



LITERACY & JUSTICE: A CALL FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ACTION

We are living at a moment when the need for universal literacy has never been more urgent.¹

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed and exacerbated the racial and economic disparities gripping our society. Institutionalized racism is targeting Black, Indigenous, and people of color through the organized repression of their democratic rights, state violence at the hands of police, the denial of quality health care, housing, and work, and the denial of educational opportunities for both children and adults. We are seeing more clearly how these systemic issues are interconnected. To turn the tide, we must prioritize policies that support people and communities, especially those that have been marginalized. This requires building a robust, inclusive education system that reaches the large numbers of adults with limited literacy.

The current crises have underscored the importance of digital and health literacy, the ability to navigate complex systems, and equipping parents to support their children's education. Yet, today in New York City, **there are more than 2.2 million adults age 16 and older with limited English language proficiency or without a high school diploma.** Many of these New Yorkers are on the frontlines, performing essential work that is sustaining our communities – as grocery workers, delivery workers, home care workers, and parents. Others are service workers and domestic workers who have lost their jobs and incomes and face a harsh reality with little or no safety net, and many continue to be excluded from government relief.² While adult education is only one part of the solution, it will be crucial for a sustainable recovery. Now is the time for New York to invest in a policy of “Literacy for All.”

Literacy is not simply the ability to read and write. **Literacy skills give individuals the power** to understand and command information, communicate in the language of access, make informed choices, leverage resources and opportunities, participate in civic and professional life and, ultimately, transform their lives and the world around them.

Adult literacy education is a matter of racial, social, and economic justice. The majority of adults in NYC with limited literacy skills are women and people of color. Over 75% are immigrants, including many who are undocumented. Others were born in the U.S. and underserved by the public school system. Many of these adults live in poverty. Limited skills impact almost every aspect of their lives, making it difficult to secure and maintain living-wage jobs, support their children in school, access quality health care, advocate for their civil and human rights, and fully participate in the political process.

Literacy and Social Impacts

Literacy is linked to positive social and economic outcomes, including a strong relationship with income. A new national study from Gallup shows that the average annual income of adults who reach the minimum level for proficiency in literacy (level 3 on the PIAAC assessment) is

¹ The *Literacy & Justice Initiative* defines “literacy” as the power to understand, interpret, and command speech, text, data, and graphics in a community’s dominant language and modes of communication to access, navigate, analyze, and transform social, political, and economic systems and conditions.

² “150 Days Later: Unemployed and Excluded”, Make the Road New York, August 2020. <<https://maketheroadny.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/MRNY-Survey2.pdf>>

nearly \$63,000, substantially higher than the average of almost \$48,000 earned by adults who score just below proficiency (level 2), and much higher than those at low levels of literacy (levels 0-1) who earn just over \$34,000 on average.³ In New York State, 56% of adults are below level 3 proficiency in reading – that’s over 8 million people. In parts of New York City, the percentages are even higher – in the Bronx, 81% of adults are below level 3 and 50% are at or below level 1 in reading.⁴ Similarly, census data shows that median wages for adults with a high school diploma or its equivalent are 24% greater than for those without a diploma; and immigrants who speak English “very well” are half as likely to live in poverty as those who do not.

Higher levels of literacy are also associated with greater health knowledge, use of healthcare services, and the ability to manage chronic health conditions and communicate with healthcare providers. Moreover, according to the National Institutes for Health, “a mother's reading skill is the greatest determinant of her children’s future academic success, outweighing other factors, such as neighborhood and family income.”⁵ Increased literacy not only benefits individuals but also drives collective gains in economic, social, and civic measures. The Gallup study finds that “getting all U.S. adults to at least a Level 3 literacy proficiency would generate an additional \$2.2 trillion in annual income for the country”, and that large **cities like New York would see a 10% increase in gross domestic product.**⁶

Inadequate Funding

Despite the direct benefits, funding for adult literacy education is so inadequate that **fewer than 4% of adult New Yorkers in need can get into classes in any given year.** Currently, New York State invests \$105 million a year in adult basic education (ABE), high school equivalency (HSE), and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes statewide and distributes an additional \$40 million in federal adult education funds. Less than half of this funding goes to programs in New York City. The City currently invests an additional \$15 million a year in community-based adult literacy programs. The total state and city funding for adult literacy education in NYC amounts to approximately \$85 million a year – less than \$40 a year for each of the 2.2 million adults in need and just over \$1,000 for every student who is able to access classes. Moreover, a 2017 report published by the Literacy Assistance Center documented that it would cost four times the current funding per student to provide the adults participating in literacy programs with the full range of services and supports they need and deserve.⁷

Adult education has been increasingly recognized as an important part of a cohesive workforce development strategy – that job-seekers with more skills, education, and training will have better access to higher quality jobs and will more closely match the needs of employers. **In a fair economy, all people would have access to education, training, and family-sustaining livelihoods.**

³ Rothwell, J. “Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy Nationally and Regionally in the United States,” Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and Gallup, September 2020.

⁴ PIACC: U.S. Skills Map State and County Indicators of Adult Literacy and Numeracy, <<https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>>

⁵ <<https://www.nih.gov/news-events/news-releases/improving-mothers-literacy-skills-may-be-best-way-boost-childrens-achievement>>

⁶ Rothwell, J. “Assessing the Economic Gains of Eradicating Illiteracy...”

⁷ Stoneman-Bell, S., & Yankwitt, I. “Investing in Quality: A Blueprint for Adult Literacy Programs and Funders,” Literacy Assistance Center, December 2017.

Literacy and Social Justice

The reality is that adult students come to education programs with a wide range of immediate needs, goals, and aspirations, well beyond those related to employment. **We envision an adult education system that honors the diversity of our students and their self-determination and that embraces the power and potential of adult literacy programs to align their work with broader campaigns for human rights and social justice.**

Adults who need educational opportunities live on the forefront of struggles for racial justice, immigrant rights, civil rights, gender equity, workers' rights, fair housing, educational equity, universal healthcare, voting rights, environmental justice, police accountability, and carceral reform, where grassroots organizing efforts are leading the way to improve conditions and make systemic change. These efforts can be strengthened by integrating adult literacy skills-building into these movements, as well as by engaging adult literacy students around social, political, and economic issues in their classes and explicitly developing their skills as community leaders.

Adult literacy education can provide the space for community members to read, write, and speak the truth of their lived experience; to build understanding and solidarity across differences; to examine historical and current systems of oppression and envision alternatives; and to claim the power to transform the cultural, social, political, and economic structures that circumscribe their lives. Through adult literacy programs, students gain valuable skills and connections to community resources and family supports. **In its most powerful forms, adult literacy education can be a catalyst not only for individual empowerment but for critical consciousness and collective action.**

Our Call for Investment

The [Literacy & Justice Initiative](#) recognizes the profound need to tackle NYC's adult literacy crisis and sees a pivotal opportunity to elevate adult literacy education as a tool for activating democracy and creating a more equitable future.

We call on New York State and City to **increase investment in adult literacy education over the next five years to reach \$500 million annually for NYC** and to begin the movement toward "Literacy for All." This unprecedented investment through new and existing funding streams will:

- 1) **Respond to the needs, dreams, and desires of New Yorkers** who need educational opportunities to support their families and fulfill their aspirations.
- 2) **Dramatically increase the number of adults who could access ABE, HSE, and ESOL**, and other adult literacy education programs.
- 3) **Support grassroots social and economic justice organizations to develop and sustain adult literacy programs** that build critical consciousness on key community issues while simultaneously developing basic literacy, numeracy, academic content knowledge, and English language skills.
- 4) Enable currently funded adult literacy programs to **connect classroom instruction to the social, political, and economic issues** that their students are confronting, to connect their students and programs to the social and economic justice organizations that are

addressing these issues, and to engage interested students in sustained programs of leadership development.

- 5) **Significantly increase funding rates** for all adult literacy programs to enable them to provide students with the full range of resources, supports, and services they need and deserve.
- 6) Strengthen and advance the adult literacy field with **targeted technical assistance and professional development** for programs and practitioners in areas including culturally responsive-sustaining education (CRSE), popular education methods, digital literacy, and student leadership development.

A substantial investment in adult education will boost the city and state's economic and social outcomes: more people will have the skills to access better jobs and higher wages; more parents will be able to support their children's education; families will be healthier; more people of all backgrounds will know and speak up for their rights; more New Yorkers will participate in civic institutions and democratic processes. It will also help generate more revenue for the city and state over time.

We must find opportunities in this time of crisis. Faced with the pandemic, systemic racism, and economic and environmental collapse, **New York State and City governments must step up to champion a people-first agenda that lives up to our progressive values and invests in our collective strength and well-being.** We need bold, creative solutions that cross sectors and create the conditions for an equitable and sustainable future. As one piece of a larger whole, a \$500 million investment in adult literacy education, with a social justice lens, would be a profound step towards community education and economic recovery for all.

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