



The bottom rung of American education: Stories from an adult literacy class

WHYY | Avi Wolfman-Arent | November 20, 2017



At the bottom rung of America's education system, you will find someone like Sandie Knuth.

Knuth teaches English for adult learners on the 10th floor of a Center City office building, in a room of carpeted plainness that suits the invisibility of its inhabitants. The students in Knuth's class are varying levels of illiterate — placed here because an entrance test found they read below a third-grade level.

They're here because they think — despite years of setbacks and stacked odds — they can earn the basic education promised to all Americans. Knuth's task is to set them on the journey toward that distant goal. Class begins on a Wednesday in April at 5:30 p.m.

At least that's when it's supposed to begin. There's a 10-minute grace period for students to arrive — and about a

10-minute grace period informally tacked onto that grace period for those who straggle in even later.

As the 25-year-old Knuth waits for everyone to show, she scribbles a question on the whiteboard.

What do you hope to get out of class?

By 6 p.m., five students have arrived. The last of them is 41-year-old Katrina Williams, who swaggers in with sunglasses on, earbuds in, and a large plastic cup full of Dunkin' Donuts coffee.

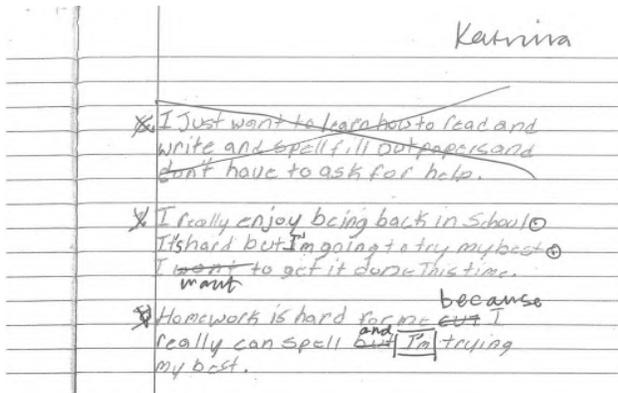
After a boisterous hello, she pulls out her pencil.

I Just want to learn how to read and write and spell fill out papers and don't have to ask for help

I really enjoy being back in School It hard but im going to try my best I want to get it done This time.

Homework is hard for me cuz I really can spell but Im trying my best.

IN THE NEWS



A sample of Katrina Williams' writing (Avi Wolfman-Arent/WHYY)

Although the numbers and faces fluctuate from week to week, the five who've shown up on this first day will form the core of the class. All have a common goal: to earn their GED. This class is step one — the furthest point from a faraway destination.

Nationwide, about 1.5 million adults are in state-funded adult education programs, a number that's fallen sharply since 2000. Over the same stretch, federal funding for adult ed has declined about 8 percent when adjusted for inflation.

This is not because every adult can suddenly read. In Philadelphia alone, an estimated 245,000 adults lack "basic" prose literacy skills, meaning they're not even capable of parsing a television guide.

Philadelphia has exactly 569 classroom seats for adults who aren't proficient enough to tackle high school-level work. That's one opening for every 430 low-literate adults.

Across the state and country, policymakers preach the value of early intervention. There are new pre-K programs to boost kindergarten readiness and warning systems that identify wavering middle-school students. An ounce of prevention, the saying goes, is worth a pound of cure.

But what's left over for the sick?

Relatively little, it seems. Pennsylvania spends just \$12 million on adult and family education, \$6.5 million less than it spent a decade ago and about 1/500th of what it spends on basic K-12 education. Nationally, the typical adult education program spends roughly \$200 per student per year, according to researcher Steve Reder.

Adult education in Philadelphia is less a school system than it is a federation of do-gooders. The city had made some novel efforts to systematize adult ed by creating central intake points where prospective adult learners can be tested and placed. But there is no bureaucratic body that disburses money, promulgates rules, and shapes curriculum — at least not to the extent a school district does.

The work itself falls on nonprofits such as the District 1199C Training and Upgrading Fund, which is tied to a union representing hospital and health care workers. Last fiscal year, District 1199C received about \$740,000 from the state to educate approximately 555 students, whose skills ranged from high school-level to barely literate. The union pays most of its instructors, but, in order to extend its reach, District 1199C recently recruited volunteer tutors to work with students who couldn't test into its "level one" course.

'Job versus no job'

That's where Sandie Knuth and her students come in. The handful of students in Knuth's class are here to begin their ascent of the adult education ladder. From this lowest step they can move to level one. From there, another three classes stand between them and actually sitting for the GED test. Though the program doesn't have precise records, administrator Lynette Hazelton tells me dozens of students have entered 1199C's program reading below a third-grade level over the last two years and none of them have yet earned a GED.

But let's imagine, for a moment, that one of these five students will be the first to make it all the way out of the educational basement. And let's imagine they are then among the [63 percent](#) of test takers who actually pass the GED.

Where then will they be? What exactly is a GED worth?

The students in Knuth's class believe it will be their ticket to stable employment. They want to be nurses, medical assistants, and nannies. They want something that will distinguish them in the ceaseless hunt for good wages.

Hazelton considers the GED a passport into the formal economy. High school equivalency in hand, a worker getting paid cash to clean houses can become, say, a hospital cafeteria worker and earn the relative stability and protections of an aboveboard job.

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