

Southwest Adult Basic Education was asked to showcase the collaborative work it does with its multiple partners by COABE, a national adult literacy organization, at its virtual conference for its members last week



Pat Thomas  
ABE



Dawn Regnier  
MN West



Carol Dombek  
SW MN Private Industry Council

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**MARSHALL** - Our local Adult Basic Education agency has received national attention.

An official with the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) invited Pat Thomas, director of Southwest ABE, to present to a national forum on how her agency is able to help more people by collaborating with a variety of community partners.

COABE's virtual conference took place Oct. 25 and Oct. 26. COABE is the largest adult education professional organization with 15,000 members and has an in-person conference each spring. This is its first virtual conference.

"I had originally thought they just wanted me to showcase our adult/youth career pathway work, but when they became aware of other things we are doing in a collaborative fashion from low literacy to college bound, they asked that our focus be one of sharing the various collaborations we have going on," Thomas said. "A big reason for this is the new federal WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) law that was signed (in 2014) giving the directive for Workforce and ABE to be more collaborative to serve individuals better."

During the local contribution to the teleconference, which took place Wednesday morning at Southwest Minnesota State University with the help of city of Marshall communications specialist Alex Peterson, Thomas and others told the nationwide conference attendees of the origin of the ABE collaboration. It started with the "three-legged stool," they said, of ABE, SW MN Private Industry Council and Minnesota West Technical and Community College - Thomas, Carol Dombek and Dawn Regnier.

Thomas told the conferees, who hailed from all across the United States, that she had tried for years to get Minnesota West on board to help her teach classes to unemployed or underemployed clients.

"When Dawn started there, she said yes, she would work with us," Thomas

said. "Then in 2003 Carol wrote a grant for ESL in CNA training. We were then better able to serve more clients and more individually."

"You need to find your champions," said Dombek.

Thomas had the various agencies that contribute their time, expertise and sometimes funding, to the programs that ABE and Workforce coordinate.

The collaboration came about out of necessity.

"We have a shortage of skilled workers, which causes a challenge to employers," said Dombek.

One by one, around 20 people "testified" to the COABE audience about the ABE collaboration including Michelle Noriega and Leanna Ginocchio from Marshall Area Technical and Educational Center who talked about the college technical courses for Career Pathway Training: certified nurse assistant and welding which features commingled adults and youth.

"These courses help break the cycle of poverty," Noriega said.

With the commingling of adults with youth, the classroom atmosphere is improved, she said.

"The adults take their education much more seriously," she said. "The younger students see the older students and think, 'I don't want to be 30, 40 years old and still be struggling.'"

Tammy Gustafson from Boulder Creek Assisted Living-Memory Care and Jackie Esping of Avera Marshall Morningside Heights Care Center spoke about being "overwhelmed, understaffed and needing qualified staff."

By working with employers, ABE is able to provide the students with "a better understanding of what employer expectations are," said Esping.

Avera Marshall has provided nurses in the classroom to better the education of the CNA students and has reaped the benefits, Esping said.

"We've hired quite a few amazing students," she said.

ABE also collaborates with Literacy Volunteers of Southwest Minnesota.

Candace Thomas refers participants in her program to ABE and Workforce if needed "and they refer learners to us."

"We work together to ensure we're not duplicating services," she said.

Dawn Wambeke of Advance Opportunities, which works with people with development and intellectual disabilities, talked about the career pathways training that she has instituted. For example, 30 individuals from Advance are now receiving a "competitive wage" at Mid Continent Cabinetry in Cottonwood.

Other speakers include Rep. Joe Schomacker, R-22A, who spoke during the webinar from the city of Luverne.