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## Northeast Kingdom Learning Services FY22 Recovery Plan

The Northeast Kingdom of Vermont is one of the most rural areas in the Green Mountain State and provides various challenges for the residents of the area. Northeast Kingdom Learning Services (NEKLS) has been providing Adult Education opportunities for the communities of the Kingdom for close to 50 years. The onset of COVID-19 created a new level of challenges for the students that we serve, with the impact of these challenges on the health, engagement and academic achievement of our students still being felt today.

1. Every supervisory union and school district was required to submit recovery plans to the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE). Was your organization asked to participate in the planning?

No. NEKLS was not asked to participate in the development of the recovery plans submitted by our partner schools. In order to understand the submitted plans and if there are benefits for the HSCP students that NEKLS serves, management obtained and reviewed plans from our partnering schools and have had conversations with HSCP staff to process and understand the plans.

2. Please address each of the three outcome areas by describing your plan to provide effective services that will meet the recovery needs of your students.

The following are the three outcome areas referred to:

1. Social emotional functioning, mental health, and well-being
2. Student engagement
3. Academic achievement and success.

All three areas are important, vital aspects to explore in regards to how COVID-19 has/is impacting Adult Education students. For each outcome area we will explore what the challenges have been for the past 18 months and what strategies we have utilized to meet these challenges, which ones were effective and how we will continue to implement strategies and build on success.

### Social emotional functioning, mental health, and well-being.

By May of 2020, it was becoming obvious that students were struggling emotionally and mentally the longer the pandemic wore on. Executive function skills were impacted, with some students having difficulty keeping remote learning appointments, staying organized and on task. Even when in-person learning was available again in the summer of 2020, many students had difficulty managing even basic tasks. The opportunity to come into the center also caused alarming stress for many students who were struggling with fear of the virus. Many students were afraid to even leave their house. Fortunately, remote learning did provide them the opportunity to receive instruction. But that form of fear was very harmful to the mental health and overall well-being of the student. The uncertainty of the situation was crippling for some students, bringing on depression and some students simply disengaged from their learning. Staff would attempt to make contact with students via phone calls, email or messaging platforms, often receiving no reply from the student. Even as COVID-19 numbers fell and the vaccine became available, this brought on fresh stress for some students who were still frightened to leave home and had anxiety around the vaccine. For many students, the past 18 months has been a long period of struggle, with many of them slipping into survival mode, simply wanting to get through the day and losing sight of their larger goals that pertained to education.

Recognizing the struggles many of our students had, NEKLS Adult Education staff began seeking out professional development that would allow us to assist our students. On September 18, 2020, Adult Education & Literacy (AEL) staff undertook a training on understanding executive function, the impact COVID-19 was having on these skills and strategies to assist students who were struggling. Many Adult Education organizations such as ProLiteracy and Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) offered webinars that spoke to the effects of COVID-19 on students and offered resources for teachers who had students struggling with these effects. Staff were made aware of resources in the community, such as those offered by Northeast Kingdom Human Services, that might assist struggling students. Continuing to offer remote learning was crucial to many students, and NEKLS AEL staff continued to refine their understanding of effective use of the technology available.

Strategies that improve executive function skills have helped many students to reengage. Skills such as emotional control, flexibility, planning and prioritizing are a few of the areas that staff have worked with students on to help improve executive function. Dealing with stress is also a crucial component. Not only is there the consistent stress of COVID-19 itself, but the stress of managing different learning approaches such as remote learning opportunities, online programs such as *TABE Academy*, as well as in-person learning. The availability of the vaccine and dropping COVID-19 numbers all went a long way to helping students get back on the path of their educational goals. By the summer of 2021, more students were electing to return to in-person learning within the NEKLS learning centers. Safety protocols such as masks, social distancing, proper cleaning and sanitizing all remain in effect and help reduce the anxiety some students may continue to feel. Staff are confident that many of the lessons learned during the height of the pandemic will continue to help students feel comfortable and allow them to fully engage in meeting their educational goals. Professional development in Positive Psychology continues for Transition staff, with lessons learned from COVID-19 often incorporated into the training. Positive Psychology is the scientific study of what helps people to lead a fulfilling life and what strengths are needed for them to thrive. Professional development has included the study of textbooks by renowned Positive Psychologist Martin Seligman, a certificate program around the Science

of Happiness from The Greater Good Science Center of Berkley College and extensive work understanding the VIA character strengths and how to use those strengths with students. These professional development opportunities have taught staff Positive Psychology interventions that help foster a growth mindset and build resilience in students, allowing them to be more successful in their academic endeavors.

### Student Engagement

As mentioned in the previous section, the impact, especially in the early part of the pandemic, of COVID-19 on students resulted in many students disengaging from their educational goals and entering a survival mode. Staff would temporarily be unable to make contact with some students, who later, after contact had been re-established, reported anxiety as a barrier to their participation. Remote learning opportunities through Zoom, phone calls, even mail were all available to students, but for many the overwhelming effect of COVID-19 led to total disengagement. As a result, NEKLS served a record low 121 students across all counties of our service area for FY21.

As the COVID-19 vaccine became available and the number of cases fell, combined with continued communication from staff, students have begun to return. Staff continue to utilize lessons learned from professional development that assist students to focus on their goals and re-engage with their learning plans. Professional development around executive function, delivered by Katie Willard, a Speech Language Pathologist, provided staff tools needed to help students improve skills that would allow them to be successful in their academic plan. Communication with students is also a major factor in bringing them back to the centers, and staff continue to reach out to students on a weekly basis. Remote learning options remain in effect for students who are more comfortable with that mode of learning. In August of 2021, NEKLS employed a full-time Outreach and Recruitment Specialist to help bring new students into the centers, improve community awareness of the services NEKLS offers and to help maintain collaborative relationships with community partners.

### Academic achievement and success

Measuring academic achievement and success is done through utilizing data collected by the AEL providers and entered into the statewide AEL data system, DataWorks. The bedrock of some of the most crucial data comes from the baseline and progress assessment scores of the assessment tool the AEL system in Vermont uses; the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE). This assessment allows AEL providers to discover the level a student is performing at in reading, language and math. Upon entry into the AEL system, a student is assessed in all three areas to establish a baseline. Progress assessments are performed after every 40 hours of instructional time. These progress assessments not only chart skill advancement, but help instructors determine skill areas that need further instruction. Benchmark targets for AEL providers help inform the Agency of Education on the effectiveness of the AEL providers and informs them on areas where further professional development or technical assistance may be required.

One adverse effect of the pandemic and the subsequent shutdowns, was the inability of AEL providers to deliver TABE progress assessments. The TABE was traditionally given as a paper test at NEKLS. The pandemic necessitated the need for NEKLS to bring onboard the computerized TABE assessment. From that point, staff needed to be trained in the new remote proctoring option of the TABE that allowed students to take the assessment at home while being monitored by an NEKLS proctor. By the time all systems were in place, it was late summer of 2020, which resulted in a loss of students being progressed

assessed from March to September of 2020. This had a negative impact on crucial benchmarks target that AEL providers must meet; Measurable Skill Gains, baseline assessments, and progress assessments among others.

Meeting these benchmarks are important, not only for Agency of Education oversight, but to ensure that students are receiving the instruction they need to be successful in meeting their academic goals. To be certain that these benchmarks will be met, the Director of Adult Education & Literacy for NEKLS monitors reports from the DataWorks system on a weekly basis. This analysis is shared with crucial members of the management team in order for to ensure assessments are being delivered properly and in a timely manner. Weekly staff meetings give staff the opportunity to discuss students' progress, and identify students in need of assessment. As there is a correlation between instructional hours and academic skill obtainment, NEKLS instituted a minimum 4 hours a week requirement for all HSCP students. These hours can be met either through in-person instruction or through remote learning platforms such as Zoom. While this was a new approach for NEKLS, the requirement was embraced by both staff and students and resulted in 364% increase in student hours in a 3-month period. The new hour requirement, combined with student numbers increasing, allows NEKLS to feel confident that not only will FY22 benchmarks be met, but students will see improved outcomes with their academic skills and goals.

### 3. Describe plans to recruit targeted populations in FY22

With the number of students being served in FY21 down so drastically, NEKLS recognized the need for a coordinated outreach, recruitment and marketing approach. To facilitate this, NEKLS hired a fulltime outreach and marketing specialist, whose job it is to increase public awareness of NEKLS and all the services we offer, continue to build relationships with community partners, coordinate marketing strategies and explore new marketing techniques, and to help recruit new students. Reaching populations such as English Language Learners (ELL) and students with low literacy levels is a key component of the position, as these are populations that NEKLS has seen a decrease in accessing our services. There is also data that has been presented by partnering schools that as much as 15% of their enrolled students have stopped out of school due to the pandemic. NEKLS has been working with our partners in the public schools to provide packets of information regarding the Vermont High School Completion Program that can be sent to the families of students that have stopped out. The hope is that these students will engage in a flexible pathway that will allow them to complete their education, earn a diploma and transition to their next step in life.

The NEKLS Outreach and Recruitment Specialist has undertaken a number of strategies to help increase public awareness and recruitment of new students. Strategies such as:

- New marketing materials that focus on services NEKLS offers outside of credentialing programs, such as; workplace skills, ELL services, skill development, financial literacy, and digital literacy. New posters and brochures speak to these offerings and are being placed in multiple locations in the Kingdom.
- Social media plays a crucial role in outreach. The NEKLS Outreach and Recruitment specialist has taken over the NEKLS Facebook page and is posting on a much more frequent and consistent basis. An Instagram page was also created to further develop the reach of NEKLS within the social media landscape. Postings draw attention to the many services NEKLS offers and emphasizes safe, remote learning opportunities for students of all ages.

- The NEKLS Outreach and Recruitment Specialist has also been attempting to broaden our community partner base. For example, every library in the Kingdom was reached out to with an introduction and an offer to meet to discuss how NEKLS might partner with the library. Several libraries not only responded, but asked for meetings to discuss partnership. A similar approach was taken with all school guidance personnel within the NEKLS service area, with an offer to meet to discuss the High School Completion Program (HSCP) and how NEKLS can partner with schools. These emails have already resulted in several meetings with school personnel as well as referrals to newly unenrolled students.
- Seeking new opportunities to reach a wider audience to help improve name recognition. The NEKLS Outreach and Recruitment Specialist and the NEKLS Transition Coordinator were invited to appear on The NEK Voice, a local television/radio program hosted by Scott Wheeler, a local publisher and historian, to discuss NEKLS and the many services we can offer students of all ages.

It is important to NEKLS to increase the number of older students, as well as students in targeted populations such as ELL and low literacy skills. The need is there within our communities and NEKLS remains committed to finding new ways to reach these populations and serve them. NEKLS, along with the other state AEL providers, have joined together to create the AEL Network. This network looks to help raise awareness of AEL services across the state and where students can access those services. This is done through consistency in messaging and marketing. Each provider is aware how to refer a potential student that may contact them to the provider in the student's area.

#### 4. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) grant application requested metrics under Consideration 10.b.

Explain how the program will show evidence of success for a specific, implementable plan ensuring that all Vermont adult education students are introduced to the following opportunities in their region and/or state:

- i. Career Technical Education including Adult career and technical education;
- ii. Postsecondary education; and
- iii. Employment.
- iv. Provide analysis of key metrics that will be used to determine success of this plan.

It has been and will continue to be the plan of NEKLS to introduce the opportunities of Career Technical Education (CTE), postsecondary education, and employment during the early stages of the registration process, as well as continuing these discussions with students during their time at NEKLS, regardless of what service they are taking advantage of. It has always been our policy to align student passion and interest with career pathways. Going forward the measure of our success in introducing these opportunities to students can be measured against the [six common performance measures](#) of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. We will also adhere to all Agency of Education protocols and guidelines pertaining to the data collection and metric analytics.

When members of the community come to NEKLS for adult education and literacy services the registration process includes an orientation, enrollment form, and an educational goals discussion. The orientation includes a slideshow presentation that detail the aspects of the services NEKLS provides. This includes examples of learning experiences we provide, such as technical center classes, college courses,

and work-based learning. We explain each opportunity to the attendees, and later during a one-on-one meeting, we cover in detail how we can help them meet their educational and career goals. After this detailed overview, all students are offered to participate in our transitions program. Transitions is where students will dive more deeply into their desired or chosen career path, and with the aid of the Transitions specialist will explore what their career pursuit will entail.

We also see value in broadening our students view on what is possible for employment. To connect Vermonters to career pathways, we ask every student to complete at least one career interest survey; oftentimes, they will do several. Based on the survey results, students explore their careers of choice, prepare and conduct informational interviews with community members who work in those careers, and write up their findings in a career interest research paper.

Every student who goes through our orientation process is exposed to other possible career services, postsecondary education opportunities and referred, when relevant, to other partners such as Department of Labor, or Vocational Rehabilitation. Our goal is to improve the capturing of these career services in Data Works so that, by the end of the 21/22 fiscal year, 95% of new students have a career service.

NEKLS is also working to expand our relationship with our local CTE centers to better understand what they can offer all NEKLS students and what services might be offered that would meet student needs. Partnering with CTE centers on an IET program will hopefully allow at least 10 students the ability to access CTE services. HSCP Plan Managers are also improving relationships with local CTE centers in order to ensure our students are able to access all CTE can offer.

Post-secondary or job training is an area that is explored with any student accessing NEKLS Transition services. The HSCP offers many students the opportunity to experience a college course. In FY21 9 students had the goal to enter post-secondary education or a job training program, yet only 1 achieved that goal. As this is a crucial component to employment success, NEKLS would like to see the number of students who enter post-secondary rise from 1 to 15.

As gainful employment is one of the primary goals of the AEL system, NEKLS wants to see the students who exit our services continue with employment. According to Table 5 of the federal report, In FY21 42 of 115 students who exited our services had retained employment a year after exiting. For FY22 we would like to see that number rise 31% from 42 to 55.

## 5. Describe Integrated Education and Training program plans and strategies.

For FY22, NEKLS is committed to providing an Integrated Education and Training (IET) program that involves preparing students to work in a childcare facility. Childcare workers are an in-demand profession within the Northeast Kingdom, with several childcares expressing to NEKLS the need for qualified workers. Partnering with local childcares, as well as with our local Career Technical Education (CTE) centers, the IET model we are proposing would not only train students for the work within a childcare facility, but also provide them with positive psychology techniques and soft skills to improve their work readiness and value as a worker, as well as address any academic skills that may need to be improved. NEKLS plans to seek assistance from the Agency of Education as this program is developed to ensure that all IET guidelines are being met. While this plan is in the early stages, targeted start date is February, 2022.

## 6. Describe Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education program plans and strategies (if applicable).

This does not apply to NEKLS.

## 7. Describe professional development plans for FY22 and include any requests for specific topics for statewide AOE-sponsored events.

For professional development for FY22, NEKLS staff will continue to improve their understanding of positive psychology, as this is the basis of so much of the work we do. Also of interest is continuing to improve our abilities providing engaging distance learning opportunities. There are many new programs that offer students remote learning options. Finding and evaluating these programs is often time consuming. However, the benefit to the student makes the effort worthwhile. New professional development offerings from LINCS, COABE, ProLiteracy, Edtech Center and other publishers and organizations happen on a monthly basis. NEKLS staff subscribe to email updates from many of these organizations and take advantage of these opportunities as they arise.

Staff as a whole have elected to participate in the *Introduction to Teacher Effectiveness and Induction* course being offered by LINCS. This course, while primarily for teachers new to Adult Education, also offers experienced teachers the chance to revisit AEL teacher effectiveness with some of the newest research, as well as to develop as mentors to newer teachers. This program is a combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning and runs from September, 2021 through February, 2022.

As for AOE-sponsored professional development, a topic that has been discussed in conversations between AEL providers, is a training around special education would be beneficial to AEL staff. More and more students are coming into the AEL system with IEP's and 504 accommodations and understanding the rules around special education would be of particular use.

## 8. Describe up to two targeted areas of technical assistance that you would like to request from the AOE

There are two areas that have come up in discussions among the AEL providers:

- A better understanding of what services can/should a school be providing to HSCP students? Guidance to schools is always evolving and understanding all options helps AEL providers better serve our students.
- NRS guidance from the federal government is always changing and while much of these changes are relayed to the statewide AEL Data Specialist team, a more general discussion available to a wider audience may be of benefit.