

WAGE Program Helps Adult Learners Improve Employment Potential



Overview—Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy Program, Conway Arkansas

- WAGE Program participants moved up at least one grade level for every 12 hours spent on PLATO Learning instructional curricula.
- Teachers appreciate the tracking and monitoring abilities built into the PLATO Web Learning Network (PWLN), allowing them to continue to support student progress.
- Forty percent of students who completed at least 12 hours of instruction earned a certificate.

Industry and Education Partner to Equip Workforce With Necessary Skills

Housed in the Workforce One-Stop Center, the WAGE Program in Conway, Arkansas, provides adult learners with work-based skills education to help them earn certificates issued by the Arkansas Department of Workforce Education and improve their potential for employment.

The program, started 10 years ago through a community and industry alliance, services about 400 students each year. The center receives students referred by the Employment Security Department, Department of Human Services, as well as 19 business/industry partners who recognize the certificates as part of their employment programs. A local advisory board of business professionals set the employability skill levels students need to meet to earn each certificate:

- Employability certificates require 85 percent mastery on PC skills, life and job skills, and pre-employment, as well as 10th grade reading, math and language arts levels.
- To complete the clerical or industrial certificates, students must meet the 85 percent mastery requirements above and improve their reading, math and language arts skills to a 12.9 level.

PLATO Instruction Helps Students Improve Employability Skills

The PWLN was chosen to deliver instruction in each skill area in WAGE's online, computer lab. Upon entry into the WAGE program, the students take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) exam, which identifies their skill level, and through a custom alignment, places the students into the appropriate instruction within PWLN.

PROGRAM: WAGE (Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy) Program at the Conway Adult Education Workforce Center

MISSION: "Linking today's workforce with tomorrow's jobs."

PURPOSE: To enhance the skills of the unemployed and underemployed for improved potential to serve employers and to assist in providing a community's employers with a perpetual workforce that has basic skills and is therefore trainable.

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In 2003, 43 students enrolled in WAGE entered post-secondary institutions, 82 earned certificates, and 147 were employed at some point during the program.

Once PWLN was implemented, the teachers immediately saw a direct correlation between time spent on the PLATO Learning system and improvement in student skill levels. “Every student who spent at least 12 hours on PWLN moved at least one grade level; so we know the program works,” said WAGE Coordinator Esther Gross.

Project IDEAL Opens New Doors for WAGE Students

In addition to offering PLATO instruction in the lab, center coordinators saw a need to offer distance learning for students who could not always make it to the lab, specifically women with children or students who are already employed and need to work before or after business hours. Two common barriers for adult education are transportation and childcare, and by offering a distance-learning dimension to the WAGE program, more students had access to the instruction and could improve their basic skills.

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Vocational and Adult Education, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, Project IDEAL, a consortium of states working to develop effective distance education programs for adult learners, helped guide the WAGE program’s expansion into distance learning. Currently 15 percent of the students in the WAGE program are accessing PLATO instruction through distance learning, and many students have appreciated the flexibility to work as their schedule permits with minimal lab time. Teachers appreciate the tracking and monitoring abilities built into PWLN, allowing them to continue to support student progress. Currently, PLATO Learning provides instruction for Project IDEAL centers in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Mississippi.

PWLN and WAGE Get Results

Whether delivered in lab environments or offered through distance learning, students in the WAGE Program have achieved significant skill gains through their work on PWLN. In 2003, 43 students enrolled in WAGE entered post-secondary institutions, 82 earned certificates and 147 were employed at some point during the program. While impressive, Ms. Gross said that these statistics don’t show the entire story. “Many students enter this program already employed and other students enter with no plans of completing a certificate—they simply want to improve their skills to test for placement within the department of human services or receive promotions or job changes in

their current positions. Each individual student that comes through the WAGE center has their own goals, but students who spend a significant time working on the PLATO system see results and enter or reenter the workforce better trained. In fact, 40 percent of students who complete at least 12 hours of PLATO instruction earn a certificate.”

Ms. Gross shared specific stories of students whose lives were changed as a result of their participation in WAGE.

Dislocated Worker Shines in Nursing School

“We had a young dislocated worker who wanted to become a nurse. When she left our program, she had improved her skills to 12.9 in reading, math, and language arts. During nursing school, she was struggling in a specific math course. She went back into PLATO math instruction through our distance learning option, and she ended up being one of only seven students in her 30-student math class who passed the course.”

Time and Commitment Help Student Dramatically Improve Skill Levels

“Another story I love to share is of a young, dislocated man who spent four or five months working daily in the center. Upon entry, his reading tested at the 4th grade level, math at 3rd grade, and language arts at 4th grade. By the end of the program, all of his levels were at 12.9. As a result, he was able to get a job with an Arkansas state agency and passed his CDC test, which allowed him to be promoted within the field. Upon completion, he told me he could not have made it without the help of the PLATO system.”

Teachers Respond With Enthusiasm

WAGE teachers have also responded positively to the PLATO system. “They love the program,” said Gross. “A networked PLATO system is such a thorough program. When I came to the WAGE program, PLATO Learning was already here but was minimally used. I had used PLATO instruction in a Kimberly Clark Learning Center before; so, the teachers and I worked through assigning courses, monitoring and assessing students, and general use of PWLN. Now it has become *the* way we get people from point A to point B and get them employed and out in the workforce.”