

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## Rebuilding the American Middle Class by Investing in Adult Education

By Judith Rényi | March 11, 2015

The phone rings, and a hesitant voice says, "I need to get my GED. I need a class." The phone rings all day long, and 350-400 times a month in the offices of The Mayor's Commission on Literacy in Philadelphia. Decades of off-shoring manufacturing have left us with a shrinking middle class and a devastated working class. Americans whose parents and grandparents supported their families with well-paying jobs have been stranded with few or no job prospects. At the same time, the education levels expected for entry-level jobs have risen ever higher. Employers now expect job applicants to have not just the high school diploma, but at least a couple of years of college or a post-secondary certificate.

A slow and tentative return of manufacturing to our country, or "re-shoring," has begun over the last few years, but it will not increase the prospects for the millions of underskilled and under-educated adults in our country. Employers complain they have trouble finding qualified workers. While many who call for help never finished high school (61 percent), with and without the diploma or GED, two-thirds who call for help are testing between 4th and 8th-grade levels in reading, writing and math. Many of the high-stakes employer, apprenticeship, and community college tests they face are set at the 10th-grade level. The populace we serve -- even the 12 percent who have college degrees or post-secondary certificates -- fail entrance tests when they apply for jobs, job training programs, or entrance to community college. Nationally, 36 million American workers are testing considerably lower than these entry-level tests.

The American worker has not given up hope, they just need help from systems that work. In 2014, we created myPLACE, a city-wide registration, assessment, and enrollment system, and a series of online courses. We partner with 27 community-based literacy providers who list their courses in our system so we can enroll qualified adult learners directly in those classes. Three of those partners are also campuses that are home base for our adult learners citywide.

The Commission's online courses are the first-ever cohort-based and facilitated courses for low-literate adults. The six online courses address the greatest need not just in Philadelphia, but nationally, which is instruction at the level of 4th and 5th grade skills. We based our courses on new, very rigorous standards for adult learners, and we are seeing phenomenal results.

Adult learners are neither lazy nor incapable of learning. They are desperate for work and want to take good care of their families by becoming productive members of society. They include Audrey A., 53, who was inspired to return to learning by her daughter who had worked hard to become a teacher. Audrey gained so much confidence in herself in just one online course, she retook a college placement test she had previously failed and was admitted to community college.

Cassandra C., 24, told us when she completed one of our online math classes, "...before starting this course I wasn't at all confident about my ability to take a math test. I felt nervous and a little overwhelmed. After taking this course my confidence shows not only in math but in overall life I'm much happier and less nervous when walking into a classroom."

Jaime C., 27, has a growing family, and works at a hauling and storage company. His horizons expanded after one online course:

When I originally started this course, my goal was to get my GED. After starting this course, I realized that my path changed. I want to pursue not only a GED, but continue my education and start college.... After I get my GED, I will continue my education in computer technology. I want to be a video game tech.

The online instructor from a 5th-grade level online reading and writing course that ran in the Fall of 2014 helped Charlotte S. gain admission to a dental assistant training program.

Adult learners love improving their computer skills while also improving their academic skills. They love the convenience of learning asynchronously rather than trudging to a class at particular times each week. And most of all, they love their broadened horizons and growing confidence in their ability to learn, to achieve, and to make a better life for themselves and their families.

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## **Rebuilding the American Middle Class by investing in Adult Education (continued)**

In its first year myPLACE welcomed 3,115 adult learners. We expect to scale this up to 8000 in 2015, and to 15,000 in 2016. Each adult job-seeker who moves into a good job will return our investment by reduced dependency on public assistance, improved performance by their children in school, and increased safety in our community. We are establishing a myPLACE Online campus in the Philadelphia Prison System, and hope to expand to state prisons in the year ahead. Along with other innovations using technology to advance adult employability, myPLACE was cited by the U.S. Department of Education as a model innovation in a recent report, Making Skills Everyone's Business (February, 2015). Our nation's 36 million under-skilled adults can help bring industries back to our shores and show employers that Americans do have the knowledge, ability and passion to do a great job.

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