Adult Literacy in Connecticut: How Contextualized Learning Can Bridge the Skills Gap

Background

In today’s society, basic literacy skills are essential to lead a productive and sustainable life. Literacy not only increases success for an individual in the workforce, it also has a lasting impact on the greater community and future generations to come.

Recent studies show that thirty million Americans currently do not possess the necessary skills to perform everyday literacy-related tasks. The consequences of low-literacy among adults extend beyond the struggle of finding meaningful employment. Individuals faced with this obstacle are more likely to be impoverished, become involved with the justice system, and have higher health care costs.

Between crime, government welfare assistance, and inefficient output within the workplace, low literacy costs the nation $225 billion dollars annually. This is more than the 2013 budget for the United States Departments of Labor, Homeland Security, Education, Agriculture, and Health & Human Services combined. While efforts have been made to alleviate this issue, continued support and broadening of these efforts are essential to the growth of the Connecticut workforce.

Adult Literacy in Connecticut

Connecticut is profoundly affected by the gap in adult literacy. According to the 2012 American Community Survey, 10% of Connecticut residents over the age of 25 do not possess a high school diploma or equivalent certification. Additionally, 20% of Connecticut’s population does not have the literacy skills necessary to succeed in the 21st century workforce. Most impacted by this epidemic are the urban areas of Connecticut. The city of Hartford, for example, maintains a 65 to 70% illiteracy rate among its population. The literacy struggle in urban areas may be attributed in part to language barriers, due to the fact that 47% of Hartford residents speak a language other than English at home and 21% identify as speaking English “less than very well”.

In addition to adult illiteracy, studies demonstrate a correlation between the education gap and securing employment. The unemployment rate for people in Connecticut with less than a high school diploma
was 23.8%; for people with a high school diploma it was 10.2%. Both of these rates are significantly higher than for those with some postsecondary education (9%) or a bachelors’ degree (4.4%).

Reports in Connecticut indicate that businesses across the state need workers with basic skills in reading and math, as well as transferable skills. These skills include problem-solving, team work, decision-making, and specific occupational skills. Based on the status of adult literacy and education within the state, Connecticut employers feel that skills necessary for occupations within their field are not being met by the potential workforce. In the absence of workers with job-ready skills, positions go unfilled. Furthermore, small businesses, which drive our economy, cannot find the workers needed and do not have the resources to hire and train people to fill these positions.

**Existing Efforts to Improve Adult Literacy**

The importance of education has dramatically increased since the recession. In fact, approximately 66% of jobs created by 2018 will require some post-secondary education. As such, lack of basic literacy skills creates a difficult path to higher education. Based on the need for post-secondary degrees, certifications, and relevant job skills, adult literacy services are vital to the success of Connecticut’s future workforce.

Existing programs aiding adult learners within Connecticut include Adult Basic Education (ABE), General Equivalency Diploma (GED), English as a Second Language (ESL), and Community College Continuing Education. Adult Basic Education programs provide adult learners with the opportunity to improve basic reading, writing, and math skills in effort to prepare individuals for a high school completion program; such as the General Equivalency Diploma. The GED Program allows adult learners to complete high school education requirements and pursue higher education opportunities, as well as, training for a successful career. Programs such as English as a Second Language offer individuals the opportunity to develop English language skills, such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. By obtaining these basic proficiencies, non native-English speakers have the chance to advance educationally and professionally. Over 26,000 individuals are served annually in these types of programs through adult education programs overseen by the State Department of Education and supported with federal, state and local funding.

Currently, Connecticut colleges and universities offer over 40 ESL programs to non-English speaking adults. Furthermore, higher education institutions throughout the state offer continuing education programs for adult learners. The Connecticut Community College system provides such programs to support non-traditional students through a degree program, based on their specific circumstances. While Adult Basic Education, General Equivalency Diploma, English as a Second Language, and Community College Continuing Education programs exist as a means to support adult learners, more needs to be done to close the growing skills gap throughout the state.
Public Act 12-40 was enacted to support students in the transition from secondary to higher education. The new act requires remedial support within an entry-level course of a college program and bridge programs to improve college readiness for certain students. Moreover, Public Act 12-40 requires public high schools, the Connecticut State University system, and community colleges to align curriculum in order for students to develop mathematic and language arts skills within the state standards of college readiness.

Public Act 13-121 was enacted to support college transitional programs for adult learners. It allows adult education programs to offer college preparation classes/bridge programs and assistance with enrolling into a higher education institution to students with high school diploma, or its equivalency. Such legislation supports the success of adult learners throughout Connecticut and provides opportunity for the Connecticut General Assembly to strengthen public policy pertaining to college readiness.

Educational experts have identified teaching in context, also known as contextualized learning, as an effective strategy to accelerate a student’s path from education to employment. The purpose of these strategies is to help a student learn or improve their basic skills while also teaching the technical skills to prepare them for employment.

Efforts have been made to advance contextualized learning throughout Connecticut. The most well known example of a contextualized learning strategy is Washington State’s Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) Program. The program was developed in response to studies that indicated that students were unlikely to complete a long-term basic skills class and then successfully transition to college level vocational programs. The I-BEST model challenges the traditional notion that students must first complete adult basic education or ESL before moving to college level course work that leads to a post-secondary certification.

In Fiscal Year 2012-2013, the Connecticut State Department of Education (CSDE) invested $240,000 in Program Improvement Project (PIP) grants specifically to implement I-BEST programs. In addition, the Connecticut Department of Labor is overseeing nearly $3 million in state funding to pilot I-BEST programs within the Jobs First Employment Services Program.

**Moving Forward**

Investing in adult literacy is essential to the growth of Connecticut’s workforce and economy. The Campaign for a Working Connecticut calls on the state to continue and expand its investments in innovative models to meet the needs of adult learners. Successful and promising programs such as contextualized learning and bridge programs should be supported statewide to ensure all adults have the training and education needed to succeed.
This fact sheet was designed by the Campaign for a Working CT (CWCT) which provides policy and advocacy support to the Workforce Solutions Collaborative of Metro Hartford.

The CWCT shares an aligned vision: to promote the state’s economic competitiveness through the development of sustainable, effective workforce solutions to increase workers’ skills and advance families to self-sufficiency. The CWCT works to accomplish this goal through a unique and diverse statewide coalition, which includes education and training providers, workforce investment boards, advocates and chambers of commerce. For more information about the Campaign for a Working CT contact Alice Pritchard at 860.247.6090 ext. 107 or apritchard@cwealf.org. Visit the website at http://www.cwealf.org/cwct/

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7 CT Department of Labor December 2013 presentation to CT Employment and Training Commission.


15 Connecticut General Assembly. (2013). An act concerning adult education and transition to college (Public Act 13-121)
