



2023 NYS Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Education

February 8, 2023

Testimony of Sierra Stoneman-Bell, Literacy Assistance Center

My name is Sierra Stoneman-Bell, and I am the Director of Strategic Initiatives at the Literacy Assistance Center (LAC), a 40-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. We also coordinate with the statewide NY Association for Continuing and Community Education (NYACCE).

Adult literacy education is an immigrant rights issue, a feminist issue, a racial justice issue, and an issue of educational justice. There are currently **3.9 million adults** in New York State without a high school diploma or English language proficiency. Most of these adults are women and people of color. Many are immigrants. Others were born and raised in the U.S. but do not have a high school level education. Yet, overall **state investment in adult literacy education provides classes for only 3%** of the population in need. Adult education must be part of New York's strategy to invest in communities and empower individuals to secure living-wage jobs, support their families, access healthcare, and fully participate in the democratic process.

The LAC is joining with NYCCAL and NYACCE to call on the legislature and the governor to **restore and increase investment in NYSED's Adult Literacy Education (ALE) funding stream from \$7.8M to \$27.9M to serve nearly 10,000 adult learners**. Our priorities are as follow:

- **Restore** current Adult Literacy Education funding (ALE) to **\$9.3 million** to keep programs whole. This means reversing the \$1.5M cut in the Governor's budget that would take away opportunities from over 1,000 students.
- **Stabilize:** Invest an additional **\$9.3 million for the ALE Stabilization and Enhancement Fund** to begin to stabilize and enhance ALE programs by increasing the rate per student and allowing providers to better serve the **6,600 New Yorkers** enrolled. The ALE funding line must be amended in the budget to allow for additional funding to go towards existing programs.
- **Expand:** Invest an additional **\$9.3 million in FY24 to reach and serve an additional 3,300 students** at an increased rate per student.

When it comes to funding for adult literacy education, there are two main issues. The first is the limited funding itself, which shuts the door to over 97% of the adult New Yorkers whose lives could be transformed through adult basic education, high school equivalency, or English 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.

The ALE funding priorities outlined above are geared to address both issues simultaneously: 1) sustain and strengthen programs to serve current adult literacy students, and 2) expand services to reach more students, including new arrivals. We know from research and experience that this is a smart approach that will lead to greater outcomes and a wider range of impacts for adult literacy students, their families, and their communities.

In 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 2017 dollars) to fully implement the components and services outlined in the report. The current average annual investment per student in NYS ALE-funded programs is just above \$1,200.

We urge the state to move closer to covering actual program costs by doubling the level of investment per student in FY24. This would enable programs to upgrade their 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.

In New York City, the [Adult Literacy Pilot Project](#) has shown the success of this approach. The City Council created the \$2.5M Adult Literacy Pilot Project, which funded 19 community-based adult literacy programs to invest more per student and strengthen and enhance services. As a result, programs reported significant increases in student engagement, staff engagement and retention, digital literacy skill gains, access to culturally responsive education, educational gains, workforce preparation, and student support services. The NYC Adult Literacy Pilot Project offers a successful example of how innovative funding can bolster the resources and build the capacity of current adult literacy programs. New York State can apply the lessons learned from this pilot to strengthen adult literacy education across the state.

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 future, we must strengthen and expand educational opportunities for all New Yorkers.

Thank you for your attention.

Submitted by:

Sierra Stoneman-Bell, Director of Strategic Initiatives

Literacy Assistance Center

85 Broad Street, 16th fl

New York, NY 10004

sierrasb@lacnyc.org