

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS IN EL DORADO . . .

- **The state of Arkansas** supplies a framework, training, and certification process for the creation of local Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy (WAGE) programs statewide.
- **South Arkansas Community College** provides a home for WAGE in its adult education center.
- **Local businesses** hire WAGE participants and provide information on skills needed for their entry-level jobs for WAGE's locally tailored, competency-based curriculum.
- **The Departments of Employment Security and Human Services** send referrals to WAGE and offer supportive services to WAGE learners.
- **The One-Stop** refers job seekers who need to upgrade their basic skills and provides space for WAGE classes.
- **The Department of Economic Development** touts WAGE services to businesses considering locating in the area.

AND WHY THEY WORK . . .

- **A tradition of community collaboration is a solid foundation for partnerships.** El Dorado has a history of collaboration on behalf of community needs.
- **Employers are active decision-makers for the WAGE program.** WAGE clients are trained to meet specific local workforce needs, and WAGE services and graduates are highly valued by local businesses.
- **A state framework provides guidelines, but permits local control over most program decisions.** Adult education centers can create WAGE programs to suit local conditions, but must still meet requirements set by the state.
- **Flexibility accommodates changing local labor markets.** When employers are hiring, WAGE emphasizes training for job seekers. When they're not hiring, WAGE puts more resources into upgrading incumbent workers' skills.
- **Monthly meetings of an inclusive advisory group are "the place to be."** WAGE advisory group meetings have become a popular place to keep abreast of local events and network with colleagues.
- **WAGE has a strong leader especially valued for her skills in working with the business community.**

INTRODUCTION

Ruth is an outgoing, fifty-something grandmother and a proud graduate of the Arkansas Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy (WAGE), a statewide workforce education program for job seekers and workers who lack basic skills. As a child, she only had a few years of formal schooling, but she hadn't done well because of her disability. She is visually impaired and says, "Back in those days, they didn't do much to help out people like me." Her lack of a high school diploma was an obstacle to getting a good job. But Ruth decided to change this situation when her grandchild asked her to help him with his homework. She did her best, but when he got a poor grade on that assignment, he blamed his grandmother. It was at that moment she decided to go back to school to get her GED diploma.

Ruth enrolled in WAGE and also began taking GED preparation classes at South Arkansas Community College. After she earned her GED and WAGE certificate, she decided that was not good enough: she went on to enroll at the community college.

WAGE is a statewide program based on the idea of local partnerships and local control. Currently, there are some 20 local WAGE programs around the state, involving more than 250 businesses and more than 150 social service agencies, all uniting to help upgrade the academic and work skills of the unemployed and underemployed. WAGE has attracted national attention, and several states have turned to WAGE for inspiration in building their own workforce education programs. To view a PowerPoint presentation on WAGE, visit <http://aalrc.org/html/wage/wage.htm>.

WAGE is designed both to prepare unemployed adults for entry-level jobs and to upgrade the skills of incumbent workers so that they can adjust to changing demands in their jobs. Local WAGE programs can choose to

emphasize one over the other, depending on local economic conditions—specifically, whether or not local businesses are hiring. Participants, who numbered nearly 1,000 statewide in 2002, can earn three different WAGE certificates. Instruction is competency-based, and the curriculum is adapted to meet local business needs. To see the WAGE brochure, visit <http://www.work-ed.state.ar.us/AdultEd/WAGE.pdf>.

Partnerships are at the heart of the WAGE model. There are two major types of WAGE partnerships. The first is with local businesses, which help WAGE design its competency-based curriculum and provide jobs for WAGE graduates. The second is with other public agencies, such as the Department of Human Services (DHS), the Department of Employment Security (DES), Workforce Investment Boards and One-Stops, community colleges, and employment and training providers. Partners of the latter type generally provide referrals and outreach or support services.

BACKGROUND

The origins of WAGE can be traced back to the late 1980s, when managers at a company near Little Rock encountered a surprise. Preparing for automation, managers at the Maybelline Cosmetics factory discovered to their dismay that many employees could not decipher fractions. Employees in the shipping room did not know the difference between 1/4 dozen, 1/3 dozen, or 1/2 dozen (the units in which products were sold). With each transaction, employees were shorting either the buyer or the company. To gauge the extent of this problem, the manager administered a basic skills test to the employees—only one out of five passed.

All who failed the test were promptly enrolled in a local adult basic education class, but the results were disappointing. The workers made little progress, perhaps because they saw little connection between their class-

es and their jobs. At about this time, the manager attended a presentation on the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), a federal initiative to develop skills standards for a variety of occupations. As she saw the link made between work and education, she realized its relevance for her own workplace literacy challenge at home.

In 1991, the newly inspired manager met with some local public officials to propose a workforce education program to upgrade the basic skills of incumbent workers. They liked the concept of linking work and education, but they had no funds to support the program. Undaunted, the manager turned to the Department of Employment Security, Department of Human Services, Department of Economic Development, and some local employers. Most people were enthusiastic, but still no funds materialized.

Finally, the agencies, many of which did not have cooperative relationships in the past, began pooling their resources, launching a tradition of creative financing through partnerships that is still a key feature of the WAGE program today. One partner provided the desks, another the teachers, someone else the money for outreach, and soon the statewide WAGE program was off and running.

The WAGE program is a natural for El Dorado, with its poor population and employers hungry for a more literate workforce. The town has some built-in assets: a community college with a strong workforce development mission and a tight-knit community willing to abandon "turf issues" to join a broad-based collaborative effort between businesses and public-sector agencies. A town of about 45,000 located in south central Arkansas, El Dorado is the largest town in rural Union County. It is the regional hub for services and jobs, as well as home to South Arkansas Community College, known locally as "South Ark." Because of the town's size and position at the junction of several major highways, many industries have located plants here.

The demand for labor ebbs and flows in El Dorado as the local and national economies change, but employers' increasing need for a literate workforce remains a constant. Figures for 2002 show that about 19 percent of the population in Union County lives below the federal poverty line, compared to 16 percent statewide, and about 34 percent of the population is minority, compared to 20 percent statewide. The unemployment rate is 5.7 percent, somewhat higher than the state average. In 2000, nearly 9,000 people were estimated to have inadequate basic skills and therefore to be eligible for adult education services.



*A WAGE graduate
at work in an
El Dorado factory*

El Dorado is home to many long-term residents who are used to cooperation and collaboration among different sectors of the community. "Partnerships have always existed in this community," says one social service program staff member. "As far as turf issues go, we don't have that, because we are sincere about helping people."

WAGE in El Dorado began in 1997, when the current adult education center director was hired and encouraged to start a WAGE program. She enrolled in the WAGE certification course provided by the state and, once qualified, she started the WAGE program in El Dorado, following the steps required by the state to create a certified program:

- Surveying businesses in the community to assess their workforce needs and human resource practices. Twenty-two El Dorado businesses responded.

- Conducting several “Literacy Task Analyses” (LTAs)¹ for businesses who volunteered to participate. WAGE performed LTAs for, among others, Pacific MDF and Cooper Tire and Rubber. To see a sample LTA, return to the Arkansas Partnership Profile Summary (<http://www.c-pal.net/profiles/arkansas.html>).
- Analyzing the data from the LTAs and local businesses to customize WAGE’s basic skills competency-based curriculum to match local business needs. WAGE developed a matrix called Union County WAGE Essential Skills Averages, which shows that such skills as “Using common knowledge for safety” and “Performing whole number operations” were those most in demand by local employers.
- Establishing partnerships with the local offices of the Departments of Human Services, Employment Security and Economic Development, the Chamber of Commerce, local government, human resource associations, and other community organizations.
- Convening an advisory group with more than 51 percent of the membership representing local businesses and a business representative as the chair.

WAGE blends best practices from adult education, workforce training and economic development, while erasing the traditional—but artificial—boundaries among these worlds. The result is a program that benefits businesses while meeting the employment and literacy needs of the local population.

¹LTAs are assessments of the foundation skills needed in entry-level positions. A WAGE staff member begins the LTA by observing the skills involved in successfully performing a job. The staff member then correlates these observations with a list of 112 competencies developed for the statewide WAGE program, to determine the competencies needed for the positions of interest. Several companies have noted how this information revealed discrepancies between the basic skills level they thought necessary for each position and the skills workers actually possessed.

WAGE AND ITS PARTNERS

WAGE offers two types of basic skills training: pre-employment training and training for incumbent workers. For pre-employment training, WAGE recruits adults who score less than 12.9 on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) and are seeking work. For incumbent workers, WAGE works with local employers seeking to upgrade their workers’ skills. One strength of the WAGE model is that local communities can decide if they want to emphasize pre-employment training, for example, when employers are hiring, or incumbent worker training when employers are not hiring.

Curricula for both incumbent worker training and pre-employment training are designed to address the competencies identified through the survey and the LTAs, summarized in the WAGE Essential Skills Matrix. WAGE staff use the matrix to calculate which competencies local businesses most often identify as essential, and those become part of the list of competencies learners must master to receive a WAGE Certificate.

WAGE is committed to teaching basic skills in the context of the functional skills needed in the workplace. WAGE staff regularly collect materials from their business partners to use as real examples in their curriculum. They call this the “Functional

WAGE HELPS THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

“Improving the workforce provides support to an employer’s competitive edge—better performance on the job means improved products, better services and increased profits. The community as a whole realizes a return on investment when a WAGE graduate is employed—they spend their income in their community and are able to contribute to their community’s tax base.”

WAGE brochure.

“I didn’t know where to begin. I felt hopeless and helpless and alone. Since I found the WAGE program, my expectation[s] of myself have gotten a lot higher. I have learned a lot about computers. I have more faith in myself now.”

WAGE participant.

Hooks” teaching method, and it is an integral part of the WAGE program. WAGE also uses the PLATO curriculum software, which has been adapted to provide workplace-relevant examples in math, writing, and reading.

WAGE offers three certificates. The Employability Certificate, which all WAGE students must earn to graduate, requires 12 hours of class time and a score of 9.5 or better on the TABE. Employers in El Dorado view this certificate, often nicknamed the “WAGE certificate,” as solid evidence that the

holder is a good worker with the basic skills needed to succeed in an entry-level job. Learners also have the option of earning a Clerical or Industrial Certificate. While Employability Certificate requirements are set locally because they reflect the local job task analyses, those for the Industrial and Clerical certificates are standard across all WAGE programs.

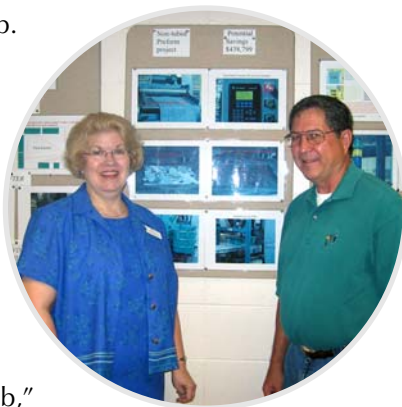
WAGE certificates are a “ticket to a job,” in the words of one learner. WAGE business partners give preferential treatment in the hiring process to WAGE certificate holders. And even businesses that are not active partners with WAGE are very aware of the certificates and take them as strong evidence that

holders are not only competent in specific workplace skills, but also highly motivated. WAGE training and the certificates are so highly valued by local employers that WAGE students in El Dorado, as well as throughout the state, are often hired before they complete the requirements and receive their certificate.

The WAGE advisory group has about 30 members, a large group for a community this size. Its monthly meetings often draw as many as 60 or 70 people. The group meets at South Ark, a location convenient for many businesses. In addition to lunch, the costs of which are sometimes covered by local businesses if WAGE’s coffers are low, members are treated to a keynote speech from an invited guest, a feature many business representatives value highly.

At these meetings, WAGE administrators and their business partners inform the larger community of WAGE activities and get feedback and guidance on strategic decisions. New WAGE graduates receive their certificates in a ceremony—to much applause—and have the opportunity to say a few words and pass out their resumes. Exactly why these meetings are so popular (drawing considerably better attendance than local Workforce Investment Board meetings) is unclear, even to the director of WAGE. She once suggested that the group meet every other month, instead of every month, and was immediately overruled!

One explanation for the vitality and centrality of this group in El Dorado is that it has become the “place to be for the movers and shakers of the community,” and its meetings are simply not to be missed. Another is that members feel pride in and responsibility for the WAGE program and want to contribute to its continuing success. In any case, the meetings are obviously a sign of a flourishing partnership.



*Patricia Bates,
the WAGE Director
with a business partner*

Partners for Outreach and Recruitment

The WAGE director and the only full-time paid instructor for WAGE are responsible for recruiting new participants, doing outreach to businesses and other partners, conducting intake for students, administering the TABE and WAGE certificate tests, instructing students, performing and interpreting the Literacy Task Analyses, and assisting with job placement. Without the active participation of the partners who assist them in most of these roles, they would be hard-pressed to accomplish it all.

South Arkansas Community College

South Arkansas Community College has two campuses several miles apart. The campus downtown is the academic center, and the campus on the outskirts of town, which houses the adult education center and WAGE, is the primary site for workforce and economic development activities.



A Wage graduate at work at South Ark

South Ark has traditionally had a strong workforce development mission, so WAGE was an easy fit for them. According to South Ark's president, "This college really wants to serve businesses." As a sign of their strong support for WAGE, college administrators recently decided to include WAGE graduates in the graduation ceremony for all students.

Many classes are held on campus, an arrangement with advantages and disadvantages. On the positive side, students who can drive there enjoy the experience of "going to college," and the college offers computer labs, a career guidance center, and other facilities in addition to classes. Unfortunately, however, there is no public trans-

portation to this campus, so that access can be difficult for some learners. Moving the One-Stop, along with some WAGE classes, from South Ark to the center of town has alleviated this problem for many.

The One-Stop Center

One-Stop Center officials are active members of the advisory group, and staff are pleased to have a program to which they can refer job seekers who lack basic skills and need TABE testing. WAGE relies on the One-Stop for referrals, support services, classroom space, and job search and placement services.



A WAGE instructor with a WAGE student

WAGE is an important stop for adult learners at the One-Stop, which recently moved into an abandoned shopping mall in the heart of downtown. Although the run-down buildings and empty parking lots are somewhat dreary, the ambiance changes the moment a visitor opens the front door. The halls and rooms are well lit and cheerful, and One-Stop staff are courteous and friendly. The WAGE classroom is just down the hall from the One-Stop's main reception area, so learners can get a referral from One-Stop staff and walk just a few steps down the hall to meet with WAGE's instructor.

In the classroom, several WAGE participants are working their way through the curriculum towards a WAGE certificate. Some are honing their math and reading skills using interactive software adapted to include the workplace competencies needed by El Dorado employers. Most are welfare recipients who heard about WAGE from their DHS caseworker. They have varying occupational goals. One woman wants to work at

home; another is hoping for an office job; and a third is contemplating college. Each is grateful for WAGE's services and enthusiastic about their second chance to get a good job. They also appreciate the schedule, which allows them to attend class in the mornings when their children are at school and to set their own pace for their work.

Department of Employment Security

"Before WAGE, I seldom got outside of my own realm. Now, it is the individual I serve....I know what my partners can offer. Before, I could give a referral and I never knew if the person even got there. Now I know he got there." This was the response of a Department of Employment Security staff member when asked what WAGE offered her department. She also noted that WAGE gives her job-ready people. DES sends referrals to WAGE and offers participants assistance in finding a job, such as resume development and job leads. Many WAGE graduates are hired immediately after or even before they graduate from the program by employers eagerly seeking a "WAGE worker."

Department of Human Services

Like DES, DHS provides WAGE with many referrals and support services for welfare recipients who enroll in WAGE. For DHS, WAGE is an excellent program for their job-seeking clients who lack basic skills and for those who need TABE testing. In addition, through a special program, WAGE participants receiving food stamps can get job-placement support from an employment and training coordinator who works at South Ark.

Partners for Job Placement

Businesses

With a few exceptions, all of El Dorado's largest employers are active WAGE partners; roughly 10 to 20 local businesses are involved at any given time. They attend the advisory group meetings, have hired or hope to hire WAGE graduates, or are using WAGE's workforce education servic-

es for their current workforce training needs. These businesses include a light fixture factory, a factory producing rubber parts for automobiles, a chemical manufacturer, a paint factory, and Benchmarks, a business that hires disabled people for assembly tasks. Each business has agreed to give preference to WAGE graduates when hiring; one company recently hired six WAGE graduates.



A WAGE participant at work in a partner business in El Dorado

WAGE's business partners benefit in many ways:

- WAGE employers get access to qualified, competent, and motivated job seekers who have received training in the specific competencies the employers need.
- WAGE employers not currently hiring but wanting to upgrade the basic skills of their workers have access to on-site training in academic skills with a "functional hook" tailored to their needs.
- WAGE employers can get a detailed assessment of their workforce literacy needs through the LTA.
- WAGE employers can get special assistance from WAGE. For example, one business had its training manuals rewritten by WAGE staff to align more closely to the skill levels of their employees.
- WAGE employers attending the monthly advisory group meetings are informed of WAGE and local workforce development activity and can network with their counterparts in other businesses and organizations such as the Chamber of Commerce.

The WAGE Seal of Approval

One WAGE business partner observed, “WAGE acts like an inspection sticker. If an applicant arrives with WAGE on their resume, the employer already knows this person is dedicated, driven, and hard working. Also, upon receiving one of the certificates, the employer is guaranteed the applicant has already mastered the skills needed for any entry-level position at their company.”

Business-Related Organizations

WAGE also forms partnerships with organizations that represent or serve businesses, such as the Chamber of Commerce and the Department of Economic Development (DED). The latter supports WAGE by referring businesses seeking to hire or to upgrade their workforce. DED staff appreciate being able to tell businesses interested in locating in Union County about what WAGE can do for them. WAGE is a distinct asset to DED’s work in recruiting and keeping businesses in town.

CONCLUSION

WAGE has made a significant difference in Union County by:

- Helping more than 500 adult learners prepare for entry-level jobs.
- Providing services to more than a dozen local businesses, including formal assessments of the literacy requirements of their jobs, TABE testing, basic skills training for incumbent workers, and, most importantly, a pool of job-ready workers.

- Establishing and strengthening important connections between organizations and sectors in the community.
- Making El Dorado attractive to new businesses in the area through its business services.
- Reinforcing the community college’s commitment to and involvement in local workforce and economic development efforts.
- Tapping into resources not typically available to adult education programs and working to make the most of traditional funding sources.

El Dorado residents familiar with the WAGE program do not hesitate when asked why WAGE works as well as it does. They give two main reasons. First, the program has enjoyed stable, well-trained leadership. Admiration for the WAGE director’s leadership and personal skills is wide and deep. With the state taking an active part in recruiting and training local WAGE leaders and providing ongoing support, local leaders are far more likely to succeed in reaching out to businesses and establishing close ties with other social services agencies, both hallmarks of the WAGE model.

Second, the community’s culture of collaboration is a distinct advantage as well. Turf issues have never been much of a problem in this small town. Challenges certainly exist, the most serious of which is insufficient funds. Staff often must scramble for resources, even to buy a few badly needed computers or desks to furnish donated space at the One-Stop. Still, strong leadership and solid partnerships have combined to allow the WAGE program to flourish, helping both learners and employers in Union County.