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# Introduction

The *1999 Families First Idea Book* is a collection of lesson plans by Tennessee adult basic education instructors who have been rising to the challenge of integrating work preparation activities with basic skills. In light of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA) of 1998, it is a challenge many adult basic educators are now facing.

## **SCANS Report**

In the past several years, it has become clear that to be successful at work, adults need not only basic skills, but other skills and qualities. In 1991, the Department of Labor commissioned a study to learn what youth entering the workforce need to know and be able to do in order to be successful. Employers, unions and workers were asked to define the skills needed for employment and to propose acceptable levels of proficiency. The resulting *SCANS (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills)* report "What Work Requires of Schools" (1991) suggested that workers need not only basic skills, but also thinking skills and personal qualities and competencies to equip them for the world of work. (A copy of the skills identified with the *SCANS* report is included in the appendix.)

## **Welfare Reform**

Around the time that the *SCANS* report and other events pushed Americans to rethink the role of education and work, there began to be increasing public demand for accountability regarding the effectiveness of public programs. Policy makers were challenged to come up with new approaches to entitlement programs, approaches that incorporated personal responsibility as well as a time-limited "safety net" for families struggling to pull themselves out of poverty.

In the following years as states and the federal government moved toward welfare reform, the national debate centered on questions such as how to most effectively help adults gain the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to be successful at work. How does this nation help adults

move toward self-sufficiency? For example, should policy be established to put welfare recipients in jobs regardless of the person's skills, or the quality of the job? Some policy makers asked difficult questions about whether basic skills programs, traditionally a long-term investment, were really worthwhile. Others questioned the wisdom of economics being the sole driver behind civic decision-making concerning the value of education.

At the same time, other policy makers observed that unskilled workers often move from low-wage job to low-wage job, unable to achieve real self-sufficiency or to truly move out of poverty. As they considered ways to restructure welfare, some policy makers noted respected research that suggests basic skills education, job training, job search, and workplace experience should be integrated for real improvement in the wages and quality of life of welfare-to-work participants. (D'Amico, 1997; Strawn, 1998)

### **Families First in Tennessee**

As welfare reform efforts were sweeping the nation, Tennessee legislators, public officials and citizens were engaged in debate over the future of Tennessee's welfare program. After spirited discussion, heated public forums, negotiation and compromise, on September 1, 1996, *Families First*, Tennessee's ground-breaking welfare reform program, was in place.

Welfare reform programs across the nation typically emphasize work and self-sufficiency. Tennessee's program does that, too. But *Families First* differs in an important way from virtually every other welfare reform effort: it actively encourages adult education (White, Ziegler & Bingman, 1999). *Families First* policies acknowledge that without basic skills and work readiness skills, adults are unlikely to attain employment that leads to lasting self-sufficiency.

In order to be eligible for assistance, participants in *Families First* agree to a Personal Responsibility Plan that outlines goals and activities designed to assist a family achieve self-sufficiency. There are several possible "activities" from which participants may choose, including adult basic education, job training, job search, and job club. The Tennessee Department of Human Services supplies support services such as transportation and child care to enable adults to participate in sponsored activities.

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Although eligibility and need differ according to individual situations, many *Families First* participants who lack a high school diploma elect to spend up to 20 hours per week in adult education classes. More than 90% of the adult caretaker in families enrolled in the program has some work history, although it may be sporadic (Fox, Boyer, Cunningham and Vickers, 1998). While participants are working to gain basic skills up to the ninth grade level, there is no additional work component required, and no time limitations on assistance are in operation. Once a participant gains ninth-grade-level skills, a work requirement of up to twenty hours per week and time limitations on assistance, begin.

### **Adult Basic Education**

In the beginning, most adult education teachers operated their *Families First* classes much like other ABE classes. They knew how to do a good job teaching basic skills. However, teachers soon saw that they needed to make changes to better help their *Families First* participants move toward work-readiness. Teachers realized that it took more to hold a job than being proficient at basic skills. At the same time, Tennessee policy makers at the Department of Education and the Office of Adult and Community Education began to ask adult basic education teachers to integrate work-preparedness skills with basic skills in the classroom.

The Department of Human Services commissioned research to find out the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSAs) that Tennessee employers believe to be essential for success in entry-level employment. That study revealed that while Tennessee employers definitely value a GED or high school diploma, employee skills and attitudes such as dependability, following instructions and getting along with others are just as vital (Davis, 1998). A full listing of the Tennessee Essential Workforce Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes (KSAs) is found in the appendix.

Even as teachers saw that learners needed more than GED preparation and heard requests from policy makers to create more work-focused classrooms, they also realized that little in their educational background prepared them for this task. How can instruction take place in a different way, a way that helps adults become prepared for workplaces that demand

not only basic skills, but also the ability to work together, to solve problems, and to flourish in the complex world of work? Teachers needed a chance to explore methods of teaching in this different way. They needed to talk with each other and learn together about how to weave basic skills instruction with activities that helped adults move toward self-sufficiency.

### **Equipped for the Future (EFF)**

While some teachers saw instant possibilities, others struggled with integrating work and basic skills. Some were troubled by narrowing the focus of adult basic education to only work because they knew that equally important were educational experiences that equipped people to be successful in all areas of their lives. A national initiative, *Equipped for the Future*, was a useful tool that helped teachers reframe their instruction from a work focus to one that also contributes to the development of the whole person. *EFF* skills parallel many of the KSAs and *SCANS* skills, but they grow out of what adult learners themselves said they needed in order to be equipped for their futures as workers, family members and community members. The knowledge, skills and attitudes needed for work are also needed to be effective in one's life. (A copy of the *EFF* framework is included in the appendix.)

### **The 1999 Families First Idea Book: A “Teacher to Teacher” Resource.**

Using the Tennessee KSAs as their primary framework—with *SCANS* and other skills frameworks as resources—*Families First* instructors have started to let their creativity guide them in a new direction. This publication, the *1999 Families First Idea Book*, provides ample evidence of that shift. Here you will find lessons submitted by teachers from all areas of the state to be generously shared with their colleagues. Within these lessons, teachers seek to strengthen the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for their students, *Families First* customers, to be successful at work as well as in their families and communities. Some of these lessons teach these skills directly such as when students are asked to relate specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes to the way they live their daily lives. Other skills are taught indirectly as teachers integrated an identified KSA such as being able to work effectively on a team into a lesson stressing an additional skill such as math or social studies.

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The lessons are presented in loosely organized sections which arose from the primary focus of each lesson. The sections are:

- I. Job Acquisition Skills—Preparing to Work
- II. Job Management Skills—Overcoming Obstacles, Adapting to Work
- III. Life Management—Managing Life While Managing a Job
- IV. KSA Direct Instruction
- V. GED Acquisition—Skill Development

Many lessons could fit in more than one section. Their actual placement is in the section of their primary focus. They are referenced in the introduction to other sections where they could also have been placed.

Previous *Idea Books* were collections of lessons, in any format submitted by the teacher, copied as submitted, and gathered together under one cover. The *1999 Idea Book* asked teachers to submit their lessons in a Learning Activity Framework so that the lessons could be more easily organized and presented in a more standardized form. (A copy of the Learning Activity Framework is included in the appendix.) In addition, lessons were edited to be more consistent across the framework. The result of this standardization makes it easier for teachers looking through the book to find a prospective lesson, get a quick overview of it, and decide whether the lesson meets their needs. It will also facilitate easier access to the lessons as they become available online published as locally produced materials and available through the “local materials” link on the Center For Literacy Studies home page at <http://cls.coe.utk.edu/>.

As in previous years, teachers were asked to submit their best lessons to be published in this year’s *Idea Book*. Because of the new format for the book, not all of the lessons submitted could be edited in time to be included in this published version. We expect to be able to include additional lessons in the next version of the *Families First Idea Book* that will be published on line.

Without the generosity of teachers who felt it was important to share with other teachers, there would be no “ideas” in the *Idea Book*. We wish to thank all the teachers who shared their teaching experiences and ideas by submitting lessons for inclusion in the *1999 Families First Idea Book*. We hope that these lessons will serve to help other teachers and spark more creative ideas.

**References**

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