

Pennsylvania Senate Labor & Industry and Education Committees Joint Hearing on Adult Education and Workforce Development

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9 am – 11 am



Testimony from PAACE

Cheryl Hiester, Chair, Advocacy and Public Policy Committee

My name is Cheryl Hiester and I am the executive director of The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon and the board of PAACE, The Pennsylvania Association for Adult Continuing Education. PAACE is the trade association for adult and family literacy educators in the Commonwealth. 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.

Our member organizations representative every region of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Adult education is a mandated partner in the workforce development system of Pennsylvania's CareerLink System, providing adult education services funded in part by Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act. The Line item in the Pennsylvania Department of Education's budget supplies the required match for these funds.

This week is National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week and we are grateful to the Senate Education and Labor & Industry Committees for giving us this opportunity to talk about the value and impact of adult literacy and basic education in Pennsylvania. Today, you will hear from a few of our members, including me on behalf of The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon, who will share inspiring stories of the adult learners who were left behind by traditional education and stories from the newly arrived who came to the United States as refugees and immigrants.

Before we share these stories with you, I would like to start with an overview of the public funding for adult and family literacy in Pennsylvania. This fiscal year, Pennsylvania is investing 11.7 million dollars in adult and family literacy education. In 2008, Pennsylvania invested 23.4 million dollars. Post-recession cuts continued through 2011. Funding has remained level for 10 years. Over the last 10 years, more demands have been placed on programs. Student materials cost more. Occupancy costs have increased. Technology costs have increased. And even more importantly, expectations of what programs are expected to do with these limited funds has continued to outpace the investment and the spending of these funds is restricted to certain activities or purposes.

And yet, programs have risen to the challenge. And we have big challenges. Nearly 700,000 adults in Pennsylvania do not have a high school credential. In the last five years, 67,903 students dropped out of high school. We are already hearing from school districts who are deeply concerned about the impact of the pandemic on juniors and seniors approaching their 18th birthday who are well short of the number of credits they need to graduate. Many students who were barely getting by in face-to-face learning found simply gave up.

There are 771,000 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 proficiency. Adult and family literacy programs provide free English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes where newcomers can build their language fluence 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 service 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. Take for instance Nick whose father was incarcerated when he was 16 years old, leaving his mother and younger siblings unable to function. 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. 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 aggerate 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. The majority (66%) of students who are able to continuously attend for at least 60 hours are making educational gains equivalent to 2 years of K-12 schooling – a remarkable accomplishment for them and a significant return on investment for Pennsylvania.

In fiscal year 2018/19, programs welcomed 20, 916 adult learners. This number includes anyone who completed an intake and received an initial assessment. Of that 20,916 adults, 3,761 (18%) attended for less than 12 hours of instruction. These adults came to explore the program and find out if it was a good fit and a good time in their lives to take on adult education. 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 remaining 17,155 adults who were placed in an instructional program., 6,606 (38%) stopped attending classes before they had enough hours to be given a follow up assessment to determine learning gains (40 – 60 hours). Many of these students had to stop out 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 taken into account.

- In summary, 44% of the total number of adults who walked in our doors had a documentable learning gain.
- 54% of the total number of adults with 12 or more hours had a documentable learning gain.
- 66% of adults who were pre and post tested had a documentable learning gain.

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 \$1,450 annually.

As you can see, the current level of investment does not align with the need and the value of these programs.

These programs are able to connect the untapped labor force of low skilled adults to employers in need of workers.

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



Testimony from The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon
Cheryl Hiester

Lancaster Lebanon Intermediate Unit 13 and The Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon are partners in the Adult and Family Literacy Line-item funding received from the Department of

Education's budget which that is invested in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties. Together, our organizations provide a full range of complimentary adult literacy and basic education services. These include basic literacy and education, high school equivalency preparation, English for Speakers of Other Languages, workplace education services, career pathways, integrated education and skills training, and digital literacy.

IU 13 offers semester-based classes in all areas of adult literacy and basic education including integrated education and training for adults wanting a career in education where they can begin as a para educator. There is also an integrated education and training program for adults seeking employment as a nursing assistant which can lead to a career in nursing. The Literacy Council provides small group and large group instruction, volunteer-based instruction and flexible options for adult learners.

We have combined our forces to achieve better outcome and together, we are making a difference in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties. Our students are coming to our programs and meeting their goals. In your packet, we provided you with student success stories that I hope you will take the time to read.

We are striving to align our services with the needs of employers in our community. Our organizations have a strong presence in the CareerLinks of Lancaster and Lebanon and we are working at the local level to align services with our workforce development partners. I would like to share an example of how a Literacy Council, a skills training provider and an employer can partner to have a real impact. Lancaster County is home to at least 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.

Currently, we have an environment where internationally trained physicians are working in entry level jobs get because they lack English fluency. However, English language fluency is not the only barrier. They also face significant barriers to recredentialing. English language fluency is not the only barrier. 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 and actual experience in the field.

Ernesto Matos and Jenni Black and are here today to tell you about the need for medical workers and one employer/employee partnership.

Ernesto Matos, Student Testimony

My name is Ernesto Matos I am from Cuba, I come from a humble home, where I lived with my parents. They instilled in me values, principles and good habits That helped me to become the person I am today. My passion for healthcare, enjoyment of learning and thirst for knowledge is

what made me pursue a career in the health field while I lived in Cuba. I was a physician for 25 years; we know that the Cuban government has been sending doctors abroad for many years. I worked in Africa, Venezuela, and Brazil where I learned Portuguese. Working in different countries made me an independent and resilient person.

I arrived in United States of America on February 22, 2017. It was an important day, as it is also my birthday. It was a reset of my life in every aspect. I had to learn a new language and new customs. With the support of The Literacy Council of Lancaster I began to learn English. During this time my desire to help people never stopped. I still felt the urge to serve the community. Therefore, I decided that studying again in this country would be a great option.

I graduated with high distinction with a Bachelor of Science in nursing from Penn State University and today I am working as RN at Union Community Care in Lancaster. I have learned many things since that month of February 2017 and next year I will become a citizen and with certainty I say, the American dream is alive and well here in Pennsylvania.

Jenni Black, Employer Testimony

My name is Jenni Black and I serve as Chief Quality and Compliance Officer at Union Community Care, a Federally Qualified Health Center serving over 34,000 patients in Lancaster and Lebanon Counties. We serve a diverse patient population with 37% of our patients speaking one of 50 languages. Hiring people like Ernesto is crucial to our ability to meet the needs of our patients.

Our vision is vibrant and healthy communities supported by inclusive healthcare that embraces each member's unique cultural needs and values and emboldens them to make healthful choices that fuel their wellbeing. With the support of programs like those offered by the Literacy Council of Lancaster-Lebanon providing language support and Medical ESL, we are able to hire highly qualified medical assistants from the Cuban Medical Professional Parole Program and other internationally trained health professionals, shortly after their arrival. The vast experience working in healthcare systems around the world, that they bring to our health center and our patients is invaluable. They help patients feel comfortable while accessing our care and bring a global health perspective to our offices.

Over the past few years, we've hired over 20 medical assistants who are internationally trained physicians. Ernesto started his employment with Union Community Care as a Medical Assistant 4 years ago. He worked two jobs to pay his way through nursing school, graduated with honors, and now works as one of our team Registered Nurses (RN). Most of the Cuban physicians that we've hired as Medical Assistants over the past 4 years are now pursuing nursing degrees. We have one former Cuban Medical Assistant who is now a first year Medical Resident in a residency program in Western PA. There are many refugees and immigrants in our community who have medical backgrounds and want to reclaim their medical careers. They need to have the proper support and resources to pursue the training that will allow them to do so. We are facing critical staffing shortages, brought on in part by the pandemic and in part by incredible competition for the medical assistants, nurses and physicians in our community. Ernesto worked 7 days a week for 10 weeks straight to allow us to maintain adequate staffing levels

during the week and to perform community COVID testing and vaccine clinics on the weekends. While Ernesto's work was exceptional, all of our staff worked countless extra hours to meet patient needs. Investing in those who are interested in healthcare careers and helping internationally trained physicians enter into the healthcare field in our communities, is critical to the long-term health of our communities.

Success Stories in Adult and Family Literacy Education

- After arriving in the United States from Thailand, Thanamas Rugaber enrolled in High School Equivalency (HSE) classes with IU13 Community Education. Since English is her second language, she had to spend a significant amount of time outside the classroom studying for the four subject tests. Thanamas notes that sometimes her classmates were discouraged with their progress. "When I heard them say, 'I don't think I can make it!' I told them, 'Look at me! To read just one page, I have to look up a lot of English words that are new to me, but I don't give up...so keep fighting, you can do it!'"

Indeed, in less than a year--and during a pandemic--Thanamas passed all her GED tests. She gives credit to her teachers and to her classmates, for helping her in class and for giving her a better understanding of American life and culture. She says, "I felt really comfortable talking and helping students. I appreciate that teachers worked really hard to help all the students. They found the best way to help each student and gave me helpful things to study on my own, which I used during the quarantine."

Thanamas is now a student at HACC in the healthcare administration program, a two-year degree. Upon graduation, she may continue her education to earn a bachelor's degree or immediately enter the workforce. We applaud Thanamas's perseverance--she made Dean's list her first semester, after studying 12 hours a day!

- A recent graduate of Cedar Crest High School and the Lebanon County Career and Technology Center (CTC), Jose Marrero III faced obstacles that could have deterred him, but his gentle disposition, positive attitude, dedication and perseverance contributed to his ultimate success.

Diagnosed with a disability and given an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP), Jose attended the Cornwall Lebanon School District for 14 years. During his time at CTC, he enrolled in the Pastry Arts Program while working at McDonald's and living with a foster family. When living with one foster family, he endured abuse and was ultimately removed from that placement.

A difficult home life and transition to a new home did not deter Jose from his dreams of

working in pastry arts/culinary arts. His first step in achieving his goal was through the IU13 Lebanon Youth Program; Jose completed a 90-hour paid work experience at a local sandwich shop. From there, he was approved for a two-week training period at Hiram G. Andrews Center. Shortly after completion of that program, he was hired by the Hotel Hershey as a prep cook. Jose's response to these trainings and eventual hiring? "I can't believe all of these things are happening to me!"

- Covid, cancer and then a career change made for both a difficult and successful year for Mary Mathews. Mary was furloughed from her production position as a result of Covid and, although diagnosed not long after with cancer, she felt restless and in search of something new. She saw a link to IU13 Community Education's Administrative Assistant microcredential class and signed up.

In the six-week virtual class, she learned keyboarding and customer service skills, how to look for a job and create a resume, and how to interview for a job--Mary reports that the mock interviews helped because they boosted her confidence. "I learned a lot," Mary says. "I had basic experience with Microsoft Word, but I learned and remembered a lot of things I hadn't used in the past. My skills are much better now." Indeed, her instructor notes, "Mary was an exceptional student. She always came to class early, had perfect attendance, participated in class, and worked many hours outside of class to do assignments to perfection and increase her typing speed."

Not long after the class ended, Mary was offered a full-time position with responsibilities including customer service, billing, scheduling and accounts payable. She shared with her IU13 instructor, "I use the skills I learned in your class eight hours a day, 5 days a week!" Mary really likes her new job and is happy to also share that she is cancer-free!

- Herve Dorsainvil worked as a journalist in Haiti before fleeing the country due to political instability and turmoil. Arriving in the United States three years ago, he learned of Lancaster-Lebanon IU13 Community Education's programs and enrolled in the Teacher Assistant Training class in September 2020. This microcredential class met twice weekly for three months and by February 2021, Herve had graduated and been hired by IU13 as a paraeducator at the Valley Road Education Center.

Herve shares that he liked the methodology used in the microcredential class and that the teacher provided great support for the students, all of whom were English as a Second Language learners. "We had good discussions about children with disabilities and learned about the legislation surrounding these children," he reports. "I loved my teacher and my classmates, too."

This summer Herve is working with the Extended School Year program. When asked

what he loves about his job, Herve replied, "I'm learning new things and learning to have more compassion and more patience."