Nearly One-Quarter of Philadelphia’s Adult Population Lacks Basic Literacy

By Kate Kilpatrick | December 15, 2015

In part two of our ‘America left behind’ series, Al Jazeera explores the vicious cycle of poverty and lack of education

At the end of this year the Millennium Development Goals, targets set by the United Nations in 2000 for developing countries, will expire. In this project, we examine how some communities in the United States measure up against those goals. We have applied each one to the U.S. by looking at an indicator used to measure a country’s development success and interpreting it for a community in America. The eight goals are to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. An indicator of the second goal is the literacy rate of 15- to 24-year-olds. In this piece, we look at how lacking basic literacy affects adults in Philadelphia.

PHILADELPHIA — Marilyn Cifuentes wants to work in accounting. But she needs to learn fractions first.

Cifuentes, 35, the mother of two boys, 10 and 11, dropped out of high school in the 10th grade to help raise her nephew. Two decades later, she's back in school, studying for her GED. Her reading and math skills are at a fourth- or fifth-grade level — the same grades her two sons are in.

"My kids, they say I can do it — ‘Mom, it’s so easy,’” said Cifuentes, who lives in Kensington, a high-poverty neighborhood in Philadelphia.

In 2010, Philadelphia Mayor Michael Nutter decried the city’s “serious literacy crisis.” A 2003 survey found that 22 percent of people over 16 in Philly lack basic literacy skills, with scores below basic or language barriers preventing testing in English. Adults who test below basic range from being completely nonliterate to being able to follow short, simple instructions (such as what is permitted to drink before a medical test) to locating and adding simple numbers (such as for filling out a bank deposit slip) but unable to complete basic tasks such as using a TV guide to determine what programs are on at a given time or comparing ticket prices for two events.

According to a 2009 report from the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board, more than half of Philadelphia adults don’t have the literacy and work skills necessary to “compete in our knowledge-based economy or to successfully complete a postsecondary degree.”

While an eighth-grade education was once sufficient to land a manufacturing job in the city, that’s often no longer the case.

“We’re not just talking about what people might think of as white-collar professionals,” said Diane Inverso, the interim executive director of the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy (MCOL). “

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“Everyday jobs have started to lock out individuals who don’t have the literacy skills and digital skills.”

Only 46 percent of Philadelphia adults without a high school diploma or equivalent participate in the workforce, compared with 71 percent of all adults, according to a recent analysis of American Community Survey data.

Aleemah Redding, 25, says her limited education has made finding a job tough. She hasn’t worked since 2013, when she was a sales associate at Walmart.

“I don’t have an education. You gotta have an education in order to work nowadays,” she said, sitting in a two-bedroom North Philly apartment that she shares with her two little boys, her boyfriend and her boyfriend’s 18-year-old son. Every few minutes, an elevated public transit train rumbled past the front windows.

Last month Redding enrolled in Philadelphia’s MyPlace Online program. Launched by the mayor’s office in 2013, it’s the country’s first completely online group classes for low-literate adults. The curricula are contextualized around three rising industries in Philadelphia: manufacturing, health care and transportation, warehousing and logistics.

“I think the surprising thing — and it’s really changed the way we’ve operated — is the amount of low, low literacy people — people who come in and can’t read at all,” said Stephanie Webb-Phillips, the MyPlace site administrator at the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund location in Center City, one of three such campuses in the city.

TRY A LITERACY LESSON

In Philadelphia, the Mayor’s Commission on Literacy offers courses on a variety of types of literacy, helping adult learners master reading, math and digital literacy.

Question 1: The Heathplex Hospital patient an can start taking passengers 3/4 of the van is full. Twelve out of 16 seats (12/16) are occupied. Can you start your van trip.

Redding was assessed at a sixth-to-seventh-grade math level, a fourth-to-fifth-grade reading level and second-to-third-grade level in language arts — assessments she said make her feel “horrible.”

But she’s far from alone.

Two-thirds of the Philadelphia adults seeking help who take the test are assessed at a fourth-to-eighth-grade level.

And in the digital age, literacy involves basic computer skills too. Residents of Philadelphia, which has the highest poverty rate of America’s 10 most populous cities, are stymied by the digital divide.

“We see learners come in typing five or 10 words [per minute],” said Jennifer Kobrin, an MCOL associate director. In addition to typing, she said, adult learners need to know how to format a cover letter, how to upload and download files using the cloud and how to surf the Internet safely.

“ ‘Our learners are often very vulnerable to scams,’ she said. ‘They’ll be online looking for a job, and a thing will pop up saying, ‘Give us your credit card number and we’ll send you some job leads.’ They don’t know that’s a scam because they don’t have digital literacy.”

According to analyses from the Pew Charitable Trusts and others, 41 to 55 percent of Philadelphia households don’t have Internet access apart from smartphones.

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However, the city is aggressively trying to tackle these barriers and earlier this year was among six winners of the first-ever Digital Inclusion Leadership Awards.

Redding is halfway through the MyPlace Math 101 online program, which she’s taking to work toward her GED. She graduated from the John Welsh Elementary School in North Philly and then attended high school in Indianapolis. She dropped out in her junior year.

“I knew that education was something I needed. I just didn’t take it serious,” she said.

She hopes to eventually land a job in the health care field. But for now, she said, she’ll take pretty much anything she can get. “I feel like I need to be working in order to really provide for my children. I mean, their father is helping, but to me, it’s not enough. I should be able to help pay bills and stuff like that,” she said.

At home, all Redding’s attention is on her children. She smiles and sings along with her younger son, TJ, when the “Caillou” theme song comes on TV and plays basketball with her older son, Jaden, using bouncy balls and a children’s net set up in the corner.

When she takes the boys outside, she said, she tries to shield them from their surroundings.

“I live directly on Frankford Avenue. So when I go outside, I see people on the corner, people selling cigarettes, people selling narcotics,” she said. “I don’t want them to grow up thinking that’s how they got to live.”

Nearly a third of residents in the Frankford neighborhood, according to a Philadelphia Inquirer database, live in poverty. The unemployment rate — at 17.9 percent — is more than triple the national average, and 29.2 percent of residents over 25 have not graduated from high school.

“I want my kids to be able to see me going to school so that when they grow up, they’ll know ‘Well, Mommy did it. I need to go to school,’” Redding explained.

It’s an ambition that’s often heard by the literacy staff at MyPlace, where two-thirds of students are women and a majority of those women have small children at home. “A lot of women recognize their education needs when they start to have children,” said Inverso.

“You have to be the bigger, better example for your kids,” said Cifuentes. “If I don’t hold that sheet of paper, I can’t constantly preach to them to keep getting education.”

Research shows a mother’s education level has a significant impact on her children’s health and success.

A Foundation for Child Development report released in 2014 looked at disparities between children whose mothers did not finish high school and children whose mothers had a bachelor’s degree. More than half the former group lived in poverty, compared with just 4 percent of the latter group. In the former group, 40 percent of children did not graduate from high school by age 19, versus 2 percent in the latter group.

Of course, not all low-literate adult learners are young, unemployed moms. Often it’s an adult who is underemployed, perhaps working multiple jobs and seeking more career stability.

That’s the case for Annette White, 50, who graduated from high school in 1983 and lives in the Huntington Park neighborhood of North Philadelphia. She said she works three to four nights a week at a North Philadelphia nursing home, where she earns $11.40 an hour helping elderly patients get dressed and do range of motion exercises. She also works part-time on weekday afternoons at an after-school program, where she earns $12 an hour.

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White said she became a certified nursing assistant in 2010 and is working toward becoming a licensed practical nurse to find a better-paid position at a hospital. “I just want to be able to live comfortable and be successful and happy,” she said, adding that she rents a room for $250 every two weeks. “My son in Seattle has his own house. He beat me.”

Unlike White, Mariano Arzola, 32, still has young children to worry about — five daughters from 1 to 10 years old. He said that after he lost his job a year ago, he couldn’t afford to pay the family’s $750 monthly rent and other bills.

“I lost everything — my house, basically my family. I even lost a part of myself,” he said. He currently lives in a men’s shelter in North Philly, he said, while the girls live with their mother. They separated after the family was evicted. He is not financially supporting them at the moment, he said.

“For me, that eats me up because I’m they dad. I brung them into this world with they mother, and she’s struggling,” he said. Originally from the Bronx in New York, he dropped out of high school. He has been living in Philly the past 10 years, working a string of low-paying jobs.

“I qualify for jobs that just hire people — McDonald’s, fast-food restaurants,” said Arzola, who wants to get his GED in order to enroll in a certified nursing assistant program.

Enrolling in basic skills courses, of course, does not guarantee an adult learner success. A Department of Education study published last year that looked at the long-term economic effects of adult learning on annual wages found that learners need to be enrolled in at least 100 hours of training in order to see an improvement in their wages. Also, it can take years after completing education before its benefits are seen. However, the ultimate results were significant and amounted to an increase of about $10,000 in annual wages in 2013 dollars.

And then there are the societal benefits.

“Investing in adult education pays a high return,” said Deana Gamble, MCOL’s communications director. “Because when adults are working, they’re paying taxes, contributing to their communities, active in their children’s education, [and] we see the crime rate go down.”

“The adults in the work environment will be there 20 years from now too,” Iverson said. “So the investment you’re making with these adults will be sustainable for the future.”

For Arzola, it’s about finding a fresh start and proving to his daughters he is a “hardworking, educated, fun-loving” father, he said.

“They know I work hard. They’ve seen it before,” he said. “But I also want them to realize that we’re living in an era where education is everything. If you don’t have it, you stay stuck in the same place.”

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