



Literacy Assistance Center

2022 Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Education

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Testimony of Ira Yankwitt, Literacy Assistance Center

My name is Ira Yankwitt, and I am the Executive Director of the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC), a 39-year-old not-for-profit organization dedicated to strengthening and expanding the adult education system and to advancing adult literacy as a core value in our society and a foundation for equal opportunity and social justice. The LAC is also a proud member of the New York City Coalition for Adult Literacy (NYCCAL), a coalition comprised of adult literacy teachers, program managers, students, and allies from over 40 community-based organizations, CUNY campuses, and library programs across the five boroughs.

There are currently 3.9 million adults in New York State without English language proficiency or a high school diploma. Many of these New Yorkers have been on the frontlines of the pandemic, performing the essential work that has been sustaining our communities – as farm workers, grocery workers, home care workers, and parents. Others are service workers who lost their jobs and incomes and have faced a harsh reality with little or no safety net. While adult literacy education is only one part of the solution, it will be essential to a fair, just, and sustainable recovery.

The LAC is joining our colleagues in NYCCAL in calling on the legislature and the governor to **create a new Adult Literacy Education (ALE) Stabilization and Enhancement Fund, with a first year investment of \$15.6 million**, to effectively triple the rate of investment per student to enable ALE-funded programs to provide a fuller range of supports and services to the 5,600 New Yorkers that they currently serve.

When it comes to funding for adult literacy education, there are two issues. The first is the limited funding itself, which shuts the door to over 96% of the 3.9 million adults whose lives could be transformed through adult basic education, high school equivalency, or ESOL classes. The second is the inadequacy of the funding rates, which undermine programs' ability to provide the full array and depth of services that students need and deserve.

In December of 2017, the LAC released [*Investing in Quality: A Blueprint for Adult Literacy Programs and Funders*](#). Funded by the NYC Department of Youth and Community Development, the report details 14 "Building Blocks" of a comprehensive, community-based adult literacy program, identifies the resources needed to fully implement the Building Blocks, and includes a first-of-its-kind cost model. Based on the cost model, we found that community-based adult literacy programs would need to have their funding rates increased to approximately \$3,700 per student in order to fully implement the components and services outlined in the report. The current average investment per student in ALE-funded programs in NYS is just above \$1,200.

While tripling the level of funding might sound like a big leap, we know that, at the current funding rates, many of the critical program components that we identified in our report – such as full-time teachers, counseling, student support services, workforce transition services, professional development and planning time for staff, and integrated technology - are often compromised. Significantly increasing the funding per student through the ALE Stabilization and Enhancement Fund would enable ALE-funded programs to strategically invest in additional resources, services, and supports that will lead to greater outcomes and a wider range of impacts for adult literacy students, their families, and their communities.

Adult literacy education is an immigrant rights issue, a feminist issue, a racial justice issue, and an issue of educational justice. The majority of adults in NYS with limited literacy

skills are women and people of color. Most are immigrants. Others are BIPOC who were born and raised in the US but do not have a high school level education. Limited skills make it difficult for individuals to support their children in school, access health care, secure and maintain living-wage jobs, advocate for their rights as workers, and fully participate in the political process.

Adult literacy education is key to economic security and social mobility. Median wages for adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent are 24% greater than for those without a diploma. Immigrants who speak English “very well” are half as likely to live in poverty as those who do not. Furthermore, higher levels of literacy are associated with greater health knowledge, more efficient use of healthcare services, and the ability to manage chronic health conditions and communicate with healthcare providers.

Over the past two years, adult literacy programs pivoted to remote learning and support for their students, adapting class activities, providing information on the rapidly changing health crisis, and transforming programming to ensure that adult learners do not get left behind. Using platforms like Zoom and Google Classroom, students have continued to build their reading, writing, and math skills, prepare for their high school equivalency exams, and increase their English conversational skills. Parents have been supported by their programs to take on a greater role in the education of their school-aged children, a role that has become especially critical during these times.

At the same time, adult literacy students have struggled with job and income loss, food and housing insecurity, caring for family members, risks as essential workers, immigration issues, mental health issues, and access to healthcare – and all of these challenges have been exacerbated by limited reading, writing, English language, and/or digital literacy skills.

Tripling the level of investment per student would enable programs to upgrade their own and their students' technology, internet, and digital access; increase the number of full-time counselors and teachers; provide more professional development to instructors on topics like digital literacy and culturally responsive adult education; and expand the number of partnerships and referral relationships adult literacy programs have with other social and human service providers.

Literacy skills give individuals the power to understand and command information, to communicate in the language of access, to make informed choices, to access critical resources and opportunities, to advocate for themselves in the workplace, to fully participate in civic life and institutions and, ultimately, to transform their lives and the world around them. A greater investment in adult literacy education will mean that more people will have the skills to access better jobs and higher wages; more parents will be able to support their children's education; more families will be healthier; more people of all backgrounds will know and speak up for their rights; and more New Yorkers will participate in the democratic process. If we are truly a state committed to an equitable and just recovery, we should do no less.

Thank you for your attention.

Submitted by:
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