Why Public Libraries and Adult Basic Education Programs Should Advocate for and Partner with Each Other

http://www.opendoorcollective.org

September, 2017

The Open Door Collective (ODC) is dedicated to reshaping U.S. society to have dramatically less poverty and economic inequality and more civic engagement and participation in all our society offers to individuals. ODC is made up of professionals working in adult basic skills, social services and poverty reduction, who believe that adult basic skills and lifelong learning programs can open doors of opportunity to healthier, more prosperous and more satisfying lives. ODC members have expertise in connecting adult basic skills to healthcare, employment and training, corrections, and family and social services. We advocate for adult basic skills including English language, basic literacy, numeracy, high school equivalency, college readiness and technology skills as an integral part of a larger agenda of reducing poverty and income inequality, broadening social participation, and moving us closer to the kind of society in which we all want to live.

Intended Audience
This paper is targeted at professionals who work in public libraries and in adult basic skills programs.

Need for Adult Basic Skills (including English language learning)
36 million adults in the U.S. struggle with basic literacy or the need to learn English (PIAAC, 2013). Forty-three percent of adults living in poverty function at the lowest literacy levels (NCES, 2002). The impact of low literacy is evident across generations as well: a mother’s education level is the number one determinant of her children’s future academic success (Sticht, 1990). To break barriers of low literacy, lack of high school credentials, and poor English language skills, we must address parents’ low basic skills. For over four decades, education levels have had a greater
impact on earnings than any other demographic factor (American Library Association, 2016). Millions of adults who lack a high school diploma are more than twice as likely as those with higher levels of education to be unemployed, working a low-wage job, in poor health, or living in poverty.

Adult Basic Education Programs
State and federally funded adult basic skills programs and schools in the United States comprise what is often referred to as the Adult Basic Education (ABE) system. It serves adults who have not completed high school, who may have limited literacy or English language skills, and who are at least sixteen years old and not enrolled in a K-12 school that serves children. Each year, about 1.8 million adults participate in programs funded by federal and state government under Title II, Adult and Family Literacy, of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). WIOA focuses on adult learners who are ready to join programs that lead to a career pathway. In most communities, there are also community-based and volunteer adult basic skills and English language programs that do not get public funds, and may not be part of the publicly-funded ABE system. These organizations are located in their own sites or in libraries, religious institutions, homeless shelters, and elsewhere. Whether publicly or privately funded, adult basic skills programs provide a myriad of services including basic literacy, English language acquisition, high school equivalency preparation and numeracy, as well as health, financial, and digital literacy skills.

Why and How Public Libraries Should Partner with Adult Basic Skills Programs
Libraries are well-positioned to assist community ABE programs that do or do not receive public funds. They can assist community members who need adult basic skills services and aid local adult basic skills programs in supplementing or enriching services they provide for adults. Libraries and literacy are a natural fit: both are concerned about meeting the needs of adult community members for reading print and digital text, and to use computers, portable digital devices and the Internet to find, evaluate and use important information in health and health literacy, to advance in work and to meet other individual and family needs. According to the Literacy for All: Adult Literacy @ Your Library, Toolkit, a public library’s core value is giving everyone who enters its doors physically, or remotely using digital services, the opportunity for equity of access. The library is a safe and non-threatening environment for patrons of all ages to use as an essential partner
to achieve literacy and lifelong learning goals (ALA, 2012).

Adult basic skills learners, including those in English language programs, are an ideal unserved or underserved population for libraries to serve; they actively seek to become readers, use digital technology, and need other community resources to which libraries can provide access. They are also easily identified and reached at their adult basic skills programs. Public library staff, due to their knowledge, training, and ability to foster community connections, are well positioned to build partnerships, provide instruction, and offer resources for adult learners and adult basic skills programs.

The American Library Association partnered with ProLiteracy, an international adult literacy organization, to create Adult Literacy Through Libraries: An Action Agenda, a resource designed to invigorate a national discussion on the organic connection between libraries and adult literacy and basic skills services (ProLiteracy, 2014). While many efforts are underway in communities nationwide to foster the natural relationship between libraries and adult basic skills programs, the Action Agenda seeks to also help libraries that are not addressing adult literacy and basic skills to become involved. One of the priority areas in the Action Agenda is collaboration and strategic partnerships. The goal is to help libraries understand the benefits of collaborating with adult basic skills programs in their communities and to build awareness of ways in which libraries can foster or intensify partnerships to increase the quality and quantity of services provided for community members.

An important benefit of collaboration between libraries and adult basic skills programs is the power to leverage additional resources for both libraries and adult basic skills programs. Public libraries bring a host of resources to any partnership, including unique connections with the community, location, space, information resources, and a reputation for service to the community. Other partners can often bring similar in-kind and financial resources to a collaboration with a public library. When resources from libraries are paired with those from publicly or privately funded adult basic skills programs, the impact on adult learners can be far greater than either organization can achieve alone. Collaborations that increase the numbers of community members served are often viewed very favorably by funders and can generate additional benefits such as, an increase in library patrons, increased circulation and greater community support for public libraries.
Local public libraries and adult basic skills agencies need to develop processes to facilitate and strengthen their collaborations. For example, the library has meeting and collaboration space, print resources, Internet-accessible computers and sometimes also other digital devices, for tutoring and classes to help adults learn English and digital literacy skills. Library staff can also strengthen relationships with agencies in their community by referring library patrons to agencies that offer services that they need, including adult basic skills, but are not able to be offered directly in a library setting. Library patrons have also proved willing to act as tutors or English conversation partners.

**Examples of Partnerships Libraries have built with Adult Basic Skills Programs**

In some parts of the country, ABE programs and public libraries have partnered for many years to provide literacy, basic skills, high school equivalency preparation, and English language learning services. The role of libraries in their communities is evolving to serve more unserved and underserved community members, and in new ways, for example, to help community members become adept in using digital technology. Libraries are helping to bridge basic skills gaps through their adult and family literacy services. For example, At Sioux Center Public Library in Iowa, the adult literacy staff has leveraged community partnerships to expand access and services for adult learners. Members of the rural community were eager to take the Spanish GED® test, but the library lacked the staffing to offer classes. They partnered with Northwest Iowa Community College, which is 30 miles from Sioux Center—a prohibitive distance for prospective participants. The College agreed to bring the classes to the community if the library could guarantee five students. Twenty-four people signed up. The College now offers classes 30 hours per week at the library, double the number initially offered, and the library recruits the most students for the College (Mahaffy, 2016).

At Azusa City Library in California, adult literacy staff established Health Literacy Learning, a partnership among the library, the Azusa Neighborhood Wellness Center, and the Azusa Pacific University. The program is grounded in the belief that literacy is "a catalyst to transform lives." (Azusa, n.d.). And indeed, through these twice-a-week sessions over eight weeks, participants develop skills in English language learning while also gaining literacy in health-related topics such as nutrition, exercise, and disease.
Nursing students answer participants’ questions, monitor participants’ blood pressure, and track exercise through pedometers given to each participant.

In 2013 the Memphis Public Library in Memphis, Tennessee, noticed that several people visiting their branches were having difficulty reading at the basic level. At the same time Literacy Mid-South, a direct-service organization in Memphis that serves adults reading at or below the 6th grade level, realized that cuts in the city’s mass transit system were impacting their students’ abilities to access their office for services. Some students had to spend a total of five hours just to get to their training session. They also were spending a significant amount of funds on overhead, and needing to research new ways to manage their finances. The Memphis Public Library and Literacy Mid-South recognized they both could benefit by working to solve each other’s problems. Literacy Mid-South was able to relocate to a smaller office space that was more cost effective, and throughout the year has tutors in every branch of the Memphis Public Library system. The library also designated private space twice a week in their branches for Literacy Mid-South to do their intake process privately instead of in view of the public. These changes ultimately benefited the adult learners most, because they no longer had to deal with long commutes and could receive the services they needed at a library branch convenient to them. The library had the space and access to resources that both learners and their tutors desired, and the library was able to increase the number of visitors in their branches while also being able to easily direct their patrons to the services they need (Wade, 2017). Around the same time, the Germantown Community Library, in Germantown, Tennessee, adopted a similar model with Literacy Mid-South to address similar issues their library system was facing (Brown, 2015).

There are many groups working together as partners to provide different types of information and literacy services to the community. Collaboratively, library staff and these groups will be more likely to succeed in their community when the library is the key link among these various partner groups.

**Conclusion and Key Recommendations for Action**

Public libraries have an important role in promoting, providing, and advocating for adult basic skills services. There are a wide range of specific actions they can take wherever they are on the literacy action spectrum, from libraries that are new to thinking about adult basic skills services to those
that are long-time providers of basic skills, often through collaborations with community-based adult basic skills programs, and those that advocate locally, in their state and nationally for resources for adult basic skills. Collaboration between libraries and adult basic skills programs can be mutually beneficial for both, as both parties can bring resources such as funding, space, knowledge, and technology, and can advocate for each other in their public policy advocacy work. Key recommendations for libraries include: Reading the *Adult Literacy through Libraries Action Agenda* and signing up for its accompanying online course on ProLiteracy’s Education Network, raising awareness of the need for adult basic skills instruction services in the community; creating connections to increase the potential for partnerships across various sectors such as business/industry and public schools; and increasing awareness of the range of possible library and adult education collaboration models by regularly reviewing case studies to better understand current and historical collaborations at the local and national levels (ProLiteracy, 2014).

**Authors**
The authors of this paper are: David J. Rosen, EdD., Chair; Jean Demas, Ed.D., M.B.A., M.A.L.S.; Leonardo Espinosa; Kristin Lahurd, M.Ed., MPH; Alicia Suskin; Peter Waite, Ed.D.; Michele Diecuch; and Katheleen McCook, Ph.D.

**Presentation slides that can accompany this paper**

**References**


PIAAC Fact Sheet (2013). *New Data on the Skills of American Adults*. Retrieved May 11, 2017 from [https://s3.amazonaws.com/b.3cdn.net/dpromise/47ea55c5ec3c5ac2e9_23m6iizfd.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/b.3cdn.net/dpromise/47ea55c5ec3c5ac2e9_23m6iizfd.pdf)


Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. TESOL International Association. (2012)

*Principles-based Approach for English Language Teaching Policies and Practices.*

Retrieved May 4, 2017 from

https://issuu.com/ecserrano/docs/a-principles-based-approach-for-eng


*The Memphis Daily News.* Retrieved from

www.memphisdailynews.com