



Mayor's Commission on Literacy Launches New Effort to Improve Adult Skill Levels

By Cherri Gregg | December 14, 2013

The Mayor's Commission on Literacy and the U.S. Department of Education held a meeting at the Community College of Philadelphia this week to create a national action plan to improve skill levels among adults.

Recent data from the US Department of Education shows that roughly 36 million Americans between age 16 and 65 lack basic literacy, math and problem solving skills, putting American adult skill levels far below the international average.

"We have a growing underclass of people who don't have the skills to secure employment," says Brenda Dann-Messier, assistant secretary of the office of vocational and adult education for the U.S. Department of Education.



She says the low-skill adults are not able to fully participate in the economy and contribute to the productivity of our country. She says the country needs an action plan to "skill-up" the adult population and her department is holding regional engagement sessions throughout the country to bring together employers, labor leaders, researchers and more to create solutions.

"We have got to work together to skill-up our adult population so they can get the type of employment where they can take care of themselves," says Dann-Messier.

In Philadelphia, the poverty rate is 27 percent in large part because of the number of people who lack the necessary skills to get higher paying jobs.

"One out of every two adults in the city of Philadelphia is either low literate or in need of English language learning," says Judith Renyi, executive director of the Mayor's Commission on Literacy. "We need to up-scale the populous significantly for the jobs that we hope to attract here."

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Much of effort to “up-skill” adults is based locally, with the Mayor’s Commission taking the lead nationally. This January, the commission will launch the country’s first interactive online learning center for low literate learners, as well as an online, virtual institution.

“This has never tried before,” says Renyi, who notes it is difficult to connect with adult learners who are no longer in the education pipeline.” She says part of the problem is low-skill workers tend to be very poor and they have little time for education. So the commission is trying this new approach to make learning more accessible.

“Their lives are very, very hard,” says Renyi, “many of these folks are employed, but their wages are very low so they’re working two and three jobs and are still at the poverty level. What I’ve seen is that many of the adult learners log on between midnight and 4 a.m.”

Renyi says the Commission’s goal is to take the learning to the adult through interactive online opportunities for education, as well as on the job training and education. For more on the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy go to www.philaliteracy.org. For more on the national effort to increase adult learning, go to www.timetoreskill.org.

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