

The Impact of Adult Illiteracy in Washtenaw County

Today, the bar is raised in the workforce, in educational settings, in everyday communications. Adults must continually demonstrate a higher level of skills just to keep pace, this is not happening in Washtenaw County. **The problem of illiteracy in Washtenaw County is growing.**

About the Problem

A new, comprehensive skills assessment of adults world-wide, released by the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies ([PIAAC, 2012](#)), confirms that in the United States the problem of low skills is getting worse, not improving, just as investments in adult education have hit a ten-year low. By international standards, the basic skills of adults in the United States are relatively weak. Unlike many other countries, the US has shown little sign of improvement in recent decades. The skills of young people are little different from those of their parents. Thirty-six million adult Americans are living with the consequences of low literacy skills:

Low “basic” skills (literacy and numeracy) are more common in the United States than on average across countries. One in six adults have low literacy skills – in Japan the comparable figure is one in 20. Nearly one in three have weak numeracy skills against a cross country average of one in five. In a new domain designed to assess some skills with modern information and communication technology “problem solving in technology-rich environments” the US results are a little worse than the cross-country average. (PIAAC, 2012)



Mirroring this data, the problem of Illiteracy in Washtenaw County is growing. The last county-level survey in 2003 (National Adult Literacy Survey, NALS) estimated that one in six Washtenaw County adults, about 27,000, did not have skills sufficient to hold a family-sustaining job, read a map or prescription labels, or fill out an application or form. Not many years ago the traditional definition of low literacy, reading prose below the 8th grade level, matched cultural and workforce expectations and demands. In 2014 adults must demonstrate a higher level of skills today just to keep pace, but that is not happening in Washtenaw County:

- 50,450 unduplicated individuals in Washtenaw County received some form of public assistance from April 2012 to April 2013 (State of Michigan [Department of Human Services Green Book](#), May 2013).
- 11,032 Washtenaw County adults over 25 do not have a high school credential ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2012 American Community Survey](#)).

- 35,803 Washtenaw County adults over 25 have only a high school diploma or equivalent ([U.S. Census Bureau, 2010-2012 American Community Survey](#)).
- Unemployment for low-skilled adults is grim. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), the general unemployment rate nationally was 7.3% as of October 2013 (seasonally adjusted), but 9% in Michigan (third highest in the US). Broken out according to educational attainment (nationally), it looks like this:
 - ✓ with a Bachelor's degree or higher: 3.8%
 - ✓ with some college or an associate degree: 6.2%
 - ✓ with a high school diploma but no college: 7.3%
 - ✓ with less than a high school diploma: 10.9%
- 45.7% of individuals who came to Washtenaw County Michigan Works for JET or FAE&T services between October 2010 and October 2011 tested at reading levels below the 8th grade (Washtenaw County Michigan Works Agency).
- Among the general Washtenaw County population (344,791), 2.8% (9,654) lack lower bound prose literacy skills, 6% (20,687) lack basic prose literacy skills, 11.6% (39,996) lack upper bound prose literacy skills ([2010 US Census](#)).
- From 2012-2013, 1,021 adults who took the COMPASS test to gain admittance to Washtenaw Community College scored too low on the reading scale to even qualify for WCC's developmental reading classes, and they were referred to Washtenaw Literacy. Many of these referrals who came to campus unable to reach WCC's pre-college level of literacy likely believed that they could read well enough to enroll in college or they would not have come to WCC in the first place – some, for a variety of reasons, just quietly slip away without trying – some are embarrassed, some are frustrated, some are scared. (Washtenaw Community College Adult Transitions)
- Adults without a high school diploma who have the lowest level of skills suffer even higher levels of unemployment than this; nationally it is estimated that unemployment for this group is over four times higher than for adults with a college education ([Washington Post, 2012](#)).
- Improving low health literacy would yield savings to the U.S. economy from a lower bound of \$106 billion and an upper bound of \$238 billion. This translates into enough funds to insure every one of the more than 47 million persons who lacked coverage in the United States in 2010, according to recent Census Bureau estimates ([National Institutes of Health, 2011](#)).
- Half of all children born to illiterate parents grow up to be illiterate adults ([The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy, World Literacy Foundation, 2012](#)).



Washtenaw Literacy's mission is to provide free literacy instruction customized to the needs of adults throughout Washtenaw County, utilizing a trained network of volunteer tutors. Our vision is to end illiteracy in Washtenaw County.

Founded in 1971, Washtenaw Literacy is Michigan's oldest literacy council. If judged by the number of learners served, Washtenaw Literacy is Michigan's largest literacy council, having served more than 20,000 learners since its inception. This is a special accomplishment given that staffing levels and budget for Washtenaw Literacy are much smaller than other agencies with a comparable mission.

Washtenaw Literacy's programs serve adults 16 and older who need to improve their reading, writing, numeracy or communication in English through three broad programs:

1. Skills First – basic skill building in reading, writing, math, English communication and basic digital literacy. Tutoring is customized to the learners' goals.
2. Education Now – support for educational attainment, such as earning a GED, completing high school credits and earning a diploma, or accessing secondary training programs.
3. Workforce Ready – developing literacy-based workforce competencies such as skill building contextualized to job tasks, job seeking or employment soft skills.

All of Washtenaw Literacy's services are free. Programs are delivered through a network of highly trained and supervised volunteer tutors. They may choose to be 'Personal Tutors' working either one to one or in small clusters with two or three learners, or they may choose to tutor in a group setting. Some Personal Tutors continue to work with a learner for years; others fulfill the six month commitment that is expected. Group tutors can chose drop-in tutoring or commit to time-limited weekly sessions.

How many volunteers engage?

VOLUNTEERS	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Personal Tutors	321	343	353	356	361	340
Group Tutors	236	226	310	356	336	369
Mentors	24	24	29	27	24	29
Fundraising & Admin.	160	175	170	170	170	184
Total engaged	741	768	862	909	891	922

Washtenaw Literacy offers comprehensive tutor training and on-going development and support. The centerpiece of the tutor curriculum is the 15-hour Core Training. Group tutors may elect the 3-hour group training if they choose to be drop-in tutors exclusively. Once certified, all tutors have access to continuing education, such as topical workshops that address the continuing education needs of our tutors, for example:

- Navigating Cultural Differences,
- Explicit Instruction,
- Math Tips and Tricks,
- U.S. Government and History,
- Spelling: Assessment, Implications and Interventions,
- Using the Common Core Standards



Washtenaw Literacy's tutor training curriculum is designed to prepare volunteers to successfully provide literacy tutoring to adults. Prospective tutors first attend an "[ABCs of Washtenaw Literacy](#)" one-hour informational session that serves as an orientation to the critical issue of illiteracy in Washtenaw County, Michigan and the United States. Attendees learn about Washtenaw Literacy's solution to illiteracy: our programs and the various tutor training opportunities and commitment. The how-when-where-why answers provided at this initial session help new volunteers to decide how they would like to be involved and register for training.

Washtenaw Literacy's Core Tutor Training is a nationally recognized, comprehensive preparation for new volunteers. This foundational training provides research-based tutoring strategies that are goal-centered and paired with authentic, contextualized materials and structured individualized lesson plans. Sensitivity activities give meaning to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as volunteers have a chance to simulate the challenges faced by those they will tutor.

The Washtenaw Literacy Core Tutor Training is based on a hybrid of [ProLiteracy](#) and [LITSTART](#) methods. It relies heavily on the concepts of [Malcolm Knowles](#), the father of Adult Education in the United States, education theories from Piaget, Vygotsky and Kolb, and the academic rigor of the [Common Core State Standards for Adult Education](#) as adopted by the State of Michigan. All program staff members are certified through ProLiteracy; facilitation is based on the Weikart Active Participatory approach to adult learning. Additional staff certifications include the [Weikart Youth Methods](#) and [Learning to Achieve](#) research-based approach to instructional leadership for adults with learning disabilities.

Building on the foundational Core Tutor Training, on-going Tutor development is extensive. Washtenaw Literacy's unique Tutor-Mentor Team assists new volunteer Tutors. In the first six months of tutoring, an experienced volunteer Tutor-Mentor is assigned to each new Tutor to support lesson planning and materials selection and to offer additional practical advice on tutoring.

Monthly, professional development is provided so that tutors can continue to hone their skills and pick up additional best practices. Topics are chosen based on frequently asked questions and new research and developments in the field of Adult Education. They range from *Visual Literacy for the GED Test* to *Phonemic Awareness to Self-Determination to Math for the Kinesthetic Learner*.



Washtenaw Literacy presents an annual day-long conference called "Power Tutoring" that is attended by literacy volunteers working throughout the state of Michigan. This conference includes a variety of topical workshops, a plenary session and networking. Currently it is the only offering of its kind for literacy volunteers in Michigan and northern Ohio.

Washtenaw Literacy maintains an extensive materials lending library, the [Community Literacy Resource Center](#). Tutors and adult learners can check out materials and learning activities from a wide variety of categories, including learning disabilities, GED preparation, English as a second language resources, math, and digital literacy materials.

Ultimately, tutors with at least two years of experience can choose to work towards the ["Master Tutor"](#) designation. This certification is based on earning credits through extensive professional development and involvement in delivering training and programs.

Snapshot of Washtenaw Literacy learners

How many learners are served?

LEARNERS	2007-2008	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Basic Literacy 1:1	231	233	215	226	258	283
ESL 1:1	231	244	245	245	230	191
1:1 tutoring total	462	477	460	471	488	474
Basic Literacy groups	55	53	93	209	200	398
ESL groups	1009	1058	1213	1164	1118	1105
Groups total	1064	1111	1306	1373	1318	1503
Total served	1526	1588	1766	1844	1836	1977

Who is served?

In the 2012-1013 program year:

- ✓ 68% of our learners were women
- ✓ 88% of our learners live below the [federal poverty guidelines](#), e.g.; \$23,550/year for a family of four.
- ✓ 73% of our learners were unemployed or under-employed
- ✓ 61% of our learners were parents
- ✓ ESL learners represented 69 countries, largest number from Asia (Korea, China and Japan)
- ✓ Our learners' ages: 8% were 16-24 years old, 34% were 25-39, 37% were 40-59, 18% were 60+.

Part of the success of Washtenaw Literacy programs is attributed to meeting the learner in the community, in spaces throughout Washtenaw County:

- 72% of 1:1 pairs meet in public libraries
- 15% of 1:1 pairs in coffee houses/McDonalds
- 6% at Washtenaw Community College

Program Success

Washtenaw Literacy programs have consistently demonstrated results for forty-two years. For example, in one ten-week session of Washtenaw Literacy's Skills Building program at Washtenaw Community College with eleven participants, the average reading level was 4th grade before tutoring. After 20 hours of one-to-one tutoring, the average gain was 2.25 grade levels. After another 20 hours of one-to-one tutoring the average gain was another 2.65 grades for a final average reading level of grade 8.9. Every participant moved on to either completing a GED, or passing the COMPASS test for entrance to Washtenaw Community College.

Data is collected quarterly, and survey the learners' annual accomplishments in both literacy skills attainment, and literacy skills application. Learner gains include:

- 100% - improving their literacy or English skills and meeting at least 2 literacy goals,
- 91% - feeling more confident,
- 62% - reporting they are more successful at work, and
- 41% - understanding details from their doctor better.



Funding

Washtenaw Literacy must raise 100% of the budget annually; our 2013-2014 cash budget is \$475K. Locally we are supported by Washtenaw County Coordinated Funding, the United Way of Washtenaw County and the Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation.

Because volunteer contributions are leveraged and the budget for overhead for operations is minimal our actual budget, cash + in-kind contributions, is \$2.2 million annually. **That means that for every \$1 invested in Washtenaw Literacy, \$3.51 in programming is delivered to the community.** (2013, Titus & Urbanski, Certified Public Accountants, P.C.)

Funding for adult education in Michigan has taken a ten-year nose-dive from \$77.5M in 2003 to \$20M in 2004 (Detroit Free Press, April 12, 2003) to \$14M last year. In Washtenaw County three school districts have eliminated or severely curtailed adult education (Chelsea, Dexter & Saline) due primarily to budget cuts. Washtenaw Literacy has a growing waiting list for adult literacy and basic education services.

As a root cause of poverty, low skills contribute to homelessness, food insecurity, unemployment, poor health outcomes, poor civic involvement, and weak parenting skills. Illiteracy is a hidden cost of living we all bear.

When adults improve their literacy skills they become more productive employees, more engaged parents, and more responsible health care consumers. It is a tool that leads to lowered dependence on supportive social services. The opportunity to teach adults who are ready to learn is one we can't afford to miss.

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