

Abstract

“Adult Literacy for Workforce Development”

By: Jessica Fu

This proposal explains how supporting workforce development starts with supporting adult literacy centers. The purpose of this proposal is to convince government officials that literacy is something that needs to be encouraged within the community because we want to further workforce development, improve the economy, and lead future generations to the path of literacy. This proposal explores the relationship between the promotion of adult literacy centers and the community’s literacy rates, academic achievement levels, workforce readiness, intergenerational illiteracy, and economy.

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Adult Literacy for Workforce Development

About 24% of Baltimore's population is living below the poverty line, which is an income of \$20,090 per year providing for a family of three. In addition, 35% of children are living below the poverty line and 61% are living in households with an income of less than two

“Literacy” is a term that most people understand as meaning the ability to read and write. However, literacy as a concept encompasses many different kinds of literacies: functional, cultural, academic, and critical. In these subsections of literacy:

Functional refers to basic reading and writing skills for work and civic life, such as reading emails, filling out various forms, and following instructions and procedures.

Cultural refers to having cultured knowledge and habits, such as conflict resolution skills in a work environment, and proper etiquette in client meetings and business conferences.

Academic refers to scholarly skills, such as articulating clear arguments and constructing informative, concise emails.

Critical refers to consciousness of power relations and structural injustices, such as understanding organizational structures and ethical practices (Deans 69).

times the poverty level (Malter). These facts correlate with the reality that 36% of Baltimore's adult population lacks basic literacy skills (Holden). In addition, with the decline of manufacturing and shipping industries, there are not many job opportunities for this population to rise out of poverty. However, there has been an increasing number of jobs- seeking white-collar, college-educated workers who are obtaining employment (Malter). Therefore, Baltimore's first step in bridging this skills gap should be to work with adult literacy centers to improve adult literacy rates and help adults take and pass the GED test. Not only will a high school diploma allow adults to be eligible for above minimum wage job opportunities, but it will also promote workforce development and stimulate Baltimore's economy.

Why Adult Literacy is Important for Workforce

Development in Baltimore

We must address illiteracy in Baltimore because as mentioned before, about 36% of Baltimore's adult population lacks basic literacy skills (Holden).

This not only prevents them from entering or doing well in the workforce, but also prevents the workforce from further developing. For example, the workforce stagnates when positions are left unfilled, because companies cannot find qualified people to fill the jobs. This also contributes to preventing the advancement of Baltimore's economic environment. In addition, the children of illiterate or low-literate parents are more likely to be illiterate and drop out of school. For example, data has shown that children raised by at least one illiterate parent are twice as likely to be illiterate (Hansen). Therefore, Baltimore needs to increase funding for adult literacy programs because adults unable to meet jobs' basic literacy requirements leads to a deficient workforce. In addition, improving the workforce also leads to a better economy, and illiteracy often leads to intergenerational illiteracy that only perpetuates an insufficient workforce.

Lack of Adult Literacy in Baltimore Leads to a Deficient Workforce

Workforce development directors in the Baltimore region reported basic math and reading skills deficiencies, which leads to a skills gap and insufficient workforce. For example, interviews revealed low levels of literacy, lack of basic math skills like working with fractions, and poor written communication skills inadequate for available jobs. And, from the job seekers' perspective, surveys indicated that 30% reported low math skills as a barrier to employment and 14% reported low literacy skills as a barrier. Therefore, this skill gap has led to a high unemployment rate in the area, with a low labor force participation rate ("Barriers to Employment" 16-17).

As mentioned before, while 36% of Baltimore's adult population lacks basic literacy skills (Holden), increasingly more jobs require at least a high school diploma. For example, over 53% of new jobs that are expected to be created in Baltimore between 2012 and 2020 have a

minimum education requirement of a high school diploma, in addition to some time in higher education (“Barriers to Employment” 14). Because adults with low literacy skills do not have the education to earn a high school diploma, this makes them ineligible for newly created jobs.

The more adults with high school diplomas, the stronger our workforce becomes. Therefore, rates of adult literacy need to be increased, in order to lead to more adults earning their diplomas. After all, 13% of workers in Baltimore reported that not having a high school diploma became a barrier in finding a job (“Barriers to Employment” 17). In addition, a study by Federal Reserve economists reveals that a state’s high school and college attainment rates are important factors in explaining its per capita income growth, compared to other states (Berger and Fisher). Therefore, as reflected in its per capita income growth, a higher high school graduation rate correlates with a better, more productive workforce.

A More Educated Workforce Means a Better Economy

Baltimore’s current workforce is not meeting the needs and requirements of companies and organizations, which shows how illiteracy and lack of high school educated adults decreases the advancement of Baltimore’s economic environment. For example, reports show that adult illiteracy in the U.S. costs about \$240 billion each year. This sum is the accumulation of lost industrial productivity, unrealized tax revenues, welfare, crime, poverty, and other social factors (Hansen).

Meanwhile, funding adult literacy has been proven to have a high return on investment, in regards to economic returns, public assistance and welfare, crime prevention, and health. According to Chiswick and Miller in the *Journal of Labor Economics*, investments made in literacy training have an economic rate of return of 17%-34% in the U.S., even with variables

such as initial educational attainment, work experience, geographic location, and country of origin. And, in regards to public assistance and welfare, reports have shown that there is an over-representation of illiterate and low-literate people receiving public assistance. Therefore, rates of improving adult literacy can decrease the amount of people living in poverty, which allows government resources to be invested in other areas for economic growth. In addition, literacy is a factor in crime prevention, as 79% of 19-23 year olds on public assistance who were arrested in the previous year had below average basic skills. This shows how funding adult literacy could stop the cycle of prisoners being over-represented at the lowest literacy level (“Literacy Works” 19-21). Breaking this cycle of crime helps the economy because the large costs crimes impose on taxpayers, who fund police personnel, courts, jails, and prisons, can then be allotted for promoting economic growth (Shapiro and Hassett). In addition, funding adult literacy also improves general health. For example, 20% of Americans aged 45-65 are at the lowest literacy level, so they may not be able to fill out medical forms or read instructions on a medicine bottle. And as the health of individuals is what drives the nation’s ability for economic development, funding adult literacy will improve the country’s capacity for economic growth.

A more educated workforce in Baltimore can also lead to a better statewide economy, because businesses consider workforce quality their top criteria when deciding locations for future operations. For example, business surveys show that a highly skilled workforce is the top criteria for selecting locations. Therefore, by funding adult literacy, Baltimore can leverage a highly skilled workforce when competing with other states to attract more businesses (“Barriers to Employment” 26).

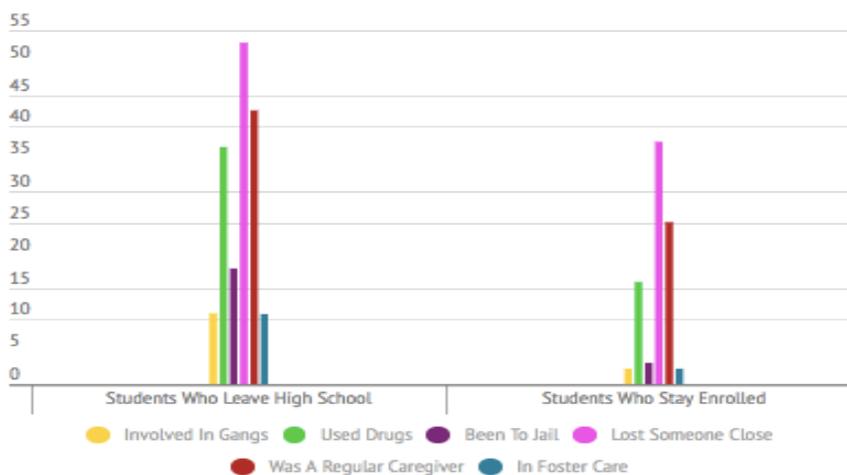
Barriers to Literacy and Education

Literacy and education can be easily attainable for some people, if they grow up in encouraging environments with good school systems. However, that is not the reality for many people. One case that displays multiple barriers to literacy is the case study, *Other People's Words*, by Victoria Purcell-Gates. Purcell-Gates focuses on the complexities of learning to read and write, through detailing Jenny's (mother) and Donny's (son) struggle to become literate. As members of the urban Appalachian culture, they come from a traditionally non-literate world. Therefore, Donny has no awareness of the meaning and uses of written language. For example, in routine instructions such as finding words to fit into the blanks on a worksheet, he uses his fingers to measure words to "fit" the blanks of the same length. And when bringing home homework, Donny finds his parents are unable to help him with it. In addition, without literacy skills, Jenny cannot complete a parent survey because of the terminology, programs, and issues mentioned in the survey. However, without understanding these contexts, many would erroneously attribute lack of school success to Donny having deficient abilities and Jenny not caring about her child's education. But it was the cultural context that became a barrier to literacy, as well as the school system's failure to understand students' cultures and accommodate minorities (West).

And in regards to barriers to a high school education, a study interviewed over 200 Americans who left high school and analyzed over 3,000 survey response, and found that growing up in a "toxic environment" served as a major barrier to finishing high school. A "toxic environment" is created when students experience traumatic events like violence at home or at school. For example, of the survey respondents, 30% reported that they were abused, 22% reported that they were homeless, and 18% reported that they spent time in juvenile detention.

The reality is that these circumstances make students less likely to graduate high school, as shown by the following graph that compares students who left high school with students who graduated high school. This graph shows how students who left high school are more likely to have endured education barriers such as an unstable home life or been involved in illegal activity (Klein).

Characteristics Of Students Who Leave High School



Share

infogram

Illiteracy Affects the Workforce for Future Generations

Generation after generation, illiterate individuals perpetuate the cycle of illiteracy in society. Children from illiterate households are more likely to be set on a path of illiteracy. For example, growing up with illiterate parents means that children will not be able to get help from their parents for school and literacy needs (“Poor Students”). These needs include helping with homework, reading to them, reading school memos, and understanding how the school system works (“The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy”). There have also been studies that show a child’s academic performance will be higher if he/she has highly educated parents, and lower if he/she has less educated parents. For example, the academic achievement advantage for

adolescents with highly educated parents and the academic achievement disadvantage for adolescents with poorly educated parents makes up a difference of 85 percentage points (“Poor Students”).

In addition, illiterate parents are more likely to have lower educational expectations for themselves and for their children, which also perpetuates a cycle of illiteracy and poverty. For example, they often place importance on work rather than education, and this leads to a cycle of generations rarely doing well in school. And doing poorly in school, having a high absentee rate, and having to repeat school years before most likely dropping out of school, continues this cycle of poverty (“The Economic & Social Cost of Illiteracy”). This shows how illiteracy is not family-sustaining, and leads to intergenerational illiteracy that affects the community and workforce as a whole. Future generations represent our future workforce development; we need to focus on improving adult literacy rates that are directly tied the success of our future workforce.

Workforce Development Starts with Improving Adult Literacy

Funding solely to public schools to create a stronger workforce does not make all the difference in literacy rates. For example, as mentioned earlier, children raised by at least one illiterate parent are twice as likely to be illiterate. In addition, the U.S. Department of Education found that introducing books to children at home is the most important determiner of initial success for children. And, the National Adult Literacy Survey found that children are three to four times more likely to drop out of school if they started school without basic literacy skills (Hansen). Therefore, while children need a good education system, the most successful learning experiences start at home, with adults supplementing their children’s education.

Baltimore actually has one of the U.S.'s highest per-pupil spending levels; however, this funding has not been effective, as shown by six Baltimore City schools not having any students score proficient in math or reading in 2016. In addition, data has shown that Baltimore has the lowest rate of mobility out of poverty in the U.S., which is directly tied to both education and economic opportunity (Arnett). Therefore, there it takes more than school funding to raise literacy rates and student achievement. School quality must be good, but the education level of adults and parents is a key determinant of student achievement.

Adult Literacy Programs

Adult literacy programs have proven effective in helping adults learn to read and write, and helping adults earn their high school diploma. For example, Strong City Baltimore's Adult Learning Center has provided free classes in Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English Language Acquisition (ELA/ESL/ESOL) for more than 20 years to Baltimore residents. The ABE program provides training in reading, writing, and math, with the goal of helping individuals obtain their GED. And, the ELA program provides English language instruction to individuals who speak other languages. Therefore, every year, this organization allows for 600 native-born and immigrant adults in Baltimore to empower themselves both personally and professionally, through helping build skills through a learner-centered setting (Adult Learning Center). This shows how adult literacy programs do make a difference, and educate adults for a more developed workforce and economy.

Conclusion

We must fund and support adult literacy within the community because we want to further workforce development, improve the economy, and lead future generations to the path of literacy. This is why we need the help of the Baltimore City Council to build our community by promoting adult literacy centers, which will increase literacy rates, increase high school education levels, stop the cycle of intergenerational illiteracy, and grow our economy.

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