

Forum: The Power of Partnership*(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-served 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 provides 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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