



**Beyond
Literacy**
LEARNING FOR
WORK & LIFE

10/24/2023 Literacy Testimony
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at Beyond Literacy,
SE Pennsylvania's Leading Title II
Adult Education Organization

About Beyond Literacy (BeLit)

In a city where 50% of adults are challenged by their lack of work-ready skills, BeLit provides educational access and increases economic opportunity creating a more equitable and productive Philadelphia. Serving 1500 working-age adults, BeLit delivers high-quality classroom instruction and workforce training that breaks down barriers and equips under-represented workers. Our core programs include:

- ✓ Adult Basic Education
- ✓ High School Equivalency
- ✓ English Language Proficiency
- ✓ Integrated Training and Pre-apprenticeship
- ✓ Family Literacy
- ✓ Digital Literacy



THE NEED

In 2018, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the results of a 5-year study* showing that over 50% of adults ages 18-64 in Philadelphia read and comprehend at the equivalent of a 5th grade level *or below*, requiring further education in order to enter or advance in the workforce. That means half the adults in our city struggle to complete a job application.

Literacy is vital to human and economic development. Research links low literacy levels to poverty, poor health outcomes, and the likelihood of incarceration. It's not a coincidence that Philadelphia is the most impoverished of America's largest cities *and* has one of our nation's lowest functional literacy rates. That's the Philadelphia story. Meanwhile, across the Commonwealth:

- 396,637 (18%) of adults between ages 18 and 64 have literacy and numeracy skills at or below the 8th grade level.*
- 646,612 working adults between ages 18 and 64 lack a high school credential.*
- 387,549 do not speak English well or at all.
- In the last 5 years, over 68,000 students dropped out of high school.*
- In the last 12-15 months, we have received unprecedented surging demand for services from both American and foreign-born adult learners resulting in crowded programs and growing wait lists.

Data demonstrates the generational impact of this silent crisis:

- The leading predictive indicator of a child's academic success is the reading level of that child's parent or primary caregiver, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income. (1)
- Children of adults who did not complete high school are 4 times more likely to drop out of high school themselves. (2)

* Source: <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>



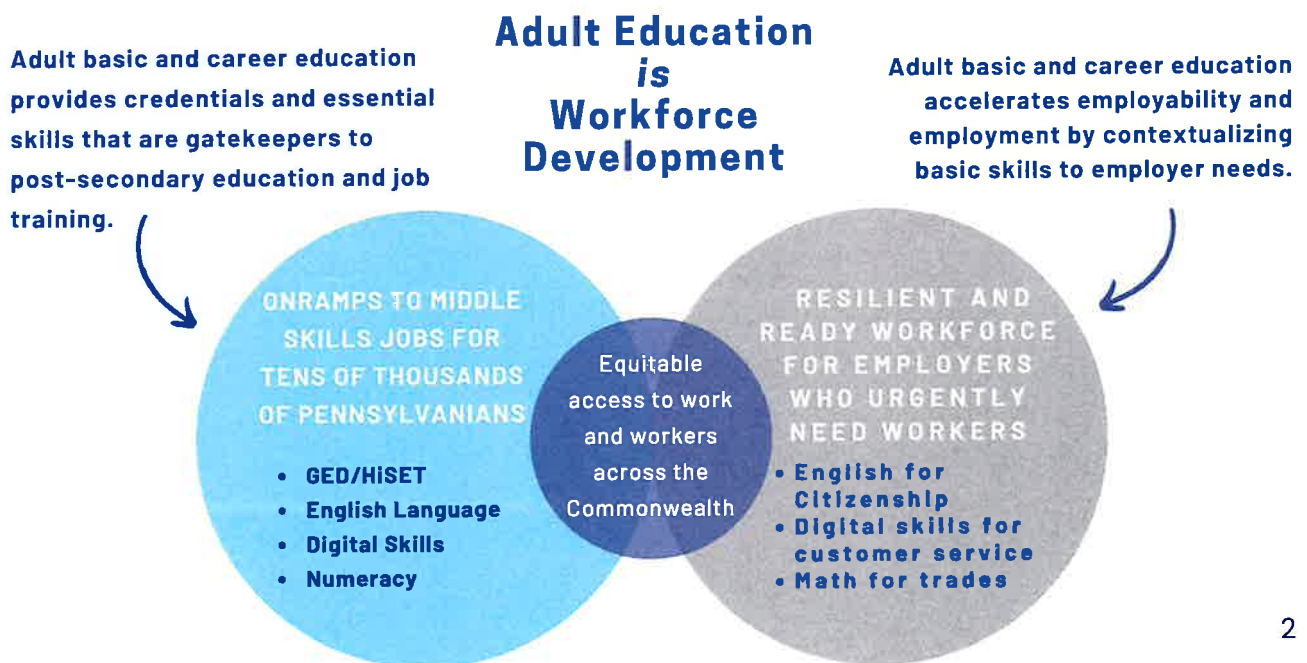
Adults who lack education and skills face significantly higher rates of under-employment in low-wage, low-mobility jobs. Our free literacy and workforce readiness programs prepare adult learners with upskilling instruction, career coaching, and portable, nationally recognized credentials that help future-proof our city's workforce. By reaching into our city's marginalized communities – including returning citizens, immigrants, and the housing insecure – we equip all adults with the 21st Century skills needed to earn employment in family-sustaining jobs and inclusively revitalize the economy for all.

Our programs, services, and pre-apprenticeships directly address:

- Educational inequalities related to access, class, and race
- Unemployment, skills gaps, and economic instability
- Digital equity (connectivity, access to devices, and digital literacy skills training)
- Out-of-school youth, low literate caregivers, and intergenerational illiteracy
- Immigrant integration and citizenship
- Risk of incarceration and recidivism

Our typical students are working age adults with significant skills gaps who are raising families. Participation is at their own pace and often includes breaks of months or years as they balance educational needs with life's demands. The majority (66%) of students who continuously attend for at least 60 hours make educational gains equivalent to two K-12 school years – a remarkable accomplishment for them and a significant return on investment for Pennsylvania at an estimated cost of \$2,000 per student.

Adult education programs are not just a second chance at a basic education; for many adults in Pennsylvania, these programs are the last chance. Our programs connect the untapped labor force of under-skilled adults to employers in need of workers.





THE OPPORTUNITY

Research shows that an investment in adult literacy is an investment in the health, wealth, safety, and welfare of *all* Pennsylvanians, creating changes that matter:

- **Improving adult literacy has enormous economic benefits.** Bringing all adults to a 6th grade reading level would generate an additional \$2.2 trillion, 10% of our GDP. (3)
- **Income is strongly related to literacy:** Average annual income of adults who read at a 6th grade level is \$63,000 -- significantly higher than adults who read at 3rd to 5th grade levels, who earn \$48,000, and *much higher* than those at the lowest levels of literacy, who earn just \$34,000 on average. (4)
- **Economic gains would be highest in large cities:** Philadelphia stands to gain at or just above 10% of GDP by bringing all adults to a 6th grade reading level. (5)
- **Adult education alleviates crime and violence:** Returning citizens who participate in correctional education programs recidivate 43% less than inmates who do not. (6)
- **Adult literacy program graduates acquire gainful life skills that increase access to better living conditions, healthier foods, and health care services.** (7)



THE PROBLEM

From 2008 to 2023, adult literacy was the only educated-related line item *not* to receive an increase. 15 years of decreased or flat funding has starved adult basic education of resources. As a result, many rural programs are too small to influence the workforce system, and urban programs like BeLit have long, growing waiting lists. While the 2023–24 investment in Adult and Family Literacy Education was raised to \$14,508,000, a 24% increase up from \$11.7 million, there remains urgent, unmet need.





THE SOLUTION

With long wait lists of adults seeking our free services, we need more flexible funding that loosens program administration restrictions by raising the overhead cap from 5% to 10%, and allows us to hire additional teachers and staff at competitive wages so that we may open new classes to meet this urgent demand. With your support, we can adapt and scale programs in order to expand access for more adult learners.

On behalf of the more than 1.4 million Pennsylvanians who require adult basic education to earn middle skills jobs, we urge your committees to make these vital investments:

- 1 **Increase the Adult and Family Literacy line item to \$30 million** in the 2024–25 Department of Education budget. The recent 2023–24 is overly restrictive and does not align with the need and the value of our programs. An infusion of an additional \$15 million will enable 9,150 more Pennsylvanians to access adult education and career prep services.
- 2 **Create a \$15 million Adult Education and Workforce Recovery Fund competitive grant** to enable programs to innovate and quickly meet area employer needs. Adult and Family Literacy Education providers need flexible funds to improve access to technology, provide stand-alone digital literacy skills, expand student advising and career navigation, and strengthen employer partnerships that open job advancement pathways. Such investments are restricted under our current WIOA Title II funding limits.
- 3 **Update the name** of the Adult and Family Literacy Education line item in the Pennsylvania Department of Education Budget **to Adult Basic and Career Education** to more accurately describe our services and expand support for our workforce readiness programs.

RESOURCES & IMPACT

A line item infusion of \$15 million, plus creation of a \$15 million competitive Adult and Workforce Investment grant fund, will move more adults into middle-skills work and help employers fill openings.

IMMEDIATE IMPACT

\$15 million will expand access to high quality robust adult basic and career education for 9,000+ adults across PA. Renaming the line Adult Basic and Career Education will add clarity to the field.



FUTURE-PROOF

\$15 million funds a competitive grant (Adult Education and Workforce Recovery Fund) to catalyze creation of innovative programs that meet urgent employer needs.

Bridging the literacy divide is possible. By restoring Adult Basic and Career Education funding and loosening outdated restrictions on Title II funds, our programs can be more accessible, effective, and efficient -- an investment that improves generational outcomes *beyond* education. Together, with your support, we will ensure Pennsylvanians of all ages and stages have the education, skills, and future they deserve.

END NOTE

Being an adult student is a significant commitment that is not undertaken lightly. Approximately half the adults who seek out our services will step away at some point in the year due to the challenges of balancing work, family and their own education, including shift changes at work, overtime, new jobs, moves, family obligations, illness, and/or lack of transportation and childcare. Federal reporting includes all adults who have attended as few as 12 hours of classes, whether or not they have persisted, and thus can create a misperception that even PA's adult education students who do persist earn fewer academic gains. Thankfully, our adult education staff work with adults who need to temporarily stop out to ensure they will be welcomed back when they can accommodate the commitment.

While we are not funded to offer social services, we do provide student support counseling, hyflex classes at 3 community-based centers in Kensington, Chinatown, and West Philadelphia, as well as off-site instruction in collaboration with more than 12 community partners. We encourage you to consider funding other barrier-reducing measures such as:

- On-site childcare
- Public transportation passes or stipends
- Peer mentorship programming
- Acknowledging the difficulty of persistence and removing stigmas associated with irregular participation.

Questions or feedback? Please contact Dawn Hannah, dhannah@beyondliteracy.org.

SOURCES

(1) U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. 2010, October 25. Improving mothers' literacy skills may be best way to boost children's achievement. National Institute of Health. <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/improving-mothers-literacy-skills-may-be-best-way-boostchildrens-achievement>.

(2) Jeynes, W. H. 2007. The relationship between parental involvement and urban secondary school student academic achievement: A meta-analysis. *Urban Education*.

(3, 4, 5) 9/9/2020: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelnietzel/2020/09/09/low-literacy-levels-among-us-adults-could-be-costing-the-economy-22-trillion-a-year/?sh=4fdf93c04c90>; See also <https://www.barbarabush.org/new-economic-study/#:~:text=Improving%20adult%20literacy%20would%20have,annual%20income%20for%20the%20country>.

(6) Davis, L., Bozick, R., Steele, J., Saunders, J., & Miles, J. 2013. Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs That Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults. <https://doi.org/10.7249/rr266>.

(7) Freudenberg, N., & Ruglis, J. 2007. Reframing school dropout as a public health issue. *Preventing Chronic Disease*.

OUR STUDENTS GO FROM LEARNING TO EARNING



Christina Battle

GED Graduate

"It was important to graduate so my children can see that it's never too late. You're never too old to finish school."



Hannah Bui

English Language Learner

"I live in America, and because I'm from a different country, it is very good for me to learn to read, learn grammar, and to speak well."



Richard Whitt

Digital Literacy Credentialing

"Beyond Literacy is a wonderful tool to help me learn and grow and be able to take advantage of the opportunities available."

PLEASE HELP US MEET TODAY'S CHALLENGES

Beyond Literacy goes beyond increasing adult literacy and employment rates by positively affecting economic prosperity, crime, and other social issues in the Greater Philadelphia region. Your support allows BeLit to sustain, grow, and diversify our adult education programs that, in turn, address inter-generational poverty and make our community stronger.

WITH YOUR SUPPORT, WE WILL GROW THE IMPACT OF OUR SIGNATURE WORK-READY PROGRAMS, BY:

EXPANDING MOBILE ACCESS

We will equip our mobile learning lab with technology that provides drive-up services and digital access to diverse prospective learners in our region's hardest to reach communities.

MEETING COMPLEX NEEDS

We will tailor course offerings and expand wrap-around services to reduce barriers that inhibit trauma or justice-impacted, and intellectually disabled participants from advancing in the workforce.

ENSURING SUSTAINABILITY

We will leverage corporate partnerships with in-demand energy and utilities leaders to expand our pre-apprenticeship pipelines into in-demand, middle-skills jobs that earn a family-sustaining wage.

INVESTING IN INNOVATION

We will replace our outdated database with a technological solution that optimally tracks and manages data, enhances decision-making, improves services, and accelerates progress toward benchmarked outcomes.



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