



Philly announces adult-literacy partnership

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Gladys Stokes and Lyndon Washington, both 53, for years shared something in common with more than a half-million Philadelphians and millions of Americans – they couldn’t read.

What distinguishes Stokes and Washington is their openness about their struggle with literacy. Experts say too many Americans are uncomfortable with their reading difficulties and reluctant to seek help.

“People didn’t want to talk about it at the dinner table,” said Liza McFadden, executive director of the Barbara Bush Foundation for Adult Literacy. “Thirty-six million Americans reading at less than a third-grade level; people don’t realize that’s 15 percent of the folks in the United States.”

Through the foundation’s XPRIZE competition, it hopes to improve adult literacy with mobile education apps. Teams from around the world have been developing apps since 2015, vying for a chance to win \$7 million in prize money.

On Tuesday, Philadelphia announced that it would be one of the cities where the competition’s eight semifinalists would test apps. The city is seeking 3,500 eligible adult learners to try one of the literacy apps, and participants will be offered a \$25 cash card and six months of free Comcast Internet Essentials.

“Placing cutting-edge mobile learning apps in the hands of thousands of adults in the city is yet another way that we’re making quality education accessible to all in Philadelphia,” Mayor Kenney said at Tuesday’s announcement. The School District also has worked to improve literacy in the city, with its teachers completing a summer institute on new early literacy teaching methods this summer.

The Office of Adult Education worked with some of its learners, such as Stokes and Washington, to develop flyers for the program, and volunteers signed up participants in the City Hall courtyard Tuesday.

Diane Inverso, executive director of the office, said after the announcement that these apps are a different way for people to learn. “Many of our adults ... spend a lot of their time concealing their inability to read and write. They can do this on their own time; they can do this in the privacy of their own home,” she said.

IN THE NEWS

Learners from Philadelphia will join those from Dallas and Los Angeles in the search for the best app.

The Barbara Bush Foundation partnered with the Dollar General Literacy Foundation and XPRIZE, a nonprofit that aims to spur innovation in various fields through competitions. Shlomy Kattan, head of the literacy competition and a senior director at XPRIZE, said that it filled gaps in the adult literacy-education market.

“Over the last 20 years in real dollars, federal investment in adult basic education and adult ESL has decreased about 25 percent,” Kattan said. Before this competition only two companies were making such apps.

“Forty-one teams submitted a functional and publicly available app that was targeting adults at this level of literacy,” he added, noting that it represented better than a 20-fold increase in 21 months.