



Education: “I don’t want to say having literacy is a panacea. It gives you access.”

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Diane Inverso has been serving as the executive director of the [Office of Adult Education](#) (OAE) since 2016, after working for the recently renamed Mayor’s Commission on Literacy for more than 25 years.

Though the OAE is not a direct services organization, the city government office develops partnerships and public policy, oversees the [Philadelphia Adult Literacy Alliance](#) and coordinates free adult education services. The office runs five [myPLACE](#) testing centers for placement in adult education classes and more than [50 KEYSPTS](#) across the city, which are computer labs with free access, and unlike libraries, no time limit.

What need presented itself in Philadelphia that the Office of Adult Education created myPLACE?

It has always been a little frustrating that we have multiple programming for adult education in the city. Various people providers are doing this but they are not linked in anyway shape or form. Unlike a school district, or a community college. This information is not shared amongst the many providers.

It always wasn’t very efficient and it certainly always was putting adults in a constant state of being tested and evaluated and that’s also not a good practice and that was one component.

What is the state of adult literacy as you have seen it in Philadelphia?

What we have seen for the 17,000 folks that have come to us so far in the last three and a half years, 60 percent are reading between the fourth- and eighth-grade level. Think about that. And these are just the folks that come in the door and ask for help.

I think it’s one of the big factors on why we have the poverty rate that we have. It impacts many things in our community. It impacts our children receiving the right kind of services. It impacts our economy our workforce system. People who are trying to get into apprentice programs, trying to get into community colleges. They are not reading at levels that are high enough. It impacts so many things. Some of it is very subtle.

Then there are adults who are looking to increase their English language capabilities and that is important as well. Some of them come up to us with professional degrees but they don’t speak English. Some of them come and they are not even literate in their own language. So they want to learn how to speak English and write English and understand how they can get the right kinds of credentials.

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What we are looking at is adults to be successful in the workplace.

Do low literacy rates affect working adults as well?

We are not just talking about adults who don't have high school diplomas. We are talking about adults who have high school diplomas who just haven't kept up their skills because maybe the job that they have been in. They lose their job and maybe they have not been in the market. For a lot of adults it's stunning to them because they have been successful up to that point and they have been able to find jobs. Now suddenly this high school diploma, they still have it, but the skills they had when they graduated have gone away so they need to brush up or relearn skills.

What workplace skills see the most need for improvement among adults?

When we talk about adult education, we are not just talking about the reading, writing and math, we are talking about digital literacy as well. We also want to talk about foundation skills, those are the skills that make you successful in the workplace. Are you a critical thinker? Do you know how to work in teams? Do you show up on time? Do you know how to ask questions appropriately?

It gets really important that with education with adults that what they are learning is not just the reading and writing but contextualize within a work environment.

How does investment in adult education on behalf of the individual affect the city at large?

There has been some research that has been done on the return on investment that individuals who engage in adult education the investment shows that they do get jobs, and if you get jobs you pay taxes, you buy houses. All of these things are so interrelated.

It helps the individual rise to a certain level that they are more successful or more content with their life. There is better healthcare.

I don't want to say having literacy is a panacea. It gives you access. Getting on a computer gives you so much access to many things. The people who need it the most are the ones who don't know how to get on a computer.

We move so quickly with technology and moving things online and things that are written at levels that individuals can't read that further pushes them off with not being successful, with not being engaged in our community.

-Text and images by Brianna Spause.