

# Teacher's new approach helps pinpoint learning problems



Chris Jordan/Daily Inter Lake

MARGARET GIRKINS talks with students in a new adult learning class at Flathead Valley Community College. Girkins has been director of the college's Adult Learning Center for the past 13 years and recently received a distinguished service award for innovative use of technology.

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Margaret Girkins has seen all manner of people walk through the door at Flathead Valley Community College's Adult Learning Center during 13 years as director.

From an expelled 16-year-old to a 60-year-old anticipating a return to school, they have a common goal: They want to buff up their ability to learn.

"Many of our students have been diagnosed with learning issues," she said. "But many have never had any testing."

Girkins recently won a distinguished service award for innovative use of technology to improve learning for these adults. She was one of five Montana literacy coaches honored at the Denver

conference of the National Association for Adults with Special Learning Needs.

The coaches worked together to spread the word about PowerPath, a program that solved a problem vexing teachers of adult with learning problems.

"It gives instructors some strategies to talk to the students about," Girkins said. "We don't want to just do the same thing that didn't work before."

She said the program doesn't make a formal diagnosis of a learning disability. But it allows the instructor, working with a student, to find out if he or she has learning problems.

"It prints out a report specific to that person," Girkins said.

She participated in a national model program started with money from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families. With state

support, Girkins and the others formed a coaches network to train others at 23 adult learning centers in Montana.

"The goal was not only to have people trained but to implement this process into their programs," Girkins said.

As part of this process, she worked first with a program in Havre and continues assisting an adult education program in Missoula with PowerPath advice.

According to Girkins, the PowerPath system begins with a screening which takes up to two hours over two appointments.

"I think one of the most powerful parts is that you are actually sitting with the person," she said.

For many, pinpointing their learning problems comes as a welcome

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## Some people need to learn in a different way

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revelation. Girkins said she hears a familiar refrain from these people.

"They say, 'For most of my life I've felt like I'm stupid,'" Girkins said. "Most of these people are very bright."

She explains to them that they just need to learn in a different way based on their PowerPath findings. The screening gives them strategies to help them learn and retain information.

"They began to feel they have more control over their learning and over their lives," she said.

The instructor works together with the student to develop a personal learning strategy. Girkins emphasizes that the learner helps put the plan together.

"That's the real power of it," she said. "The person becomes part of the process, not just a spectator."

Girkins heads up a staff that includes six adult education instructors. Adult education services are provided in Kalispell, Columbia Falls, Libby and Eureka.

"I run the [GED] testing center here," she said.

Along with people seeking to complete their high school education, the learning center also attracts potential college students who, after long absences from school, want to build up their skills and learning confidence.

Non-English speaking people have access to "English as a second language" classes.

"Sometimes we get parents who just want to help their kids with math," she said. "Some are just trying to learn to read."

All the classes are offered free due to a government grant and a local tax levy for adult education. Adults 16 and over not enrolled in school qualify to attend.

Girkins said she unfortunately has noticed a trend of more students leaving high school early.

"It's an epidemic across the country," she said.

Girkins said the GED was originally created after World War II to serve people who went to war instead of completing their high school education.

"It wasn't created for people who wanted to leave," she said.

According to Girkins, not every student succeeds in meeting the rigorous standards required to earn a GED. She said the staff helps as much as possible but some just aren't ready to make the commitment to succeed.

They are welcomed back when they find that motivation.

"We have an open-door policy," she said.

For older students, Girkins said the hardest part of the process is walking through the door for the first time.

"In that first step, we're out of our comfort zone," Girkins said.