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## How a 32-Partner Front is Tackling Citywide Illiteracy

By Tony Abraham | March 1, 2016

***The Mayor's Commission on Literacy just opened its fifth adult learning center at the Center for Literacy. It's the newest leg of the city's cross-sector agency fight against illiteracy.***

Omar Diaz looks a little nervous as he takes the podium at the Center for Literacy for the grand opening of the newest myPLACE location, adult learning centers spearheaded by the Mayor's Commission of Literacy.

Unlike some of his friends who have been here for 10 years and still can't speak English, the native Honduran is able to stand in front of a room full of fluent English speakers and articulate his thoughts.

Today, he's full of pride. Diaz moved to South Philly from Honduras in 2010 looking for a job. He eventually got one as a dishwasher, but wanted to make more money. That meant learning how to speak English and getting an education. So, he became an adult learner with CFL with aspirations of landing a degree in computer science.

"Your English is much better than my Spanish," Mayor Jim Kenney told Diaz, adding that his first job was also as a dishwasher.

Diaz is one of the 9,000 adult learners to get an education through myPLACE (Philadelphia Literacy & Adult Career Education), which launched just two years ago. According to the Commission's Associate Director Jennifer Kobrin, over 50 percent of adult learners in the program have a reading level below 6th grade.

This myPLACE location will be the program's fifth, and together with over 30 partners across sectors, from small volunteer organizations to large state-funded programs, the city and CFL have been fighting to educate the approximately 550,000 Philadelphians in need of workforce literacy skills.

"This works. This is working," said Brendan Conlin, Vice President of Workforce Services at Congreso de Latinos Unidos. "We're really starting to harness the community need. It's completely expanded our reach into the community."

Together, the unified front has been able to share data, increase access to training opportunities and rally more partners. If an adult learner has to stop taking classes, their info is in the system. And once they come back?

"That adult learner is not starting at the very beginning," said Diane Inverso, executive director of the Commission.

"We are the poorest big city in America. A lot of that has to do with education, literacy and opportunity," said Kenney, stressing the importance of refurbishing blighted parks, rec centers and libraries — a major pending initiative that he has begun touting about town. "All of this has to do with literacy. All of it is interrelated."

As state and federal resources continue to shrink, the fight against illiteracy in Philadelphia is hoping to be a scalable, replicable model for other cities in need of helping adult learners achieve academic goals and find sustainable employment — folks like Diaz.

"We are a sanctuary city because of people like [Diaz]," said Kenney. "To have him deported because of some insane national, crazy debate ... Omar, don't let anybody beat you down."

And with that, the mayor handed the ribbon-cutting honors to Diaz.



*Omar Diaz at CFL's myPLACE ribbon cutting.  
(Photo by Tony Abraham)*

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