



**Testimony Before the Senate Majority Policy Committee
Hearing on Improving Reading Outcomes in Pennsylvania**

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Mister Chairman and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify on behalf of adult literacy programs in Berks County. My name is Ryan Breisch, and I am Executive Director of the Literacy Council of Reading-Berks. I am also a member of the Berks County Workforce Development Board.

The Broader Definition of Literacy

While many people define literacy simply as the ability to read and write, we understand it encompasses far more. In today's rapidly evolving world, literacy for adults must include not only the fundamentals of reading and writing, but also critical thinking, basic mathematical skills, problem-solving, and increasingly, digital literacy skills. True functional literacy means adults can comprehend difficult texts, understand and use data in everyday situations, communicate effectively in various formats, and use the digital tools that are now essential to nearly every aspect of modern life. These competencies are not luxuries—they are fundamental requirements for developing essential job skills, participating fully in civic life, accessing healthcare and social services, and supporting their families' educational success.

Digital literacy has become particularly critical in the 21st century. Adults must be able to navigate online systems to apply for jobs, complete employment onboarding, access work schedules, and communicate with employers through email and messaging platforms. Beyond the workplace, digital navigation skills are necessary for managing healthcare through patient portals, completing telehealth appointments, accessing government services, conducting online banking, and avoiding increasingly sophisticated online scams and misinformation. The digital divide disproportionately affects adults with low literacy, creating a compounding barrier that limits economic opportunity and social participation. When adults cannot confidently use computers, smartphones, and internet resources, they are effectively locked out of a growing portion of essential services that have moved predominantly or exclusively online.

The consequences of low literacy are staggering: according to ProLiteracy, the leading organization in adult education throughout the world, says low literacy costs the U.S. at least \$225 billion each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment. These costs reflect not only lost earnings and economic output, but also increased reliance on public assistance programs, higher healthcare costs due to inability to follow medical instructions, and the intergenerational cycle of poverty that occurs when parents cannot support their children's education. Here in Berks County, 90,000 adults struggle with literacy, creating significant social and economic challenges for our entire community. This represents neighbors, coworkers, and family members who face daily barriers that most of us take for granted—from reading a prescription label to follow its instructions accurately to helping children with homework,

from understanding a lease agreement to completing a job application online.

Our Track Record and Impact

For 58 years, the Literacy Council has provided comprehensive services to help adults improve literacy skills, achieve English proficiency, and succeed in the workplace. Over the past three decades, I have witnessed firsthand how our programs transform the lives of individuals determined to improve their living standard and provide better opportunities for their families. These students overcome numerous obstacles—transportation barriers, childcare challenges, and health crises often rooted in poverty—on their path to success. This experience reflects the reality faced by most adult education learners.

Our programs serve participants who may not have succeeded in traditional educational settings. We provide them with the skills necessary to enter and thrive in the workforce. These learners may or may not have completed high school. Most are experiencing a life transition that has made them acutely aware of their need to develop stronger literacy skills. In many cases, our programs represent the only available resource for this population.

The Economic Imperative

As Pennsylvania considers how to compete with neighboring states and in the global economy, adult education emerges as a critical solution.

The statistics are sobering. More than 650,000 working-age Pennsylvania adults lack a high school diploma. According to the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 29% of Pennsylvanians aged 16 and older lack basic literacy skills,

meaning they struggle to complete a job application or follow written workplace instructions daily.

The Program for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) provides additional concerning data from 2024. This international survey assessed the cognitive and workplace skills necessary for successful participation in 21st century society and the global economy across 31 countries, including the United States. Evaluating literacy, basic mathematical skills, and problem-solving skills, the results revealed significant gaps in American competitiveness. The U.S. now ranks 14th in literacy and 24th in numeracy among 31 developed nations, creating the widest skills gap between high and low performers of any participating country.

Our Comprehensive Approach

We work diligently to bridge the gap between the skill levels of a portion of Berks County's adult learners and the demands of employers in our modern economy. Adult literacy extends far beyond reading and writing, just as the needs of adult learners extend beyond basic education. We provide people with the information and resources they need to focus on securing employment, offer targeted professional development for our instructors, and deliver enhanced training for our volunteer tutors.

Programs at the Literacy Council effectively address both academic needs and essential workforce skills and employer expectations—including time management, critical thinking, and problem-solving—by presenting students with practical, workforce-relevant information. Additionally, we have integrated technology skills throughout our curriculum to meet current workplace demands.

Our curricula focus on instruction in key skills: listening, speaking, reading, mathematics, writing, and technology. We combine teacher-led classroom instruction with flexible online learning that students can access anytime, anywhere. For students who struggle with technology, our digital navigator provides assistance, ensuring everyone can access and participate in our programs without difficulty.

A Success Story

Katie is a 32-year-old single mother of four children living in Reading. Currently employed as a Certified Nursing Assistant at a local skilled nursing facility, she realized she wanted to advance her career to better provide for her family. Katie decided to pursue Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) training, but first she needed to pass an entrance exam.

She was matched with one of our tutors, who identified grammar and reading comprehension as key areas for improvement. Meeting for approximately four hours weekly over twelve weeks, Katie prioritized her studies with remarkable dedication. Her hard work paid off—she recently passed her entrance exam and is now enrolling in a local program to obtain her LPN license.

Katie is positioned for better employment opportunities and increased earning potential, all while serving as a powerful role model for her children, demonstrating that with determination and support, goals are within reach.

The Growing Demand for Skills

Today's employment landscape demands increasingly complex skills, with basic technological proficiency no longer optional but essential. As automation and digital transformation reshape industries, workers must continuously adapt and acquire new

competencies if they are going to retain their jobs, and certainly if they want to seek advancement. Adult education programs provide the foundation for this lifelong learning, enabling participants to remain competitive and economically secure while contributing to Pennsylvania's economic growth.

Conclusion

Pennsylvania's future depends on the investments we make today. Maintaining—at minimum—current funding levels for adult literacy isn't just about teaching people to read. It's about building a stronger workforce, empowering individuals to support their families, and creating pathways out of poverty. The Literacy Council stands ready to deliver results. We're counting on the Legislature to recognize that adult literacy funding isn't an expense—it's an economic imperative. Thank you for your time and the opportunity to testify before you today. I welcome any questions you may have.