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NJ adult literacy programs focus on better-educated children and stronger workforce

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(Photo: ~Photo by Monica Chenault-Kilgore)

More than 17 percent of New Jersey's adults, many of whom are parents, lack the basic literacy skills necessary to comprehend a note from their child's teacher requesting a conference, to help with homework or read a bedtime story.

According to advocates, these are low-literate adults who are unable to read, write, and speak in English at levels of proficiency necessary to help their children succeed in school.

While the causes for low literacy in adults are complex, the impact on children of low-literate parents can be devastating. Research from ProLiteracy, a national adult literacy organization, states there is 72 percent chance that children with parents with low literacy rates will be at the lowest reading levels, which in turn becomes a

contributor to many issues these children will face as young adults.

Elizabeth Gloeggler, chief executive officer for the Edison-based Literacy New Jersey, an adult literacy program providing direct services and support for a network of literacy programs operating in all 21 counties, feels that there is a great divide within this educationally rich state. She wants to bring attention to this issue, particularly this week, which has been designated Adult Education and Family Literacy Week by the National Coalition for Literacy (<http://#AEFLweek>).

"There are pocket communities where low literacy is pervasive and children are most likely being left behind as a result," she said. "What we see happening is parent[s] that are struggling with literacy. They don't do pre-literacy things with their kids. When you get that kid to kindergarten they are already behind and are in school with kids who have been read to since being in the womb. If they are already behind they continue to stay behind. Parents that are struggling with literacy don't know how to participate in their child's education."

READ:[Literacy efforts in Somerset County \(/story/news/local/how-we-live/2017/01/06/somerset-county-learn-literacy-volunteers-somerset-county/96159940/\)](/story/news/local/how-we-live/2017/01/06/somerset-county-learn-literacy-volunteers-somerset-county/96159940/)

READ:[Central Jersey cares about literacy \(/search/literacy/\)](/search/literacy/)

READ:[Central Jersey's Caring Community in action \(/caring-communities/\)](/caring-communities/)

Jessica Tompkins, chief operations officer for Literacy NJ, agrees.

"In New Jersey even though we have high graduation rates we have people who don't finish high school," she said. "The 17 percent low literacy rate, which is below the 14 percent national average, means we have a lot of people who are not connected and are getting left out."

Gloeggler added: "If we don't fundamentally change something in that home around the parents, we're never going to fix it. We're trying to fix one half of the problem and do nothing about the other half. If we would spend five cents for every dollar that we spend on youth education on adult education then we can be a team together. The teachers can't do it all by themselves."

Breaking the cycle of low literacy

High school dropout rates signal the need for adult literacy programs further down the road. Nationally one in six young adults drop out of high school. With a graduation rate of 86 percent, New Jersey is below the nation average. Although there has been improvement over the years, the rate commands attention as states compete to attract a roster of new and emerging businesses to the state via the quality of their workforce.

Literacy NJ strives to remedy by working toward breaking the cycle of low literacy.

"We want to go out of business," Gloeggler said. "We don't want any more kids coming to us in 10 years or 20 years. We look at the drop-out rates. If we see a school has kids dropping out, we know we will see them at our doors when they are 25 or 35 or 45. The opportunities don't get better when that's what happens."

Adults carry out many roles in their home from parent to role model. Gloeggler recounts how one of the program's participants, a single mother of two who dropped out of school and was reading at a fourth-grade level, was able to turnaround a negative family pattern.



Left, Rosa Nicks, Plainfield Public Library Literacy office manager and Scott Kuchinsky, coordinator of Literacy Services. (Photo: ~Photo by Monica Chenault-Kilgore)

"She had a daughter who [also] dropped out of school and a son who was still in school but having trouble," she said. "The mother didn't have the tools to know what to do about that. Statistically, if you drop out, your children are more likely to drop out. She was working with her tutor and bringing in these notes from [her son's] school that she didn't know how to read. She then started meeting with her son's teacher to see what help she could get for her son and saying to him you're not dropping out we're going to figure this out. She began coming home every week [from her tutoring class] and sitting

down at the table doing her homework. At the same time she was asking her son to do his homework at the table.

"Something fundamentally changes when all of a sudden it's about how are we going to finish this education verses you're not doing well so you can drop out," she added. "Her son graduated. He was the first person in the history of their family to ever graduate from high school.")

Brenda Rodas, an Elizabeth resident and mother of three children, ages 15, 13 and 11, came to the United States more than 10 years ago from Guatemala. She struggled with English which kept her from communicating with her children's teachers and obtaining a job. She had been an office assistant in her country but was unable to secure a similar professional position due to her language skills. Rodas completed the Literacy NJ English as a Second Language (ESL) program at the Elizabeth Public Library after a year and half of tutoring.

"It was a blessing for me," Rodas said. "Now I feel confident about myself. I can talk to the teacher, send them emails, and also go to the doctor. I have friends that still struggle with English. They ask me to go with them to the doctor and the school. I can help other people.

"I am looking for a better job now," she added. "My youngest said 'Mommy I'm so proud of you.' "

While literacy funding is largely directed toward youth, Gloeggler believes a missing piece of the financial puzzle is focusing on adult literacy to build successful families.

"We may not take someone who is reading at second- or third-grade level and get them to be reading at a college level, but what we do is fundamentally change something in the home," Gloeggler said. "All of a sudden they are bringing reading material into the home. They are caring about the education of their kids. If we work together as a team, invest in adult education and reinvest in education for kids, we have both pieces."

Adult literacy advocates see a completed puzzle as an image of healthy families, citizens and contributors to a dynamic workforce. Along with high school drop-out rates, incarceration and recidivism rates, generational poverty, underemployment and even difficulties in decision-making related to healthcare can be attributed to adult low literacy.

ProLiteracy statistics indicate that 75 percent of state prison inmates did not complete high school or can be classified as low literate. By partnering with federal, state and city funded literacy organizations and employers, adult literacy groups are able to bring those in need out of the shadows to proactively address issues impacting families.

Improving job opportunities

Low literacy is an extremely sensitive issue due to the stigma and embarrassment of an inability to read. Gloeggler said many individuals hide in the shadows because they are embarrassed about the things they can't do.

"They aren't standing on the corner shouting advocating for what they need," she said. "We are asked by people to meet them two towns over from where they live because someone [might] see them in the library getting help."

Most low literate adults tend to isolate themselves, stay in one job or neighborhood for safety of a trusted and familiar pattern which, in many cases, leads to a perpetuating cycle of underemployment. Job advancement is one of the main reasons adult literacy classes and resources are sought out.

Scott Kuchinsky, coordinator for the Plainfield Public Library's Literacy Services program, oversees a number of free services and resources such as basic skills development, GED preparation, ESL and citizenship, as well as job and career related certifications that are available to residents in the surrounding area.

"Libraries have been stepping in to provide [adult literacy] services because every community has a library," Kuchinsky said. "We have a legitimate foothold in every community. A huge advantage with libraries is that folks trust us. Adults feel safe."

Adult literacy in Plainfield is viewed from a jobs perspective, he said.

"Plainfield has a 70 percent graduation rate, that is lower than the rest of the state, and an unemployment rate that's much higher than other areas," Kuchinsky said. "We've worked with the Department of Labor for many years and just received a large grant aimed at helping people get secondary training to earn industry recognized credentials for jobs. Still the high school diploma is the prerequisite for everything."

Some program participants have a diploma but are unable to pass basic assessments to qualify for higher paying career jobs.

"We get people who have a high school diploma and they want to get into a secondary training program that requires them to test above Ninth grade math on their assessment," he said. "They come to us and we hook them up with someone who can get them to that point."



Left, Roberta Karstadt, Plainfield Public Library Literacy volunteer, and Tracy Spann, program participant. (Photo: ~Photo by Monica Chenault-Kilgore)

Volunteers build bridge to literacy

Services provided by Plainfield Public Library and Literacy NJ, like similar organizations around the state, are delivered by a cadre of volunteers. With almost 1,000 additional students waiting to be matched with tutors, there is always a need for more tutors.

Currently, volunteer ranks are comprised of teachers and retired teaching professionals. However, having experience as a teacher is not criteria for being a literacy volunteer. Volunteers from different backgrounds and professions are welcome and are matched based on a student's needs. All volunteers go through a four- to five-week training program and are supported through ongoing training throughout their volunteer life cycle.

"One thing that distinguishes effective teachers is that students know that you care," Kuchinsky said. "All you have to bring me is two hours a week and show me that you care. I will find a way to use you. If you don't feel comfortable [teaching] a class, you can be a conversation partner or help as a teacher's assistant. I will find a way to make it work."

Roberta Karstadt, an Edison resident and retired teacher, has been a literacy volunteer for the Plainfield program for more than 20 years. She currently taught GED and Basic Literacy courses.

"Adults are strongly motivated on their own," Karstadt said. "They're not here because they have to be, they're here because they want to be and that's a big difference. They lack confidence [and are] very pleased when they start doing it then realize they can."

Karstadt stressed that as a literacy volunteer, patience and flexibility are necessary when helping adults overcome hurdles to learning. Her students may stay in the program well beyond the six- or 12-week period because their situations change. Also students may fail assessments and testing several times before they successfully pass.

"Our job is to keep encouraging them to try," she said. "Life itself is a challenge. It's hard to coordinate going back to school with job responsibilities. Generally we work for several months and fit in time off when children are off. We [volunteers] have to accommodate a rolling schedule."

Tracy Spann is one of Karstadt's students. Spann is a former professional boxer whose impressive career achievements landed him in New Jersey's Boxing Hall of Fame. He spent his youth in the ring as an amateur fighter and is now taking time to earn his GED. His goal is to attend college and pursue a career in law. Spann attends class once a week and said that he has improved his focus, reading and math.

While Literacy NJ is always looking for volunteers, the greater need is in establishing a conduit of financial support for volunteers who have made the grassroots commitment of service to the organization. Over the past year, the volunteers have provided more than 154,000 hours of free tutoring to more than 5,700 adults.

"Every time we have training [for volunteers] sessions, we fill them," Gloeggler said. "It goes back to resources. If we had more dollars, we could run more volunteer tutor training sessions. Volunteers are extremely cost effective but they are not free. If we don't support volunteers then we don't have successful experiences."

"We need more people who care about this issue and are ready to roll up their sleeves and help us make friends that are willing to invest," she added.

"We need leadership to make sure this we can help a lot more people."

READ: [The MyCentralJersey Super Summer Reader program \(http://preview.mycentraljersey.com/search/summer%20reader/\)](http://preview.mycentraljersey.com/search/summer%20reader/)

Take action

To volunteer, donate or for more information about Literacy New Jersey, call 732-906-5456, or visit litracynj.org (<https://litracynj.org/>).

For more on the Adult Literacy Services of the Plainfield Public Library, call 908-757-1111.

For information about Literacy Volunteers of Somerset County, call 908-725-5430 or visit www.literacysomerset.org (<http://www.literacysomerset.org/>).

For information about literacy services provided by Hunterdon Helpline, call 908-782-4357 or visit www.helplinehc.org/literacy-services (<http://www.helplinehc.org/literacy-services/>).

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