

Baltimore City Adult Literacy:

Programs Supplementing MSDE's Literacy Works

A Study Conducted for
Baltimore Reads
and the
Abell Foundation

By

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Executive Summary

A recent study in one state found that participants in the state's adult basic education programs increased their learning, earned high school credentials, and found employment. Another study of several welfare-to-work programs, cautioned against simple assumptions that adding adult literacy components to employment programs improved people's employment and financial status. However, people without high school credentials face major challenges in the new economy, and 38% of Baltimore City adults do not have a high school degree. The Maryland Governor and General Assembly passed legislation in 2001 to study adult literacy in Maryland. The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) is preparing a report based on data it collects from programs that participate in its Literacy Works initiative. The report will include data on 4,563 Baltimore City learners enrolled during fiscal year 2000 in eight Literacy Works programs. This report, supported by the Abell Foundation and Baltimore Reads, provides information about other adult literacy programs in Baltimore City to complement the MSDE report.

The initial objective of this study was to measure the short term value of adult literacy in terms of employment and wages. The unavailability of individual outcome data from organizations, and their concern about providing confidential information required to link with external data sources redirected the focus of the study to identifying service providers and the characteristics of people receiving adult literacy services outside the Literacy Works programs. This study identified 41 Baltimore City organizations directly involved in adult literacy. These included 8 direct providers participating in Literacy Works, 23 direct providers not receiving Literacy Works support, and 10 organizations that provided sites for the direct providers in the first two groups. The 23 community-based organizations not included in the MSDE served an estimated 2,323 learners, or as many as 34% of the adult learners in Baltimore City during FY2000. The accuracy of this estimate is not known, but nine organizations provided information on 659 of these individuals.

One-third (35%) of the learners were young adults 18-24 years of age, 65% had 9-11 years of education, and 39% were employed at the start of their programs, differing little from those served by Literacy Works. However, 66% of learners in this study were women compared to 50% of Literacy Works learners. Individual programs differed greatly in the characteristics of the learners they served. Most of the learners first enrolled during FY2000 and enrolled in ABE/GED programs (79% and 65% respectively). Between 17% and 30% of the learners participated in adult literacy for at least 12 months; 7% of those who participated at some time during FY2000 were still participating several months into FY2002.

Organizations frequently did not know what happened to their learners after the program, but at least 9% had earned their GED, 10% had continued their education, 14% had gotten a job or job advancement, and 8% were known to have higher wages. Although the data are limited, they support a causal model that achieving their GED increases the likelihood of people continuing their education, which leads to better employment opportunities, which lead to higher wages.