Forum: The Power of Partnership

(*Part 1 of 3*)

Digital Skills Partnerships: Philadelphia Office of Children and Families, Adult Education Division

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Based on lessons learned over the past 9 months of programming in 2023, the Office of Children and Families, Adult Education has key recommendations for literacy providers looking to provide basic digital skills for adult learners: build partnerships with organizations that serve atypical learning locations and meet learners where they already are, both physically and skills-wise.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, The City of Philadelphia, like many literacy providers across the country, quickly discovered that a significant number of residents needed support learning about digital skills. This specific skillset quickly became a necessity to access so many aspects of life that moved online after previously being conducted in-person. When faced with these computer-based tasks, many residents lacked the ability to navigate them with confidence. Significant work was done at that time by employees within City government, alongside volunteers and workers at community-based organizations, to ensure the residents who needed assistance were reached so that they could receive the supportive services they needed for digital skills. And while many aspects of life today have nearly returned to a pre-pandemic rhythm, the work around digital equity has only gained more momentum.

In recognition, the Office of Innovation and Technology in Philadelphia released a Digital Equity Plan in January 2022 to address the myriad ways it continues to tackle the digital divide facing its residents. The main barriers residents face were identified as affordability, digital literacy and support, housing insecurity, and language, cultural, and racial barriers. To address these barriers, the City outlined a series of goals to help residents with these issues. Embedded in the goal of providing digital skills support for Philadelphians is the expectation that this training be centered around both the work and personal lives of residents. The three of the key strategies encompassed in this goal are building a coordinated system of digital literacy providers across the City, standardizing digital literacy assessments and curriculum for all learners across providers in Philadelphia, as well as ensuring multi-lingual outreach to residents. This is where our office saw an opportunity to contribute to this goal.

To best align with and support these strategies, the Philadelphia Office of Children and Families, Adult Education Division (OCFAE) made a commitment to prioritize funding and supporting basic digital literacy programming for adult learners aged 16 and up. One baseline activity included OCFAE's funding of Northstar Digital Literacy subscriptions for interested literacy providers within the City, which is still in place today. Through taking on this cost, OCFAE has enabled providers to access this online platform free of charge.

Northstar, an online platform created and maintained by Literacy Minnesota, offers basic digital skills assessments and certificates, self-directed online learning for participants, and pre-written teacher lesson plans. These tools allow literacy organizations who are interested in launching digital literacy programming to do so without undertaking the massive task of creating curriculum, materials, and lesson plans from scratch. Currently, there are materials available in both English and Spanish, with plans for future translations into additional languages. By absorbing the cost of Northstar for providers, as well as purchasing a significant amount of licenses for organizations across the City, OCFAE was able accomplish two goals. One was to build a coordinated system of digital literacy providers across the City. The second was to support the standardization of digital literacy assessments and curricula for all learners. The idea here was that if a

learner started Northstar at one organization and had to switch to another for any reason, they could continue their digital literacy progress in any part of the City. Additionally, the City created advertising materials in multiple languages that allowed for speakers of many languages to learn about digital skills classes and ways to access them.

Beyond investing in Northstar Digital Literacy, another aspect of OCFAE's support of this programming is through a partnership with the Philadelphia Parks and Recreation (PPR) department that brings basic digital skills classes into older adult centers (OACs) in the City. OCFAE has worked extensively to bring digital skills workshops to PPR sites. Originally launched in 2011, adult digital skills training was based on a network of public computing centers called KEYSPOTS. These KEYSPOTS were housed in community-based organizations, libraries, and PPR recreation centers where learners could access computers and digital skills training. Only a few KEYSPOTS remained open as access centers during the COVID-19 pandemic, while most were shut down. As the world began to re-open after COVID hit, PPR decided to re-establish eight of their public computing centers which were now branded as KEYSPOT Innovation and Technology (KIT) centers, locating them within their recreation centers. Building on the foundations of the KEYSPOT investments, OCFAE sought to reimagine the partnership with PPR.

With this in mind, and considering that adult education is typically connected to workforce entities, libraries, and community-based organizations, OCFAE was interested in exploring other locations where adult education could succeed. A partnership with PPR to bring digital skills to the recreation centers seemed like a logical move. OCFAE released a request for proposal to hire a local literacy provider to develop workshops at courses to be held at the KIT centers, schedule and proctor Northstar assessments, use a train-the-trainer model to build more capacity for PPR computer instructors, and connect interested learners with additional adult education support and opportunities.

The KIT centers, however, proved to be complicated spaces to facilitate classes due to several factors. The main pain points that caused logistical complications were the timing and space sharing limitations related to children and adults being in the same space at the same time, as well as the different schedules for the summer camps being held at the recreation centers. All of this

was compounded against low participation at one-off workshop sessions. And although the classes did not work in the manner they were originally envisioned, there was high confidence in the potential of the PPR model.

This led the OCFAE and PPR teams, along with the provider, to conduct a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats analysis. This analysis highlighted a few key areas related to programming. The first major conclusion from the analysis was that adult education is most sustainable in adult-centered spaces, which the KIT recreation centers were clearly not. Classes and workshops needed to be held in places where adults already had a presence rather than figuring out how to weave adult programming into child-centric spaces.

The second conclusion was that stand-alone workshops were not the ideal structure for meaningfully reaching adult learners. Cohort or rolling-admissions classes seemed to be a more effective model for learners looking to improve their basic digital skills. Learners both wanted and needed multiple workshops to earn a Northstar Digital Literacy certificate. They required more time and practice to truly gain confidence in their new skills. Finally, the OACs run through PPR had previously requested adult digital literacy programming but had been unable to secure stable, reliable, and quality programming across their sites. With that in mind, these centers seemed like logical places to apply resources.

Across the City of Philadelphia, there are six OACs located in a variety of neighborhoods. Unlike other adult education class locations which are open to all ages (e.g., recreations centers, libraries, and workforce sites), OACs have an age requirement of 55 and older for entrance. These centers offer extensive programming to those who decide to utilize them, ranging from exercise and health programs to social services, volunteer opportunities, art programs, recreational and cultural programs, door-to-door transportation, daily lunch, as well as lifelong learning programs. The OACs see up to 100 visitors over the course of each day. The case for moving the classes away from the KIT recreation centers to the OACs continued to become clearer due to the robust programming already in place, as well as a consistent group of visitors.

OCFAE began by bringing in programs to three of the OACs. As programming got off the ground and word

spread through PPR about the new classes, more OAC site managers began to reach out about securing digital literacy programming in their locations as well. Slowly but surely, more OAC locations were slated to have digital skills classes. The classes at each site currently have between 5-10 learners, and attendance is very consistent. We saw these attendance numbers increase immediately by moving the location of the classes to a space where there are already learners. Recruitment also became significantly easier by meeting learners where they already were.

The ethos of meeting the learners where they are skills-wise also holds true for the entire program. Instructors have tailored these in-person classes to respond to the needs of their participants. For example, while there was not a huge demand for learning skills around composing emails, there were numerous requests for how to access telemedicine and social media. The instructors took this into consideration when writing their lesson plans and figuring out what topics to focus on. Additionally, while there were some requests for learning how to navigate computers, most participants wanted to build confidence around using their smartphones to access these resources. Once again, the instructors also took this into consideration and made sure to write their lesson plans in such a way that allowed learners to learn how to complete these skills using either a computer or a smartphone. The lessons were also structured to be highly engaging for participants and to allow for ample time for social connections. By taking these steps, the instructors could make classes accessible to their learners. This work was done in part by spending time getting to know the learners as individuals, discovering what their goals are, learning what skills they can do easily and which ones need more strengthening, setting up classes in such a way that allow for learners to teach and support one another, and allowing for space for learners to demonstrate their newly gained skills to their peers.

OCFAE was also able to bring additional digital supports to the older adult learners in the OAC digital skills classes. A digital needs assessment is done with each learner to identify not only what skills they need and want to learn, but also their internet and device needs. If learners need to get connected to free or low-cost internet, the instructors can connect them to Digital Navigators. The Navigators will then work one-on-one with learners to sign up for the Affordable Connectivity Program (if they qualify). Another

way OCFAE's funding supports digital equity is through device distribution. All of OCFAE's contracts require providers to purchase quality devices for learners in adult education classes. In the coming months, learners in need of a laptop will be identified and provided with a device. It is a goal to ensure that learners can fully utilize the skills gained from their classes with their new computers.

OCFAE still maintains a partnership with the original PPR sites despite programming shifts. The paid provider continues to create a pathway between their classes and the PPR sites through the PPR Computer Instructors. With the pivot to a class model as opposed to one-on-one support, OCFAE wanted to ensure learners continued to have access to an expert to help them through any individual technology needs and questions they may have outside of class. The class instructors now refer learners to the PPR computer instructors, given the new capacity limitations. Learners receive information for locations and times they can drop in at the PPR sites for additional support. They are also to apply what they learn at the OACs at the computer labs at PPR KIT centers.

The partnership with OCFAE and PPR continues to grow, and both public and private OACs have asked for digital skills instruction to be offered at their sites. The demand for the workshops has not only led to more residents gaining the knowledge they need around digital skills, but also led us to identify the technology gaps at the OACs. One location did not have a computer lab, and another had outdated computers. Upon learning this, OCFAE worked with other City departments to bring the computer labs up to date so that these sites could allow patrons to access the online tools and resources that they needed while there. Residents and visitors of the OACs now have an additional avenue for digital access that previously did not exist to them through the establishment of these computer labs. Learners can confidently access the resources they need with their newfound skillset.

Flexibility based on capacity and feedback is key to keeping these continuing partnerships both effective and sustainable. Between working with the PPR to ensure the technology located on-site is current, to working older adult centers to serve their population, the needs of many organizations are being met while working together towards a collective goal: to serve adult learners who want to strengthen their digital literacy skills.

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(Part 2 of 3)

Adult Literacy Ecosystem Partnerships Beyond the Workforce

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Adult literacy programs are critical for individuals who face challenges in functional literacy and in other areas of literacy required to successfully navigate through everyday living. These programs empower adult learners and have a significant impact on their families and communities. A large percentage of adult learners come from under-resourced and under-serviced areas and come from systemically under-resourced neighborhoods, a number of structures, systems, policies, and practices have resulted in significant gaps in access to equitable resources and support (Mayor's Office for Adult Education, 2021). In order to address the systemic injustice of low literacy, a network of partners from across sectors must come together not just to collaborate but to plan for results (Mayor's Office for Adult Education, 2021).

With the increased focus of adult education on the needs of industry and workforce preparation, employer relations have become a driver for the field. However, employment is not the only challenge for adult learners nor is it the only goal our adults have. Successfully addressing their challenges requires a broader approach to partnership development based on a collective impact model. Understanding the inter-relationship between actively addressing learner challenges and the successful completion of their goals requires a holistic approach to adult education service planning. This inclusive approach incorporates an adult literacy ecosystem comprised of adult learners, adult literacy providers, community non-profit and faith-based organizations, the education system (K-12), wrap-around service and government agencies, and the business community (Mayor's Office for Adult Education, 2021). Together, these partnerships provide opportunities for a provider network that supports the needs of various stakeholders through innovative solutions

that are as likely to be initiated by the traditional provider of literacy services as they are by business partners who are coming to understand the impact of these programs on their incumbent workforce. The different partners come together understanding that they each address a different need of the adults and families served and that successfully addressing those needs requires a concerted effort to avoid duplication and maximize outcomes.

The current adult education system plays a vital role in promoting literacy skills and services for adults across the country; however, adult educators alone cannot address the multiple systemic challenges associated with low literacy (Cacicio et al., 2023). This article explores partnerships between large national service groups, financial institutions, global software developers, the faith-based community, health care systems, city government and adult literacy providers. While these partnership descriptions are Houston, Texas. based, they demonstrate the impact working together can have to accomplish common goals and desired outcomes for populations served in under-resourced communities around the nation.

Partnership Description 1: Volunteer Recruitment and The Next Step, Inc.

The Next Step, Inc. (TNSI, 2023), a nonprofit organization addressing digital access and literacy, partnered with Volunteers of America Texas (VOA Texas) to give clients a comprehensive path to financial stability through education and support services. Lakisha Bates, Director of Professional Skills Development at TNSI, says they have been actively working towards adding financial literacy into their Microsoft Office Basics Program in response to

Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint. The newly developed partnership with VOA Texas ensures their clients are connected to a trusted financial education and financial coaching provided without delay. The partnership between TNSI and VOA Texas exemplifies the collective effort to create a brighter, more inclusive future for underserved communities across the state (TNSI, 2023)

Partnership Description 2: Financial Institutions and EastSide University

Under the Community Reinvestment Act (1977), banking institutions are encouraged to assess and address the financial needs of the communities in which they do business. Part of this process includes financial literacy. EastSide University (ESU), for 25 years a provider of adult basic education, high school equivalency, and digital literacy, is located in an under-served area called the Third Ward community in Houston, Texas. ESU formed a partnership with Houston Money Week, a group of financial education providers and institutions, including area banks, making it possible to offer no-cost personal finance classes and workshops. Learners received information and resources to assist with credit repair, scams, identity theft, and money management skills leading to savings goals. Some learners opened accounts for the first time in their lives, and through a financial essay contest, one ESU mother won contest funds helping her to buy her child a motorized wheelchair.

Partnership Description 3: Xprize and Adult Literacy Providers of Houston

The Xprize (2023), whose mission is to "inspire and empower humanity to achieve breakthroughs that accelerate and abundant and equitable future for all," needed non-profit education providers for a national competition piloting newly developed apps for English as a second language and high school equivalency courses. ESU partnered with two of Houston's larger adult literacy providers, Memorial Assistance Ministries and Community Family Centers, to form a team that led the teacher training to support learner usage of the apps across the city. This team won the national competition. Five months later, COVID-19 forced all schools and businesses to close their physical sites temporarily; the programs that were

now comfortable using educational apps and other online platforms were among the only ones able to continue offering learning opportunities without interruption, resulting in over 9,000 learners continuing to be served despite the mass closures across the city.

Partnership Description 4: Faith-Based Organizations and Aldine Independent School District's Family and Community University

One of Houston area's largest school districts, Aldine Independent School District's (Aldine ISD, 2023) Family and Community University, centers around the central theme of "Empowering Families Look Forward." All lessons and resources are provided in both English and Spanish or Vietnamese. Ivan Tamayo, Family and Community Engagement Specialist, says that the project's success is related to the collaborative efforts of multiple departments within Aldine ISD, the generous participation of nonprofit organizations, and, most importantly, families and community members eager to learn and take advantage of learning opportunities. The program partnered with two local churches to serve 300 families with English as a second language classes. The partnership allows for unique opportunities to engage with the school system through contextualized classroom experiences benefiting their families.

Partnership Description 5: Health Care Services Related Partnerships with Legacy Health Care

The Legacy Little Readers Prescription for Reading program supports family literacy through a unique partnership between books and their attending physicians. As part of wellness visits, families leave with an age-appropriate book and a "prescription" from the caregiver to read. Thanks to partnerships with the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, HEB, The Molina Foundation, The Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy (MOAL), and many individual donors, the program has given away more than 231,000 books during well-child visits. Low literacy is associated with many adverse health and preventative care outcomes. Prescription to Read

brings together fundamental literacy with health literacy in the health care setting where caregivers contribute to both the physical and educational welfare of those served. Family literacy within a health care facility is taking the concept of contextualized instruction to a level which reaches the people where they are and creates a model that providers consideration for an alternative that can address the issues of transportation and childcare.

Partnership Description 5: City Government-Based Partnerships with the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy

MOAL in Houston was opened in September of 2019 through the leadership of Mayor Sylvester Turner and Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, Houston Public Library Executive Director. The office was created to advocate for adult literacy providers and their learners and to educate the community at large about the impact of low literacy on all aspects of our community. MOAL does not provide direct services but helps literacy providers establish partnerships for service as much as it helps other partners establish in-house educational programs for their employees and clients through collaborations with literacy programs. Through the pandemic, the office played a significant lead in finding ways to support adult literacy providers with alternative solutions to providing services to their learners. An objective of The Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy's leadership has been to change the conversation about literacy and project the need for services in every possible community forum. The results have been significant. In 2020, MOAL was contacted by the Molina Foundation offering a donation that brought 35,000 new books to Houston for distribution to the city's adult education and family literacy programs. Drive-Up 4 Literacy made it possible for literacy providers to pick up cases of new books for their programs when libraries were still closed to the public, collecting age-appropriate materials from the safety of their cars or in open spaces to observe safety protocols at the height of the pandemic.

MOAL and The Molina Foundation successfully partnered for two additional book distributions providing for additional distribution events totaling more than 25,000 new books. The drive-up model of distribution during the pandemic expanded in 2021 to include distributing

laptops to adult literacy programs within the city's limits. Whether the events were to distribute books or laptops, the model was made possible because area businesses and foundations near and far initiated the partnership with the office because they understood the impact of their support on the efforts of adult literacy providers to keep adult learners engaged in their educational pursuits.

With the support of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, MOAL was able to work collaboratively on research that would become the nation's first blueprint for adult literacy. Houston's Blueprint for Adult Literacy is a 15-year strategic plan dedicated to addressing the challenge that 32% (1:3) adults in Harris County function at the lowest levels of literacy (Mayor's Office for Adult Education, 2021). Partnerships were an important part of the successful planning process. Over 100 partner organizations participated in the development of the document and suggested sources for the research conducted. Their engagement was important not only because it helped MOAL identify strategic goals that include the partners' needs but also because the Blueprint reflects the input and voices of the partners. The strategic plan would not be a success if those voices had not been integrated. A critical result of the broadened literacy ecosystem has been the number of businesses and agencies that call MOAL to ask about starting adult education and literacy programs in their locations because they see MOAL as a broker of services. So, most recently, a large company providing janitorial services contacted MOAL to help them connect to a literacy provider to start English language classes for their employees. Even other departments of the city, employing hundreds of immigrant and low-skilled workers, have contacted our office to broker discussions with providers to set up adult education classes throughout the city.

MOAL uses the Blueprint to coordinate support for adult literacy providers through professional development topics and strategies that align with the seven goals at the heart of the plan. Pilot projects from grant funds that align to the Blueprint have allowed MOAL to develop unique and innovative opportunities for providers to serve their learners, especially in the areas of digital literacy.

The digital divide is one of the most persistent systemic inequities affecting under-resourced communities. This was made evident during COVID-19 related closures when access was limited for those who did not have

connectivity, devices, or the knowledge needed to access resources vital to daily living, accessing health care, information, applying for assistance or employment, and attending classes that had transitioned to virtual instruction models (Mayor's Office for Adult Education, 2021). Funding for digital equity and inclusion projects allowed MOAL to create opportunities for adult literacy providers that benefit traditional literacy while supporting or advancing digital literacy programming. Through a competitive grant from Literacy Minnesota for AmeriCorps VISTA, MOAL was able to secure VISTA members who worked with providers to establish the Bridge Digital Academy (BDA). The BDA utilizes North Star Digital Literacy to institute a standard digital literacy model within the cohort that also allows for the customization of the model for each provider service population. The BDA includes a unique partnership between the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, Houston Community College, and The Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy. The Foundation generously agreed to invest in the BDA to help meet a portion of the costs of the VISTA members for the project. Houston Community College also agreed to help with costs and to provide space and shared supervision of the VISTA members with The Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy. Houston Community College also provides advisory services regarding their certification and degree opportunities for adult learners participating in the BDA. Each adult literacy provider receives individual assistance in developing their digital literacy programming, professional development, and advisory support from MOAL and continues to be supported while expanding their BDA programming from basic digital literacy to upskilling and reskilling for technology-driven employment opportunities.

The successful launch of the BDA and the city's commitment to digital equity brought an additional opportunity for MOAL to develop a digital equity project in partnership with the Houston Public Library and the Complete Communities, Houston's equitable development initiative established by Mayor Sylvester Turner focused on bridging the gap between equity and opportunity in historically under-resourced neighborhoods. This opportunity for a collaborative project utilizes adult literacy providers serving 5 of the 10 complete communities to establish community computer labs for citizens who lack equitable access to digital resources. These digital spaces address the three goals of broadband related funding:

access, connectivity, and training. The project also includes the planned acquisition in 2024 of a mobile digital literacy training vehicle that will allow MOAL to expand the project's impact throughout the Greater Houston area. The grant funds the purchase of a new bus that will not only provide access to traditional digital literacy instruction but also integrates up-to-date technology that includes laptops with VR and AR capabilities and training opportunities for both adult literacy instructors and their learners. Partnerships with entities like Xprize provide the opportunity to engage with adult education app and reskilling software developers for access to pilot versions for the project, making available digital literacy skills experiences that might not be accessible were it not for this collaboration.

Conclusion

Partnerships between agencies and organizations that serve adults living in poverty and adult literacy programs are key as they can bring together stakeholders such as national volunteer service groups, financial institutions, global software developers, the faith-based community, health care systems, city government and adult literacy providers. Cross-sector partnering ensures that the full range of community-serving entities can better meet their objectives by working with adult literacy providers to ensure that adults receive comprehensive support and equitable access to a wide range of services and learning support to address the range of challenges they face in daily life. If those operating in the same space as organizations that provide educational services for adult learners can establish a working relationship with their neighboring adult literacy providers, then improved outcomes that benefit all within the literacy ecosystem can be achieved. Workforce-based outreach to adult literacy providers is strong as demand for an equipped talent pool continues to rise. However, the diverse stakeholders in the business and non-profit community will achieve greater impact in serving adults living in poverty if they include adult literacy providers in their outreach as pointedly as workforce agencies do. This article focused on diverse partnerships between members of the Houston profit and non-profit entities and adult literacy providers. These provider descriptions illustrate how inclusive, innovative partnering can address diverse needs that extend beyond workforce outcomes and create more holistic solutions for adults, their families, and the communities in which they reside.

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