

OLA` GMB Union support language need

The General Municipal & Boiler Makers Union, (GMB) has over the last two years been developing courses to engage with adult learners across all employment sectors, including; Manufacturing, food processing, service, construction, retail and local authorities. In this time nearly 1500 people have stepped back into learning as part of the Norfolk/Suffolk Learning Project. Common areas of interest have been IT and numeracy/literacy levels 1 and 2 courses. Also over 100 migrant language learners from Portugal and Poland have been recruited to the project.

The engagement of supporting and encouraging migrants to learn English has played a vital area part within the Project.

For sometime the Union had been looking at ways of supporting Migrant workers and their families to improve their language skills. English Speaking Other Language, (ESOL) courses have been offered widely with a degree of success, alternatives were sought as part of the Unions strategy to increase participation. Currently it is estimated there are several thousand Portuguese living in the Thetford area, many with skills in great demand that are not used due to poor English levels.

Steve Walker the GMB Education Co-ordinator decided to explore other ways to the approach the learning. This was done by changing the learners to a third party; i.e. School support staff that would see the benefits begin passed on to pupils and their parents through there own learning.

The objective of the courses was to learn effective communication skills to communicate with the migrant children and their parents. School staff have had a high degree of difficulty in communicating with Portuguese children, most not being able to speak any English at all. Frustration occurs from both staff and children. Many School staff are mums and dads themselves and can related to the first days when their own children started school where there were great worries and concerns for the first few weeks at school. Steve said, "imagine how the Portuguese children must feel very isolated, confused frightened and not being able to share any concerns and fears to the teaching staff."

Some of the topics covered are counting, introducing yourself, days of the week, the alphabet and lots more.

So far nearly 60 school staff have signed up for the 10-week course, with many others on a waiting list.

Norfolk County council welcomed the initiative, but could not fund the programme of courses, although they have given facilities.

Funding came from the GMB Union Learning and Skills fund and Breckland Councils European Social Funded Project.

Once funding was in place School Heads were contacted to encourage staff to attend. All the courses were organised straight after school and on school premises.

The GMB has the largest School Support Staff membership in Norfolk and sees these members as a much valued and dedicated group of people that the Union supports effectively in all issues.

Thereza Duarte is the Portuguese Tutor. She has Taylor-made the courses for the schools and has made it not only a useful course but also a fun learning experience.

Comments from Dr Graham Sigley from Thetford Excellence Partnership, (TEP).

'A number of school staff have been very keen to gain some basic Portuguese language skills for some time since they feel it will make a significant improvement in how they do their job. The programmes provided by GMB are now meeting a long felt need and are making a real difference to local families.'

For more information on the GMB Union education contact Steve Walker 07905635023 or email stevewalker27@yahoo.co.uk

Photo 004 is Drake School in Thetford with Thereaz Duarte

Photo 003 is Rosemary Musker in Thetford with Thereza

Other Photo Steve Walker GMB Education Co-ordinator.