



## The Pandemic Strikes:

The sudden COVID-19 pandemic forced ABE to convert all classes from in-person to virtual overnight. Over 60,000 adult learners and over 1,350 staff needed to quickly learn to function online. The Digital Divide, now a chasm, was quickly apparent - many low-income students lacked devices, WiFi, and digital literacy skills.

A solid funding base, an ABE culture built to foster creativity and inclusion, and strong support from the Minnesota Department of Education and Distance Learning Support Services allowed rapid, creative responses. Programs adapted quickly, finding ways and means to serve adult learners effectively in a fast changing, unpredictable environment. Efforts to provide devices, WiFi, and digital literacy skills ramped up. **Within a short time, ABE was functional in a radically changed environment.**

**55,600+ students were served over the program year, a drop of only 5,000 from the previous year - a remarkable achievement in a deeply disrupted environment.**

## Major Innovations:

- Staff learned to do more at a distance, and found ways to develop virtual community for learners and themselves.
- Remote testing was developed for GED, Northstar Digital Literacy, and other services.
- The professional development system pivoted quickly to provide the online training and support needed in the new environment.
- ABE programs began distributing crucial technology for students (and staff), including laptops, tablets, and hotspots.
- Greater awareness of and collaboration with other systems occurred. At the national level, previous Minnesota innovations, such as a focused intensive professional development system, and the Northstar digital literacy assessment and curricula, achieved widespread use.

## What We Learned:

Programs realized there were people the 'old' in-class model didn't serve, who are now (and hopefully in the future) better served at a distance. At the same time, some who had been served previously did not continue in the new paradigm, often due to the challenges of the digital divide. Everyone realized being in a physical classroom was not required in order to learn. Going into a crisis, a creative and innovative mindset helps people adapt to rapid and even traumatic change. And, **the ABE system is a crucial resource system for many, perhaps most, especially during times of rapid change.**



## ABE Voices Across the Distance: How are MN Adult Educators responding?

### Jessica Jones – Open Door Learning Center, St. Paul:



When I found out that the school would be closed (for a long time), I stayed up way too late one night putting together a class website. I wanted to have a landing page for everything that my students are working on. On Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays I have a two-hour block of office hours that's open for one-on-one video conferencing. On Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday we do group lessons online with Zoom.

The thing that I'm particularly proud of is that I actually have more students on my roster now than I did when we closed. I was able to re-engage some students who had been home with infants or had other situations where they couldn't come to class.

Emphasize connection over academic goals. It's important to work to establish connection with all of your students first. The first couple of weeks I just made calls and sent messages asking people how they were doing, if they had enough food, if everyone in their family was healthy. That initial connection was crucial to keeping everyone engaged. Also, pick one thing that you're going to do and get good at that. You can add to it later; it doesn't have to be perfect right away.

### Liv Musel-Staloch - Mankato Area Adult Education:

Our program is considered middle-sized in the state. We had five levels of ESL instruction happening, plus GED and adult diploma preparation classes. We were able to move all of our 'core' leveled ESL classes online, as well as some additional classes. Our ABE classes use Google Meet/Hangout for video lessons.

Teachers are focused on the basics: reading, vocabulary, listening comprehension, math operations. Many teachers are offering health and community resources to contextualize the learning and provide much-needed support to students. They're also trying to be a "safe place" for students, checking in on how people are doing, providing suggestions for parents with children at home, offering ways to get food or jobs that are hiring.

Some students are getting online with us at 8:00 in the morning and staying on until 3:00 in the afternoon. Teachers are also struggling to reach students who haven't been able to connect to online learning yet. We worry about our students who have limited access to internet or devices.

### Pamela Dane – WEST ABE (Monticello, Big Lake, and St. Michael-Albertville):

Teaching online is completely different than teaching in a classroom. I had to do a few ESL classes online to realize that I couldn't replicate what I did in the classroom, where I try to have the students talk as much as possible while reducing my teacher talk. In video meetings, you can't do mingles or multiple conversation partners at the same time. Learning to teach online is a humbling experience. You have to be able to laugh at yourself. Most importantly, listen to the students.

Address their well-being needs first. Learn one platform and just go with it. Start small, but jump in; nothing will be perfect when you start. Be willing to change strategies after each class session.

Connect with other teachers; we all need moral support right now. And don't give up on the synchronous online lessons; I can see that the students really miss their friends from class, and for some it is the only connection they have outside of their home.

