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Bridging the Knowledge Gap Citywide System Aims to Advance Adults' Reading, Math Skills

By Kristen A. Graham | August 24, 2015

Public schools are a perpetual worry for Philadelphia, and scant attention is often paid to another weighty educational problem: adults who struggle to read.

But nearly half of all adults in the city - more than half a million men and women - lack the basic skills necessary to qualify for postsecondary training or hold jobs that permit them to support a family. Many function below eighth-grade levels.

The Mayor's Commission on Literacy is making inroads. Its work is attracting national attention: praise from the U.S. Department of Education, and designation as a model site from Digital Promise, a nonprofit established by act of Congress in 2008 to use technology to improve education for all Americans.

In 2011, Mayor Nutter revamped the commission, decrying the city's "serious literacy crisis." Three years later, the commission became the nation's first provider to offer free, online, interactive courses for men and women with low literacy and math skills.

And since the launch of myPLACE - Philadelphia Literacy and Adult Career Education, a citywide system to advance adults' skills - nearly 1,500 Philadelphians have completed classes in basic education, GED preparation, or English as a Second Language, and gotten help planning their educational and career paths.

Marcella Matthews, 54, is one of them. The South Philadelphia resident had always worked - as a nurse's aide, an administrative assistant. But with her daughter approaching college graduation, Matthews wanted more for herself.

She hoped to study health information technology at Peirce College, but found that her math skills weren't up to par. She was steered to myPLACE's Center City location, at the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund offices on South Broad Street, where she had a quick assessment, then began an online course to shore up her basic skills.

Matthews last sat in a classroom 30 years ago, when she graduated from South Philadelphia High. The idea of taking a math course - especially one online - was daunting.

"It was like being a baby again," she said. "I was kind of shaky, but I got used to it. It was visual, it was good - if I didn't know fractions, I would see a whole pizza pie, and then three-quarters."

She liked her instructor. (Online courses have facilitators who check in with texts, emails, even postcards home.) She liked that she was part of a cohort, a group of other Philadelphians moving through the six-week class with her. And she liked that materials were tailored to her field of interest.

Matthews proved herself a star student, showing up at 9 a.m. each day to motor through lessons at her own pace. She has now finished her math class, and is about to begin studying for her associate's degree at Peirce.

"I have the skills now," she said. "I'm more confident, definitely."

In Philadelphia, as nationally, adult-education programs are a mishmash. There are hundreds of providers and little oversight.

"Adult education is all over the map," said Diane Inverso, the commission's senior director. "That stymied how we're able to help the 550,000 adults who have literacy needs in the city."

A conversation two years ago between Inverso and Judith Renyi, the commission's executive director, spurred change.



Marcella Matthews at the myPLACE Campus. (Alejandro A. Alvarez/Staff Photographer)

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Bridging the Knowledge Gap (continued)

What if they fashioned a citywide system of hubs for adults with basic education needs? What if the system incorporated existing technology to both maximize the number of people served and get adults more comfortable with the skills they need for a changing workforce?

"In this economy, a lot of our adults don't have the digital literacy skills they need," Inverso said.

Before myPLACE launched, there was no central registration and enrollment system. If someone took a course with one provider, that information stayed siloed. Now, 30 providers are linked to track progress and need.

And the need is great. In myPLACE's first three months of operation, double the expected number of adults showed interest in its services.

"The phone was ringing off the hook," said Jennifer Kobrin, associate director.

Most adult basic-education courses are still face-to-face, but the online pilot has been a success, and organizers hope to expand it. The commission's budget from the city is about \$1 million, supplemented by private donations.

The city's learners - a diverse group, from high school dropouts to longtime workers who find themselves suddenly jobless and lost in a digital age - are clamoring for more spots.

Take Adanna James. She came to the United States from Trinidad 11 years ago with no high school credentials.

"Everybody said, 'You have to get your GED in order to get a good job,' " said James, 32, who found work as a nanny.

James learned of myPLACE through her brothers, whom she had encouraged to try for their GEDs. She found herself enrolling, too, taking a math class to help her prep for the test.

She's seen success after success. James earned her GED, and the next day, she got a job in customer service with US Airways.

"I knew I had the potential," James said. "I tend to downplay myself a lot, but my teacher said, 'No, you're ready.'"

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