Oral History Interview with Robert E. (Bob) Ehlers

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California Department of Education
Adult Education Oral History Project

Oral History Interview

with

ROBERT E. (BOB) EHLERS

California Department of Education, Sacramento, Consultant, Adult Education, Continuation Education, and Educational Options,
1969 - 1995

Riverside Unified School District, Instructor, Counselor, Continuation School Principal/Founder,
1958 - 1969

Corona Unified School District, High School Instructor,
1956 - 1958

Kimberly, Wisconsin, Adult Education and High School Instructor,
1954 - 1956

May 31, 1995

Elk Grove, California

By Cuba Z. Miller

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RESTRICTIONS ON THIS INTERVIEW

None.

LITERARY RIGHTS AND QUOTATIONS

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

Robert E. Ehlers, Oral History Interview, Conducted 1995 by Cuba Z. Miller in Elk Grove, California, for the California Adult Education Oral History Project.

PREFACE

Adult education in California has a proud history of helping its citizens to meet the challenges of life in a huge, complex, multicultural state. Through the years, California adult educators have provided leadership to the nation in the development of innovative instructional practices and creative educational solutions.

The California Adult Education Oral History Project began in 1992 as a companion to a print history of adult education commissioned by the California Department of Education. As the century draws to a close, the growth and energy of California adult education in the sixties, the institutionalization of competency based education in response to the influx of refugees and immigrants in the seventies and eighties, and the innovative uses of technology of the nineties will be recorded.

The oral history project started with a small group of leaders whose careers began in the 1950's and 1960's and who witnessed and influenced important events in the development of the nation's largest adult education program. Seven interviews were added in 1994 - 95.

Significant assistance to the project was initially provided by the staffs of both the California State Archives and the Oral History Program, History Department, California State University, Fullerton. This project could not have begun without the vision of Raymond G. Eberhard, Administrator, Adult Education Policy and Planning Unit, California Department of Education, and the support of the late Lynda T. Smith, Consultant, Adult Education Policy and Planning Unit.

Linda L. West
June 30, 1995

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Interviewer

Cuba Z. Miller

Interview Time and Place

One interview was conducted in Elk Gove, California, on May 31, 1995.

Editing

The interviewee reviewed and edited the transcript. When the tape was inaudible or when necessary for clarification, some information was added and is indicated by brackets [ ].

Tapes

The original cassette tapes were transferred to reel to reel format at California State University, Fullerton and deposited with the California State Archives.

CALIFORNIA ADULT EDUCATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT E. EHLERS

INTERVIEWER: Cuba Z. Miller

[Session 1, May 31, 1995]

[Begin Tape 1, Side A]

MILLER: This is Cuba Miller interviewing Robert E. Ehlers, a retired consultant from the Adult Education Unit of the California Department of Education, in Elk Grove, California, on May 31, 1995. The purpose of the interview is to record his recollections of the major events and trends in adult education during his career.

Bob, you have been retired for less than a month now. Have you gotten used to not getting up and going to work every morning?

EHLERS: As of this week I did.

MILLER: As of this week? [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Yeah, I finally got caught up with all those priority responsibilities that my wife had for me.

MILLER: Okay.

EHLERS: I told her she was taking over where my boss left off, but my boss didn't put a deadline on all the assignments.

MILLER: Well, you can't let that happen. [Chuckling] Okay. Bob, you first got a taste of adult education when you were living in Wisconsin. Tell us about those first experiences.

EHLERS: Well, it kind of happened when I moved to my second teaching job, which was in an industrial paper mill town. The Kimberly Clark paper company had apprentice machinists and they asked me if I would be interested in teaching the academic science and math for the apprenticeship program. And then [the following] summer at college I took an upholstery course and I came back and I taught evening upholstery, which I think back in those days was fee-supported. [Chuckling]

MILLER: Well, it used to be fee-supported in California, so it probably was in Wisconsin.

EHLERS: I don't remember for sure, but I think that Kimberly Clark probably paid my salary for teaching the academic program, or the union did.

MILLER: Okay. Did the apprenticeship programs work then pretty much the way they do now?

EHLERS: Well, I think we've probably lost a lot of our unionism. Apprenticeship programs aren't as predominant as they [used to be]. They have more informal ways of people getting training and breaking into the trades than they did years . . . twenty, thirty, forty

years ago, where you had to take a formal apprenticeship program and you went up through the pay scale and so on.

MILLER: Okay. So, what was that, a couple years, three years, whatever?

EHLERS: I did that for two years, and then I got wanderlust and came to California in 1956. I graduated from college in February of '54, so I had two and a half years of experience and decided I needed to head west, young man.

MILLER: Good, good, and what part of California did you come to?

EHLERS: I ended up in Riverside County. I spent two years in Corona teaching shop, industrial arts, wood shop, drafting, and then went to Riverside and taught five more years of woodworking. [Subsequently] I got into counseling and then into continuation education. And then, let's see, that would have been about '65, '66. Sixty-five was the year they mandated continuation ed, and if you didn't [establish a program the district] got a financial penalty.

MILLER: So you were in on the ground floor of that.

EHLERS: So I was in on the ground floor. I started the continuation school in Riverside, California, in 19 . . . the second semester of '65-66, 3:00 to 6:00 in the afternoon on each of the respective high school campuses. The next year we got funded for a Title III project to establish an exemplary continuation school for the state of

California, which gave me more money than I could spend. [Chuckling]

MILLER: We don't have to worry about that anymore. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Anyhow, we got into developing the first how-to-do-it handbook for continuation ed, which was [titled *Orientation to Continuation Education*]. We [referred to our program as] individualized instruction. I'd like to think of it as being the original competency-based education because everything was related back to the course that the students were taking. After two years of that, they needed a consultant for the Department of Education in continuation ed, and I was the first full-time continuation ed consultant. I got here March 1, 1969, hired by the famous Max Rafferty [Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1963-70].

MILLER: Okay. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: And two years later, two years and two months later, there was a surprise upset when Wilson Riles became the new superintendent. I got reassigned after two years of continuation ed, and for five years I worked with the Office of Program Planning and Development on all kinds of exciting, innovative, creative things.

MILLER: What did that department do, Bob?

EHLERS: Well, we were responsible for the overall planning of all of the various units in setting their annual goals and how they were going to work with the local school districts and so on, and their budgets and stuff like that. Then I got on a little sidetrack and served as the Department of Education liaison between Wilson Riles and John Vasconcellas [member of the State Assembly] on the Joint Committee on Educational Goals and Evaluation, and that was half-time for about five years.

MILLER: So you've had a lot of liaison work with the legislature as well then.

EHLERS: I did with that one. That was the longest standing joint committee at the time, five years. They usually go after two or three years. They self-destruct. But it put advisory councils in every [district] in California, and that was not something that administrators were wanting to do in 1970-71. Vasconcellas was very adamant about it and there were some logistical, philosophical, turf problems between the department and the legislature. We had a citizen advisory committee that was broad-based statewide, and we overcame all the hurdles. They published several volumes of the joint committee's work on how to establish advisory committees. Basically, it was the beginning of SIP [School Improvement Program] councils, special ed councils and just . . .

MILLER: I was going to ask, was that the predecessor to the school site councils?

EHLERS: It opened up the door for parents to have a say in their kids' education, and it was very exciting.

MILLER: What was it like working with the legislature?

EHLERS: Well, they had a staff. John Vasconcellas had a staff of two people representing him and doing all the legwork and a lot of the coordination. I didn't have as big a role because I was only half-time from the Department of Education so my time was limited. The rest of [my] time was devoted to the other activities that we had going in the office, like year-round school and some of the other things that came along. So that was very interesting serving as a liaison directly to Wilson Riles, not to the cabinet [or] rarely to the cabinet.

MILLER: Yes. [Chuckling] So a lot of your work then has been in associated fields to adult ed, certainly starting out with continuation and playing a major part there. A lot of times these schools, these other than the regular K-12 classroom are referred to as "alternative education." Can you explain the term to us, and what's the relationship of both continuation and adult education to that broader term?

EHLERS: Well, I think when I started in education the only alternative we had the first couple years was special education, and then you got . . . Well, there are so many alternative programs. Traditionally we think of alternative programs now for kids who have been at risk or who have had some problem with the typical academic program. But when you take a look at all of the specially funded programs, bilingual, GATE [Gifted and Talented Education], these are all alternative programs in the sense that you're encouraging students who have special needs or special skills to get into something that enhances or corrects what's [special about] them.

Traditionally we think of alternative ed, in my opinion, as that which begins when the student starts to display a possibility of being a dropout. And having spent nine years in a junior high school, I think that those . . . well, in the early days you could usually determine that a student was going to drop out about halfway through eighth grade. Now we have indicators, because of drugs and earlier maturation of kids, that [make] earlier [identification possible]. Usually we think of opportunity programs, continuation ed, and court and community schools and things that relate to the kids who are having not only academic but adjustment or discipline problems [as alternative ed, along with adult education].

California is probably the only state in the nation that has all of these wide alternative . . . this wide array of alternative programs, and I think we're about the only one that has a totally free adult education program. We're the only one that has an almost free community college program in the United States. We are one of the few states that has compulsory attendance through age eighteen, I mean up to age eighteen, with continuation schools, so it's. . . . We're different, we're unique, and we still are losing the battle.

MILLER: Yeah. Yeah, okay. So you then got to the adult ed unit then in what, '76?

EHLERS: Okay, after the Joint Committee shut down, during that time I had. . . . When I was in the Office of Program Planning and Development, Xavier Del Buono [Associate/Deputy Superintendent, 1974-86] came back from Michigan where he had earned his doctorate and worked in our office, and eventually he got involved with adult education. Somewhere around '76, I believe it was, he asked me if I wanted to come over and work with adult ed, and because I really enjoyed Xavier and wanted to work in his office, I went with him. And to me, I wanted to stay with alternative ed, and adult ed seemed to be the place to go because this is about the beginning of when the state was going to administer the federal

ABE [adult basic education] grant money, or the whole ABE program. [The federal funds] previously [were] administered through the Far West Regional Laboratory in San Francisco.

Bob [Robert] Welte wrote the first state plan, I think starting in '76. This included the procedures for distributing the money to LEA's [local education agencies], the 309 and the 310.[1] The 306 was grants that went to the LEA's back in those days based upon a.d.a. [average daily attendance]. Originally it was only the LEAs and the community colleges that got the money. Then it was extended to the CBOs [community based organizations], then it was extended to all the institutions, like the state hospitals, the California Department of Corrections, the CYA [California Youth Authority]. Then literacy projects in recent years have [been eligible to receive] the money. [These include] libraries, fraternal organizations, sorority organizations and so on.

MILLER: Anyone that can gather six students in front of them. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Anyone that could submit a plan to determine that they were providing ABE or ESL [English as a second language] for these students. So it kind of eroded away the dollar amount, and the

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[1]Sections of the Federal Adult Education Act that were designated for special projects. These sections are pronounced three-oh-nine, three-ten, and three-oh-six.

horrendous number of immigrants chipped that dollar amount away so that it became less and less for the school districts. [Meanwhile] CBOs were scrambling for a piece of the action. And they got it.

MILLER: Let's talk about the unit just a little bit, when you first started there. Are there still any consultants in the unit who were there when you started?

EHLERS: Let's see, I think Tom Bauer. We had a Southern California office, and I worked in the Northern California office before they consolidated it, so I didn't know a lot of them. But let's see, it seems to me that Tom Bauer is probably the only one that is left from the original group that were in Southern California or part of the office that was consolidated in Sacramento.

MILLER: Did the department run a full office in Southern California?

EHLERS: Oh yeah. Roy Steeves moved up about 1976. [Roy Steeves was Director of Adult Basic Education, 1967-73, and State Director, 1974-75.] And, oh, who was the other gentleman that was in charge of the. . . . Oh, gosh, I can't think of his name. Roy was the assistant, and one of the original long-term people—I can't think of his name—was head of the unit. [Eugene De Gabriele was Bureau Chief from 1970-74.] And then shortly after that, Don[ald] McCune came in. Don came in about . . . end of '77 or '78, I think. [Don

McCune was State Director, Adult Education, 1975-86.] That's when we moved to the K Street Mall, in 1978, our temporary location that I retired from seventeen years later. [Chuckling]

MILLER: A temporary location? [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Right.

MILLER: Where was the adult ed office before that?

EHLERS: Well, the adult ed office before that was over at 1025 P Street. It was the original Department of Finance building that was built in the 1930s. About three years ago they tore it down and replaced it with a more modern high-rise, but at that time it was the oldest . . . one of the two or three oldest state buildings in the state. It was originally the Department of Finance, where all our good friends hang out.

MILLER: Okay. [Laughter] I take it you have tongue firmly planted in cheek with that comment. Maybe we'll get to the Department of Finance later on. [Chuckling] Who were some of the other consultants in the unit when you joined? I mean, Tom is still there, but. . . .

EHLERS: Oh, Warren Brenner, Bob [Robert] Calvo, Joe Simms, [Carl Larsen, John Camper]. Ray [Raymond] Eberhard [Consultant and Administrative Assistant, 1976-83, and then Administrator, Adult Education, 1988-present] came on board in '77 possibly? Shortly

after I got there. I can't recall, I think he was at 1025 P Street when he came aboard and we were still over there. Bob Welte came over and stayed . . . wrote the state plan, and he was with us for a few years. I wrote the second one which. . . . The state plans are renewed every four years, or they were then, and you had to go through the public hearing process. In the state plan you had to meet the current federal regulations regarding the distribution of the money for the LEAs, and then for the innovative research and development type, which was 10 percent, I think it's now 15 percent. Those are the funds that I had the responsibility for administering when we took that responsibility over from the Far West Lab.

MILLER: Okay. Do you, before we go into . . . talk more specifically about the. . . .

EHLERS: Three-ten?

MILLER: About the federal program, yeah. Let's talk just a little bit about how the unit functioned at the time that you joined it, in terms of what your job assignments were and things of that nature.

EHLERS: Okay, in those early days we had field consultants who had specific regions of the state. And I'm not sure if there was a time when they kind of jumped around and had different parts of the state, like somebody might have San Diego and Santa Barbara, but more or

less over the years we've had regional territories. Like some people like a certain part of the state. I think with Joe Simms, he loved the Napa-Sonoma-Solano . . . and he had Northern California all the way up to Humboldt. Warren Brenner, I guess his roots were in L.A., so he kind of wanted to work the L.A. area. I think Bob Calvo always liked the Central Valley. In fact, that's what he's got now in this current JTPA [Job Training Partnership Act] [assignment]. But the people had regional assignments. Then there were some of us who didn't have regional assignments who had specialty assignments, and I guess now we call them "policy assignments." But that's basically how we operated, but we only had one or two or three people that were doing that. And when we worked with the districts that had projects and things like that, we would work with the district and their regional consultant. He was still the direct pipeline to provide the technical information and assistance that went along with apportionment and legal aspects and stuff like that. Because while we were administering the federal part of it, we still had students who were drawing local apportionment, so that was . . . it was a teamwork thing. But like I had the 310 projects. I had a responsibility with working with every one of the consultants that had a 310 project in their. . . .

MILLER: In their region.

EHLERS: In their region.

MILLER: The field consultants also had some policy responsibilities, though, didn't they?

EHLERS: Well, when we developed our guidelines and worked on the state plan and so on, they had the responsibility to let the field know what the state plan contained, and they would come to the regions where we had the public hearings and so on. They were the main pipeline both to and from the field in trying to develop and meet the federal requirements.

MILLER: Okay, I guess I'm thinking about like the different areas of authorized instruction, which of course was much broader then than we have now.

EHLERS: Oh, okay. Okay, well, we pretty much had the ten areas, and along with that we also had some of the individual consultants who were specialists that had come in from vocational ed, from basic ed and things like that, so there was . . . each had a specialty of that type, that they had kind of the key responsibility. Back in those days we didn't have the resources, maybe we didn't have the leadership, to provide handbooks and all of the things that we now provide, like our curriculum guides and things like that. We didn't have that

expertise or foresight or whatever. But it was the influx of federal money that allowed us to go out and bring in the key people who were truly the specialists in their large school district or in their curriculum field.

MILLER: I guess I'm specifically thinking of Marian Marshall, who came in to work with the older adults.

EHLERS: Right.

MILLER: And that Joe Simms was considered the contact for counseling activities.

EHLERS: Right. I don't remember what all their backgrounds were, but, yeah, it was different because we didn't have the resources to go out and. . . . A lot of the people who came in and are writing our curriculum guides and our handbooks, or did over the years, were people who were leaders in the field. We could provide the consulting service to bring them in [from] the field. Because most of us hadn't been in the classroom, or we came in from different backgrounds and we weren't truly an ESL specialist or an ABE specialist to the extent that we could write a handbook. Now, Marian was the exception because she had taught college courses in gerontology, and I think when Lynda Smith came in she was. . . . I don't remember what her background was, but she had taught at

several universities. Juliet Crutchfield was brought in because she was a reading specialist and had published some work in Berkeley where she came from. So, as we got more active in these various instructional areas, we were able to bring in some people to be specialists—

MILLER: To help out a little.

EHLERS: To provide more effective policy leadership from the Department of Education.

MILLER: Okay. Now the unit—well, actually there are two units now, one called the Adult Ed[ucation] Field Services Unit and one called the Adult Ed[ucation] Policy Unit.

EHLERS: Right.

MILLER: Do you see any advantage to having that two separate units over, you know, the one, or does it make any difference one way or the other?

EHLERS: Well, there are certain things that I think make it very valuable. For instance, when you're a field consultant you need to know a little bit about everything to share with the people who need to know a little bit about everything to manage their programs. But for a field consultant to write an ESL handbook or to write a program . . . a handbook for handicapped, you need people with that expertise, like

Jim Lindberg and Juliet and the various people who have those responsibilities. Also, if you had ten field consultants and one had a passing responsibility in vocational ed or ESL, he doesn't have the time or the expertise to provide the type of leadership that we need now. And that leadership could be the coordination of bringing in people from the field to serve as the people who put together the handbooks and things like that. I think it makes it. . . .

I think sometimes we don't get together enough [for] the expert [to] share his expertise with the field consultants through staff development in staff meetings and things like that. I think that always has been a weak area and I think it always will be. It's not just unique to adult ed, it [applies] to any field, that people either don't want to take the time or they're not told to take the time, or it's easier not to take the time [for in-service training].

MILLER: Is there routine staff development for the field consultants, the ones that are regularly going out?

EHLERS: Yeah, we tried to . . . they tried to provide staff training at staff meetings. Sometimes we'd set aside a half a day. Like when the new handbook came out, we had several sessions with Tom Bauer to go through the handbook and for us to critique it as well and talk about the interpretation of code. And, oh, you have eight field

consultants, you're going to have eight interpretations of the code the first time you're going to read it. And then you've got the person who's putting it together in the handbook, so you're going to get nine interpretations, but he's the key person, so he needs input from the people. But they've had some real good committees that have worked on the various curriculum guides, and I think that's where the expertise of the field comes in.

MILLER: Yes, in recent years those have done that. Okay, let's get back to the Federal ABE Act. You mentioned that Far West had some responsibilities for the administration of that before you came on board. Do you remember . . . or do you know, not do you remember, did you ever know [Chuckling] what Far West did along those lines?

EHLERS: I think, I'm not sure, but they did have the responsibility for determining the allocation to the LEAs. Now, I don't know if they did it and then the department paid them or what. I'm not that familiar with the logistics of what happened on that. My major assignment coming in was to take the state plan, which had California's perceived and approved priorities by the feds, [and implement it]. The feds had to approve the state plan that we did

the public hearings on and then went through the state board, and then I think the governor had to sign off on it.

We took those priorities and guidelines and then we established the procedure for disseminating the 310, which is now 353, 321, 323, 326 money. But those were all within the parameters of the state plan. On the first go-round, the first several years—it's an annual thing—we would have sometimes as many as eight or nine priorities relating to our adult ed programs, ranging from counseling to ESL, to ABE, to the development of specialized curriculum. Like we funded an organization of Samoans that developed their curriculum to make it more meaningful, because they were having high rates of dropouts. The Chinatown Resources Development Center [San Francisco], which is now CRC, it used to be CRDC, had the project to develop an ESL handbook. The list was. . . . and some years we would have fifteen or twenty projects that would be funded.

And the way we did it is the request for proposals went out, we selected a committee of practitioners, [the projects] were all blindly numbered, and they were prioritized by the perceived importance of the reviewers. And if we had fifteen projects, they would be ranked in order of 1-15, and we would take the amount of

money that we had, and if we could pay for all fifteen we would fund all fifteen. If we could only fund the first twelve, we'd fund the first twelve.

But during those early days people were . . . they were a little bit hesitant about writing projects, they were not creative, except certain districts like Berdene Swann [Chuckling] from little old Elsinore—with a cap of what, eighty?—had three projects going at one time. But she was one of those persons . . . you go to a state conference and she'd go down in the gift shop in the lobby, and there could be three racks of books and if she could find two or three that she hadn't read, she would purchase those and she'd have them read by breakfast in the morning. So she was a very—

MILLER: I see. [Chuckling] A high-energy lady.

EHLERS: Well, no, a very, very brilliant and an astute writer. She'd come to the meetings and she'd sit there and do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle with a pen, and it would take her about ten minutes. [Chuckling] So you can see why she was an outstanding project writer. If she was writing for Los Angeles, she probably would have brought in millions of dollars a year. [Chuckling]

And we had a lot of other agencies where somebody had expertise in a certain subject area, whether it be ESL or

competency-based education like the CLASS [Competency-Based Live-Ability Skills] project in Clovis, and, you know, we had a lot of those projects. So we did that for a number of years and then we just found that sometimes we'd put out a priority and there was no longer a need, even though we had perceived it as being a priority, and nobody would even apply.

MILLER: Didn't even respond to it.

EHLERS: So, after we had gone through all of the ESL and ABE and things that were on our big list and started heading in a direction, we needed about three major things on a continuous basis. One was a dissemination network. We tried several versions of that on a regional basis, a centralized basis, and now we have OTAN [Outreach and Technical Assistance Network]. Assessment was always a problem for . . . well, it started out primarily for ESL because you had so many languages.[2] Then we got into ABE, and then eventually we got into the handicapped program where Bud [Sylvester] Pues [Camarillo State Hospital] and Jim Lindbergh had

[2]In addition to dissemination and assessment, the third major category is staff development.

developed assessment for the substantially handicapped, who have always been eligible for ABE funds.[3]

MILLER: And those federal funds did require assessment for the students that were benefitting from those programs.

EHLERS: Well, so did sound educational practices.

MILLER: Sure.

EHLERS: At the upper end of the assessment, we in California have never allocated any of our federal money for high school level, just other than maybe ten grand or something like that. So we've always held out all that money for ABE and ESL because of the huge numbers that we had. So the upper end assessment would say, "Well, this student's no longer eligible," so he goes into the high school diploma program or something like that. But mainly it was to help the large districts place their students according to ability levels so they didn't have an advanced student with a beginning, and so on, especially with the large number of districts we have with thousands of students.

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[3]Since 1980 all assessment for the federal programs in California, including ABE, ESL, and handicapped, have been developed under the auspices of the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System, San Diego. Work on assessment for the handicapped by Bud Pues, Jim Lindbergh and others was completed within the CASAS framework.

MILLER: You've made reference to the competency-based programs. Let's concentrate on that for a little while. The APL, Applied Performance Level Study's final—

EHLERS: The University of Texas, right. The Texas APL Study.

MILLER: Okay. It's final report was in 1975, and then California replicated that a few years later with the NOMOS study [California Adult Competency Survey]. And let's see if we can talk about a little more specifically what the impact those studies had. And starting with the APL, can you tell us just briefly what that was?

EHLERS: Well, the Texas APL primarily, as I recall, kind of took the real-life skills, whether they were getting along with your peers, the boss, or whatever, plus some of the basic academic skills, and identified what a person needed if he was going to succeed in [daily living at home, at work, and in the community]. I think there [were] about 150 or 160 of those, something like that.[4] These things all kind of were the forerunners to our competency-based [programs] in the application of life skills in so many of the projects that we ended up funding, even in recent years when we got involved with JTPA.

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[4]As adapted by California these competency statements fell into five content areas: Consumer Economics, Community Resources, Health, Occupational Knowledge, and Government and Law. Computation was added to the content areas early on and was followed later by Learning to Learn and Independent Living Skills.

I guess because California always considered itself a little bit different, a little bit bigger, and because we had such large adult ed, voc ed, and apprenticeship programs and all that, we wanted to do a similar study for California. We did it in a shorter period of time, and we had the basic list of competencies from Texas so we didn't have to put several million dollars in.

MILLER: Start from scratch.

EHLERS: I think we probably ended up with $100,000 or $150,000 doing that, but it did revalidate the Texas study, and I don't think that we were ever sorry that we took the money and put it in that priority because we used it as the basis for continuing our work in competency-based education, which then got into the high school. . . . Other than the application of life skills in the workplace, which had been ongoing and so on, but we also got into the New York External Diploma Program, we got into the City as a School, we worked with them. But because we've always had high school diploma programs in place in California, especially since World War II, we used that delivery system rather than trying to create some others. I think the City as Schools and [similar programs] like that [are] more replicable and should be something the high schools should use, although the External Diploma Program could make good use of workplace skills

that someone had learned. But in California, though, we've always used the GED [General Education Development tests] as our basis for a high school diploma, and that was in place, so it's a little bit more academically oriented for that—

MILLER: Well, there are full high school diploma programs and then there are those that do use the GED. I mean, there are both.

EHLERS: Well, most of them still use it. There are a few that exclude the GED, and there's a good reason for that. I don't think that it's ever hurt any students that get it that way because—

MILLER: Bob, you're using a term that I'm not familiar with, City as Schools. What. . . . ?

EHLERS: Oh, that was an external diploma, the City as a School. It's kind of like our community is a school, programs that were getting into the high schools, where the students earn significant credits in the community towards their high school diploma. That's [happening] now in some of our comprehensive high schools in California. It originated [in New York], they called it the City as a School. So, instead of the community as a school, the students work in the mayor's office, they work in the Department of Recreation office, and they [apply] their academics [through their jobs] and get high

school credit. I think this is going to be a significant part of the future because kids. . . .

MILLER: And that's something that's current now?

EHLERS: It's starting to happen in the comprehensive [and] continuation schools.

MILLER: Okay, okay. As a result of APL, and before California's NOMOS report was completed, we did have several of the federal projects that directly addressed the issues that were brought out by APL. Are any of those outstanding in your mind?

EHLERS: They were all outstanding when they were operational, but where we fell down, and I think we're better now than we were but we still haven't resolved the problem, we still don't have a delivery system to get the good programs into all of the schools. OTAN is nice, but there's nobody—

MILLER: So that dissemination remains a problem.

EHLERS: Yeah, in my opinion it does. Because when I got back into continuation ed from '86 to '89 . . . '86 to '89? Eighty-six to . . . for a few years. I got back into continuation ed and I was trying to use those projects in continuation ed, because alternative ed is alternative ed and we were dealing with the same kind of students, they just got them a little bit younger. Eventually, if they didn't get

their diploma, they might end up in adult ed. But then we had the two-year period when we as consultants in our regional territory were responsible for every alternative program.

MILLER: *Everything.*

EHLERS: I felt very comfortable with it because my background was high school—

MILLER: You probably were the only one that felt really comfortable with it.

EHLERS: Well, I had all the years [experience] in continuation ed, I had it in court and community schools, correctional ed, and adult ed, so I felt very comfortable. I felt that I could facilitate the cross-utilization of all of these programs, and I think I was fairly well successful in it, but, you know, you're talking about five years' experience in each of those different areas. And if somebody came into adult ed with a vocational background or an ESL background and that's all he knew, it was very difficult for them.

We had some people that really got interested in continuing ed, for instance, did a good job with the JTPA and all that, but the Clovis project, the little projects in Elsinore, all those projects. . . . The San Mateo [County] ACE [Adult Competency Education] project was one of the first ones where you really had the application of academics to the world of work. But when the

project director was no longer funded for two or three years, we still did not have a real powerful dissemination network.

And my last six months on the job, I'd go to my regional meetings or monthly meetings and somebody would say, "Well, I didn't know about that." And I said, "Well, did you check OTAN?" "Oh, no, I didn't do that." "Oh, do you have somebody that checks OTAN?" "No, I don't do that." And somebody who is sitting across from him will say, "Well, I checked. It was on there two weeks ago." So we're still not getting people to pay attention to OTAN. We gave them the equipment, we give them the monthly [fees] . . . you know, you can't stick their nose in the water.

MILLER: [Chuckling] Can't turn on their computer for them.

EHLERS: And in all fairness to them, they've reached the point where they might have continuation, opportunity, adult ed, independent study and all those things to worry about, and if they're understaffed they just can't physically do it. As I said, it's a problem from '76 and it's a problem now, except we've got a little bit better means for dealing with it, but not everybody deals with it.

MILLER: Certainly some of these projects were a little more successful at dissemination than others. You were talking about the Clovis project, CLASS.

EHLERS: Oh, yeah, they got to go all over the United States when they were at their peak.

MILLER: And that was through the National Diffusion Network.

EHLERS: Right, right.

MILLER: And then they also achieved publication. Now some of these other projects have been published. Can you—

EHLERS: Well, some of them just published and disseminated . . . out of their local city or county publications unit, or some of them would spend hours with their secretary xeroxing it, trying to get it out. But it's difficult. They can go to meetings up and down the state. And one of the things that . . . I think it's less of a problem now, but I know early on we had a high attrition rate in adult ed. You had people who were upward mobile as administrators, they go through the adult ed chairs and they move on. And because we've for so long been hiring part-time teachers, some of them come in and teach part-time in adult ed while they're trying to get into a full-time job in a comprehensive high school, and we have those attrition problems that created the need for ongoing dissemination and ongoing staff development.

MILLER: ICB-VESL [Integrated Competency-Based Vocational English as a Second Language] and the ESL Institute had also achieved commercial publication, like CLASS did.[5]

EHLERS: Right. But then you get a lot of the rural areas that people can't get to the meetings, and they're working during the day and teaching ESL at night, so there's definitely a problem with that. And I'll say that we've addressed it better in the last ten years than we've ever addressed it.

MILLER: Yeah. Yeah, information and . . . yeah, it's always a problem.

EHLERS: But that's a problem with our comprehensive schools.

MILLER: Sure.

EHLERS: Go talk to some of those nuts down there, they haven't gone to an institute for ten years.

MILLER: Yeah. When the NOMOS report was finally completed, when the NOMOS study in California was finally completed and their report came out in '81, did it have a more precise influence on policy in the state than. . . ?

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[5]ICB-VESL was developed by Chinatown Resources Development Center in San Francisco. The ESL Teacher Institute was sponsored by the Association of California School Administrators in Burlingame. These projects were developed with federal funds administered through the state.

EHLERS: I don't know if it. . . . Well, as I said, I think it just kind of confirmed for California that this is the way to go and that we did it. I think once you see these things reinventing the wheel or something or reassuring you that this is how it was, you know, you just go with both programs. And I think by . . . from the Texas APL study to the NOMOS, I think we kind of, as we got our progress reports, we realized that we were on the right track and it helped us move down the trail.

MILLER: It was the following year, Bob, that the state then actually mandated implementation of a competency-based program to be eligible to receive these federal funds.

EHLERS: Right.

MILLER: Can you discuss the policy-making process that led to that? Or was it just this gradual realization that you were talking about?

EHLERS: Well, I think that it just kind of evolved, and as we funded some of these projects and we'd see some of the things that were coming out and was happening in the field, these things then kind of were transitioned into our state plan through our . . . and our every four years of revising the plan. You know, you start a year ahead of time looking at what you've done the last three or four years, and that becomes part of it. But we didn't have any problem with it. You

know, competency-based education, sometimes called outcome based now, we've got . . . half the world thinks it's goofy and we shouldn't do it because we're getting away from the basics and. . . . You've got the Christian right's thing. That's something different.

When I talk competency-based education for our high school diploma programs in adult ed, continuation ed, I'm talking about the competencies that we have identified in the model curriculum standards. These competencies then have to be put into the competencies that are in the local district-adopted course [of] study. So, if people think I'm going to take somebody to church or talk to them about self-esteem, I'm saying, "No, let's not fight that battle." We're talking about what the state board has adopted as a model curriculum standard, and that's what we're talking about when a student has met the competencies for a specific five- or ten-unit course of study.

And the same thing for the ones that you need in the vocational area. You know, you're talking about the application of not only academic vocational skills, you're talking about getting to work on time, you're talking about how to fill out an application form and so on. We know these things are all necessary, and those are the competencies that I have always promoted.

MILLER: So let's talk a little bit about leadership during this time. From the mid-'70s to the mid-'80s, Don McCune and Xavier Del Buono provided the top management in adult ed. You've already mentioned that Xavier had asked you to come into adult ed. His job changed, or I guess he got promotions through the years. What was he when you first had contact with him?

EHLERS: Well, he came from the completion of his doctoral program at the University of Michigan—that was before I got in adult ed—and we were on the thirteenth floor of this building that was demolished to put up the new convention center. The building was vacant all the way down to the first floor, where we had a couple of offices until we moved to 1025 P Street. I remember very vividly Xavier coming in, because I had set up my office and had about the neatest office in the building. He came in and he said, "I want that office," and he ran me out of my office. [Laughter] I remember Xavier.

MILLER: Now you know you've got a dynamic leader. [Laughter]

EHLERS: So we've always joked about that over the years. But he had that charisma. He was a facilitator, he was cool, nothing rattled him. He had a caring attitude towards people, regardless of where they were coming on from, and I don't think I ever saw him in a confrontational situation. He'd just kind of sit back and let people

talk things out. On the other hand, he had a perception of what was good for education.

MILLER: It seems like he was talking about, you know, years ago, concepts that are just now being generally accepted.

EHLERS: Oh, yes.

MILLER: In terms of one-stop . . . [Chuckling] one-stop centers to receive all of the educational and vocational services and so on that . . . yeah, that we're just now talking about. And Don?

EHLERS: Don had that same capability.

[End Tape 1, Side A]

MILLER: This is Tape 1, Side B. Bob, we had just started talking about Don McCune.

EHLERS: Okay. Yeah, Don had the ability to also get the best out of people. He was a facilitator, he was low-keyed, and he provided a forum for people, good people that he brought in and special projects and stuff like that. And I think that's why he was so well-liked and did a good job.

MILLER: Okay. And then the field was . . . lost both of them within a week of each other. Can you enlighten us on that?

EHLERS: What year did Don die? Was that '86?

MILLER: Eighty-six.

EHLERS: Eighty-six, that's almost ten years ago.

MILLER: Xavier had just retired.

EHLERS: Yeah, well, then we had that void, and then it was, you know, that period of time where you reorganize and you go out and make a search for other people, or consider people that you have with you, and that's when . . . basically when Jerry [Gerald] Kilbert [Assistant Superintendent, Director YAAES Division, 1986-95] and Ray Eberhard took the helm, and we kind of firmed up the YAAES Division, bringing in—

MILLER: Tell us what YAAES is.

EHLERS: Youth, Adult and Alternative Education Services Division.

MILLER: Okay.

EHLERS: And we had the JTPA, we had the Employment Training Network, and we had the. . . . They change the names too frequently.

MILLER: Yes, they do.

EHLERS: Anyhow, four subunits, but they all dealt with alternative education. Now, we didn't mention our strategic plan for adult ed. We were the first unit to get a strategic plan [*Adult Education for the 21st Century*].

MILLER: Well, that, of course, was after . . . [in 1989].

EHLERS: Right.

MILLER: I mean, you kind of [Chuckling] . . . when Jerry and then Ray came back in.

EHLERS: Yeah, we then, once we got that underway, did a magnificent job, in my opinion. We then embarked upon the *Roads to the Future*, which was the strategic plan for alternative education. And meanwhile, they worked out the *It's Elementary*, the junior high [*Caught in the Middle*], and then they got to *Second to None*, which was about three or four years behind our strategic plan for alternative education, which in my opinion could have been a strategic plan for secondary education. And it boggles my mind today that once again they took *Roads to the Future* out of the publications list so nobody would buy it, even though there's 500 copies left in the Publications Office. I went over to ask them and they said, "Well, one person was responsible for taking that out," and he's the person who fought us for two years to keep it from being disseminated. But I'm of the opinion that *Roads to the Future* is about twenty years ahead of *Second to None*. We know that, given the proper attitude, that what works in alternative education can work in the comprehensive high schools equally or better than it [does] in alternative ed, because you've got the cross-section of all students from all ability levels. But just as most local school districts

put alternative ed off on one side—as long as nobody rocks the boat and makes no waves, you can do your thing—but they won't take the best of what you have to offer and cooperate or collaborate to work with, in our case, the Curriculum and Instruction Division. It's just like having . . . you might as well have one office in San Diego and one in Sacramento, as far as the amount of [cooperative] work they've done under our most previous administration. Maybe that will change with our new leadership. I hope it does.

MILLER: I was going to say, perhaps with the new leadership you could . . . I mean, that the *Roads to* [*the Future*] could even be reactivated. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Right. But many of the same people are still there, the survivors.

MILLER: Okay. [Chuckling] You had mentioned, and I want you to elaborate on it a little bit. We've mentioned competency-based high school diploma programs, and you've also mentioned the quality standards, and you had indicated that both of these you thought were really significant developments in California. I'd like for you to enlarge upon that. First of all, why don't you tell us a little bit. What are quality standards? Let's start with the definition.

EHLERS: Well, we had a little mini project that Ray Eberhard was nice enough to fund when I was working in continuation ed, and we

developed a set of *Quality Indicators for Alternative High School Diploma Programs*. So it's for secondary education; it was generic in the sense that you went through these [indicators]. [They] had to do with counseling, curriculum, administration, staff development, everything that goes into the establishment of a quality program. It was a self-administered checklist, generic, because if you talked about parent committees, you don't have parent committees in a juvenile hall school.

MILLER: In adult schools.

EHLERS: Well, some adult [schools] do have [student] committees, but the content was such that if you could meet this criteria you had what we would consider a quality secondary-education program. I used to [duplicate] those by the thousands and tell people, "Hey, send this over to your high school principal and see if he can meet them." I'll bet you [the] continuation or adult ed high school program can better meet these quality indicators than the comprehensive high school, when it comes to what they were doing with, for, or to kids. So we've been pushing those [indicators] for years and years. I think I did that in '88.

MILLER: So it's quite clear that you see. . . .

EHLERS: We know where we're going and we know how to get there.

MILLER: Okay. And that you would like to see the alternative programs be a workshop for the comprehensive programs.

EHLERS: Well, there are so many things, you know. Such simple things as . . . if you've ever gone to a comprehensive high school and sat in a classroom when a kid came back that was absent for two days and the teacher said, "What, are you back again? It sure was quiet when you were gone." In an [alternative] school they say, "Hey, we missed you. You know, you would have had that assignment done, you would have earned your five credits. You know, we don't want you to be absent." And that's just a very simple thing, but that's. . . . I personally think we're treating our secondary students worse now than we did twenty-seven years ago when I came to the Department of Education.

MILLER: Do you really?

EHLERS: I really do. And I think that's partly due to the lack of a professional ethic on the part of significant numbers of teachers. I taught in two school districts in Wisconsin, I taught in two school districts in California, and every one of those four years and four high schools I had a home room, I had to be in my classroom thirty minutes after school every day, I had yard supervision on a rotating

basis, I had to stand in the hall during passing periods, just the mere presence—

MILLER: Stand by your door.

EHLERS: The presence of an adult keeps trouble down. We had to go to PTA back-to-school nights. If we wanted to go to school, we did it on our own time in the evenings and Saturdays. Now they can deprive the kids of up to eight days of education because they don't want to come in a week before school and get staff development. I think this is symptomatic of what's happened in education. I'm sorry.

And I also have a very strong feeling that all of these activities fit within an eight-hour day. Now, to me an eight-hour day is a professional responsibility. If you know a doctor or a lawyer or a salesperson, if they can get by with an eight-hour day, that's a minimum day to them. And I don't really . . . don't want to hear the crap about taking papers home to grade. Because if you've got that many papers to grade, you just lay them out on your desk from three to five o'clock in the afternoon and grade those papers. And if a parent wants to come in and see you, or a student wants to come in and see you, they can see that you really are grading—

MILLER: You're available.

EHLERS: That you are grading papers. But when you see people running their real estate businesses from their classroom at three o'clock in the afternoon, or if you get run over in the parking lot, if you happen to be on the campus, and it's not just—

MILLER: You've obviously seen this. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Yeah. I've seen it with . . . not only in person but I've seen it with my own kids in school. Yeah, we're alienating kids through our attitudes, refusing kids to enroll because they're two weeks late to register. Hell, if the father got an emergency transfer from Chicago, would you deprive that kid of registering late? But because he might be a marginal kid and for some reason didn't show up at the doorstep the first day of school, you can't deprive him of his education. But they are, they're kicking them out. They're not letting them enroll if they're short in credits. How are you going to make up credits if you don't let them in school?

MILLER: This points out or leads to the growth in the community schools.

EHLERS: Oh, yeah, and you've got them all over the place.

MILLER: And they're growing by leaps and bounds.

EHLERS: Yeah, because they've been kicked out of the comprehensive schools. California has 510 or 515 continuation schools, and we've

got 810 or 812 high schools. More than one-third of our secondary schools are continuation schools, close to 200,000 students a year.

MILLER: Bob, as a field consultant you've obviously seen a lot of things up and down the state. What kind of changes have you seen in programs at the local level over the years in adult ed?

EHLERS: Oh, I think we've upped the quality of our educational programs, and I think primarily having the federal [funds helped]. You know, we in adult ed are the only special subject areas that really have significant amounts of staff development money that comes in through the ABE grant, and that has kept us . . . kept our heads *above water and given us that extra edge.* It's so bad out there now, we've got adult people who have the $500 that's mandated for staff development—I mean, the. . . . What is it? No, the. . . .

MILLER: Oh, they've got $3,500.

EHLERS: Thirty-five hundred mandated for staff development, and the district won't let them out. They can't go because the [high school] teachers [don't] have money to go, so they won't let the adult ed people go. Now, that's professional jealousy. If I was teaching a subject and I could not get away because there just wasn't money for my field, I would be happy for my friend to go [if he] could do that.

MILLER: Had the resources to do it.

EHLERS: Especially if it's categorical money. You know, if he had money and I didn't have any adult ed money, . . . well, I'd probably go on my own on Saturdays or evenings, but it's. . . .

MILLER: Well, certainly things like the ESL Institute and our ABE Institute have provided high quality [training].

EHLERS: Oh, yeah, and CASAS [Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System] institutes or competency-based—

MILLER: High-quality staff development.

EHLERS: Yes.

MILLER: We do continue to have a problem throughout the state with high turnover of staff, so, you know, a lot of the staff development we have is really necessary to keep staff up-to-date.

EHLERS: Right, it's because of our part-timers.

MILLER: Okay, can you comment on how much of a burden this is for—

EHLERS: Oh, it's a tremendous burden, because just before Prop[osition] 13 came we were starting to push for, and I think we were just starting to make a little progress, for adult programs to give full-time contracts to their teachers. But then when Prop. 13 came and we got only 50 percent of the revenue limit, you can't get full-time teachers with 50 percent of the revenue limit. There is no fiscal way you can do that. It's just impossible. And unfortunately we have so

many dedicated alternative people who don't even want to go back to the comprehensive high schools, but find it necessary to make a living, or they're teaching in two or three districts and not getting any benefits and wearing out their cars going from classroom to classroom. That's happening in community colleges now, too.

MILLER: Yeah, it's working its way up.

EHLERS: Even though they supposedly have some legal limit.

MILLER: What other kind of changes have you seen in the schools? You say you think that the quality of our programs are better.

EHLERS: Oh, I think we still . . . I think we still have dedicated teachers who are doing their best. Alternative educators go that extra mile. I mean, you can't find an ESL teacher that'll say, "No, you can't come in here because I can't handle any more." [Chuckling] The same with continuation people.

MILLER: Yes, where you have to fight the teacher and say, "You may not take another student in class."

EHLERS: Right, right.

MILLER: Which can be rather typical with ESL teachers sometimes, and—

EHLERS: I think dedicated teachers.

MILLER: Okay. Have you seen any improvement in the position of women in adult ed over the years?

EHLERS: Oh, I think they're taking over. [Laughter]

MILLER: Well, that's all right! [Laughter]

EHLERS: No, there has been a tremendous increase since I came aboard in '76, '78, and I think that's typical of the profession. If you just go through the state directory now and look at all of the superintendents who are female—I mean, large school districts, small school districts—it's just. . . . I think education always has been a leader. I mean, women were always elementary teachers and then they started migrating to junior and senior high. I think they have scored another victory in the administrative ranks now, lots of them. Lots of them.

MILLER: Okay. Do you see as much of the districts' bad apples being transferred into adult ed as used to be the case, people being kicked upstairs?

EHLERS: I don't know, I'm thinking more globally in terms of continuation and alternative ed. I don't know if that's as prevalent as it was, but it's probably more likely to happen in a small school district than it is in a large district. But what I see happening in large school districts—and large now, I'm talking about somebody that maybe has a 200-student continuation school, a 100 or 200 cap in adult

ed—we're seeing administrators overworked with multiple responsibilities.

I did a workshop in May at the state continuation conference. It was for new and/or interested administrators. You know, it's at the end of the year but it was for the first-year or people who just want a refresher. I think there were forty-five people in my seminar for a half a day, and when I asked for a show of hands, I think there was only about five or eight that did not have multiple responsibilities. Which means then they have to learn twice as much because you have to know just as much to be a continuation principal or an adult principal as you do to be a comprehensive high school principal. You need to know personnel—

MILLER: I would contend more.

EHLERS: You have to know. . . . Well, yeah, because you do the counseling, you do the suspensions, expulsions, and . . . you know, in a smaller system like that, but it's. . . . And then, once again, adult ed is the only one where you have freer access [to supplemental] resources to come to meetings and so on.

MILLER: Yeah, when I said "more" I was particularly thinking of the budgeting responsibilities that go with adult administration.

EHLERS: Well, yeah.

MILLER: That comprehensive school administrators don't have.

EHLERS: Well, they have somebody on their staff that's supposed to take care of that. But it's still that constant battle in alternative ed for when a GATE student goes to alternative ed, when a LEP [limited English proficient] student goes or a special ed student goes, that money is supposed to follow them, and in most districts [it doesn't]. They dump the kids out and send them over and keep the money at the high school.

MILLER: Bob, one of the things that I'd like to get your input on, because they can be really good or I've seen some really bad ones, and that's individualized learning labs.

EHLERS: Okay. Well, if it's a good computer lab, they've got programs that'll keep the teacher and student on track, but I can still probably find continuation schools where [some] guy's got a bunch of pigeon holes with 100 sheets for his class and he's still handing out the same piece of paper he handed out twenty-five years ago. But hopefully we're getting away from that. I think we've made improvements.

I think we in alternative ed have made more strides in alternative delivery systems for students—you know, group learning . . . oh, what do you call it? individual learning, community projects, independent study, meaning that the student has an independent

project for that class or that teacher that he can work on at home or in the classroom and so on. These things don't happen in the comprehensive high schools to the extent that it is possible to happen. And, you know, I can't get excited by the numbers, because when I was coming up through the ranks I was teaching when we had the explosion in student population and there wasn't enough classrooms, and we had. . . . I've had as many as thirty-six ninth-graders in a wood shop class that was built for twenty, and you have to have a work station and tools. And we made do. We did. . . .

MILLER: You made do. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: Well, no, and I think I did a good job. The more capable students were helping the less capable, because in shop your kids are always non-grouped, and that was at the time when everybody was grouped according to their ability, in the early '50s and late '50s. Now we're going back the other way, but shop has always been that way. But I did the same thing when I taught math, and thirty or forty kids in math class. So the numbers are. . . .

You know, one of the few things I agree with Pete Wilson on is it isn't just more money is going to make education better. They talk about commitment, being willing to change. . . .

MILLER: Would you have your own nominations for . . . whether you want to call them demonstration sites or exemplary schools or ideal places to visit if you want to see a good adult school? Any special programs that you've become familiar with that you'd like to—

EHLERS: Yes, I would. Every one in my region was exemplary.

MILLER: Oh, how nice! [Laughter]

EHLERS: No, there are some. . . . You know, each program is unique. Now, we've got . . . let's just take a couple examples. We've got districts that are [primarily located] in retirement centers: Acalanes. You know, probably 80 percent of their program is in senior programs. Santa Cruz is the same thing, a lot of retirement people there. You'll go to some places where 80 percent of their effort is in ESL, and I think they're each exemplary in their particular area. It's difficult in California because of the uniqueness of all of our communities to have uniqueness in all ten areas. But you get some of your larger programs, they cover all the bases, and I'm thinking [of] some of the ones in Santa Clara County, Alameda County. You know, I had a lot of programs in that area, but then we've got some little new-start programs with 15 units of a.d.a. where they've maybe generated 5 or 6, and they're doing some great things in one or two

classes there. But I think it's the dedication of the people that were doing the programs.

MILLER: Recently—

EHLERS: Oh, one point on that. And, you know, the California Continuation Education Association [CCEA], which is the counterpart to the CCAE [California Council for Adult Education], it's for teachers, counselors, support staff, and administrators. Okay, and they both have about the same size conferences every year, like 500 or 600 people in attendance, and they have maybe a few more continuation schools. But five years ago we started the model school program. Every winter a list of criteria is sent out. Well, it was the quality indicators that was the original list. That was the original list. They made some modifications to zero it in more on continuation, because remember I said it was generic. Anyhow, you self-nominate, and it's a joint venture between the Department of Education and the CCEA, the nominations are all reviewed by a committee, paper-screened first, some of them are just automatically not screened—I mean, are automatically screened out—and the others, the people are visited and they're given recognition at one of the major functions at each of the state conferences. Now we've got a five-year running of that, and this year they published a new

continuation ed handbook, as we did an adult handbook, and they're given their recognition in the appendix. So, if you wanted to know an exemplary program in a certain region, you just open up that back part of the book. And I think that would be a great venture for CCAE.

MILLER: I was going to ask, had you attempted to transfer that to adult ed?

EHLERS: No, they didn't. No, I didn't. I haven't. Somebody should. And you walk into a school, a continuation school especially, where you've got supposedly all the bad apples. If I were a parent who was a little bit hesitant about bringing my kid to continuation school, and you walked into the principal's office and there on a mural on the wall it said, "This is an officially recognized model continuation school by the California Department of Education," you're going to feel pretty good, because you might not see that on the front of the comprehensive school.

MILLER: Recently you've been promoting, or maybe that's not the right word, but I know that you've given several workshops recently on the 5 percent innovative grants. And they were authorized by legislation a few years ago, and at first they weren't picked up on very much. Can you talk to us about those and how that's going now?

EHLERS: Well, if they were ever going to hang a label on me, they probably would call me "Nontraditional Bob." And when something like this comes along, I think that's carte blanche to do whatever you want that will work for students, things that will expand their opportunities, expand the scope of operation, and just break from tradition like we've been doing in [alternative] education. And I think it's a fantastic opportunity, and if we don't start doing something like this I think we're going to run out of resources to provide services. If you can take 5 percent of your a.d.a. and run a TV lab that goes out over local cable TV for little or nothing and reach 1,000 students, or you could take that 5 percent and maybe reach 200, I think you've achieved something. On the other hand, if those students aren't coming for seat time in the 95 percent of your program, you're not generating any a.d.a. [Chuckling] So we've got to prove that it works for the 5 percent and get that increased to 10, 15, or 20, or whatever the legislature will go. But if we have 400-and-some school districts that have adult ed, and we only have twenty projects, the legislature is going to say, "Well, geez, we gave you the opportunity to be creative, innovative, and you're sitting on your duff. You've got twenty programs out of four hundred? Don't come to us for 10 or 15 or 20 percent."

MILLER: What kind of projects are being implemented?

EHLERS: Oh, workplace literacy, outreach through radio, through TV. We've got businesses that have brought the district in and said, "Hey, I will provide two full classrooms of computers if you will provide the teacher." Well, before [the innovative grants that class] would [have to] be open to the public. If you run it under your 5 percent it's workplace literacy, you're going to the workplace, you're dealing with the students in that particular organization that might need different skills than you'd be teaching in the classroom to people who wandered in from the community. Those are a couple examples. I guess L.A. has gone. . . . I only dealt primarily with my region, because originally I think I had about eight out of the original eighteen that ended up being funded, so that was pretty good. So I brought them together and, man, we had a hell of a time because everybody was learning from everybody else. So that's something that's got to be promoted.

MILLER: Bob, sometimes people in the field get frustrated with the adult ed unit because they don't perceive the unit as being an advocate for them in Sacramento, or an advocate for their needs. Can you talk about the limitations that are on consultants, or what you can and

cannot do, and what can be done to relieve these periods of tension between the field and the state?

EHLERS: [Chuckling] Well, I think that, number one, sometimes it's difficult to communicate the real pressures that exist here, or the short notification you get when you get a different interpretation from our legal office, to name two of the problems. There are two ways a consultant can work. He can plead ignorance and say, "Well, I don't know, you're going to have to wait until you get the official notification signed by Delaine Easton [Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1995–]," or you can say, "Well, we had a staff meeting yesterday, and this is what we were told and this is what we're hoping transpires. But you happened to see me today and I'm telling you what is expected right now." Okay, if that reverses 180 degrees and I go to my next meeting and somebody says, "Well, Ehlers, you told them up in Antioch that this was going to happen. Now you're telling us. . . ." I'd say, "Hey, I'm trying to keep you informed and I'm bringing to you what my perception is in as honest a manner as I can. But when those things change, hey, I. . . ." Part of my responsibility as a consultant was to be the whipping boy for people who were upset. And they had reasons to be upset, but that's part of my job.

MILLER: You actually see that as part of your job then?

EHLERS: Oh, heck yes. I see colleagues. Why, they get insulted, they never go back to that district again because somebody gave them a little hell. Well, you know, they get frustrated, we get frustrated. And, you know, I think that I see more professionalism in the alternative education organizations than I did, and I'm the past president of a CTA [California Teachers Association] chapter that had 800 members. Talk about subject areas, social studies, math, and stuff like that, the CCAE, the CCEA, both of their ACSA [Association of California School Administrators] affiliates, those people bust their fannies and they do a good job, considering what they have to put up with in trying to deal with the legislature. Like the 321 money when the legislature ripped it off, you know?

MILLER: And of course that's one of the things that the field was very upset about.

EHLERS: Well, it's upset, but when you've got a legislative caucus that has 200 CBOs pounding on their door, they see it a little bit differently than we do. We know what the problem is but we can't do anything.

And then the other one was reallocation of the a.d.a. You know, I said, "Hey, the letter has been prepared and this is what's going to happen and this is what we expect." And then two months

later they found out there wasn't going to be any reallocation. But if some of those people would have read their OTAN, they would have found out in two days instead of two months later.

MILLER: They would have known, yeah.

EHLERS: But no, it's frustrating out there. As I said, now they're dealing in multiple responsibilities. They might have a problem with adult ed today and one with continuation ed tomorrow. You know, your problems are never-ending when you are stretched thin and trying to do a good job. I've always told my people, I was up-front, I said, "Hey, this is my understanding. If I find out it's different, I'll call you or I'll get back to you, but, you know, this is all I've got to go on."

MILLER: Within the department, how much leeway do you have to push for interpretations or policies that you would like to have?

EHLERS: Depends on who you are. Bob Ehlers, well, I say, "Yeah, I don't see anything wrong with that." The first thing you've got to ask yourself is: "What's the penalty if you get caught?" With many of the things that we do that are not within the parameters of the Education Code, there's no penalty. Now, if the penalty is going to be loss of a.d.a., then I point that out and I say, "You know if you're below cap, well, you're going to lose it anyhow, so go for it." [Laughter]

No, I've always been a risk taker. And if you're doing something that is in the best interest of kids, it's kind of hard to get penalized for it if there's no financial or severe legal restriction.

MILLER: Okay.

EHLERS: I don't know if that's right or wrong, but that's been my policy.

MILLER: Yeah, I was trying to get at something a little bit different.

EHLERS: Okay.

MILLER: Is there any process by which the different units within the department have input into policy-making on up the line?

EHLERS: No.

MILLER: Or into interpretation of policy up the line.

EHLERS: Well, it depends on what you're talking about. With legislation, the legislative office sends the piece of legislation to whichever office it would affect. You have that. You react to the legislation.

MILLER: And you do react to it in a written way.

EHLERS: Oh yeah, in a very formal way. But then when it gets to the legislative office, there are very few people that go over. . . . I mean, the department's [relationship] to the legislature is a very hallowed ground. Only a few selected and invited people will go testify on a bill, depending upon what it is, public testimony. And

that's usually managers. Once in a while they'll take a person who might be a specialist in that field, but as far as. . . .

Well, let's take the issue of *Roads to the Future* versus *Second to None*. Nobody ever came to our division, that I know of, to sit down and talk with us about *Roads to the Future* or *Second to None* and integration of those. I'm sure Kilbert, Eberhard, I don't know about Thornton [Shirley Thornton, Deputy Superintendent, 1986-95], might have tried, but I don't know. You know, you can make recommendations, you can. . . . Well, Jerry Kilbert would always say, "Hey, send us a memo of things that you think we should advocate for next year, like legislation or whatever." And sometimes he did that and sometimes nothing got done about it, but that doesn't mean that he didn't take a look at it.

MILLER: That he didn't try.

EHLERS: Maybe he checked and didn't get back to you or whatever. But input has to come from the field as well as the department.

MILLER: Oh, certainly.

EHLERS: We're not practitioners.

MILLER: Certainly, I didn't mean that.

EHLERS: No, but no, it is important. And as I said, our professional organizations have done a fantastic job, and I think they've been

[productive]. You know, we talk about [these] organizations. Somebody has a group going now supposedly that is outside of all these things. Well, maybe these were people who got frustrated because their problems were different from the rest, but I think a clear head prevails all around. You know, the more organizations you get going, the less you can give attention, so it's got to be somewhat formalized, organized, and cohesive.

MILLER: You were telling me one story that I want you to repeat for us here, and that was about when Prop. 13 passed and the department's response to that.

EHLERS: Oh, you're talking about sensitivity.

MILLER: Yes.

EHLERS: Oh, yeah. Well, that was the major calamity of education in California. But when Prop. 13 passed. . . . That was '78?

MILLER: Eight.

EHLERS: I had just come from the Office of Program Planning and Development shortly before that, a year or two before that. They set up a bank of phones in a conference room, and only certain select people were to answer those phones on Prop. 13. All the calls were to be funneled to them. I was one of those persons. And again it was one of those things that you. . . . Because of the

sensitive nature of this issue, I mean, the day after it passed, summer school was canceled for the summer, and this was June 10th or something like that. They didn't even know where adult ed would be. You just talked to people and you tried to field their concerns, and if you couldn't answer your question, then you didn't shoot from the hip. I mean, you had to tell them, "Well, I will get that answer and call you back," or "If you will call back next week, we hope to have some direction on that." I mean, it was a very sensitive issue and. . . .

You know, consultants are human, they're like teachers, they're like administrators. We have some that . . . oh, shoot from the hip when they should take careful aim. [Chuckling] And we have people who have hoof-and-mouth disease, foot-in-mouth disease, and, you know, I think we probably have all been guilty of that somewhere along the line. But people are looking for honest answers, not necessarily the one that's going to make them feel the best, because it can't always be that way.

MILLER: Now, when you were fielding these calls after Prop. 13, were you there to answer questions about adult and continuation education, or did they bring in a group and brief you and you handled all calls?

EHLERS: No, the phones were all set up in a bank, and you finished a call and you might get another one. You didn't know what the subject was going to be. But we were briefed in a generic [manner] and had key people that we should contact, as I recall. It was kind of interesting to sit there after a catastrophe like that.

MILLER: Yes, yes.

EHLERS: It beat sitting in my office doing nothing, because we didn't know what we were going to be doing either. [Chuckling] At least I was active. And I don't like to be without a. . . . I don't like any dull moments in my life.

MILLER: Okay, let's see. . . . Well, Bob, as you look back over the years, who or what do you think have made things happen in adult ed in California? What's been the major influences?

EHLERS: I think it's been the alertness and the vision of our top administrators in the field, and we've got lots of them out there. You know, I could run off a laundry list right now. The list changes every ten years, but they learn from their colleagues and so on. You don't have that much influence in Sacramento. It's the practitioners in the field that have made adult ed what it is. That's my opinion.

MILLER: Okay.

EHLERS: We have some fantastic people out there. I just stayed on four years more than I had to, and I hated to leave this year. I just said, "I'm going to leave on May 1, and that's it." I made that decision fourteen months ago, no matter what was going to happen. So. . . .

MILLER: Do you think you'll stay involved in any way?

EHLERS: Oh, if they have any retired annuitant. . . .

MILLER: Programs?

EHLERS: Time they want, and they make me an offer I can't refuse, yeah.

MILLER: Because I know that . . . well, certainly the compliance unit uses a lot of retired annuitants.

EHLERS: But, you know, we've got block grants standing in the wings and we've got new administration playing musical chairs. I'm not interested until the end of the summer anyhow. When the dust settles and we get funded. [Laughter]

MILLER: Well, certainly not till the end of the summer, that's for sure! [Laughter] After all! So what have you found most rewarding about your work?

EHLERS: Oh, I think—

MILLER: You have a lot of enthusiasm for it, that's apparent.

EHLERS: I have never in my career had a bad assignment [pounding the table for emphasis]. But I was always . . . you know, if I saw something

coming down the pike I'd like a little bit better, then I would jockey for a new assignment. I've only had a couple of bosses that I didn't really appreciate, and I learned long ago you don't fight the boss. You try to do a job that somebody else will recognize and they'll let you come and work for them, because you're never going to win when you fight the boss.

But my most rewarding experience is all of the support and friendship that I've developed with people out there. They've been a fantastic bunch. Couldn't ask for a better group.

MILLER: We've got a nice family in adult ed. [Chuckling]

EHLERS: And alternative ed, basically.

MILLER: Yeah. So any final thoughts? Have we missed anything that you'd like to share?

EHLERS: I can't think of anything. You know me. [Chuckling] I don't shut up unless told.

MILLER: [Chuckling] Well, I'll let you keep talking.

EHLERS: [Chuckling] No, no.

MILLER: As I say, you just give us all the dirt in the department. People would love that. [Chuckling] So, well, thank you, Bob, both for the interview but especially for all of the contributions that you've made to adult and alternative education through the years.

EHLERS: Well, it's people like you that have made my job easier, Cuba.

MILLER: Well, thank you for that.

EHLERS: And a lot of you out there that just made life perfect for me.

MILLER: This interview was conducted as a part of the California Adult Education Oral History Project.

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ROBERT E. EHLERS

EDUCATION

Long Beach State College — M.A., 1958
University of Wisconsin - Platteville — B.S., 1954
Additional 75 Units at Various Colleges and Universities

CREDENTIALS

General Secondary - Life
General Elementary - Life
Pupil Personnel - Life
Supervision - Life
Secondary Administration - Life

TEACHING AND ADMINISTRATION

1969-1995 CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

- Adult Education Unit — 1991-95 & 1977-85
  - Liaison to: Department of Corrections
    California Youth Authority
    Department of Developmental Services
    Juvenile Court School Administrators of California
    Correctional Education Association
  - Adult Basic Education Act, Adult Education Section 321-353 Director
  - CBE Project Implementation
- Educational Options Unit — 1985-91
  - Consultant/Liaison - California Juvenile Court & Community Education Programs
  - Liaison - California Continuation Education Association, ACSA Continuation and Educational Options Committee
  - Consultant- SB 65 Program
- Office of Program Planning and Development — 1971-76
  - Liaison to Legislature's "Joint Committee on Goals and Evaluation"
  - Established California Teacher of the Year Program
  - Prepared Staff Implementation Guideline
  - Year Round School Consultant
- Continuation Education Consultant — 1969-71
  - Opportunity Education - Program Administrator

1965-1969	Riverside Unified School District • Founder/Principal of Abraham Lincoln High School, an "Exemplary Continuation High School"	Title III Project Director
1963-1969	California Youth Authority	Teacher, Substitute
1963-1965	Riverside Unified School District	Counselor, Child Welfare & Attendance
1958-1963	Riverside Unified School District	Teacher, Industrial Arts/Math
1956-1958	Corona Unified School District	Teacher, Industrial Arts
1954-1956	Wisconsin	Teacher, Industrial Arts/Math

HONORARY AWARDS/POSITIONS

- CDE Sustained Superior Achievement Award, 1994
- Special Award for Leadership and the Promotion of Excellence in Correctional Education - November 15, 1994 by Correctional Education Association Western Region
- Directors Award - In Recognition of Continuing Contribution to Correctional Education 1985 by Correctional Education Association - Western Region VII
- Special Proclamation for Contributions to Continuation Education Students in California -1990 by California Continuation Education Association
- Honorary Life Membership -1980 by California Continuation Education Association
- "Recognition of Many years of Service to District 12" -1993 by California Continuation Education Association, District 12
- "Certificate of Recognition for 25 Years Service to the State of California", October 1993
- Martinez Adult School Award for Leadership and Service -April 1994 (Presented During their 75th Anniversary)
- "Recognition for Outstanding Support to The California Army National Guard" April 1988 by California National Guard
- Commendation for Support and Leadership as Chapter president, Recording Secretary and as Active Member of Representative Committee" -1982-1988 by California State Employees Association
- California Council for Adult Education Honorary Life Membership Award, 1995
- California Continuation Education Association Award for Outstanding and Dedicated Service to the Youth of California & CCEA, 1995
- California Continuation Education Association, District XII Award for Many Years of Service & Friendship to the North State, 1995

COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES

Member - Sacramento Regional Transit District Board of Directors - 1971-78
Sacramento County Board of Supervisors Appointee
Charter Member - Elk Grove Citizens Planning and Advisory Committee - 1972-74
Elk Grove Lions Club - 1969-74

4H Club Leadership - 1971-77
High School Football Boosters Club - 1976-80
Pop Warner Football Boosters Club - 1972-76
St. Peters Lutheran - Sunday School Teacher, High School Youth Leader, Building Committee Chairman - 1969-85
Sacramento Democratic Club

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

California Teachers Association President - Riverside Chapter, Vice President, Building Representative
Association of California School Administrators Charter Member - 1976
California State Employees Association, Chapter 762 - Past President, Recording Secretary, Job Steward, Representative
California Continuation Education Association
Phi Delta Kappa

PUBLICATIONS

Continuation Education Handbook, CDE 1987
Individualized Instruction in Continuation Education, 1969-71
Orientation to Continuation Education, 1967

CALIFORNIA ADULT EDUCATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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PLACE Elk Grove
California

DATE May 31, 1995

Robert E. Ehlers
(Interviewee)

Erika J. Miller
(Interviewer)
(for California Adult Education
Oral History Project)