

Pennsylvania House Education Committee Hearing on Adult Education  
September 16, 2024



Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education

Testimony from PAACE

Cheryl Hiester, Chair, Advocacy and Public Policy Committee

The Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education (PAACE) is the professional association for adult and family literacy educators in Pennsylvania. We have 1200 members from more than 60 organizations. Our members work in school districts, intermediate units, colleges and community-based organizations. PAACE inspires adult education partners through advocacy, networking and professional development so that adults succeed, and communities thrive.

This week is National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, and we are grateful to Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper and the House Education Committee for giving us this opportunity to talk about the value and impact of Adult and Family Literacy Education in Pennsylvania. Today, you will hear from a few of our members who will share inspiring stories about adult learners who were left behind by traditional education and stories about the newly arrived who came to the United States as refugees and immigrants.

This fiscal year, Pennsylvania is investing \$16,310,000 in the Adult and Family Literacy Education line item. \$1,050,000 is set aside for High School Equivalency testing fees and about \$800,000 is earmarked for an afterschool program, making the actual program funding level at about \$15,180,000. Between 2008 and 2011, state and federal funding was cut in half and remained level funded until FY 2024-2025 when Governor Shapiro proposed an increase to the line item and you all in the General Assembly passed it– the first increase in 12 years. Last year, the Governor proposed a \$1 million increase that disappointingly did not make it in to the final budget. We urge Governor Shapiro, the Pennsylvania House and Senate to invest in job seeking and working adults and restore funding for Adult and Family Literacy Education.

In honor of [International Literacy Day](#), the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) shared an update that was sent out on a national listserv by famed researcher, Tom Sticht. The findings were highlighted by a 2023 UNESCO report which confirmed his decades long research that adult education truly breaks barriers and creates pathways to prosperity.

UNESCO reports that adult education continues to:

1. Improve productivity at work, at home, and in the community leading to higher tax bases for communities, decreased violence at home and in the community, and greater participation in citizenship activities by a larger segment of the adult population.

2. Improve self-confidence and other psychological and physiological health aspects of adults, including activities that will help the brain grow throughout adulthood which contributes to reduced medical costs for adults as they age.

3. Improve the health of participating adults' children resulting from parental learning in adult education programs leading to better prenatal and postnatal care, reductions in low birth rate infants, and better home medical care, thereby contributing to lowered medical costs for children and fewer learning problems in school.

4. Improve social justice by providing literacy education for marginalized populations to permit them to acquire skills and knowledge needed to take political action that allows them to achieve their civil rights and to overcome social exclusion and join in the mainstream of society.

5. Improve productivity in schools by providing adults with the knowledge they need to better prepare their children to enter school, help them achieve in school, encourage them to stay in school, and increase their opportunities to enroll in higher education, thus breaking intergenerational barriers.

Nearly 650,000 adults in Pennsylvania do not have a high school credential. In the last five years, 62,459 students dropped out of high school. There are 387,579 adults in Pennsylvania who do not speak English well or at all. Many of them are highly skilled and eager to work and the only thing holding them back is English language fluency. Adult and family literacy programs provide free Adult Basic Education, High School Equivalency Preparation, and English for Speakers of Languages (ESOL) classes where adults can build their language skills for work, family and community life.

Today, we are here to tell you about the challenges and the successes of adult learners across the Commonwealth. There is no typical adult learner. They come from diverse backgrounds with diverse needs. We serve immigrants who never held a pencil in their hands to people with advanced degrees from their native countries. We serve adults who grew up in cities, towns and rural communities across Pennsylvania who were not able to complete high school because their lives became complicated. Like Nick, whose father was incarcerated when he was 16 years old, leaving his mother and younger siblings unable to go on as a family. Nick's mother told him he had to go away because she could no longer care for him. He was homeless for 2 years. At 17, he decided that his best option was entering the military, and he needed to get a high school equivalency diploma to do that. While in a homeless shelter in Elizabethtown, PA, he started attending a GED preparation class provided at the shelter by The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon. Nick is a smart and determined guy. He studied hard and passed the tests. He is now serving in the US Army and plans to make it a career.

Another challenge that we face as a field is the perception that the aggregate outcomes for adult and family literacy education do not demonstrate program efficacy. I strongly disagree and would like to clarify what those numbers mean.

The students we serve are working age adults with significant skills gaps who are working and raising families. Their participation is at their own pace and often includes breaks of months or years as they balance their educational needs with the demands of life. These factors influence reported outcomes in the field. Students who can continuously attend for at least 60 hours are making educational gains equivalent to 1 to 2 years of K-12 schooling – a remarkable accomplishment for them and a significant return on investment for Pennsylvania.

In fiscal year 2022-2023, programs welcomed 14,893 adult learners. This number includes anyone who completed an intake and received an initial assessment. Of the 14,893 adults who connected with our programs, 5,536 (37%) attended for less than 12 hours of instruction. These adults came to explore the program, find out if it was a good fit, and determine if the timing was right for them to begin. Most adults who separate early, quickly determine that they are not ready to take on the level of commitment required to benefit from the program. They work with student advisors who help them decide and ensure that the door is open to come back when they are ready.

Of the 14,893 reportable students, 6,879 (46%) did not achieve enough hours to be given a follow up assessment to determine learning gains (40 – 60 hours). Many of these students had limited time to attend classes because of shift changes at work, overtime, a new job, moving, family obligations, illness, and issues with transportation and childcare. Federal reporting guidelines require PDE to report outcomes for everyone with 12 or more hours of service. Valid reasons for stopping out are not considered.

In summary, 57% of the total number of adults who had enough hours to take a posttest had a documentable learning gain. Many more had learning gains that did not meet the criteria for an educational functioning level advancement. Measurable skills gain data does not consider that students who start late in the program year are counted even though they have not completed the instruction hours and will be continuing into the next program year.

**I would like to emphasize that our students are demonstrating learning gains equivalent to 1 – 2 years of K-12 schooling in 50 – 60 hours of instruction with a cost per learner of about \$2,500 annually.**

Adult education programs are not just a second chance at a basic education, for many adults in Pennsylvania, these programs are the last chance.



## The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon

[www.literacysuccess.org](http://www.literacysuccess.org)

Cheryl Hiester

[cheryl@literacysuccess.org](mailto:cheryl@literacysuccess.org)

### The Problem

- 22% of Lancaster County's 380,144 (83,631) adults are functioning at or below Level 1 Literacy.
- 21% of Lebanon County's 97,867 adults (20,552) adults are functioning at or below Level 1 Literacy.
- 104,183 adults who struggle with basic literacy living and working in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties.

Source:

PIAAC is an international assessment of adult skills that compares adult competencies across 35 countries. Here is the link with more information about PIAAC

<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/>

This link provides information about the proficiency levels and what they mean

<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/litproficiencylevel.asp>

This link takes you to the interactive map of the United States:

[https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/?utm\\_campaign=Programs%20-%20General&utm\\_source=hs\\_email&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=86337630&hsenc=p2ANatz--BXG5zzKiF3hGd\\_V\\_V\\_pVdinms6sVNtbalfmM8Gbg7w3hDegPKpwQQBMh\\_yH4Gm2CnHw1-nMe\\_KeQ3\\_a5G9Ugva1HWQ&hsmi=86337630](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/?utm_campaign=Programs%20-%20General&utm_source=hs_email&utm_medium=email&utm_content=86337630&hsenc=p2ANatz--BXG5zzKiF3hGd_V_V_pVdinms6sVNtbalfmM8Gbg7w3hDegPKpwQQBMh_yH4Gm2CnHw1-nMe_KeQ3_a5G9Ugva1HWQ&hsmi=86337630)

### The Solution

Adult and Family Literacy Education provides adults with a chance at a basic education. Lancaster-Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 Community Education and The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon are partners in the Adult and Family Literacy Line-item funding that is invested in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties. Together, our organizations provide a full range of complimentary adult literacy and basic education services. These services include basic skills in reading, writing, and math, high school equivalency preparation, English for Speakers of Other Languages, Family Literacy, workplace education services, career pathways advising, integrated education and skills training, digital literacy, and an International Healthcare Professionals Program. All services are provided at no cost to the students.

### Adult Basic and Literacy Education is Workforce Development

IU 13 and The Literacy Council are partners in the Lancaster and Lebanon CareerLinks. We partner with local businesses to provide education services to workers and job seekers that support job success. We partner with skills training programs, colleges and universities to support the successful transition and completion of a postsecondary education credential. Our students are diverse. Some grew up in our community. Others come from countries all over the

world. Some students never held a pencil in their hand or went to school. Others have advanced degrees in medicine, engineering and many other fields. What they all have in common is a desire to improve their lives through education.

Many foreign trained professionals who immigrate to the United States are working in low pay, entry level jobs because they have limited English fluency or have barriers related to the recognition of their credentials. Adult and Family Literacy Education can help these adults reclaim their careers.

For example, internationally trained physicians are working in entry level jobs. Many arrive with little to no English fluency. English language fluency is not the only barrier. Their credentials are not recognized in their new home, and they face significant barriers to recredentialing. Many must first learn English. They must pass the United States Medical Licensing exams which takes years and costs thousands of dollars. Then, they must be accepted into a residency which is no small feat. As the US faces physician and nurse shortages, we cannot afford this kind of brain waste.

I would like to share an example of how a Literacy Council, a university and an employer can partner to have a real impact. Lancaster County is home to more than 200 physicians from Cuba who came here through the Cuban Medical Professionals Parole Program. Under this program, doctors and other professionals in the health field who were sent by the government of Cuba to work or study in other countries could request parole into the United States. They made the decision to come here for a better life but had no idea about the challenges they would face in trying to reclaim their careers in their new home.

### **Adriana's Story**

Adriana has been a scholar at The Literacy Council since 2016. She was one of our first foreign trained physicians to attend our program. Over the last 8 years, Adrianna has learned English, attained a medical assistant certification, gotten a job at a Federally Qualified Health Center, became a BSRN, started a program to become a Nurse Practitioner, and she is giving back to her community. Here is Adrianna's story in her own words.

My name is Adriana. I am 48 years old, a mother, an immigrant, a student, and a healthcare professional. I came to the United States 8 years ago to give my son a better future. I had been a doctor and practiced Family Medicine in Cuba for 17 years, treating and helping people of all ages with various diseases. My experiences in Cuba, Venezuela, and Brazil exposed me to different cultures, languages, and backgrounds, and I realized that, in many ways, we are all the same.

When I arrived in the United States, my main goal was to re-enter the healthcare profession, but I faced many challenges. I had to learn English from scratch and started English classes at the Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon in Lancaster. There, I not only learned English, but also English medical terminology in the International Healthcare Professionals Program. I also learned about American culture, rules, and how American people are warm,

welcoming, and fabulous. Every experience was a valuable learning opportunity for me, no matter how small.

One of my most significant accomplishments was graduating as a Registered Nurse with a BSN in 2021 after enrolling in the Second Degree Accelerated Nursing Program at Penn State University. This was a significant professional achievement for me. I learned English to do that. I had excellent teachers and tutors at the Literacy Council, and I thought that one day, I would like to give them back what they dedicated to me. Recently, I became a volunteer for LCLL to help other newcomers start their journey as smoothly as possible.

I have been working as a Registered Nurse in Lancaster City, where I am dedicated to giving back to my community. What I find most rewarding about life is the ability to help others. This has inspired me to further my education, and I am currently a Family Nurse Practitioner student at Millersville University.

So far, 8 foreign trained doctors have been admitted into a residency program (none in Pennsylvania). 18 have become BS RNs, working as bi-lingual nurses. 2 have become certified medical interpreters.

#### **Avery's Story**

Avery had to stop attending school in 10<sup>th</sup> grade in 2012. He started attending GED classes in 2015 and after 4 years, he had passed the reading, social studies and science tests. He struggled with math and decided to take a break. Two years later, a friend encouraged him to go back and try again. He connected with The Literacy Council and attended an online math class. It took him two years of attending classes and independent study. In the Spring of 2024, he passed the math test, attaining a Commonwealth of Pennsylvania High School Diploma. His next step is to take the SAT exam and apply for admittance to college.

There are nearly 70,000 working age adults in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties who do not have a high school credential. We want to significantly decrease that number and hear more stories like Avery's.

On behalf of PAACE and The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, I urge you to support an increase to the Adult and Family Literacy Education line item in the Department of Education budget, bringing the line to \$23 million in FY 24-25 with the goal of reaching \$30 million by 2026-2027.