

Adult Literacy – An Economic Benefit*

Adult Education and Family Literacy Week is September 19-25, 2021.

Celebrate this important week with the Iowa Literacy Council!

The Iowa Literacy Council (ILC) is a state association affiliated with the Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE**). The Iowa Literacy Council was established to make a concentrated effort to coordinate literacy programs statewide, to minimize the duplication of such services, and to aid those individuals in need of the basic skills. The Iowa Literacy Council is committed to improving the literacy and basic skills levels of Iowa adults in the context of family, community, and workplace. Our mission is: Every Iowan has the **literacy** skills to reach their personal and professional goals. We have over 500 members statewide.

Two simple but important facts related to adult literacy are: adult literacy is good for the economy; lack of literate adults is bad for the economy.

National statistics are troubling. 44 million adults are low-skilled, 30 million lack a high school diploma, and 66 million adults in the U.S. have limited English or reading skills, and more than 60 million can't perform simple math. Low-skilled adults are: • 2x more likely to be unemployed; • 3x more likely to be in poverty; • 4x more likely to be in poor health; and • 8x more likely to be incarcerated.

Iowa statistics are concerning. Over 140,000 adults (ages 18-64) are without a high school credential, almost 39,000 adults do not speak English fluently, and almost 9,000 adults are without a high school diploma and are unemployed. Our learners have significant barriers to employment and literacy, yet we receive limited funding of \$725 per student compared to the \$10,000 per pupil received by elementary education. The importance of adult literacy in Iowa cannot be denied for several reasons.

Adult Education can train students to fill the jobs industry needs today. By 2024, 48 percent of job openings will be middle-skill and 32 percent will be high-skill. This means that in less than 3 years nearly 80 percent of all job openings will require more than a high school degree[i]. We already have a problem filling labor market need, and the situation is only projected to worsen. Adult education provides a significant opportunity to bridge the workforce supply-and-demand gap. (National Skills Coalition analysis of long-term occupational projections from State labor/employment agency)

The return on investment into adult education is undeniable. The adult ed graduate can typically earn close to \$10,000 more per year once they get their diploma! And the economy is impacted as well. For every 400,000 adults who earn a high school diploma, we gain \$2.5 billion back in tax revenue and reduced expenses. That's \$6,250 per person! And on top of that, the estimated value to our economy in reduced costs for public support programs for low-skilled, low literate adults is \$200 billion annually!

English language learners are important to the job market. By 2030, it is estimated that nearly one in five U.S. workers will be an immigrant. However, nearly 20 million adults have limited English proficiency. We must train and educate these adults by increasing their English language proficiency, improving their basic skills, and helping them achieve a high school diploma or equivalent, so that they are prepared to join and contribute to the future workforce.

Adult education is good for business. Companies miss out on growth opportunities, product development suffers, and profits stagnate without a skilled national workforce. America needs an "all hands on deck" approach to bring every available worker to the labor pool. Adult Education brings businesses options by preparing existing workers with competing life and family responsibilities with the skills that companies need through flexible classrooms and curriculum.

Major correction needed to stave off dramatic unemployment issues. Without a major correction, tens of millions of Americans will be unprepared to fill the next wave of jobs, and we could face a dramatic increase in unemployment nationwide. Indeed, we must ensure that the working-age Americans who possess low literacy skills get the education they need to access the skills training that will help fuel our future economy. However, we must expand our focus to the often ignored, but essential, lower-skilled

workers to meet future demand and ensure that all adults can participate in the economy and contribute to society.

Adult education programs are in dire need of support. Adult education programs are in dire need of support as they continue to provide distance teaching/learning, connect with learners through digital means, and upgrade their digital infrastructure to address other immediate concerns in response to COVID-19 social distancing practices. Our programs are facing steep cost increases as we navigate the virtual learning environment, and our students are being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic as they are often the first out of the job market and the last back in during times of economic crisis. Many adult teachers and students do not have access to the technology needed to participate in distance learning. Nonetheless, dedicated funding for adult education has been left out of every COVID-19 relief package to date. To build up the adult education infrastructure and allow programs to continue to serve their students in a high-quality and safe manner, adult education needs additional funding.

We must direct more attention and resources to adult education, so workers are trained, and jobs are filled. Given the rapidly changing economy, we must direct more attention and resources to adult education so workers are trained, and jobs are filled. We recommend:

- Significantly increase our investment in adult education to prepare more of our adult learners for a changing workplace.
- Ensure that the voice of adult learners is represented in decision-making at the Federal, State and local levels.
- Advocate for adult educators to be included in the State and local Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) planning processes and for adult educators to be included in other policy making efforts including hearings, legislative development, etc.
- Support certification policies for adult education educators that improve their career pathways and ensure effectiveness.
- Provide support for professional development for adult educators and technical assistance to adult education programs to build pathways to the future of work for all adult learners.
- Ensure that data collected on adult education program outcomes are reported in a timely fashion and disseminated in an accessible manner.

*Please see the COABE website for sources. <https://coabe.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Talking-Points-for-Legislators-2021.pdf>

**The Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE) represents the system of 65,000 adult educators, administrators and mentors working to improve educational outcomes for adults in the U.S. We work with the 43 million U.S. adults who possess low literacy skills[iii]. Across the nation, COABE members work tirelessly to help these underserved adults master the skills they need to compete and build careers – and better futures for themselves, their families and their communities. In every State, we support adult education programs that foster essential skills, family literacy and workforce development. We are especially focused on growing the pipeline from adult education to the workforce. We partner with business and industry leaders to ensure that our students are able to join the workforce and contribute to the economy both today and in the future.