

A Legacy of Learning: 40 Years of Johnson County Adult Education English as a Learning Language



Amber Schrage^{1*} and Helga Dotti¹

Johnson County Adult Education¹, Kansas, USA // aschrag3@jccc.edu // hdottail@jccc.edu

ABSTRACT: Johnson County Adult Education (JCAE) has been a cornerstone of adult education in Johnson County, Kansas for over 40 years. Serving adults across the county in Adult Basic Education, GED completion and English as a Learning Language (ELL), the growth of the program has been substantial. Since its beginning, JCAE has helped tens of thousands of adults achieve their educational goals, leading to better job opportunities, improved quality of life and successful civic involvement within the community. Success can be attributed to the dedicated staff, innovative curriculum, and strong community support. JCAE's commitment to providing accessible and effective education has made it a vital resource for adult learners. This article will focus on the ELL side of the program and how it continues to grow and evolve without any advertisement or promotion, maintaining its innovative approach with high-quality education and instructors.

Keywords: Adult education, English as a Learning Language, community-based learning, program development, educational access

1. Introduction

Since 1985, JCAE has experienced consistent growth. Despite not utilizing advertising, marketing, or promotion for the ELL program, the program has thrived. Operating on a semester basis with enrollment in August and January, JCAE sees students lining outside the doors the night before registration, sometimes waiting 12 hours or more to be first in line, or to guarantee a testing spot. As a first-come, first-served program that provides quality and effective education, word-of-mouth is the only form of advertising needed. Thousands of students eagerly sign up, proof of the program's reputation and success. This remarkable growth can be attributed to the dedication of the staff, the innovative curriculum, and the strong community support. Students benefit from improved job opportunities, enhanced quality of life, and successful civic involvement within the community, making JCAE a vital resource for adult learners.

2. Growth and Enrollment

Over the past two years, focus has been on serving more members in the community. With thousands of students entering the program, it became clear that we needed to elevate our efforts. The question arose: how can we better serve this growing population and support them in achieving their language and community success goals? In response, we thoroughly analyzed our classroom offerings and considered the student-instructor ratio. We secured additional class spaces, hired new instructors, and forged partnerships with local businesses to create on-site programs. As a result, the program expanded from serving an average of 500 students per semester to nearly 1,200 students per semester.

3. Team-Driven Program Enhancements

Serving over 800 ELL students in the 2023-2024 school year, JCAE welcomed a potential 1,032 students for the first semester of the 2024-2025 school year. This remarkable growth can be attributed to rethinking, revitalizing, and cooperatively reflecting on the current processes with the entire team. Feedback from instructors, operations staff, and leadership highlighted many areas for improvement, from the initial registration steps to the testing process and even the approach to student absences. Every aspect was reviewed and replanned as a team, ensuring that everyone knew the process and was prepared. Instructors brought their classroom experiences, operations staff provided logistical insights, and leadership offered strategic direction. This collaborative effort ensured that all voices were heard and valued, leading to innovative solutions and a more cohesive approach. The goal was to improve the overall experience for students and staff, and the collective dedication and teamwork played a crucial role in achieving this.

3.1 Streamlining Registration

To address the challenges faced during the registration process, the team held a series of brainstorming sessions where instructors, operations staff, and leadership came together to share their insights and experiences. Instructors provided valuable feedback on the initial registration steps, highlighting areas where students often encountered difficulties. Operations staff contributed their logistical expertise, suggesting ways to streamline the process and reduce wait times. Leadership facilitated these discussions, ensuring that all voices were heard and that the proposed solutions aligned with the program's strategic goals. Improving the student experience was the top priority, moving from only in-person registration, to online registration with in-person registration for those that needed support was the first step in the process. This collaborative approach led to the implementation of a more efficient registration system, which included clearer instructions for students, additional support staff during peak times, and improved communication channels to keep students and staff informed throughout the process.

3.2 Payment Process Improvements

Another major change within the program was the acceptance of credit cards for payment. In previous years, only checks and money orders had been allowed. The process for finalizing these payments was lengthy and often was not processed for months after the registration date. This caused frustration with students, many of them who struggle financially, and resulted in more work and fees on their part. Opening the credit card option not only made it easier for students to provide the funds but allowed the staff to function much more efficiently. This change streamlined the payment process, reducing the time and effort required for both students and staff. It also increased accessibility for students who may not have had access to checks or money orders, thereby removing a potential barrier to enrollment. The ability to accept credit card payments demonstrated the program's commitment to modernization and responsiveness to the student needs, resulting in contribution to the overall success and growth of the program.

3.3 Enhancing Student Processes

In addition to improving the registration process, the team also focused on enhancing the testing and attendance procedures. Instructors shared their experiences regarding the existing testing process and procedures, identifying areas where students struggled. Operations staff suggested logistical improvements, such as better scheduling and resource allocation, to ensure that testing ran smoothly. Leadership played a crucial role in coordinating these efforts, providing the necessary resources and support to implement the changes. The team introduced new testing protocols, including more organized scheduling options and a better layout to the process, to accommodate the growing number of students. They also developed a more robust system for tracking and addressing student absences, ensuring that students received the support they needed to succeed. This collaborative effort not only improved the overall efficiency of the program but also enhanced the student experience, leading to higher satisfaction and better outcomes.

3.4 Optimizing Data Management

The data collection process was significantly enhanced by transitioning the responsibility from instructors to the Operations teams. This shift allowed instructors to concentrate solely on their primary role of teaching, thereby improving the quality of instruction. A centralized spreadsheet was developed to maintain student information, accessible only to authorized personnel. This document includes students' scores and class information, providing a secure and efficient way to manage data.

The primary purpose of this system is to assist leadership in making informed decisions and to provide quick access to student data. Key benefits of this approach include enhanced data security, improved decision-making capabilities, and efficient data management. Since implementing this new process, JCAE has experienced easier operations and better support for its educational goals.

4. Empowering and Expanding the Instructor Role

During this reflection, it became evident that a significant portion of the decision-making process was falling on the shoulders of a few individuals. By taking the time to train and empower the instructors, demonstrating trust in their ability to make the best decisions for the students and program, the program was able to introduce flexibility with scheduling and servicing students. Instructors became an integral part of the process, from meeting and greeting students, registering them for testing, presenting program information, proctoring tests, scoring tests, giving retakes when necessary, leveling students, placing students, determining book fees and more. This buy-in from instructors not only distributed the workload more evenly but also fostered a sense of ownership and accountability among staff. The active participation and commitment to the program's success have led to improved efficiency, higher student satisfaction, and better overall outcomes.

4.1 Supporting and Engaging Instructors

Recognizing the importance of staff involvement, JCAE made a concerted effort to ensure that instructors felt valued and empowered. Comprehensive training sessions were scheduled to equip new instructors with the latest teaching methodologies and tools, fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development. These sessions not only enhanced the instructors' skills but also provided a platform for them to share their experiences and best practices with their peers. By investing in their professional growth, JCAE demonstrated its commitment to the instructors' success, which in turn translated into a more motivated and dedicated teaching staff. All resources provided to new staff were uploaded to the internal website, making them easily accessible for current staff to review and implement as needed.

A variety of tools are utilized by the JCAE instructors to provide differentiation and engagement in their classrooms. Instructors are provided the digital 'skeleton' version of all lesson plans through Google Slides. These skeletons include embedded or linked versions of all of the audio, visual, tests, and more, reducing instructor planning time. They have the freedom to add to those plans as needed to fill the three-hour class period. The program wants each instructor to have creative freedom while knowing what objectives must be taught. Each objective must include an introduction, presentation, guided practice, application and evaluation.

To further boost staff satisfaction, JCAE implemented a system of regular feedback and open communication. Instructors were encouraged to voice their opinions and suggestions during team meetings, ensuring that their insights were taken into account when making decisions. This inclusive approach helped to create a sense of community and collaboration among the staff, as everyone felt that their contributions were valued. Additionally, recognizing and celebrating the achievements of instructors through weekly update acknowledgments fostered a positive work environment and reinforced the importance of their role in the program's success.

4.2 Retaining and Expanding Instructional Capacity

Retention of skilled instructors was another key focus for JCAE. By continuing to evaluate the compensation packages and make increases when able, the program was able to attract and retain qualified individuals. New instructors had the opportunity to observe and speak with veteran instructors to gain insight into program methodologies. This not only helped new instructors acclimate to their roles more quickly but also strengthened the bonds within the team. The emphasis on staff involvement, satisfaction, and retention ensured that JCAE maintained a high-quality teaching staff, which was crucial for the continued success and growth of the ELL program.

Accommodating such a large number of students requires adequate space and a sufficient number of instructors. To address this, JCAE first evaluated the current spaces and class offerings at each level. By adding three additional classrooms and increasing the number of students per class, JCAE was able to significantly boost overall enrollment. Additionally, the staff began analyzing where students were coming from, identifying commonalities among the businesses employing them. This opened up new opportunities for collaboration. JCAE leaders reached out to local businesses and discovered that many were sending 10-30 students to the program. By partnering with these businesses, JCAE was able to set up on-site programming. Staff developed specific SMART goals tailored to the employer's needs and created a unique curriculum focused on workplace skills relevant to the company. An instructor was then sent to the business to teach the classes, following the same structure and utilizing the same materials as the public program. This approach aligns with the state of Kansas' push for Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) and Integrated English and Training (IET) programs. These programs do not adhere to the same rigorous testing but instead use employer goals to evaluate progress. By opening this new avenue, the increase in the number of students is now limited only by instructor availability.

5. Volunteers

Volunteers are vital to the Johnson County Adult Education (JCAE) program. Their support in ELL classrooms, registration, and testing processes is a significant reason why learners choose to study at JCAE. Volunteers provide invaluable assistance by:

- Supporting learners: They work one-on-one with learners, helping them practice vocabulary and conversation skills.
- Assisting in group activities: Volunteers help answer questions and clarify doubts, ensuring learners understand the material.
- Supporting the instructor: Volunteers support instructors prepare materials for classes
- Facilitating registration and testing: They guide students to the correct rooms, waiting areas, and restrooms, making the process smoother.

Their involvement not only aids in the educational process but also creates a welcoming environment for learners. They enjoy being included and having the first contact with our learners.

6. Program Distinctiveness and Impact

What makes JCAE's ELL program so unique? It may not be much different from other programs out there, but it is a program that instructors and students are proud to be a part of. The curriculum created encompasses four community-based ELL levels and embedded into each level are language skills such as reading, listening, writing, and speaking as well as digital literacy, career clusters, financial literacy, civics,

problem solving and other 'soft' skills critical in today's workforce. Preparing students for success in life, at work, and in the community is the program's focus.

Another aspect that makes JCAE stand out is that all the supplemental curriculum materials have been researched and created specifically for JCAE students by JCAE instructors. This ensures that the materials are tailored to the unique needs and challenges faced by the students. Additionally, a comprehensive website has been developed for instructors to access all materials needed for student success. This online resource provides easy access to lesson plans, activities and other instructional materials, enabling instructors to deliver high-quality education consistently. The availability of these resources not only support the instructors in their teaching efforts but also enhances the overall learning experience for the students.

While some instructional materials are provided to instructors, the ability for instructors to add in their own teaching style and fun activities is never removed. JCAE believes that the autonomy provided to instructors allows for differentiation and that leads to student success. This flexibility empowers instructors to tailor their teaching methods to the learning styles and needs of the students, fostering a more engaging and effective learning environment. By incorporating their own creative approaches and activities, instructors can create lessons that are more relatable and applicable to the student and their lives, which enhances student motivation and retention. The trust and freedom given to instructors has the potential to boost morale and job satisfaction, which contributes to the success of the program.

7. Conclusion

Through collaborative efforts, innovative operational improvements, and a focus on empowering instructors, JCAE's ELL program has built an adaptable and effective learning environment. By integrating a comprehensive curriculum, tailored instructional resources, and instructor autonomy, the program supports students in developing both language proficiency and practical, real-world skills. This growth reflects the staff's dedication to continuous improvement, professional development, and student-centered practices.

The Authors

Amber Schrage graduated from Emporia University with her bachelor's in education (2003), masters in Curriculum and Instruction (2006). She obtained her ESOL certification from Mid-American University in 2009. She is currently the ELL Program Coordinator at Johnson County Adult Education in Johnson County Kansas. She has experience teaching in K-12, both nationally and internationally, international school administration, and adult education. She holds certifications in a multitude of educational technology, PBIL, AASB, instructional coaching, and a variety of learning needs, including SEL and trauma informed teaching. She has over 21 years of experience in language education having created curriculum for programs internationally and in the state of Kansas, provided professional development, and is a constant advocate for the adult learning community.

Helga Dotti holds a Master in Curriculum and Instruction from the University of Kansas and a Bachelor in Business Administration from the University of Costa Rica. Helga began her teaching career at the University of Kansas, where she taught Spanish and worked for an Adult Literacy research project. In 2008, she joined Johnson County Adult Education as an instructor, she has taught multiple levels of English, computer classes, civics, digital literacy and served as part of the ELL leadership team. She is currently the Site Supervisor for ELL at JCAE Center of Grace location in Olathe.