

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

RIN 1820-ZA29

**Special Demonstration Programs—
Model Demonstrations To Improve the
Literacy and Employment Outcomes of
Individuals With Disabilities**

AGENCY: Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Department of Education.

ACTION: Notice of final priorities.

SUMMARY: The Assistant Secretary for the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services announces priorities under the Special Demonstration Programs. The Assistant Secretary may use these priorities in fiscal year (FY) 2003 and in later years.

We take this action to focus attention on the adult literacy needs of individuals with disabilities pursuing employment under the State Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program. We intend that projects funded under these priorities will demonstrate that certain specific literacy services may raise the literacy levels and earnings of individuals with disabilities compared to individuals who receive the usual vocational rehabilitation (VR) services. These priorities are effective September 29, 2003.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Susan-Marie Marsh, U.S. Department of Education, 400 Maryland Avenue, SW., room 3316 Switzer Building, Washington, DC 20202-2641. Telephone: (202) 358-2796 or via Internet: Susan-Marie.Marsh@ed.gov.

If you use a telecommunications device for the deaf (TDD), you may call the TDD number at (202) 205-8133.

Individuals with disabilities may obtain this document in an alternative format (e.g., Braille, large print, audiotape, or computer diskette) on request to the contact person listed under **FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT**.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION: Data from the *Longitudinal Study of the Vocational Rehabilitation Services Program* suggest reading achievement levels are highly positively correlated with earnings. However, VR agencies provide basic literacy services to only one percent of the VR population. As a result of these findings, the Assistant Secretary is interested in testing the impact of two instructional reading curricula (the Lindamood-Bell Language Program (LBLP) and the Wilson Reading System(r) (WRS)) on the literacy of adults with disabilities against the traditional services provided by VR.

We published a notice of proposed priorities for this program in the **Federal**

Register on July 25, 2003 (68 FR 44186).

The notice of proposed priorities included a discussion of the significant issues and analysis used in the determination of these priorities.

Except for minor editorial and technical revisions, there are no differences between the notice of proposed priorities and this notice of final priorities.

Analysis of Comments and Changes

In response to our invitation in the notice of proposed priorities, three parties submitted comments on the proposed priorities. An analysis of the comments and of any changes in the priorities since publication of the notice of proposed priorities follows.

Generally, we do not address technical and other minor changes and suggested changes the law does not authorize us to make under the applicable statutory authority.

Comments: One commenter recommended that it would be better to compare a “phonics-based” approach with a “whole-word” approach using an “eclectic” approach to see which approach would provide the most gains in literacy skills and, thus, employment.

Discussion: While the idea of a comparison study in approaches is interesting, we are trying to rigorously test two research-based approaches to enhancing the literacy of adults with disabilities who are VR consumers. The interventions chosen fit those parameters. Current research suggests that we can teach to the consumers’ “weaknesses” effectively using these methods, and we are testing this specific population to identify those weaknesses and strengthen them. The problem with the “eclectic” approach or a method composed of elements drawn from various sources is that the treatment would vary, and this would jeopardize the research design and make it difficult to draw specific conclusions concerning the effectiveness of the treatment used.

Change: None.

Comments: Two commenters indicated that the interventions will enable adults with disabilities to participate in literacy curricula that may ultimately be necessary for successful employment and that persons with barriers to employment resulting from low reading ability will benefit greatly from the opportunity to increase skills in basic reading, writing, and language. Additionally, they noted that it is important that literacy programs such as the LBLP or the WRS be assessed to determine their effectiveness with persons with disabilities in VR settings.

Discussion: We agree with these comments.

Change: None.

Note: This notice does not solicit applications. In any year in which we choose to use one or more of these priorities, we invite applications through a notice in the **Federal Register**. When inviting applications we designate each priority as absolute, competitive preference, or invitational. The effect of each type of priority follows:

Absolute priority: Under an absolute priority we consider only applications that meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(3)).

Competitive preference priority: Under a competitive preference priority we give competitive preference to an application by either (1) awarding additional points, depending on how well or the extent to which the application meets the competitive priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(i)); or (2) selecting an application that meets the competitive priority over an application of comparable merit that does not meet the priority (34 CFR 75.105(c)(2)(ii)).

Invitational priority: Under an invitational priority we are particularly interested in applications that meet the invitational priority. However, we do not give an application that meets the invitational priority a competitive or absolute preference over other applications (34 CFR 75.105(c)(1)).

Priorities**Model Demonstrations To Improve the
Literacy Skills and Employment
Outcomes of Individuals With
Disabilities**

This priority supports projects that demonstrate the effect literacy services and instruction have on improving literacy skills of targeted groups of VR consumers and the effect on their employment and earnings outcomes. Projects must demonstrate how VR offices can effectively integrate literacy services into their service delivery systems and can best provide literacy services and instruction to a targeted group of VR consumers.

Evaluation

Projects must assure cooperation with the Rehabilitation Services Administration (RSA) and RSA’s outside evaluator in meeting the evaluation needs of the project and RSA. Project cooperation with RSA’s outside evaluator must include the following:

1. The assessment of all entering VR consumers in the designated project service area using brief methodologically acceptable screening instruments for learning disabilities and literacy levels to determine their eligibility for the project. The

assessment does not include VR consumers with evidence of mental retardation in their case files.

2. The assignment of approximately one-half of the eligible project participants into a literacy intervention group who would receive the additional services and benefits of the project and approximately one-half of the project participants into a control group who would not receive project services. However, no individual in the control group can be denied literacy services if his or her Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) requires those services. Furthermore, those services may not be provided or paid for under these demonstration grants.

3. The use of diagnostic tests and effective assessments of reading proficiency consistent with the procedures of RSA's outside evaluator.

4. The administration of a pre- and post-test to project participants as directed by RSA's outside evaluator.

Interventions

An applicant for this competition must choose either the LBLP or the WRS for its curriculum and provide a rationale for its choice (e.g., the local adult literacy provider already uses WRS). However, an applicant may also choose to describe its capacity to use the other curriculum if it would be willing to substitute the alternative curriculum as its curriculum in order to enhance its ability to compete. RSA will select grantees in a manner to ensure that each curriculum intervention is adequately represented in the applications selected for funding.

Project Participants

The following participant research criteria must be met:

1. Projects must have a sufficient number of individuals in the control and experimental groups so that the effects of the literacy intervention can be adequately measured.

2. Project participants must be eligible to receive VR services by the State VR agency and have, or be in the process of developing, an IPE.

3. All project participants (control and experimental groups) must be given an informed choice with respect to participation in the demonstration project consistent with the human subjects provisions as included in the application package.

4. Project participants for the experimental and control groups must

be selected using the requisite instrument. RSA requires use of the *Learning Needs Screening Tool*, a validated and public domain screener, which can be incorporated into the VR intake process. Copies of the screener as well as further information may be found on the Internet at the following Web site: <http://www.seekingwdc.org/ld/WaScreenTool.htm>.

Use of Funds

Funds may be used only for project costs and related activities and may not be used to supplant the cost of services ordinarily provided by the VR program. Related activities may include, but are not limited to— (1) counselor training or orientation, including counselor training on administration of literacy assessment instruments, (2) educational assessment and evaluation, (3) research expenses, (4) support services such as consumer transportation, childcare, and facilitation for attendance and retention, (5) instructional materials, (6) curriculum and instruction, (7) professional development for instructors and administrators, (8) assistive technology devices and services, (9) instructional technology, and (10) consultants.

Invitational Priority

Within the priority for this competition, we are particularly interested in applications that meet the following invitational priority:

Establishing partnerships with other organizations that can assist in carrying out their respective projects related to improving literacy and employability skills of adults with disabilities.

These organizations might include Adult Education and Family Literacy (AEFL) programs, institutions of higher education, volunteer-based literacy programs, community rehabilitation programs, nonprofit or for-profit vendors of literacy services, and other workforce agencies. Applicants under this invitational priority must meet the requirements in 34 CFR 75.127 through 75.129, which governs how partnerships and other groups of eligible parties may submit applications and conduct funded projects.

Under 34 CFR 75.105(c)(1) we do not give an application that meets the invitational priority a competitive or absolute preference over other applications.

Waiver of Delayed Effective Date

The Administrative Procedure Act requires that a proposed rule be published at least 30 days before its effective date, except as otherwise provided for good cause (5 U.S.C. 553(d)(3)). In order to make timely grant awards, the Secretary has determined that a delayed effective date is impracticable.

Intergovernmental Review

This program is subject to Executive Order 12372 and the regulations in 34 CFR part 79. One of the objectives of the Executive order is to foster an intergovernmental partnership and a strengthened federalism. The Executive order relies on processes developed by State and local governments for coordination and review of proposed Federal financial assistance.

This document provides early notification of our specific plans and actions for this program. *Applicable Program Regulations*: 34 CFR part 373.

Electronic Access to This Document

You may view this document, as well as all other Department of Education documents published in the **Federal Register**, in text or Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF) on the Internet at the following site: www.ed.gov/news/fedregister.

To use PDF you must have Adobe Acrobat Reader, which is available free at this site. If you have questions about using PDF, call the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO), toll free, at 1-888-293-6498; or in the Washington, DC, area at (202) 512-1530.

Note: The official version of this document is the document published in the **Federal Register**. Free Internet access to the official edition of the **Federal Register** and the Code of Federal Regulations is available on GPO Access at: <http://www.gpoaccess.gov/nara/index.html>.

(Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance Number 84.235P Special Demonstration Programs—Model Demonstration Projects to Improve the Literacy and Employment Outcomes of Individuals With Disabilities)

Program Authority: 29 U.S.C. 773(b).

Dated: September 24, 2003.

Robert H. Pasternack,
Assistant Secretary for Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

[FR Doc. 03-24530 Filed 9-26-03; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 4000-01-U