Fellow Citizens:

This State of Adult Literacy Report represents over eighteen months of intensive data review and analysis as well as many hours of interviews with adult learners and facilitation of focus groups of stakeholders concerned with adult education in the District of Columbia. The staff of the State Education Agency, Adult Education & Family Literacy (SEA) undertook this work in order: 1) to organize what we know about the challenges facing citizens who are functionally illiterate using the national data for comparison purposes; 2) to examine the implications of this startlingly pervasive problem for the District of Columbia; and 3) to offer viable solutions based on what we have learned from the work the SEA has done over the last three years.

What has emerged from this work is a compelling view of the problem that actually puts real faces on these statistics and the numbers. The SEA has attempted to make sense of these complex and multi-dimensional challenges that result for those who need literacy services with issues relating to housing, health, workforce development, and economic development. Even more importantly, this document offers viable next steps which address these matters.

I firmly believe that this is a report worth reading.

C. Vannessa Spinner, Director
State Education Agency, Adult Education & Family Literacy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I PROLOGUE .......................................................... 2
II ADULT LITERACY IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA .................................................. 4
   Defining and measuring adult literacy
III THE IMPACT OF LOW LEVELS OF ADULT LITERACY .............................................. 12
   Economic consequences of low literacy
IV RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM: THE ROLE OF THE STATE EDUCATION AGENCY .......... 16
   Responsibilities of the State Education Agency
V CREATING AND PURSUING A SHARED VISION .......................................................... 18
   Purpose, goals and accomplishments of the Adult Literacy Initiative
VI CAPITALIZING ON OPPORTUNITIES IN A CHANGING CITY ...................................... 22
   Building adult literacy into District initiatives
VII THE NEED FOR CHALLENGING LONGER TERM GOALS .......................................... 24
   Estimating the benefits of increased D.C. literacy rates
VIII MAKING IT HAPPEN .......................................................... 28
   Raising public awareness and citywide consensus
IX THE FIRST STEP .......................................................... 29
   Raising the voices of District stakeholders
X POSTSCRIPT .......................................................... 30
   The Economics of Adult Literacy
MORE THAN ONE THIRD OF D.C. ADULTS STRUGGLE WITH READING.

These adults labor to accomplish routine tasks like reading a map or a bus schedule, filling out a job application, helping a child with homework, reading a medicine label, or making sense of a pay stub. These ordinary tasks can be daunting for the 170,620 residents of the District of Columbia who are functionally illiterate. Even those with basic reading skills sometimes feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of text and information bombarding them online, at work, or on signs when traveling to another city or town.

Adults with low level reading and writing skills often think that all text is as important as a letter from the landlord because they cannot evaluate its importance. A low literate adult cannot do what proficient readers do automatically, which is to sift and sort text, dismissing that which is not relevant to them, their work, their families, or communities.

Adults in the District, functioning at the lowest level of literacy, develop elaborate and creative ways to accomplish everyday tasks in spite of their poor reading skills. Low literate adults rely on friends and family members to be their reading eyes and writing hands. Many low literate adults have become adept at memorizing information. Others develop routines that allow them to avoid unfamiliar surroundings, such as a large shopping mall where they may need to consult a directory to locate a particular store.

THE LINKS BETWEEN LOW LITERACY AND POVERTY ARE STRONG.

On average, the lower a person’s literacy level, the more likely the individual is to be struggling economically, often living below the poverty line. Studies show a direct relationship between low literacy and joblessness. Adults with poor reading and math skills are often trapped in low paying jobs that provide no benefits, and offer little opportunity for promotion. The long term consequences are low lifetime earnings, lack of home ownership, and frequent episodes with creditors.

POVERTY IS EXPENSIVE.

Poverty carries high costs. It costs poor mothers more to buy diapers, cereal, and laundry detergent at the corner store. A low income parent without a car cannot drive to a discount retailer to stock up on household items. A poor person must navigate more systems and understand more policies than a middle class person. A poor person must fill in more forms just to get the things a middle class person can accomplish online or on the phone in minutes such as purchasing a book, making an appointment, or refilling a prescription. A poor person spends more time getting to and from the meetings where he must fill out forms than a middle class person does. A poor person will take two buses to get downtown to see a caseworker even when the
Metro is faster. This is because the bus is cheaper with a transfer, and even cheaper still if the meeting is finished in under an hour so the ride back home is done on the same transfer.

**THERE ARE MANY PATHS TO INCREASED LITERACY, BUT MANY IMPEDIMENTS AS WELL.**

Job training programs exist in the city, but for the best jobs a high school diploma or its equivalent is essential. There are GED preparation programs, but they require the ability to read and perform basic mathematics at a level many low literate adults have not yet attained. There are adult basic education programs, but students often must balance their attendance and study time with family responsibilities or an uncertain or perhaps demanding work schedule. Also, most adult basic education programs are limited to students who are proficient in English. There are churches, schools, and other organizations that offer free English language instruction to new immigrants, but it takes time and costs money in bus or train fare to get there. At every step of the way, persistence and sacrifice are required.

**LITERACY GAINS PAY OFF.**

The benefits of adult literacy programs can be significant when the instruction is directly related to the person’s life and immediately useful in his or her role as worker, parent, and community member. A GED can mean the difference between living in poverty and stepping on the first educational rung toward living wage employment. The earning power of a GED grows over time, particularly when viewing the credential as a link to work and post-secondary opportunities. On average, acquiring a GED can earn the GED holder 15 percent more annually than those without a high school degree. One study found that five years after acquiring the GED, recipients earned $1,200 more per year. While this may not immediately catapult the recipient out of poverty, it can propel the GED holder into a new earning and learning bracket.¹

Family literacy programs can increase the literacy gains of parents and children. In 1994, the National Center for Family Literacy reported that adults who stayed in a family literacy program for 150 hours increased their reading skills an average of 1.5 grade levels. Other compelling longitudinal research on literacy showed that children participating with their parents in family literacy programs grew up to have fewer criminal arrests, higher earnings, more accumulated wealth, and stronger marriages than a control group. Children continued to benefit throughout their educational careers.²

She would fill out just a regular application for me and I would take that with me. It was my cheat sheet and that’s what I had to do and right now that’s where I’m at. Looking for a job ain’t easy.

--High School Dropout
Adult Literacy in the District of Columbia

Of the 469,000 D.C. Residents Age 16 and Older Living in the District of Columbia Today, An Estimated 36 Percent Function at the Lowest Level of Literacy.

That is more than 170,000 persons. The table below displays for each Ward the number and percent of adults in the District who function at the Level 1 (Below Basic) literacy level. Although adults functioning at the lowest levels of literacy level are represented in all city wards, low literate adults are most likely to live in Wards 5, 7 and 8, with the highest percentages concentrated East of the Anacostia River.

Exhibit 1: Estimated Number and Percent of Adults at the NALS Level I Literacy by Ward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WARD NUMBER</th>
<th>TOTAL POPULATION AGE 16+</th>
<th>EST. # OF ADULTS AT LEVEL 1</th>
<th>EST. % OF ADULTS AT LEVEL 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>61,445</td>
<td>26,769</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>61,126</td>
<td>13,323</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>66,731</td>
<td>5,441</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>59,498</td>
<td>25,115</td>
<td>42.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>59,013</td>
<td>28,469</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>57,536</td>
<td>21,482</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>53,088</td>
<td>26,742</td>
<td>50.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>47,604</td>
<td>23,278</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>469,041</strong></td>
<td><strong>170,620</strong></td>
<td><strong>36.4%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Kairos Management, 2006

The Relationship Between NALS 1992 and NAAL 2003

The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) was, at the time, the most comprehensive report on adult literacy in the United States ever produced. The 1992 NALS, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, considered literacy as a continuum and measured it accordingly by assessing an adult’s ability to perform a wide array of reading and computational tasks that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), an Office within the U.S. Department of Education, conducted the 2003 National Adult Assessment of Literacy (NAAL) and planned the research so that the resulting data could be compared to data from the 1992 NALS. NCES accomplished this by using nearly half of the 1992 sample questions when constructing the 2003 assessment. The NAAL also used the same sampling and data collection procedures as NALS to ensure that NAAL participants would be similar to those surveyed in 1992. The literacy scales are the same as those used in 1992: prose, document, and quantitative. Finally, the 1992 NALS data have been reanalyzed along the newly defined 2003 NAAL performance levels.

The NAAL 2003 includes a health literacy component, the first-ever national assessment of adults’ ability to use their literacy skills in understanding health-related materials and forms. It also contains a prison component used to assess the literacy skills of adults incarcerated in state and federal prisons. [http://nces.ed.gov/naal](http://nces.ed.gov/naal)
Adult Literacy in the District of Columbia

WHO ARE THE APPROXIMATELY 170,000 ADULT DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA RESIDENTS WHO ARE AT THE BELOW BASIC LEVEL OF LITERACY

The typical low literate adult is likely to have an income close to the poverty level, be older than 25 with less than a high school diploma, and live in rental or subsidized housing. Their children are likely to attend low performing public schools in the District where they qualify for free or reduced price lunch. Low literate adults in the District of Columbia also are disproportionately Black and Latino.

THERE ARE MANY WAYS OF DEFINING ADULT LITERACY. HOW A STATE DEFINES ADULT LITERACY OFTEN DETERMINES HOW SERVICES ARE DELIVERED.

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) defines literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.”

Title II of the Economic Opportunity Act in 1964 established a State Education Agency for Adult Education in each state and certain non-state jurisdictions such as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Adult literacy services with federal funding adhere to Title II of the Workforce Investment Act (WIA), Public Law 105-220, administered by the U.S. Department of Education. According to the Workforce Investment Act, eligibility for adult education services includes persons who fit any of the following criteria:

- are 16 years of age and older and not enrolled in school;
- do not have basic education skills;
- do not have a high school diploma or its equivalent; or
- need to improve their ability to speak, read, or write the English language.

The Changing Definitions of Literacy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1865</td>
<td>The ability to sign or mark one’s name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>The ability to do basic reading, writing and calculations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>The ability to read and write with understanding a short simple statement about one’s own life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>The ability to use printed and written information to function in society, achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Adequate information literacy, health literacy, computer/digital literacy, quantitative, and workplace literacy to manage one’s life, health, and family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The District of Columbia has adopted the nationally developed “Equipped for the Future” (EFF) framework citywide. EFF is designed to answer the complex question: What do adults need to know and be able to do in order to carry out their roles and responsibilities as workers, parents and family members, and citizens and community members? In response, this framework identifies functional literacy skills needed by each adult to operate effectively in these roles. Equipped for the Future is being implemented by SEA funded literacy providers, and professional development in its application is being provided city-wide for adult education practitioners to ensure that adult education programming impacts participants in real ways.
Equipped for the Future (EFF)

Equipped for the Future (EFF) is a framework of content standards of functional literacy skills adults need. The EFF Standards are categorized around four skill sets:

- Communication Skills
- Decision-Making Skills
- Interpersonal Skills
- Lifelong Learning Skills

The sixteen standards that make up these categories have been identified through a careful research process that began by looking at the changes in adults’ daily lives.

Building on research conducted in 1990 by the Secretary of Labor’s Commission on Necessary Skills (SCANS), the National Institute for Literacy engaged adults throughout the United States in a research effort aimed at “mapping” the critical responsibilities of family, civic, and work life. The sixteen core skills, grouped into four categories—Communication Skills, Decision-Making Skills, Interpersonal Skills, and Lifelong Learning Skills—constitute a foundation for success in coping with the complexities of contemporary life, fulfilling the varied responsibilities adults perform, and learning how to learn for the future. [http://eff.cls.utk.edu/](http://eff.cls.utk.edu/)

The UDC State Education Agency, Adult Education & Family Literacy has broadened the U.S. Department of Education definition by combining it with the Equipped for the Future framework. The SEA defines literacy as an individual’s ability to read, write and speak in English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to:

- get a job, retain employment, and advance in the workplace;
- earn a livable wage in order to achieve self-sufficiency;
- effectively encourage and support their children’s success in school;
- use technology to access and act upon information;
- advocate for self and family in all life situations;
- manage one’s health; and
- participate fully in the democratic process.
DATA ON ADULT LITERACY LEVELS NATIONWIDE WERE LAST COLLECTED BY THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS IN 2003 USING THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ADULT LITERACY (NAAL).
An initial NAAL report was released in 2005, but NAAL findings on local literacy levels have yet to be announced. A profile of adult literacy levels in the District of Columbia will be included in the NAAL state by state data report when it is released. NCES indicates that the results for the District of Columbia are not expected to be significantly different from the 1992 report. The NAAL is designed to measure functional English literacy. The assessment measures how adults use printed and written information to adequately function at home, in the workplace, and in the community. The assessment questions administered in the survey were designed to measure these three types of literacy: prose, document, and quantitative which measure a person’s ability to read and understand books, medicine labels, and balance a checkbook. The NAAL 2003 reports results on the same three literacy scales as used by NALS 1992 so that comparison data would be possible.

NAAL 2003 THEN USES SCORES ON THESE THREE SCALES TO PLACE INDIVIDUALS IN ONE OF FOUR LITERACY LEVELS:
Proficient, Intermediate, Basic, and Below Basic. The table on the right displays the Prose Literacy levels, performance descriptions for each Prose Literacy level, and the percent of U.S. adults at each literacy level.

Exhibit 2: Percentage of Adults in Each Prose Literacy Levels Nationwide from NAAL 2003

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROSE LITERACY LEVELS</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTIONS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF U.S. ADULTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proficient</td>
<td>Can perform complex and challenging literacy activities.</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Can perform moderately challenging literacy activities.</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>Can perform simple and everyday literacy activities.</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below Basic</td>
<td>Can perform no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL
Findings from the 2005 NAAL report tell us that—

- Several population groups were overrepresented in the Below Basic level. These groups include individuals who: 1) have not completed high school; 2) did not speak English when they entered high school; 3) are Black adults, Hispanic adults, or over the age of 65; 4) or who have multiple disabilities.

- Average scores for prose and document literacy did not change significantly between 1992 and 2003. Average scores for quantitative literacy showed a statistically significant, though not a dramatic, increase from 1992 to 2003.

- Black adults were the only group to show improved scores from 1992 to 2003 in all three literacy categories.

- Adults age 65 and over had the lowest literacy scores of any age group.

- Despite the District’s prosperity, and the opportunities generally associated with such growth, it is estimated that approximately 36 percent of D.C. adults continue to function at the Below Basic literacy level (NALS 1992, Level 1).

  Nationwide approximately 21 to 23 percent of adults are at the Below Basic level. These results were reported as findings of the NALS 1992 adult literacy survey. The data are still generally accepted, since indirect measures, such as poverty levels and low high school graduation rates, which are strongly associated with poor literacy skills, suggest the persistence of low levels of literacy.

---

Me, I want to get enough [money] so I can start my own business. I want my own business.

—High School Dropout
Synthetic Estimates of Literacy
The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) was a national survey conducted during 1992 that measured the literacy levels of a random sample of nearly 25,000 adults age 16 and over across the country. The NALS provided estimates of adult literacy levels for the U.S. as a whole. To obtain estimates of adult literacy at the state and local levels, a statistical technique was developed under funding from the U.S. Department of Education to create “synthetic estimates” of literacy rates for small geographic areas. (The method for creating synthetic estimates is hereafter referred to as the “Reder method”, after the author of the study Stephen Reder). These synthetic estimates are statistical predictions of adult literacy levels in a small geographic area such as a county, based on known information about that area such as the education levels and employment rates of people in that area.

The Reder method began with the aggregation of NALS respondents into the counties in which they live. This enabled the creation of county-level literacy estimates from the NALS data. A statistical regression was used to predict county-level estimates based on 1990 Census demographic and economic data from the county. This model was then applied to Census data from counties not included in the NALS to yield the synthetic literacy estimates.

Using this approach, synthetic estimates of literacy were created for all (or most) U.S. counties. However, because there are no counties within the District of Columbia, the only synthetic estimate for DC released by the Department of Education was for DC as a whole. No such estimates were produced for subdivisions of the District such as Wards.

We constructed Ward-level estimates of low-literacy rates for DC by applying the Reder method to Ward-level 1990 Census data. Specifically, we created estimates of the number and percentage of persons at Level 1 literacy and Level 2 literacy, and we created estimates of the mean literacy proficiency score.

Tabulating Ward-Level Census Data
To obtain the Ward-level data required by the Reder method, we used the Census Bureau 1990 Summary Tape File 3 (STF 3) data. The Census Bureau does not recognize Wards as geographic subdivisions, so there are no Ward indicators on the Census data. Therefore we began with Census tract-level data, and aggregated those Census tracts into Wards. The data that enabled a cross-walk from Census tracts to Wards was provided by researchers at the Urban Institute from a project called NeighborhoodInfo DC, which is a project of the Urban Institute and the Washington DC Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). (See http://www.neighborhoodinfodc.org for more information.)
IT IS DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE HOW AN INDIVIDUAL, GROWING UP IN THE NATION’S CAPITAL, WITH ACCESS TO THIRTEEN YEARS OF FREE PUBLIC EDUCATION, COULD GROW UP TO BE A FUNCTIONALLY ILLITERATE ADULT.

Many factors contribute to low adult literacy levels in the District of Columbia.

Social and other family factors that can interrupt a child’s learning with devastating consequences contribute to D.C.’s functional illiteracy rate. Some of the issues are: frequent absenteeism of school age children at school, an absent parent due to work or incarceration, the responsibility of caring for younger siblings so a parent can work, difficulty mastering material in school, undiagnosed learning disabilities, boredom, teenage pregnancy, and substance abuse of the custodial parent. Of course, there are many children and youth facing similar challenges who manage to succeed in school. And many others manage to find a way to complete their high school education at a later time.

The lack of English language proficiency also contributes to D.C. illiteracy levels. The lack of at least a moderate ability to communicate in English is a serious impediment to finding and holding a job. Between 1990 and 2000, the District of Columbia’s population of persons who speak English “not well” or “not at all” increased from 2.6 percent to 4.4 percent with the increases concentrated in Wards 1 and 4, as well as a slight increase in Ward 2. Based on U.S. Census Bureau data from 2000, 8 percent of persons age 18-64 speak English less than “very well” for a total of 31,000 persons. Another 4 percent speak English “not well” or “not at all” for an additional 17,000 persons.

A major factor contributing to the District’s low literacy levels is the failure of students to complete a high school education. Currently, more than 100,000 District residents lack a high school diploma or equivalency credential. Of these adults, 85,000 are age 25 and over. An additional 25,000 persons are under 25 and have not completed a high school education or the equivalent and are not enrolled in school. Thus, about 110,000 District residents need a high school credential, either a GED, or a regular high school diploma.

Several population groups are overrepresented in the Below Basic level nationally. For example, 55 percent of adults with below basic prose literacy did not graduate from high school, compared to 15 percent of adults in the general population. This means that adults who do not graduate from high school are nearly four times more likely to have below basic literacy skills than their peers in the general population who do graduate. Moreover, Hispanic adults who make up only 13 percent of the population represent 39 percent of those performing in the below basic level.
A functionally illiterate adult struggles each day with ordinary tasks. A parent with low literacy skills may be unable to read a note from her child’s teacher. A father with poor reading skills may need to ask his child for help in filling out a job application. A worker may go to his job each day fearing he will make an embarrassing error doing the simple arithmetic the job requires. A mother may be unable to determine the correct dosage of medication for her infant child. This inability to navigate the text-laden world and perform necessary computations has frustrating and dangerous implications for the well being of low literate adults and those under their care.

**HIGH POVERTY RATES GO HAND IN HAND WITH LOW LITERACY LEVELS.**

Not only are adults who perform at low literacy levels more likely than the general population to live in poverty, children who are born and raised in families living in poverty are more likely as adults to perform at low literacy levels. In 2003, approximately 43 percent of adults who performed at the lowest literacy level (Level I, Below Basic) on all three literacy scales (prose, document, and quantitative) were living in poverty.

More than 20 percent of District of Columbia residents live below the federal poverty line, including 35 percent of children under eighteen years of age, yet the average income of the highest income quintile is 31 times the average income of the lowest income quintile. Nationally, poverty rates are highest for families headed by single women, particularly if they are black or Hispanic. In the District of Columbia, 34 percent of persons with low English proficiency who are non high school graduates live below the poverty level. Another six percent live at less than 26 percent above the poverty level. The poverty index in 2004 for a single mother of two children was $15,219. Even with food stamps and subsidized housing, it is very difficult for a single mother at the poverty level to make ends meet for her two children.

**How Poverty Thresholds Are Calculated**

The United States determines the official poverty rate using poverty thresholds issued each year by the U.S. Census Bureau. These poverty thresholds then inform the poverty guidelines which establish the eligibility criteria for certain programs such as Head Start and the Food Stamp Program. The threshold represents the annual amount of cash income minimally required to support families of various sizes. The methodology used for calculating thresholds was developed in the 1960s and has not been changed since then. The official poverty rates are updated each year using the Consumer Price Index. However, the overall calculations still rely on data from the 1955 Household Food Consumption Survey. The Office of Management and Budget, Statistical Policy Directive No. 14, Definition of Poverty for Statistical Purposes, May 1978 specifically states that, “The official poverty thresholds do not vary geographically.”
EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS ARE DIRECTLY TIED TO AN INDIVIDUAL’S EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT.
This is documented nationally and has pronounced consequences in the nation’s capital, which has a true knowledge-based economy. In the District of Columbia where 47 percent of the jobs require a college or advanced degree compared to just 26 percent of the jobs nationally, individuals without a high school diploma or GED credential are at a severe disadvantage in the marketplace. They are confined to low wage jobs that may be hourly and seasonal and often without benefits.

A Brown University study found that GED holders earn five to 25 percent more than school dropouts who do not get a GED; on average, GED holders earn 15 percent more than dropouts five years after acquiring the GED. The GED seems to benefit low-skilled recipients the most. The U.S. Census Bureau reports even higher gains, on average 27 percent for GED/High School Diploma holders, compared to those without.15

Yeah, for me and my kids because I always tell them that they can do anything they want to do, be what they want to be as long as they finish school.

—Single Mother
The Impact of Low Levels of Adult Literacy

**High School Completion and Earning Power: A New Analysis of Longitudinal Data**

Using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), the National Center for Education Statistics reports that, of students who were eighth graders in 1988 but who left school without graduating by 1992, more than half completed a high school diploma or alternative credential by August 2000. The study compared the economic outcomes of those who earned their high school diploma and graduated on time (4-year completers), those who left school but earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential within two years after August 1992 (4- to 6-year completers), those who earned a diploma or an alternative credential after August 1992 and before August 2000 (later completers), and those who had not earned either a diploma or other high school credential by August 2000 (non-completers). The study found that eight years after graduation the on-time completers on average earned 19 percent more per year than the 4- to 6-year completers, 24 percent more than the later completers, and 16.5 percent more than the non-completers. Whether a late completer earned a regular high school diploma or an alternative credential appeared to make little difference in average annual earnings.

Among all workers, both part time and full time, high school graduates earned 37 percent more than non high school graduates. Further, high school graduates with some college earned 65 percent more than non high school graduates.

**THE D.C. CHAMBER OF COMMERCE ESTIMATES THAT BETWEEN 2000 AND 2005 THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA LOST A POTENTIAL $107 MILLION IN INCOME TAX REVENUE ANNUALLY FOR LACK OF QUALIFIED JOB APPLICANTS.**

During those five years the District of Columbia experienced a growth of 30,000 jobs. Based on its job share at the time, this should have resulted in an increase of 9000 new jobs for D.C. residents. However, during the five year period, the number of employed D.C. residents decreased by 13,000. This represents a total loss of 22,000 jobs for city residents. In 2005, each job that moved from D.C. to Maryland or Virginia cost the District nearly $81,000. A loss to the District of 22,000 jobs means an estimated loss of nearly $1.8 billion in personal income to city residents and an estimated loss of income tax revenue of more than $100 million.

**LITERACY IS INTERGENERATIONAL. THE FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY ARE PASSED FROM PARENTS TO CHILDREN.**

Interactions between parents and their children during the early years establish dispositions and attitudes toward learning that can last a lifetime. Parents who love reading pass this on to their children directly and indirectly. Children who grow up with books at home or regular trips to the library learn to value books. A child’s literacy level correlates strongly with the level of education the parent has achieved. In fact, a mother’s educational level is the best predictor of the child’s educational attainment.

Adults in family literacy programs experienced personal growth and social development as well as academic gain. In family literacy programs children and parents make significant literacy leaps—together. Not only that, but by reversing the documented generational patterns of illiteracy, any family literacy gains become exponential. In short, the family that learns together, learns more.

When parents had more experience with books, they selected books for their children and passed along their reading strategies. Parents reported that
family literacy programs met more of their needs than the traditional adult education program. Because of this, the programs retained the adults long enough to make gains.

**CHILDREN ALSO PROVIDE MOTIVATION FOR THEIR PARENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR LITERACY SKILLS.**

In a report titled “Reading Between the Lines,” commissioned by the UDC State Education Agency, Adult Education & Family Literacy and prepared by Symphonic Strategies, adult learners who were interviewed reported that the role of children is critical for adult learning and persistence. For many respondents, particularly the women, children were a source of motivation, inspiration, and support. Many participants in adult basic education programs, when asked what has motivated them to seek a program, report that they want to be able to help their children with homework.

The challenge for a single female household to participate in adult education classes looms large. She is the average adult learner in D.C. and is a woman of color (17–30 years of age) with two children. Her highest grade of completion is the ninth grade. She is a member of the working poor with limited income, fragile housing, limited healthcare, and limited transportation. She needs to be able to “go to school” in the evening or early in the morning.

**MORE AND MORE CHILDREN IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA ARE BEING RAISED BY GRANDPARENTS.**

There are many reasons why grandparents step in to raise their grandchildren; parents may become absent or unable to care for their own children because of substance abuse, incarceration, death, mental illness, HIV/AIDS or military deployment.

Nationally, just over six percent of children live with a grandparent as the head of household. In the District, 8,183 grandparents report that they head households that include grandchildren, but do not include the children’s parents. About 14.5 percent of all D.C. children—16,723 children—live in households headed by a grandparent. The percentage of children younger than eighteen living with their grandparent in the District is among the highest in the nation.

Grandparent caregivers, the majority of whom are female, are 60 percent more likely to live in poverty than grandparents not raising grandchildren. In some cases, custodial grandparents may not have legal custody of their grandchildren, complicating the ability to make medical decisions, to enroll children in school, and to secure benefits for which they are eligible.
Responding to the Problem:

“IN THE UNITED STATES, LIMITED LITERACY SKILLS ARE A STRONGER PREDICTOR OF AN INDIVIDUAL’S HEALTH STATUS THAN AGE, INCOME, EMPLOYMENT STATUS, EDUCATION LEVEL, AND RACIAL OR ETHNIC GROUP.”

A study of the ability of patients at two public hospitals found that one third of patients who spoke English could not read the basic health materials they were given, 42 percent could not understand instructions for taking medication on an empty stomach, 26 percent were unable to decipher the written time and date of their next appointment, and 60 percent could not understand the terms contained in an informed consent document. Clearly, low literacy skills of parents represent a health risk both to themselves, their children, and to others for whom they care.

Nearly a decade ago (1998), the National Academy on an Aging Society estimated that low literacy skills increased annual health care expenditures in the United States by $73 billion each year.

The State Education Agency for Adult Education & Family Literacy is designated by the U.S. Department of Education to receive and re-grant federal funds to community-based organizations that provide adult and family literacy services to residents of the District of Columbia.

In 1998, the City Council of the District of Columbia legislatively transferred the State Education Agency to the University of the District of Columbia where it now resides. This was done to align adult basic education more closely with post-secondary education and workforce development.

The State Education Agency (SEA) operates within the provisions of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, Title II of the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, P.L. 105-220. The SEA exists to (1) assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency, (2) assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children; and (3) assist adults in the completion of a secondary school education. The SEA’s grant making responsibility extends to both designated federal funds and to locally appropriated funds for adult education.

The SEA’s mandate includes the following responsibilities:

• Re-granting funds strategically across a network of program providers to expand adult and family literacy services;

• Establishing standards and a monitoring system that is implemented across the network of funded and non-funded program providers;

• Establishing a system of quality control that fosters, manages, promotes, and develops the network of program providers by delivering professional development opportunities and technical assistance; and

• Collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on adult education and family literacy.
The Role of the State Education Agency

THE UDC STATE EDUCATION AGENCY FOR ADULT EDUCATION MAKES GRANT AWARDS TO COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS TO PROVIDE LITERACY SERVICES TO ADULTS AND FAMILIES.

In fiscal year 2003, the SEA granted funds totaling slightly less than $4 million to 20 community-based organizations operating in every quadrant in the District of Columbia and offering classes in adult basic education, adult secondary education, GED preparation, English as a Second Language, workforce readiness, and workplace literacy. By 2005, with the infusion of nearly $3 million in new funds from the Adult Literacy Initiative, the SEA made grants to 30 community-based organizations delivering services to more than 7000 D.C. adults.

In addition to the SEA-funded grantees, a large number of other organizations, primarily small nonprofit and faith-based organizations operating on funds from other sources, also offer adult literacy and employment services. Together, these programs make up a loosely linked “network of service providers” whose members deliver adult and family literacy services to District residents. This network of service providers is fostered by the SEA, which provides leadership, coordination, training, and technical assistance to the core projects it funds, while also responding within the limits of its resources to the development requests of other network participants.

In the summer of 2004, the SEA and the network of service providers became key participants in the Mayor’s Adult Literacy Initiative undertaking a challenge to triple within three years the number adult learners served in the District of Columbia.

---

I get frustrated when I can’t help my kids, I get really frustrated. I feel really bad.

—High School Dropout
ON AUGUST 5, 2004, FORMER MAYOR OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, ANTHONY A. WILLIAMS, WITH THE SUPPORT OF A NUMBER OF CORPORATE AND PHILANTHROPIC LEADERS LAUNCHED THE ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE.

The Initiative was announced as a $20 million, three-year program “to help at least 10,000 additional District residents achieve their learning goals.” In this document, the Mayor’s Adult Literacy Initiative will be referred to as the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative.

The target population for this initiative has been the estimated 36 percent of D.C. adults who are labeled functionally illiterate. Within this broad low literacy spectrum, the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative places a special focus on five categories, namely: new immigrants; single female heads of household; youths 17 to 24 who do not have a diploma or the equivalent and who are not in school; grandparents caring for their grandchildren; and ex offenders.

THE ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE IS A COLLABORATIVE VENTURE WITH SHARED STRATEGIES AND GOALS.

The work of the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative is carried out by two organizational components working in collaboration. The State Education Office serves as oversight agent for the overall initiative funding, convenes a group that coordinates the efforts of the participating organizations and individuals, and establishes policy direction for the District of Columbia. The State Education Agency for Adult Education, located at the University of the District of Columbia, is responsible for awarding competitive grants to adult literacy service provider organizations; for coordinating and assisting grantees; for funding innovative strategies, developing new partnerships, and strengthening the service provider network; and for publicly reporting on progress.

From the outset, implementation of the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative is organized around five general strategies. These include 1) increasing access to services, 2) focusing on service gaps, 3) making the most of available resources, 4) building powerful infrastructure and relationships, and 5) expanding the service base. Each strategy is briefly described below.

INCREASING ACCESS.

A central focus of the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative is to increase the number of adult students participating in literacy programs. The Adult Literacy Initiative is the city’s response to a discouraging trend. In the three-year period from Fiscal Years 2001 through 2003, the number of participants in adult literacy programs funded by the State Education Agency for Adult Education, with its shrinking budget, decreased annually, from 3667 in 2001 to 3170 in 2003. With the infusion of additional funding under the umbrella of the Initiative, the number served in 2004 rose to a total of nearly 6000 adult learners.

In 2005, with the help of the Initiative, the number of adult literacy students served with public funds, both local and federal, was increased again, this time to more than 7000. In 2006, the number of adults who received services increased to more than 10,000. This is more than triple the number being served before the Initiative began. Yet, it still represents less than 12 percent of the 85,000 D.C. adults generally considered to be most in need of literacy services.

FOCUSING ON SERVICE GAPS.

Another strategy of the Adult Literacy Initiative is to better tailor programs to the needs of those seeking services. The demand for certain types of services far outstrips the capacity of current program providers to deliver, and many services in particular areas of the city regularly have waiting lists, sometimes of a year or more. The Initiative has increased the number being served by creating new programs, such as Lifelong Learning Centers, in areas of high need such as Wards 7 and 8 and by strategically placing Lifelong Learning Coaches in selected city agencies.
MAKING THE MOST OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES.
Relying on a strategy of collaborative planning supported by sound data and followed by newly funded cooperative action, the Initiative has been able to demonstrate important early successes.

Accomplishments to date include: 1) funding in FY06 of outcomes-based programs operated by existing service providers for an increase of 50 percent in available slots; 2) establishing six lifelong learning centers at strategic locations in Wards 4, 5, 7, and 8; 3) initiating training and development of adult literacy providers for city-wide literacy standards; 4) recruiting and assigning 20 Lifelong Learning Coaches to strengthen the city-wide literacy efforts; and 5) making sixteen competitive awards of non-federal funds combined with 27 continuing competitive federal block grants to serve 10,000 adult literacy students.

Lifelong Learning Coaches
Lifelong Learning Coaches (LLCs) are individuals selected for a year long fellowship to help D.C. organizations grow the capacity of their adult and/or family literacy services. The Coaches are expected to be dynamic, resourceful, creative, and tech-savvy “literacy leaders” able to help agencies and organizations develop new or refine existing adult and family literacy programs. The Lifelong Learning Coaches were a strategy of the D.C. Adult/Family Literacy Initiative to expand capacity that would continue to be funded by the Initiative.

Coaches:
• serve as a professional resource to D.C. agencies and community-based organizations through the collection and sharing of current research, best practices, and other data pertaining to adult/family literacy;
• recruit, supervise, and train volunteers;
• provide adult basic education, GED, and/or ESL instruction; and
• assist in the development and delivery of the annual city-wide Read Out Loud literacy awareness campaign.

Lifelong Learning Centers
Lifelong Learning Centers are established in D.C. government agencies or in partnership with D.C. government agencies that provide ancillary services to adult learners. Listed below are six examples of Lifelong Learning Centers, each staffed by a Lifelong Learning Coach. Since 2004, the Initiative has partnered with D.C. agencies to place Lifelong Learning Centers in strategic locations, 80 percent of which are in city designated hotspots.
The State Education Agency also is assembling a portfolio of web-based software to constitute an online learning suite that will be available to District residents and accessible anytime anywhere. The SEA has purchased a statewide license for software so that D.C. residents can access the technology tool at a number of locations, including homes, schools, community-based organizations, adult education centers, and libraries. Central to this suite is PLATO, a computer-assisted learning tool. More than 2,500 adult learners enrolled in PLATO in the first year it was made available by the SEA.

Availability of Literacy Coaches has provided energy, leadership, and strong connections among adult literacy providers across the city. Coaches have been placed in adult education programs, recreation centers, and lifelong learning centers, as well as in other D.C. agencies such as the Department of Employment Services (DOES) One-Stop Centers and the Income Maintenance Administration’s lifelong learning center.

BUILDING POWERFUL INFRASTRUCTURE AND RELATIONSHIPS.
The Initiative continues to increase the city’s service capacity by annually adding to the number of adult learners who can be served, creating new partnerships, establishing additional lifelong learning centers, placing additional literacy coaches, providing staff development for service providers, and selecting and preparing to install a new web-based management information and data reporting system to link literacy providers with one another and with the State Education Agency.

EXPANDING THE SERVICE BASE.
In order to more fully respond to the serious long-term challenge resulting from persistently low adult literacy levels in the District of Columbia, the Adult Literacy Initiative has concentrated on building partnerships with community, government, and corporate entities.

WHEN THE D.C. ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE BEGAN, THE FOLLOWING WERE LISTED AS ANTICIPATED FY 2007 OUTCOMES.

- The pass rate for the General Educational Development Credential will increase from 43 percent to 60 percent.
- There will be a 10 percent increase in literacy services city-wide within two years.
- There will be a 30 percent increase in literacy services east of the Anacostia River within five years.
- There will be a 25 percent increase in family literacy services.
- There will be a 50 percent improvement on all major performance measures.
- Seventy-five (75) percent of state supported literacy providers will be linked through a Management Information System (MIS).


Private sector partners, for example, include the Fannie Mae Foundation, McKissack and McKissack, Comcast Cable Communications, and Verizon. These and other partnerships have raised more than four million dollars in private sector support, as well as $1.5 million in in-kind private sector contributions to literacy efforts associated with the Initiative.

In 2006, funding for adult literacy in the District of Columbia totaled $6.1 million. Of this total, $1.5 million came from federal funds, $1.64 million came from local appropriations in the form of matching funds, and $2.96 million was designated for the Mayor’s Initiative. Funding for the Initiative has included public, foundation and corporate sources. More than $6 million in public funds is included in the 2007 budget.
THE END OF THE THREE YEAR PERIOD ENVISIONED FOR THE D.C. ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE IS FAST APPROACHING, AND IT IS TIME TO BEGIN LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE.

Participants in the Initiative have much to show for their efforts and can be proud of the results. Performance so far against the anticipated outcomes include:

- An increase in the total learners served by the UDC State Education Agency service provider grantees from 3226 in 2003 to more than 7000 in 2005. This is an increase in the number of adult learners served of more than 200 percent.

- An increase in the total number of GED credentials awarded from 511 in 2004 to 569 in 2005.

- An increase in the GED pass rate from 43 percent to 57 percent in 2005.

- A 50 percent increase in literacy service providers east of the Anacostia River.

- A web-based Management Information System links 100 percent of the SEA-funded adult literacy service providers.

While the dedicated efforts of the many staff and volunteers of the 30 publicly funded adult education providers in the District of Columbia, as well as the efforts of many grassroots organizations, have enriched the opportunities and accomplishments of those they serve, there appears to be little statistical change over time in the District’s overall literacy levels. Nevertheless, the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative has demonstrated that with coordinated joint effort, added resources, and renewed enthusiasm it is possible within a short time to boost participation, program quality, and results.

However, placed in the context of the large number of low literacy adults who are still without services; on waiting lists; or yet to be recruited, these accomplishments are only a small beginning. Services still are reaching only a small portion of the 36 percent of D.C. residents who are at the lowest level of literacy.
IN LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE IT IS IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE SEVERAL IMPORTANT INITIATIVES UNDERWAY IN THE DISTRICT THAT HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO STRENGTHEN AND INCREASE ACCESS TO ADULT SERVICES. This, in turn, can lead to increased job opportunities, improved standard of living, and more satisfying lives for low literacy learners. For example:

THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA IS ONE OF THE SEVEN FOUNDING STATES PILOTING THE “WORK READINESS CREDENTIAL.” The Work Readiness Credential reflects the components of the Equipped for the Future Framework and offers an additional way to measure and certify D.C. residents’ readiness for employment. The Work Readiness Credential certifies that holders entering the workplace can perform critical entry level tasks, including:

- Taking responsibility for completing work accurately, on time, and to a high standard of quality.
- Monitoring the quality of one’s own work.
- Working in teams to achieve mutual goals and objectives.

The Work Readiness Credential also will provide evidence that individuals possess the communication skills, interpersonal skills, decision-making skills, and life-long learning skills needed for entry-level jobs. This additional credential is a very important hiring tool for employers because it provides evidence that a holder has met a basic standard of demonstrated skills needed to succeed on the job. The Credential, which is national and transportable, became available to adult literacy learners in the District of Columbia in 2007.

Efforts are underway that make it possible to co-locate adult literacy programs and job training and placement services in certain mixed income housing developments.

THE PUBLIC LIBRARY SYSTEM IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA IS COMMITTED TO EXPANDING ITS ROLE IN SERVING ADULTS WITH LOW LITERACY SKILLS. Although differences in approach exist, there is a general consensus regarding the need to upgrade D.C. libraries, add to their technology capabilities, and design and build a new central library. Libraries ought to be an integral part of the literacy system. In planning for library renovations, consideration should be given to having branch libraries serve as access points for the larger literacy system with computers dedicated to adult learning. This would make it possible for library patrons to take advantage of the SEA’s online learning suite of web-based software.

PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS OFFER A VERY VIABLE ALTERNATIVE FOR EXPANDED ADULT SERVICES AT AN ADEQUATE FUNDING LEVEL. Four existing public charter schools have a mission to serve adult students with literacy programs, alternative high school diploma programs, and employment training. Current legislation permits the establishment
and public funding of charter schools in the District of Columbia to serve adult students who are D.C. residents.

Carlos Rosario Public Charter School, chartered in 1998, provides programs in English as a Second Language, citizenship knowledge, and preparation for the General Educational Development (GED) Diploma. Many Carlos Rosario students are Latino, though the entire student body is from 46 countries and speaks 19 different languages. In school year 2006-2007, Carlos Rosario Public Charter School has an audited enrollment of 1290 D.C. resident adult students.


The Latin American Youth Center’s Youth Build Public Charter School, chartered in 2005, serves youth and young adults age 16 to 24 who left high school without graduating. The school provides a curriculum that combines academics with vocational training, employability skill building, and community service to prepare students for college and the workplace. In its second year of operation, the school in 2006-2007 enrolled 24 adult students as well as 38 school age youth. In addition to GED and vocational training, Youth Build intends in the future to add a regular academic high school diploma program for adult students who desire it.

**LINKING LITERACY DIRECTLY TO WORKFORCE**

Both the SEA and the University of the District of Columbia have been working closely with the D.C. Workforce Investment Council (WIC), the D.C. Department of Employment Services and the D.C. Chamber of Commerce to support a citywide plan for workforce development. This plan includes adult basic education services as the beginning of that continuum. The University president serves on the Workforce Investment Council, and the WIC is a key member of the Literacy Stakeholder Group organized by the Initiative to develop policies and benchmarks. Adult basic education must be built into workforce development efforts to facilitate a seamless continuum of service from adult basic through adult advanced that coincides with consistent pairing of occupational content areas and certifications.
The Need for Challenging Longer Term Goals

**WHILE THE CURRENT EFFORTS OF THE D.C. ADULT LITERACY INITIATIVE WILL IMPROVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR MANY ADULTS, THESE EFFORTS DO NOT COME CLOSE TO SATISFYING THE EXISTING AND POTENTIAL DEMAND FOR SERVICES.**

This is evidenced by the extensive waiting lists experienced by most adult literacy service providers, as well as the latent demand of the many adults who need services but lack the self-confidence and sense of urgency to seek services. The number of D.C. adults most in need, most willing to seek services, and most likely to benefit has been estimated to be as many as 85,000 residents, or about half of the 36 percent of DC citizens in the lowest literacy level. This means that although the Literacy Initiative has increased the number of adults receiving services by 300 percent, it has touched less than 12 percent of the target population.

**THIS MEANS THERE ARE STILL VERY LARGE CHALLENGES AHEAD.**

There is a challenge to find the resources needed to continue serving a population of adult learners that has tripled in size, moving them to performance levels that enable them to improve the prospects for themselves and their families through improved employment, increased earnings, family stability, and civic participation. There is a challenge to greatly expand access to services in order to reach the many thousands of low literacy adults not now receiving services, including those who have not yet been motivated to seek services. There is also a challenge to get better results by continuing to improve curriculum, by expanding training for adult literacy and job skills teachers, and by creating clearer pathways from literacy credentials to job training to work experience and to job advancement.

*Once this program is over and I have completed and got my GED my next step is to go to college.*

—TANF Recipient
THE TIME HAS COME TO LOOK BEYOND INCREMENTAL NEAR TERM GOALS.

Long term planning, goals and commitments are needed if the problem of adult literacy is to be seriously addressed. Engaging in long term strategic planning, establishing long term goals, and eliciting strong and lasting commitments require the joint efforts of government, business, civic and grass roots organizations, and, most important, the public.

Suppose city leaders were to ask the question, “What do citizens of the District of Columbia have a reasonable right to expect over the next decade in terms of adult literacy levels and workforce development?” One way to think about this question is to examine the benefits that would likely result from setting and reaching a reasonable, yet very challenging long term goal, one that might take a decade, or even a generation, to achieve. Rather than act as advocate for a particular goal, let us conduct a “thought experiment” constructed around an imaginary but reasonable example of a realistic and challenging long term goal.

In conducting this thought experiment, let us suppose that city officials, civic leaders, and the citizens of the District of Columbia were to demand that the average literacy proficiency for the nation’s capital be raised to the national average. Although this may sound like an easy goal to achieve, it would actually present a formidable challenge. For the adult population of the District of Columbia to reach the national average literacy proficiency, it would be necessary to raise the NALS 1992 literacy proficiency score of all persons at Level 1 (Below Basic) by an average of 60 points.

Thought Experiment

A thought experiment is an attempt to solve a problem using the power of human imagination. These experiments are used to attempt to understand something about the universe. Such an experiment is an attempt to conceive the consequences of an intervention in the world without actually intervening. Thought experiments have been used to pose questions in philosophy since Greek antiquity; a famous example is Plato’s cave.

Direct and Indirect Effects as Conducted in the Thought Experiment

Research conducted in Literacy and the Labor Force found significant impacts on a person’s labor force variables resulting from a 60 point increase in a person’s mean literacy score. In conducting the thought experiment on the District of Columbia, researchers have applied the research from that report and the data on D.C. literacy to calculate direct and indirect effects.

Two impacts occur with an increase in a person’s mean literacy score, one direct, the other indirect. The direct effect is the immediate impact on labor market outcomes (e.g., employment, earnings) that results from increased literacy. The indirect effect results from a two-step process. First, improved literacy has a positive impact on educational attainment. Second, improved educational attainment will have a positive impact on labor market outcomes. The direct effect could be considered to be short-term, and indirect effect could be considered to be long-term, due to the additional time that would be required to increase educational attainment.
The Need for Challenging Longer Term Goals

WHAT BENEFITS WOULD BE GAINED?
Raising the average literacy proficiency of District residents to the national average is an extremely challenging goal; but, the potential benefits of taking on that challenge as a city would be of immense benefit to all of us and to every aspect of life in the District of Columbia. For example, if the average literacy proficiency for the District were raised to the national average:

• The employment level in the District of Columbia could be expected to increase by as much as 4800 (by direct effects) or 8900 (by a combination of direct and indirect effects).

• The unemployment rate—currently at 6.3 percent in January 2007—could be expected to decrease by as much as 1.7 percentage points (direct effects) or by 3.1 percentage points (combined direct and indirect effects).

• The number of persons living below the poverty level could be expected to decrease by as many as 2500 (direct effects) or 6200 (combined direct and indirect effects).

• The poverty rate could be expected to decrease from 16.8 percent to 16.3 percent (direct) or to as little as 15.7 percent (direct and indirect).

• The annual total personal income could be expected to increase by $91 million (direct) or $182 million (direct plus indirect effects).

• Income tax and sales tax revenue in the District of Columbia could be expected to increase by $5,000,000 to $7,000,000 annually (direct plus indirect effects).

• Costs to the District for social services and income maintenance could be expected decrease by several hundred thousand dollars annually.

WHAT OUTCOMES WOULD NEED TO BE ACHIEVED?
Of course, no one can be certain what it would actually take to bring the nation’s capital’s literacy levels up to the national average within ten years. But, continuing our thought experiment, let us suppose that such a challenging goal could be accomplished through the following achievements.

• Increasing the average annual per pupil performance gain to NRS levels years for students completing 150 hours of instruction in adult basic education.

• Increasing by 300 percent the annual number of adults earning an alternative high school credential—GED or ADP.

• Tripling the number of students who each year successfully complete an English as a second language program.

• Increasing by 60 percent the number of adults earning a credential in technical areas needed for employment.

• Increasing the number of adults moving from literacy programs and vocational training to the workforce by 60 percent per year.

WHAT CAPACITY WOULD BE NEEDED?
What would be the implications for the number and the productivity of adult literacy and vocational and employment training providers supported by public and private funds? Let us continue to suppose, using our thought experiment process, that in order to reach the national average literacy score, the District of Columbia would need to support—

• Three times the existing capacity of community-based organizations, allowing them to provide adult basic education services, English as a second language, job preparation, and family literacy to 20,000 adult students annually.

• It is reasonable to project that as many as three additional public charter schools serving adult
students may be established in the District of Columbia within the next five years. It is also reasonable to expect that within that period of time their combined FTE enrollment could grow to as much as 1500 adult students—400 in the first year—seeking to become proficient in English language skills, earn a high school equivalency diploma, and/or learn employability and vocational and technical skills. (Since many adults are enrolled part time, 1500 refers to the number of full time equivalent students (FTEs) rather than the actual number of students.

• A fully developed and fully funded community college component within the framework of the University of the District of Columbia, which enrolls at least 1,000 students FTEs (500 in the first year) in a strong program that imbeds literacy and numeracy acquisition in courses providing the knowledge and skills needed for entry into technical, public service, or business related jobs.

• A doubling of the capacity of job training and job placement programs supported by DOES and other agencies.

**WHAT WOULD BE THE COST?**

The cost projections presented below are our best “thought experiment” estimates based on either FY 2006 or 2007 cost assumptions. As is apparent, some costs might be distributed across the budgets of more than one agency.

• The annual average per student expenditure for those participating in part time services delivered by community-based adult literacy providers is $600. These organizations are now serving 10,000 adult students at a cost of $6 million for an average cost of $600.) The cost projection below assumes an increase of 10,000 students, for a total of 20,000 adult students served each year. This growth would be phased in over two years.

5,000 additional students x $600 per student = $3 million estimated cost increase in the first year; the total increased cost in year two and thereafter would be $6 million

• In school year 2006–2007, it costs $6002 per student FTE in a public charter school serving adult learners pursuing an ESL program, employment and vocational skills, or an alternative high school credential (GED or EDP). This cost projection assumes an increase of 400 adult FTEs in the first-year, growing to a total increase of 1500 adult FTEs by the fifth year.

400 student FTEs x $6002 per student = $2,400,600 estimated cost increase in the first year; the total increased cost would be $9,003,000 when a combined enrollment of 1500 students was reached

• The cost per semester for tuition for a full time student enrolled in community college courses in UDC is $2025. In this imagined scenario, tuition would be waived for students living below 200 percent of the poverty line. It is assumed that in the first year 500 students would meet this poverty criterion. The number of low-income adult students seeking such a scholarship would be likely to grow quickly.

500 student FTEs x $2025 per FTE per semester x two semesters = $2,025,000 estimated cost in the first year; the cost would increase by approximately $4 million for every 1000 scholarship students
WHAT MUST HAPPEN TO CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN WHAT NOW EXISTS AND THE BRIGHTER PROSPECTS THE LEAST PREPARED OF DISTRICT RESIDENTS HAVE A RIGHT TO EXPECT?

A good beginning already exists in the research, planning, policy influence and program implementation efforts that have resulted from the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative. As a result more adults are being served. Funding, at least in the short term, has increased. Curriculum has been strengthened and made more uniform, and service delivery approaches are being expanded to make more use of technology. But the Initiative also has severe limitations. It has relatively modest goals, lacks long-term scope, and, in terms of focus and funding, ranks low among city-wide priorities.

If really significant progress is to be made in combating low literacy levels and the accompanying problems of poverty and joblessness, and the toll they take on individuals, families, neighborhoods and the city, there are several important steps that need to be taken.

PUBLIC AWARENESS MUST BE INCREASED AND PUBLIC DETERMINATION INSPIRED.

Through public forums, community meetings and media attention, the serious need, the detrimental consequences, and the needed response should become topics of informed public discussion. This requires additional research and data gathering. It also requires the development of a public information campaign that includes local newspapers, radio and television. There must be an opportunity for the public to hear the story from the perspectives of all the parties affected—government, business, community, and, especially, the individuals who desperately need literacy and job skills training and for those who have had their lives changed by such programs.

A CITY-WIDE CONSENSUS ON A COURSE OF ACTION MUST BE FORGED AND MANAGED OVER TIME.

Out of public discussion should emerge a District-wide consensus and a public will, not just to address the problem, but also to prevail. This city-wide consensus should be solidly linked to other initiatives that are addressing aspects of the same problem. And this resolve must also include the commitment of city officials and the citizens of the District of Columbia to provide the needed resources.

LEADERSHIP AND INFRASTRUCTURE FOR THE PROVISION OF ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS MUST CONTINUE TO BE EXPANDED AND STRENGTHENED.

As described above, this already is an important component of the D.C. Adult Literacy Initiative. However, the scale of the effort being proposed here would require a greatly expanded capacity to deliver services.

My older kids, they help me. They say, “Ma, do your homework.”

—Adult GED Student
The First Step

SO WHERE DO WE START. WE CAN BEGIN BY RAISING OUR VOICES IN A CHORUS WITH MANY OTHERS TO URGE, EVEN IMPLORE, THAT THE CITIZENS OF THE NATION’S CAPITAL BE ABLE TO READ, WRITE AND COUNT AS WELL AS THOSE WHO LIVE IN ANY OTHER CITY OR STATE IN THE NATION.

And, that D.C. residents possess the skills needed to successfully compete for available jobs within the District of Columbia and the larger metropolitan area. Now is the time to act boldly, because we all know—

• There is no defensible reason that more than one third of the adult residents of the Nation’s Capital lack the literacy skills needed to manage their everyday affairs without having to overcome extraordinary challenges—without living in poverty or with the ever present threat of poverty.

• There is no defensible reason that within that one third of adults there are many who lack the skills to be employed at a living wage.

• And, there is no reasonable excuse for a system that leaves so many parents without the everyday literacy skills needed to champion their children in his school. Without the confidence that comes from being able to read and write, parents are reluctant and often unable to demand that their children be taught to read and do algebra and be prepared to graduate from high school with an education that readies him them for work, further study and civic responsibility.

WHOSE ARE THE VOICES THAT ARE BEING RAISED?

There are many; we have space to list only a few.

• The voices of business.

“Over the past five years, the District has added 30,000 new jobs. During the same period, more than 13,000 D.C. residents lost their jobs… Today, suburban workers hold nearly 70 percent of the city jobs. The federal Government solution is to employ more D.C. residents, but many of the city’s unemployed don’t have the skills they need to compete for the jobs that are being competed…

The key to sustaining growth (in the District of Columbia) is an adequate, qualified workforce to fill the growing job market.”


• The voices of civic leaders.

“For too long, neighborhoods East of the River have been left out of the economic boom in the District.”

—Carrie Thornhill, Community Activist and Former Member of the District of Columbia Board of Education

• The voices of government officials.

“I know firsthand the importance of vocational education and the impact of learning practical skills that no one can ever take from you.”


• National authority on urban economics.

City leaders also ought to create an accessible, high quality community college in the District—either as part of the University of the District of Columbia or separately. UDC does currently offer certificates and associate degrees, but its community college functions are overshadowed by its four-year and graduate programs. Preparing young people for the world of work is not just the province of the elementary and secondary school system, although reinvigorating vocational education at the high school level is also crucial.


• The voices of adult learners in the District

Several of those voices and their messages are highlighted throughout the text of this document. Visit www.LiteracyDC.org to read more.
**The Economics of Adult Literacy**

**ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS ARE AN INVESTMENT THAT PAYS DIVIDENDS TO THE CITY, ITS CITIZENs, ITS INSTITUTIONs, AND ITS BUSINESS COMMUNITY.**

For example, adult literacy and job skills programs can result in—

- an expanded, more skilled workforce;
- reduced public healthcare costs;
- reduced crime and incarceration;
- increased civic participation; and
- fuller integration and assimilation of immigrant communities.

**IMPROVED LITERACY SKILLS ARE CURRENCY FOR ADULT LEARNERS AND THEIR FAMILIES.**

- Adults who continue in a literacy program until they move to the next higher level improve the likelihood that they will become employed, advance on the job, and increase their earnings.
- On average, GED holders earn 15 percent more than dropouts five years after acquiring the GED.
- Former ESL students are most likely to report job benefits.
- Adults in family literacy programs are likely to experience academic gain, personal growth and social development. They also are likely to improve basic skills, achieve personal goals, improve self esteem and reduce dependence on assistance.

**ADULT LITERACY IS A GIFT TO OUR CHILDREN AND FUTURE GENERATIONS.**

Children as well as adults benefit from family literacy programs. For example, research suggests that children, participating with their parents in family literacy programs are more likely to—

- break the generational cycle of low skills, joblessness, and poverty;
- be enrolled in early childhood education programs;
- continued to benefit throughout their educational lives; and
- grow up to have fewer criminal arrests, higher earnings, more accumulated wealth, and stronger marriages.
The State Education Agency, Adult Education & Family Literacy proudly acknowledges the untiring efforts of the staff of the Agency and specifically, the uniquely collaborative work of David Mack, Keith Watson and Stacey Downey who made this report possible.

ENDNOTES

4 Ibid.
7 Watson, K.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 Kirsch, I.
14 Watson, K.
15 Ibid.
The mission of the State Education Agency, Adult Education and Family Literacy is to positively impact the quality of life, economic, and workforce outcomes for all District of Columbia residents by expanding access to high quality education.