

**it's
our**



right

A Showcase of Workplace
Education Programs and
Learner Stories

About this Booklet

This booklet highlights stories of different CUPE locals across Canada that have successfully taken on the challenge of setting up workplace education programs for their members. We hope these stories will “spread the word” about literacy and inspire other locals and members to get involved.

The programs described have created opportunities for CUPE sisters and brothers. Among other things, members have been able to complete high school, improve their reading and writing, learn about computers, and brush up on math for certification. In some cases, family members have had the same opportunities. These stories only provide examples of CUPE’s work in this area. They do not represent all the great work that CUPE locals are doing across the country.

Workplace education programs can help our members participate more equitably at work, at home and in their communities. They help people develop new skills for a changing workplace. They give people a chance to brush up on skills they have forgotten. They support those where the school system failed them. These programs can also help our members help their kids.

This booklet highlights eight stories about workplace education programs and CUPE members who attended them. These stories are:

- *If you have the opportunity, just do it!*
(Local 5050: Cape Breton, Nova Scotia)
- *CUPE members and their families have opportunities to learn*
(Local 51: Moncton, New Brunswick)
- *Peer tutors a success in Return to Learn Program*
(Local 21: Regina, Saskatchewan)
- *High school program opens doors for health care workers*
(HEU: Victoria, British Columbia)
- *Workplace education program adapts to changing needs*
(Local 500: Winnipeg, Manitoba)
- *The program won't go forward without the union*
(Local 3840: Halifax, Nova Scotia)
- *Workplace program helps members deal with change*
(Locals 569 and 1289: St. John's, Newfoundland)
- *Personal Education Program helps water workers get certified*
(Locals 830 and 501: Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island)

A sense of accomplishment

“Attending the workplace program gave me a sense of accomplishment. Going back to school to get my high school was something I wanted to do for a long time,” says Esther McKinnon, Local 5050 member. Esther received her GED in 2004. “I was elated and so proud of myself. I can’t even describe the feelings I had,” she says.

Esther, a playground supervisor with the Cape Breton Regional School Board for the last 12 years, says that going back to school before was never an option for her. “I married young and was busy raising four children and two nephews,” she says.

Wanted to “give it a shot”

When the opportunity for the program came up, Esther wanted to “give it a shot.” At first she wondered if she could do it because she had been out of school for so many years. When Esther first started the program she was apprehensive. After a few weeks it was fine. “Others were in the same boat,” she explains. “I worried if I could study and do the work. I wondered if I could do it on top of everything else I have to do. I found out that I could.” She adds, “After the first few classes I opened up. I could ask questions when I had problems. I felt good about myself.” She reflects that at the end of the program it was hard to say good-bye because of the friends she made.



Don't be scared

Esther advises other sister and brothers who want to do the same thing not to be scared. “No matter how frightened you are, just go do it,” she stresses. “I think this kind of program is an excellent idea. It was great that the union did this.”

“I hope to jump into the computer course next,” she laughs.

Denise Lewis (holding the award) and Gloria Charsley

If you have the opportunity, just do it!

“If you have the chance to get a workplace education program going in your local, simply do it!” says CUPE Local 5050’s education chair Denise Lewis. Denise, a cleaner with the Cape Breton Regional School Board and chair of the workplace education committee, knew there was a need. “Many of our members wanted to complete their education, but couldn’t,” she says.

How it started

Denise explains how it all started. “When Gloria Charsley (CUPE education rep) and Linda Wentzel (N.S. Federation of Labour) approached me about setting up a workplace education program, I knew it was an idea that would work. They met with our local union executive who decided it was worthwhile. We then formed a partnership with the employer.”

The workplace education committee is made up of five CUPE members, the school board’s director of human resources, and a field development coordinator from Nova Scotia’s Department of Education. The field development coordinator is a member of the joint committee throughout the project and is especially helpful during the project start up. In 2003, they surveyed union members and found that people wanted to get their high school diploma and learn basic computers. They offered two classes to start: a basic computer course and a twenty-week Essential Skills course. These courses were so successful that a second Essential Skills course and two more basic computer courses followed. The committee has planned two more courses for the fall of 2005.

Many work sites

Local 5050 has 1400 members working at 65 work sites across Cape Breton. One of the challenges was how to meet the needs of workers from so many different work sites and two shifts. To address this challenge, courses take place close to where the majority

of participants live. Classes take place on Saturday mornings so everyone can come.

Peer learning guides

CUPE has worked with the Federation of Labour to develop a program to train union members as peer learning guides. Denise is excited about this important aspect of the program as peer guides are needed. “As our computer course grew, the instructor was run ragged trying to get to everyone,” she says.

Two Local 5050 members have taken training and will begin as peer guides in the fall. They will work with the instructor and participants in the program. Education rep Gloria Charsley explains the importance of peer guides. “When the students can work with peers, people they see every day in their workplace, it can really help them get what they need from the classes.”

Benefits to CUPE members

Benefits are everything from new friendships to increased self-confidence. There is the thrill of passing courses and coming out on top. Participants say they can use their computers now and help their kids with their homework. They can move into different jobs if they want to. The local feels that people are now more open to union involvement.

Denise Lewis is winner of the 2004 Nova Scotia Alex MacDonald Ambassador Award. CUPE also recognized Denise for her work with the first CUPE Nova Scotia Literacy Award in 2005.

Workplace program helps in achieving many goals

Robert Melanson is a member of Local 51 and a City of Moncton worker. For the past 30 years, he's worked for the city as a truck driver and operator but he now holds a temporary foreman's position. "I never would have applied for a foreman's job before the program," says Robert.

Comfortable program offers many benefits

"I just got my GED a few weeks ago," Robert says proudly. "I started in the workplace program six years ago. For a few years before that I wanted to learn to read and write better, but I didn't have the guts to go to a program," he says. "When the program came up here at the workplace, it was perfect!"

The program was a very comfortable fit for Robert. He felt that he was starting at the right level and always learning something. He was excited to keep returning to class. "The teachers were great," he says. "It felt good walking out of there, always learning, always wanting to go back." Robert finds that he writes a lot more than he used to, especially at work. "Now I feel more confident and not afraid when something comes up that is different from my normal routine."

Program builds solidarity among participants

Robert quit school at a very early age without learning how to read and write well. He felt 'left out' because of this. "When I joined the program, I thought I was the only one," he says. "I found out that there are lots of other people in the same situation as me." He says he felt good in the program. "We were all grown men and women learning together for the same reason. We were all equal."

Future goals

What's next on Robert's list? He says that now he has his GED he wants to take the computer course offered through the program and improve his spelling. And he hopes to get a permanent position as a foreman in the future! "The program is one of the best things going. It works because the unions, management, and the instructors all work together to make it happen," he says.

CUPE members and their families have opportunities to learn

“The Workplace Education Program is a great thing,” says Donald Williams, president of Local 51. “Our members are taking advantage of it as much as they can. It gives us something to recommend to them to better themselves.” In addition, he says members are “attending more union meetings, speaking up more at these meetings and asking more questions.” The local has negotiated a pay raise for senior casuals who take the GED program.

Many learning opportunities offered at flexible times

The workplace program with the City of Moncton started in 1998 as one of five pilot projects sponsored by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA). The program is run by a committee with representatives from Local 51, the City Hall Employees’ Association and city management. Credit for getting the program started goes to CUPE activist Arnold Beers Jr. who worked hard on Local 51’s behalf.

The program started with a focus on basic reading, writing, and math, GED preparation, computers, income tax and basic parenting. Today, based on feedback from city workers, it also includes leadership training, public speaking, and French. Two instructors were hired and sessions are offered in groups and one-on-one. The program’s various courses are offered from 8:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. from September until May at a learning site within the city’s Operations Centre. People can enter the program at any time. It is confidential and voluntary. Only the instructors know who is registered in the various programs.

Program for family, too

“Our program is for family members, too,” says Donald. “My son got his GED through the program.”

Kathy DeWitt is Moncton’s Recruitment and Selection Coordinator and a member of the program committee. She explains that some people might not have attended unless a spouse came with them. “There are still couples in the program today,” she says.

Program gets results

A survey sent out to all 600 city workers shows the program’s impact. Nearly half of the 200 people who responded said they have used the program. A great majority of them are 35 or older. More than half said they would not have attended the program if it had been off-site.

Learn from other locals’ successes

Donald suggests that CUPE locals thinking about getting involved, call other locals that have successful programs. “Find out how the program works for the local. Go and visit,” he advises. “Most locals that don’t have a program, don’t have one because they don’t know much about it. Every local should get involved.”

This program has won CAMA literacy awards in the areas of learner achievement, organizational commitment, partnership development and creative design.

Thank you to Kathy DeWitt, City of Moncton, for information about the program.

Return to Learn offers a multitude of benefits

Darrel Drummond is a CUPE Local 21 member and wastewater worker with the City of Regina. He reflects on his decision to take the Return to Learn Program.

"When I heard about it, it seemed like a good idea to take the opportunity. I went into it with an open mind."

Co-workers face similar issues

Darrel found the program has many benefits. "I heard about what other people are going through across the city. We are all going through the same issues." He describes the example of applying for a job in a different division. "People have the seniority but there are so many qualifications that make it impossible for us to apply. Then someone with less seniority gets it."

He stresses that hearing about what other people were facing broke the ice and helped people vent their frustrations. "People could talk and put in their two-cents worth. After the first few classes, people loosened up, began to speak up and ask questions," he says. "When you are feeling blue and you have people agreeing with you because they are facing the same thing, you feel you are not alone. It was great to listen to people from every part of the city. We chatted about things, not just in class but during the breaks and before class, too."

"I learned how to interact with other people and ask questions. Before, I would muddle through things by myself."

Study skills and test-taking skills help with certification exams

Darrel also got to learn study skills and about writing tests. He says this was something he didn't know. "I learned tips from other city workers." He emphasizes that these skills have been helpful in writing wastewater exams for certification. "I have written a couple already and have to do two more levels."

You can learn and have fun, too

Darrel's advice: "You have to try to make things better where you work. You can get very frustrated and then you don't care. Do try this kind of program. You might learn something and have fun at the same time."



Peer tutors Alie Dobbs and Tracy Hrycay

Peer tutors a success in Return to Learn Program

“It was really an interesting position to be a peer tutor because the sessions were learner-directed. We were all learning together as opposed to more formal learning,” says Alie Dobbs, joint committee member and peer tutor.

In 2003, CUPE Local 21 representing the City of Regina’s 1,377 outside workers partnered with the employer to address literacy and essential skills needs. The union and employer formed a joint committee and conducted an organizational needs assessment to determine the needs of Local 21 members.

CUPE members trained as peer tutors

The joint committee decided on a pilot Return to Learn Program that would help workers return to learning and see themselves as lifelong learners. The program trained and used CUPE members as peer tutors. Using peer tutors created a friendly, informal, and safe learning environment.

The program was open to all Local 21 members. In the end, it was the city’s wastewater workers facing mandatory certification who attended. “We think that some workers in the sector need tuning up in areas such as reading, problem solving, writing, and math skills that they use every day on the job,” said Naomi Frankel, the project’s coordinator. Fifteen workers from Engineering and Works plus one worker from outside the department attended the program. Held in the city’s Al Ritchie Arena, the program ran two hours a week for six weeks. The program focused on topics suggested by participants with skills development in areas such as writing, math, critical thinking and problem solving.

Naomi along with Ron Torgenson, co-ordinator of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour’s Workers’ Education for Skills Training (WEST) program facilitated peer tutor training for five Local 21 members.

Participants learned the difference between teaching and facilitating. They learned how to develop learning from participants’ needs as they come up rather than a pre-set program. The program was an eye-opener for participants. “How open the course curriculum was surprised me,” remarked one member. “I expected a more formal structure.”

Peer tutors facilitate program

Peer tutors facilitated the program with the help of the coordinator. In their comments after the course, tutors noted the group solidarity, trust and comfort that developed. One person said that what stood out in the experience was “the look on people’s faces when they realize they are not alone with their problems.” Tutors felt that the training they received was excellent preparation for their work. They said that the difference between formal and informal learning was something both they and the participants struggled with. “Very confusing for someone who has only experienced formal learning structures!” exclaimed one tutor.

Benefits of having co-workers as peer tutors

The program became a place where “friends were learning from friends.” Participants specifically commented on the peer tutors in their evaluations of the course. They liked the fact that the tutors were their co-workers. They found them easy to talk to. In the words of one participant, it was “peers helping peers.”

Acknowledgment of the 2004 report Return to Learn: A Pilot Workplace Essential Skills Training Program by Naomi Frankel, project consultant, for information included in this story.

HEU member graduates and gets new job in the same week

"I wanted to get my Grade 12 at some point," said HEU member and former care aide Elaine Torpy. "I knew my layoff was pending. I looked at college programs but they wouldn't accept my GED. When the HEU program came up, I signed up."

Long days with fantastic results

The program was achievable, instructors were helpful and her peers supportive, emphasizes Elaine. "I felt old, very mature in the program. But we were all mature people and all in the same boat." Participants slept on weekends to make up for the extra six hours a day they spent on school after a full workday.

"I learned that I wasn't such a bad student." She adds, "I had dropped out of school early because it wasn't a good experience. After I got my Grade 12, I went to college and took the Resident Care Attendant course. I got a new job on Thursday and graduated from my course on Friday."

Advice to other union members

Elaine's advice to other sisters and brothers is to "make the sacrifice and just do it. You will be better off in the long run." She stresses how important education becomes in securing a job when there are many applicants for one job.

Elaine credits HEU's role. "My union is for people. They were willing to help in circumstances where we were losing our jobs. I think better of them now."

On a final note, Elaine says that in the past getting her Grade 12 wouldn't have been realistic. "I could never afford to take the time off to do it. But I could do it this way — in the evenings after work."



HEU graduating class

High school program opens doors for health care workers

Union activist Brenda Jordison knew that HEU members in Victoria could benefit from a high school diploma program. “Our members were facing massive layoffs after the province slashed health care funding. They couldn’t get a job at other facilities because they didn’t have their Grade 12. They couldn’t take other courses like an LPN because you needed Grade 12 for that, too,” she explains.

Members graduate with honours

Inspired by a successful program in Vancouver, Brenda quickly contacted the HEU provincial office about getting a similar one going in Victoria. The program would help members who had received a layoff notice and who would soon find themselves out of work. She got the green light and contacted Victoria School District 61. The school board jumped at the opportunity to have a high school diploma program for HEU members.

The board set up a class that allowed workers to attend after their working day. Altogether, 25 workers attended class for six hours a day, five days a week for nine weeks! Participants were mostly dietary aides and housekeepers. It was a demanding program but despite the challenge of long days, all 25 graduated, the great majority with honours. “The school was very sensitive to what was occurring to our members, the fact that we were all being fired in mid-life after years of service. Without the positive attitude of the school and the teachers, along with their encouragement, I would guess we would not have succeeded.”

Fears overcome

“People hadn’t been to school in 20 years and at first they were scared,” says Brenda. “But people overcame their fears when they began to realize how much they knew. It was great because we were all middle-aged and all in the same boat. The school was proud to have us.”

Brenda herself was one of the graduates. She always wanted to get her Grade 12 but something would always come up. At the graduation ceremony, the principal announced the award for the best overall student. Brenda looked behind her to see who it might be. She was shocked to hear her name called.

Participants in the program gained self-confidence and were able to make the best of a difficult situation. People went back to school to take other courses such as Licensed Practical Nurse, or have gone to business school. Other people got jobs as care aides.

Brenda still gets stopped by HEU members. They say things like, “If you hadn’t done what you did, I wouldn’t be standing on my feet today.” Others who had their Grade 12 were inspired to do more. “I had my Grade 12 but you gave us hope. I went and enrolled in a dental hygienist course,” said one member. “She is now working in a union shop!” chuckles Brenda.

The Hospital Employees Union is the B.C. Health Services Division of CUPE.

Opportunities for education are for more than work

Bill Bailey has worked for the City of Winnipeg "off and on" for more than 19 years. He worked for Insect Control and more recently applied for, and got, a maintenance job.

"I was really happy when the program came along. It gave me the opportunity to better myself. But I have never hidden my reading and writing problems from anyone. I am proud of who I am," Bill says.

He talks about why Local 500 and the City of Winnipeg's Essential Skills Program works for him. "I was never bored," he laughs. The instructor always used materials that were interesting to Bill.

"I have improved my reading," he says. "But I am still working on my writing!" What Bill gained for himself is more than just about work. While he reads more new equipment manuals, Bill says his greatest satisfaction is his improved family life. "I can read children's books to my grandson. This is more important to me than anything else." He says he's now got more confidence in himself, too.

Since taking the program, Bill says he feels more comfortable approaching the union. "It's easier to talk to them about things and ask about what's coming up."

Bill also finds that the program has helped him with reading instructions on the computer screen. He recently joined a computer course offered by the Essential Skills Program.

Bill has some wise advice for others who are thinking of upgrading their skills. "Don't listen to other people who are negative. You are never too old to learn. Do what is right for you," he says. "It's a big step but it will help you improve in whatever you want to do."

Bill is the winner of the CAMA 2002 Learner Achievement award.



Local 500's Celebration
of Learning

Workplace education program adapts to changing needs

“Start small. Always listen to your members. Be willing to change. What works one year won’t work the next year,” advises Kathy Todd, CUPE Local 500 activist and coordinator of the Essential Skills Program at the City of Winnipeg.

The importance of program planning

Kathy practices what she preaches. She knows the importance of program planning. “We found that our members were interested in further education and that 10 per cent of them did not have Grade 12. We felt we needed a GED program, and basic reading, writing, and math.” When Kathy brought these program ideas to the local’s membership, they agreed. These needs gave birth to the Essential Skills Program in 2001. Since then, members have had a choice of a range of courses under the program. Courses have included basic skills, GED, English as a second language, computers, communications, study skills and accounting.

Education and training money negotiated in collective agreement

In 2000, the city and Local 500 negotiated \$3 million for education and training in their collective agreement. This money was renegotiated in 2003. The Essential Skills Program now has a three-year budget of \$310,500.

Kathy explains their careful planning. Participants complete an evaluation after each course. There is a question about what other courses people want. She tallies these responses and brings them to a yearly planning meeting with instructors. Together, they develop the program for the following year based on these responses and other feedback.

New courses based on changing needs

Feedback from members has meant adapting

to changing needs. For example, the program introduced a “cabin fever” series that ran over the winter months. The series came up because members wanted shorter courses. Then, participants wanted more one-on-one instruction. Now five peer tutors provide support in and outside the courses if people need extra help. Peer tutors are CUPE members trained through the Essential Skills Program. Kathy adds, “Recently, the city reclassified higher-level clerical jobs to accounting technicians. Workers affected must take several accounting courses. When members were dropping out of the college program, we added accounting courses.” The courses mirror what people have to learn at the college, explains Kathy. “But our courses slow it down, and include more math and exercises.”

Members get many benefits from program

Kathy reflects on the program benefits over the years. “Self-esteem is number one,” she says. “But members are moving on to other education and getting promotions. Most importantly, they want to be role models for their children. People say they feel so much better and that the program has opened the world for them.”

This program has won a number of Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators literacy awards in the areas of partnership development, creative design and organizational commitment. In 2004, the program was selected as a finalist for the Canada Post Literacy Certificate of Achievement for Community Leadership.

We know you can do it!

Florence Thorne has worked as a housekeeper in the environmental department of a nursing home for the past 18 years. She has been active on the executive of CUPE Local 3840 for the past 12 years, since the home became unionized.

A promise to her father

Florence says her motivation for attending the GED preparation program is very personal. "When I told my father about the opportunity to attend the workplace education program, he told me to please take it because he knew I could do it. Everyone else of the six of us (in my family) had graduated from high school except me," she explains. "My son also quit school and went back to get his GED and he encouraged me. So did my husband."

Florence's father took sick and died before she finished the program. "Before my father died, I made a promise that I would continue," she says. "I really wanted to quit but my mother encouraged me to continue. I took my GED test with his Department of Education certificate in my pocket." Florence passed everything but math. She is going back to take it again in the fall. She says she knows she will do it.

You can go back!

"I gained confidence in myself," says Florence. "I was already a good listener but I became a better one!" Her advice to others who want to go back to school is to be positive.

"Don't be afraid to stop the teacher if you don't understand. Everyone is there for the same reason," she says. "I am 44 years old and was out of school for 17

years. It's never too late. You can go back. Now I'm enrolled for the communications course that will start in the fall."



**Florence Thorne (left)
with Administrator
Bernice Blake-Dibblee**

The program won't go forward without the union

Florence Thorne knows what it takes to make a joint workplace education program a success. Her union and nursing home management worked together and overcame difficulties. One of the positive outcomes of her workplace's joint program was that the employer recognized the union as an equal partner.

The union must be an equal partner

Florence, vice-president and shop steward for CUPE Local 3840, explains the critical importance of joint decision-making for such a program. "At first it was touch and go," she says. "Management was trying to make all the decisions. For example, they wanted to pick a teacher for our program from a sister home in Truro and set the hours for the program." Florence describes how she stopped one of the committee meetings to let management know the program wouldn't be going ahead unless the union was an equal partner.

"I want everyone to know that decision-making must be joint and we are all on equal footing," she told them. "The program won't go ahead without the union." Florence says, "Once we established things had to be joint, things went smoothly."

Solidarity built among members

Fourteen workers attended the upgrading program for GED preparation. Florence and the union president also went. Along with gaining more self-esteem and self-confidence, people got close to their co-workers. They learned more about each other and shared issues from their work. Participants supported each other. Communication was open and everyone's voice counted. Participants became friends with people from other departments. In the past, people had kept to their own departments.

"When other members in the class saw how much the union executive had to do and go

through, they were much more appreciative," says Florence.

Benefits of program to members

Florence's experience shows that education gives power to people. It is an opportunity for people to better themselves. One of the goals that the joint committee had for the program was to improve workplace morale.

"Morale did improve in the class itself," says Florence, adding, "We spread this throughout the home."

The program will continue with a communications course in the fall. Everyone identified this as a need. There will be two separate courses — one for union members and one for management.

Program helps with union paperwork

"I used to write long, saucy letters to management. Now I write short, saucy letters to them," laughs Terry Bennett. Terry, a CUPE Local 569 executive committee member, has worked as a heavy equipment operator with the City of St. John's since 1977. A joint committee member for the Workplace Self-improvement Program, Terry was also a participant. As Local 569's Recording Secretary and a member of many committees, including three negotiating committees, Terry does a lot of paperwork.

Refreshes reading and writing skills

"I saw this program as an opportunity to refresh my own literacy skills, which I had learned some 30 years ago," Terry says. "As a union activist, I am involved in many aspects of the workplace. This course seemed like a good idea and it was!" The program helped him streamline his writing and cope with all the reading he does as part of his union activities. "It also helped at home with the kids," he says.

Reasons for attending

Terry reflects on his reasons for attending. "I have been working since I was 15," he says. "I left school to go to work to bring money home for the family. We were a family of 12." Terry wanted to brush up on his reading and writing skills — skills that he hasn't used a lot over the years except in his union activities. He also wanted his attendance to encourage other members to take part.

Meets participants' needs

Terry says the success of the program was thanks to the two instructors who developed it in a way that would meet everyone's needs. He remembers the first night of the program. "One of the participants said that the program was not what he was expecting," says Terry. "The instructor asked him what he was expecting. It turns out that he wanted to focus on report writing. The instructors then worked with him on reports." Terry says the participant later retired and went on to become a city councillor.

Terry advises other union sisters and brothers to sign up and give a program a try. He says that in his own class, people were so excited once they got started that they came early, left late, and attended in the summer on their own time.

Workplace program helps members deal with change

In 1997, the City of St. John's agreed to participate in a pilot project that would give city employees the opportunity to improve their reading and writing skills. The project was part of a national pilot initiative coordinated by the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators (CAMA). A joint committee oversaw the Workplace Self-improvement Program developed as part of the project. Committee members included representatives from CUPE Locals 569 and 1289, the International Association of Firefighters, the Newfoundland Association of Public Employees, and city management.

Workers face many challenges in today's workplace

Local 569's Terry Bennett, a member of the joint committee, explains why the program was needed. "There are many challenges faced by workers in today's workplace, especially in the last decade," says Terry. "There's been downsizing, cutbacks and many experienced workers leaving for early retirement. Workers are faced with many extra duties and responsibilities," he stresses. "Many of these duties involve a lot of paperwork. Workers have to log their daily activities, write reports, complete time sheets and read e-mails."

Comfortable learning environment has impact for participants

The year after the project started, city employees participated in a needs assessment. It showed that basic writing and computers were of greatest interest. In April 1999, a Writing in the Workplace Program started up. It was so popular it was offered again that fall and was continued until 2003.

"One of the goals was to help workers realize their full potential," says Diane Martin, a Local 1289 and joint committee member. "We also wanted to ensure the program was voluntary and respected confidentiality. We wanted to raise awareness of literacy and create a comfortable environment for learning," she says.

Basic computer courses followed the writing course. Courses were offered in ten-week blocks for 12 to 14 people at a time. More than 60 people took writing and 150 took the computer course. Participants came from a diverse range of city departments.

The program's results were impressive. Participants improved their reading and writing skills. They are also more comfortable with computers. Their testimonials say that the course is having an impact at work and at home. People now find completing paperwork easier. They have more self-confidence and are more likely to participate in other kinds of training. They can help their kids at home. Terry stresses the importance of this kind of program for today's workers: "All workers and employers have a stake and all will benefit."

Diane concludes, "Our goal is to secure more money from council to get the program up and running again this fall with more advanced computer courses." She also hopes that there will be enough interest to run a GED program jointly with the training division.

This program has won two CAMA literacy awards, one for excellence and the other for partnership development.

For a love of learning

"I went back to school in my thirties and got my high school and then took a construction technology course. Since then, I have had a thirst for knowledge," says Brendon Mcaskill, vice-president of CUPE Local 830. Brendon, a construction technician with Water Utilities, says he took the math course offered through the Personal Education Program two years in a row.

Certification exams

"I wanted to guarantee myself that I would pass the certification exams for wastewater collection and water distribution," he says. "There're four levels and I didn't want to do them over and over."

Brendon describes how the course helped him. "The math helped with a lot of different formulas. There's a lot of adding, subtracting and different steps to go through." The instructor's method was very helpful says Brendon. "The instructor was excellent. He broke everything down and used visuals."

Benefits are for work and home

From a union perspective, Brendon says the Personal Education Program helps members get into better positions rather than the city hiring outside. "For starters, you need Grade 12," he explains. "Some people are going back to get their Grade 12 through the program."

"For myself, I got a feeling of satisfaction. I felt I was doing something good for myself," says Brendon. "It also helps me at home with my thirteen-year-old daughter," he laughs.

Brendon says that learning with co-workers provided support and helped with any reservations participants had about attending. "We were all in the same boat," he says. "We all needed a little hand up."



**Participants hard at work
in the Math class**

Personal Education Program helps water workers get certified

In 2002, several CUPE locals partnered with the City of Charlottetown to set up a workplace learning program. “We thought the workplace education would be of benefit to our members,” says Martin Stearns, a Local 830 member and a representative on the program’s joint committee. Local 830 represents water and wastewater workers. “Some people didn’t have their GED or Grade 12. You need high school to get hired with the city and to get certified for your own work.”

PEP’s learning opportunities encourage staff to reach potential

Called the Personal Education Program (PEP), the workplace program is a partnership between city workers — CUPE Locals 830 and 501 and the Police Association — and the City of Charlottetown. PEP’s vision is “to provide learning opportunities to encourage staff to reach their full potential at work, at home and in the community.” The program is confidential, voluntary and offered on shared time with participants and the city contributing equal time. A needs assessment showed what people were interested in learning. Two programs, the GED and computers, were offered in February 2002 and May 2003. A math program for water workers followed.

Math for water and wastewater mandatory certification

Mandatory certification is a new requirement for water and wastewater workers in P.E.I. A math program was developed to help those working toward different levels of certification. The program focused on a review of basic math, the metric system and more complex formulas needed for higher levels of certification. The group of eight workers who took the course called themselves the WH2O group with W standing for waste and H2O for the chemical formula for water.

“The instructor tailored the math for water workers,” Martin says. “He took them right through what they need to know for certification. People thought it was great. A lot passed the test and got their certification.” He adds, “It’s not easy. It’s a shock to go back to school. If you don’t use the math, you forget it!”

PEP meets workers’ needs

The benefits of the program are many. Participants are making good gains towards their GED. More than 40 of them have completed the basic computer program. “Now I can catch up with my kids,” commented one participant. “Everyone tries to help each other,” said another. Martin adds, “We had access to the math when we needed it. It was perfect for what we needed.” One participant sums it up: “Anyone doing certification should take the program.”

This program has won Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators literacy awards in the areas of new initiative and creative design.

Acknowledgment of the 2003 report City of Charlottetown Personal Education Program by Karen Chandler, Workplace Education P.E.I., for information included in this story.

Acknowledgments

We'd like to thank the CUPE activists who took the time to participate in interviews and provide information and pictures to share the success and impact of these workplace programs. Our thanks, especially, goes to the learners who shared their inspiring stories. We much appreciate the information educators, city managers, the Canadian Association of Municipal Administrators and government staff provided.

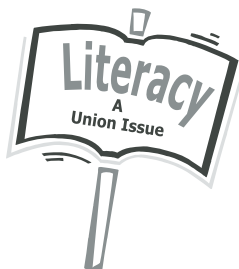
Booklet researched and written by **Sue Folinsbee**

Design by **Steve Knowles**, The Right Type and **Una Lee**, Trooper Designs

Editing by **Doreen Meyer**, CUPE Communications

Translation by Communications **Esther Matte**

This booklet was produced with the financial assistance of the **National Literacy Secretariat**, Human Resources and Skills Development Canada



For more information please contact:

Sylvia Sioufi, Coordinator
Literacy Program, CUPE Education

(613) 237-1590

literacy@cupe.ca

www.cupe.ca/www/literacy

Literacy Program
CUPE Education
www.cupe.ca/www/literacy
literacy@cupe.ca
(613) 237-1590