools students, students at least 16 years old but unqualified to be promoted to the ninth grade. These students are often uncomfortable returning to middle school, yet want to remain in school, knowing they are not ready for the job market. Some students are simply seeking an alternative to the traditional classroom. Learning disabilities and/or attention deficit disorder may have contributed to their failure in the traditional classroom. But is Adult Education the place for these young learners? What new problems do they bring to our classrooms?

Many adult educators have found learners who are 16 – 18 years old to be less mature, less motivated and less responsible than the older learner. The younger learner generally has less personal direction and

poorly defined educational and career goals. They may have a tendency towards behavior problems because of their immaturity. Still, mixing young learners with adults has been shown to be successful.

BENEFITS OF THE MIXED-AGE CLASSROOM

Many youth respond to the serious atmosphere of the adult classroom and behave like older learners. In a mixed age classroom, the older learners become mentors, sharing their own hardships of life without education and their own determination to better their options in life. And younger learners bring their own strengths to the Adult Education classroom. Younger teens tend to question authority and the validity of the education they are receiving, reminding adults to be less complacent and accepting of projects that do not meet their needs or are boring. Younger teens generally have technology literacy that can be shared with much older adult learners and an enthusiasm for change and newness that can be contagious.

Somehow a mixed-age classroom seems to obligate its learners to offer and accept mentorship. Though some advocate keeping the number of younger learners low in a mixed-age classroom, others report that it only takes a handful of older

learners to set the tone for the classroom. Younger learners respect the experience of older learners while older learners actively encourage the younger learners. The sense of competition is diminished and the sense of camaraderie increased.

The Adult Education classroom is particularly capable of teaching younger teen students because of its emphasis on individualized learning, its general practice of adapting lessons to meet individual student's needs and learning styles, and its familiarity with having multiple levels in one classroom.

STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL MIXED-AGE SETTING

There are strategies for making the mixed-age adult education class successful. First, be aware of the population mix. If at all possible, structure your enrollment so that new students know if they are entering a class primarily made up of younger learners or older learners. Second, pair a younger and older learner as peer tutors. This allows both to discover strengths in themselves and each other, enhancing the learning community in the classroom. Third, offer younger learners more structure. Assign more due dates and do more goal setting with your younger learners. You might

also have the older peer tutor work on goal setting with the younger learner, but make sure progress toward a goal is checked frequently for younger learners. Finally, provide many hands-on learning experiences for the younger learner. Though all in the adult education classroom should be directed to hands-on learning, this is probably even more crucial for the younger teen.

The key with much adult learning is using age-appropriate material. The same is true when integrating younger learners into the mixed-age classroom. For example, emerging readers can be taught the /ea/ sound with words and phrases like “dead meat” and “meathead.” Older learners can be given the task of coming up with the words that incorporate /ea/. Many young adult novels are interesting to all ages and can be read aloud in class. Consider the Harry Potter series. Though geared for younger readers, older readers report enjoying the books and any older learner would appreciate the status of being able to discuss Harry Potter with children and grandchildren. Readers of various skill levels can help each other decipher the text; J.K. Rowling’s creation of new words makes all levels of readers sound out words and use context clues. A mixed-age classroom should provide rich resources for discussions concerning heroism, conflict between good and evil, and the ethics behind breaking the rules.

ALTERNATIVES TO THE MIXED-AGE CLASSROOM

If a mixed classroom is not successful for a particular younger teen or Adult Education program, there are alternatives. Hillsborough County has a School Board approved Under-Age Pre-GED/GED program that has an extension focused on over-aged middle school students.

The Under-age Pre-GED/GED program is for students who are at least 16 and at risk of dropping out of high school or are better served through the adult program. Students who are behind in credits, have a low GPA, have not passed FCAT, or demonstrate financial or medical hardships may be identified as being better served by Adult Education GED programs and accepted into the Under-Age Pre-GED/GED program. Most classes are held at the local high school, with a few satellite locations available. Students must complete 225 hours of instruction, pass the official GED practice test, and have a teacher recommendation to be approved to take the GED test prior to their 18th birthday. This program is also offered on-line. Students enrolled in the on-line program work from home to meet the instructional content and attendance requirements and meet once a week with their teachers for progress checks and review. Karine Johns, Supervisor of Adult Instruction in Hillsborough County, reports that the pilot middle school extension of this program teaches Pre-GED classes only, meets in middle schools, serves primarily sixteen-year-olds, and promotes students to the Under-Age Pre-GED/GED program once they reach the 9.0 reading, writing and mathematics level based on TABE scores.

Leon County has developed a program focused on meeting the needs of the over-aged middle school student that does integrate them immediately into the Adult Education classroom but recruits them differently. Guidance counselors and administrators refer students to Leon County’s STAR Program (Students Tackling Academic Review). Students wishing to enroll in STAR must withdraw from their zoned schools. ACE personnel contact each student referred to assist with enrollment. The

STAR program has encouraged over-aged middle school students to continue their education by giving them an alternative route to earn a high school diploma.

The faces in the Adult Education classroom may be getting younger, but the problems are the same: missed academic skills, learning disabilities, medical complications, an inability to set goals, a familiarity with failure. The Adult Education teacher who knows how to individualize learning, teach students to work independently in learning communities, foster goal setting and follow through will be successful with any age student and with any combination of ages in a single classroom.

For information on the Hillsborough County Under-Age Pre-GED/GED program contact Karine Johns
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We hope you enjoy this newsletter. If you have any comments or questions, please contact Lynn Cunill, Leon County Schools Adult & Community Education, (850) 922-5343, cunilll@ACE-Leon.org.