

**REMOTE ESOL CASE STUDY:**  
**Reimagining the Work of Adult Education  
to Succeed in Challenging Times**  
The Ronald M. Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning,  
Saint Paul Public Schools Adult Education  
Saint Paul, Minnesota



**ESOL Program:** English Language Learning

**Website:** [www.spps.org/ABE](http://www.spps.org/ABE)

**Reach:** Urban

**Number of ESOL students served per year:** 3,375

**Student population:** Immigrants and refugees who speak 51 home languages, including Somali, Spanish, Amharic, Oromo, Hmong, Karen, Arabic, French, Tigrinya, Vietnamese, and Burmese

**Contact for more information:**

Renada Rutmanis, Adult Basic Education Supervisor, [Renada.Rutmanis@spps.org](mailto:Renada.Rutmanis@spps.org)

## Program Description

The Ronald M. Hubbs Center for Lifelong Learning (Hubbs Center) is the ABE (Adult Basic Education) program of the Saint Paul Public Schools' Community Education Department. Hubbs Center works together with area community-based organizations as part of the [Saint Paul Community Literacy Consortium](#), a collaboration of agencies throughout Saint Paul that provide literacy services to adults. Hubbs Center is located in the heart of Saint Paul's Frogtown–Midway communities, historically a port of entry for Southeast Asian immigrants and refugees.

Hubbs Center offers a full range of educational opportunities, from early English literacy to GED (General Educational Development) classes, post-secondary bridge programs, career navigation, distance education and digital literacy supports, and (usually) free childcare for students. During the pandemic, classes meet either four or six hours per week in remote live instruction and integrated use of an online distance learning curriculum, such as MobyMax. Success with this model has been supported by the center's past focus on developing robust distance and blended learning opportunities. Like all programs in Minnesota, Saint Paul ABE is supported by healthy state investment that surpasses its Federal WIOA (Workforce Investment Opportunity Act) II grant. A small percentage of the center's funding comes from the private sector and individuals. The average annual budget is \$4 million.

## Notable, Innovative Practices

Most notably, Hubbs Center re-evaluated use of staff time to meet the needs for delivering instruction remotely. Instead of having teachers provide direct live instruction for 20 hours a week, class time was reduced in half and each class was matched with an online distance learning curriculum. This guiding strategy freed up staff to work in new ways better suited to providing instruction completely online.

First, teachers collaborated and used the time to experiment with new approaches and digital resources, finding new and creative ways to deliver mobile-friendly instruction. Second, teachers had more engagement with the orientation process and onboarding of students into online learning. Third, key staff were given time to exclusively focus on the digital learning needs of both staff and students, offering “push-in” digital literacy support so that everyone could work more effectively online. This has resulted in a 50 percent increase in student time logged in online distance education — for an average of 10,000 hours per month in distance learning during the pandemic, on top of the attendance time logged for the remote live instruction.

## Remote ESOL Program Design

As described above, the entire program has taken a hybrid approach, pairing remote live instruction with distance education defined by independent learning in online comprehensive curricula. A curriculum committee constantly evaluates new options to ensure best fit with the levels of ESOL classes offered at Hubbs. There are currently 13 different mobile friendly distance learning platforms in use, including Edmentum, ReadTheory, MobyMax, Khan Academy, ReadWorks, USA Learns, Vocabulary A–Z, MyEnglishLab, MyMathLab and CommonLit. In addition, the remote live classes employ a wide range of digital tools to make the class more interactive — breakout rooms, Pear Deck, Desmos, SeeSaw, and Jamboard.

Volunteers provide support in class and meet with learners in tutoring sessions online. Students who cannot commit to remote live instruction each week enroll in coached distance education. Each distance education coach works with 75 students, who learn independently using one of the approved distance education curricula. Coaches monitor learner progress in the online curriculum and check in with students periodically to support connection and engagement. This coaching model has boosted engagement in distance education — 50 percent who enroll



are engaging with the online curriculum platforms monthly, where previously only 30 percent had activity in a given month.

Many of the digital resources mentioned above are linked from Google Classroom, teacher-created websites, and learning management systems, including Seesaw and PowerSchool. As a whole, this collection of digital learning resources allows for a mix of synchronous instruction, coaching, and independent learning opportunities that meet the majority of learners' needs.

### Student Onboarding and Persistence Supports

The new 100 percent remote intake model begins with a link to a registration form created using Qualtrics and posted on the Hubbs Center website; many ESOL learners have family help them with the intake form online. Five intake staff, which includes multilinguals proficient in Hmong and Spanish, are also available to help do intake by phone. After the form is completed, students get emailed instructions for remote placement testing. Because of the State of Minnesota ABE COVID exemption freeing programs from previously mandatory CASAS (Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment Systems) and TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education), Hubbs uses ReadTheory for reading placement and MobyMax for custom assessments for lower-level ESOL and math. The multilingual texting app TalkingPoints is used to communicate with learners through the intake process.

After their assessment, students receive training in essential technologies for learning at Hubbs. This orientation focuses on getting students comfortable with Google Meet and the distance learning platform they will use with their class. Four orientation staff, including teachers, offer these remote orientation sessions prior to the start of each managed enrollment session. Hubbs adopted a month-long managed enrollment approach to make it easier for teachers to welcome new students into their classes. Because teachers are trained to run orientation sessions, they are able to support student persistence using essential technologies students need to participate in learning.

Students are given access to their distance learning platforms before starting synchronous classes so they can get started right away. The goal of the intake process is to give students several points of contact so that they feel connected to the program and have multiple people to reach out to when needed. The tech tools used to onboard students and get them attending remote classes also make it easy and efficient for teachers to communicate more regularly with students, pushing out messages to their phones or emails with the apps they are already using. (For instance, Google Classroom will email students automatically when their teacher has provided feedback on an assignment.)

To support persistence after orientation, teachers use Remind or WhatsApp to communicate. Additionally, Hubbs created a student engagement committee that looks at ways of increasing

“fun” in the classroom, makes use of breakout rooms for increased opportunities to communicate in smaller groups, and holds asynchronous Kahoot competitions for distance education students.

In some cases, Hubbs has seen higher levels of persistence remotely than it had in person, and sometimes from students who had been struggling in in-person classes. While some students faced challenges with the online environment, others who had previously faced challenges with childcare, health, transportation, work schedules, etc., found it much easier to attend online. Others had fewer distractions learning from home.

## Instruction

The hybrid approach used throughout the Hubbs Center is marked by its focus on digital literacy skill development — for both teachers and students. Because students encounter a diverse range of ed tech, they need to become flexible users of digital technologies. Hubbs Center accomplishes this by doing “push-in” digital literacy support in each class nearly every week. A digital literacy lead teacher spends 75 minutes teaching relevant skills through demonstration and instructive activities. This takes pressure off the content teacher to come up with instructional activities supporting digital literacy, gives students some explicit instruction to build computer skills, and builds skills of the content teachers who are able to learn from the digital literacy lead.

For example, in a lesson on using browsers, the digital literacy specialist teacher may suggest installing and using the free and safe Adblock browser extension to prevent distracting ads. He will demonstrate how to search for Adblock, install it, and use it by showing a webpage when the ads are allowed, and again when the ads are blocked. Screenshots on the process and/or a link to a how-to screencast are included in the slides, which are always shared with learners via the teacher’s website or virtual classroom for review or for those who couldn’t attend class that day. For mobile browsers, the teacher shows how to use Reader View, which is an ad-blocking feature built into Safari on Apple mobile devices.

“It’s important for the class teacher to see some of those things and to see what their students are capable of doing. I mean, maybe they weren’t doing some of that in their instruction, but then Adam or one of the other teachers comes in and shows the students how to do it and the teacher kind of gets pulled along with that as well.”

—Cathy Grady, Hubbs Center Assistant Supervisor

## Digital Learning Supports

Hubbs made the most of several strategies to support digital devices and wi-fi access. Staff members helped students take part in a Ramsey County CARES (Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act initiative providing Tech Paks (refurbished computers and wi-fi access) to many students. They also were able to loan iPads and hot spots through Saint Paul Public Schools. In addition, they received nearly 50 computers through private donations.

Hubbs made instruction as mobile-friendly as possible to improve the experience for students attending on their phones and, as mentioned above, provided push-in digital literacy instruction in classes. Staff also held two stand-alone remotely delivered computer basics classes. Finally, they collected online “how-to” resources (how to download Google Meet on your phone, how to update your browser, how to make a Gmail account, etc.) in one spot for easier sharing with students and teachers.

## Sample class agenda

ELL Speaking/Listening

Home April March February January December: Climate Change September October November: Voting and Black H...

# Derick Chauvin's Trial

4/19-4/22

**Monday, April 19, we will do:**

- Check in - How was your weekend?
- Today is the last day of Derek Chauvin Trial. What are your thoughts?
- Vocabulary for for Chauvin's Trial

**Vocabulary for Chauvin's Trial:**

- Use the vocabulary to help talk about the trial and what is happening in the city of Minneapolis.
- [Click here](#) to go to the vocabulary

Duolingo

Chauvin's Trial

charged with a crime

## Support for Students' Basic Needs

Hubbs Center offers access to food support, information about obtaining unemployment benefits, health care, and rental assistance. These services are provided by a part-time counselor who meets online with individual students and who shares relevant information with teachers. Hubbs Center also posts information about support services on its popular Facebook page. In addition, Hubbs Center is proactive in acknowledging hardship and stress caused by the pandemic, the racial reckoning motivated by the killing of George Floyd, and the attack on the U.S. Capitol building. Hubbs creates curricula for teachers to use to help students stay informed and safe.

## Support for Teachers and Staff

When schools first closed in March, 2020, all staff made a personal work plan, which included sections on supporting students, building program capacity, and completing personal professional development (PD). Staff were able to target PD that was of high need for them, from working on their own technical skills to learning more about distance learning platforms and synchronous online instruction. In the first week the center reopened, Hubbs offered a “choose your own adventure PD,” where both internal and external recordings of short videos were shared in one place and staff had three hours to spend looking at ones that were most relevant to them. Since then, staff have attended several statewide PD offerings and also participated in internal professional learning opportunities. The flexibility of online learning has allowed them to increase the number of PD days, including time for professional learning communities and team meetings. Overall, they find that it has been easier to offer more differentiated PD offerings in a remote environment.

## Partnerships

In addition to the partnership that resulted in access to devices for students, the Hubbs Center credits an innovative and flexible state agency for its success. The Minnesota Department of Education, Adult Basic Education, offers access to state-funded distance learning platforms and has provided leadership with key policy shifts in response to the pandemic. Following OCTAE (Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education) memoranda published in Spring, 2020, the state offered an exemption from standardized testing, paused contact-hour and proxy contact-hour counting, and offered frequent, highly relevant and user-friendly professional development opportunities.

## Leadership

Renada Rutmanis, the program leader, gave teachers flexibility to be creative and try new things. She created a curriculum committee for planning for hybrid instruction now and in the future. Teachers were given extra prep time, extra PD time, and had fewer synchronous instructional hours. Teachers were also able to purchase licenses for platforms they needed or wanted to try. Hubbs leadership also upgraded staff technology for home use as needed.

## Indicators of Effectiveness

Like many programs in the U.S., the Hubbs Center has not been able to pre- and post-test students on TABE and CASAS, so staff cannot measure level gains. However, progress scores from their current placement and progress assessments in MobyMax indicate grade-level growth between August, 2020, and the end of February, 2021.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the organization's programming is demonstrated in the persistence by enrollment hours. Between July, 2020, and the end of February, 2021, Hubbs Center served 1,742 ESOL students; 1,219 students (70 percent) reached 12 hours; 745 (43 percent) reached 40 hours; 321 (18 percent) reached 100 hours; and 104 (6 percent) reached 200 hours. In addition, three ESOL students earned GEDs and 24 students passed at least one proctored Northstar Digital Literacy assessment, as a whole earning 73 Northstar Digital Literacy certificates in that time period. Most impressively, nine students logged more than 250 hours in distance learning platforms between September, 2020, and the end of February, 2021, earning a refurbished laptop through a distance education incentive program funded by private donations.

Though enrollment numbers are not on pace with previous years, the sharp increase in hours logged in independent distance learning bodes well for the enrollment in the future. Through its innovative response to the pandemic, Hubbs has laid in place sustainable distance and remote instruction models that will offer more flexible options for students in the years to come. Indeed, results from a recent student survey showed many students want to stay online even after in person classes can fully resume.



## ABOUT THE REMOTE ADULT ESOL PROJECT

This case study is part of the Remote Adult ESOL<sup>1</sup> (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Project led by World Education, Inc. The project's goal is to document and disseminate viable remote adult ESOL program models and practices so that ESOL instruction can be done at scale efficiently and effectively in a variety of settings. The impetus for the project was to identify strategies for meeting the current interest and unmet demand as well as meeting potential demand prompted by English language requirements for U.S. citizenship under immigration reform. During winter and spring of 2021, the project investigated selected ESOL programs' and learners' needs, experiences, and promising instructional and learner support practices that rely predominantly on technology-rich strategies and tools deployed remotely.

This case study is one of eight full program profiles selected for its innovative program design and promising practices. The eight case studies of programs from across the U.S. are complemented by:

- *Policy and Practice Brief* that presents policy considerations and recommendations;
- *Creating Equitable Access to Remote ESOL and Supports in Multiple Contexts and for Distinct Populations and Purposes*, a cross-case analysis of remote adult ESOL delivery through the lens of the varied organizational settings in which they operate and the supports needed to engage distinct ESOL populations; and
- *Promising Remote ESOL Practices*, a document that highlights specific practices and innovations of selected, nominated programs from onboarding to instruction, digital skills development, and student and teacher supports.

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term English for Speakers of Other Languages or ESOL rather than English as a Second Language (ESL) out of recognition that many English Learners already speak more than one language, just not English.