

# Mayor's Initiative Increases Adult Literacy Rates and Employment Possibilities in Washington, D.C.



## Program Profile

The Mayor's Adult/Family Literacy Initiative is run by the State Education Agency of the University of District Columbia. The State Education Agency, Adult Education helps adult learners in the District of Columbia gain literacy skills to improve and sustain the quality of their lives at work, at home, and in their communities.

## Overview

- The Mayor's Adult/Family Literacy Initiative supports expanding access to literacy and education for adult learners and their families using the best technology available.
- The Initiative is sustained by partnerships with non-profit entities, government funding, and corporate entities, including COMCAST, the Fannie Mae Foundation, and Verizon.
- Using PLATO® Instructional Solutions at sites throughout the D.C. area, the Initiative has made literacy and education more accessible to the community it serves.

In his 2003 inaugural speech, Mayor Anthony Williams committed to an all-out effort to significantly improve the status of adult literacy in the District of Columbia. More than 130,000 District residents need literacy skills enhancement. Sixty-two percent of D.C. residents fall into the two lowest levels of reading proficiency and 30 percent of D.C. residents age 16 and older do not have a high school diploma.

In his speech, Mayor Williams stressed that illiteracy impacts not only the individual's capacity to earn a living but also the ability to effectively education his or her children. The Mayor promised local government funds to non-profit education service providers and challenged the corporate community to join him in addressing the problem through the Mayor's Adult and Family Literacy Initiative.

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The goal of the Mayor's Adult and Family Literacy Initiative is three-fold:

1. To expand access to literacy and education for adult learners and their families at the community level using the best technology available;
2. To significantly contribute to both the economic and education well being of the whole family by increasing adult literacy services; and
3. To connect literacy pathways for training, jobs, and higher learning.

### Expanding Access and Improving Services

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The Mayor's Adult and Family Literacy Initiative targets five critical populations:

- New Americans (residents using English as a second language);
- Single Female Heads of Households;
- Youth between the ages of 16 and 24 who have dropped out of school;
- Grandparents caring for their children's children; and
- Ex-offenders returning to the District's communities.

A review of the services previously delivered at literacy centers around the city showed that many service providers have waiting lists from one month to more than a year. The waiting lists and lack of necessary services dissuaded many residents from using the available programs.

The Mayor's Adult and Family Literacy Initiative sought to remedy this problem, specifically for their target populations.

Resources were added to many existing programs and more programs were added in areas with the longest waiting lists. More Literacy Centers sprung up around the District and an Adult Literacy Task Force was formed to help maintain a high level of participation across all critical stakeholder groups.

Making good on the goal of expanding access using the best technology available for adult literacy, high school completion, and employability, the Initiative began exploring options to implement. PLATO Learning was selected as a partner of choice after an extensive review of available resources.

### Using Technology to Improve Literacy

PLATO Learning courseware is used in programs that target learners between the ages of 16 and 65 without a high school diploma; specifically, these programs target learners with difficulties learning through traditional methods, learners comfortable using technology, and self-directed learners. The ABE/Literacy programs have implemented PLATO® Instructional Solutions to improve adult literacy, while the High School Completion program utilizes the courseware to improve students' overall performance scores on the CASAS and GED assessments. The Employability program implemented the courseware to help students remediate or improve basic skills to prepare a learner to obtain and retain unsubsidized employment.

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Following the PLATO® Student Achievement Model, the SEA implemented the courseware with a focus on assessment, alignment, instruction, and evaluation. Learners are first assessed by the literacy instructor to identify strengths and challenges. During this assessment, the learner's goals are discussed as well. Then, learning resources are aligned to their needs and to applicable standards. Comprehensive instruction is provided using PLATO Instructional Solutions, which are aligned to specific objectives. Students are encouraged to work in the courseware at least 2 hours per week for each subject area. The literacy instructor monitors student progress on a regular basis, and incorporates optional activities, such as drills, applications, worksheets, and other resources, when appropriate. Evaluation is ongoing, using both formative and summative assessment measures. The literacy instructors look for "red flags" in attendance, completion and mastery of modules, number of tries, time on task, percentage of learning path completion, and advancement to the next level in the courseware. Mastery of the PLATO Learning courseware demonstrates improvements in skill levels in reading, writing, mathematics, and problem solving, as well as support in high school completion (GED) and WorkKeys objectives.

The major key to student success, according to the SEA, is instructor intervention. PLATO Leaders are integral to the successful implementation of PLATO Learning's courseware. PLATO Leaders are individuals who demonstrate a high level of comfort using technology, understand the PLATO Learning curriculum paths and the various aspects of interactive instruction, and have been trained in the PLATO® Web Learning Network and in learner evaluation. Twelve designated PLATO Support Sites serve as resources for other literacy instructors in the field and provide hands-on instruction to newly-funded SEA program sites.

Adult learners across the district have seen success after working through the courseware.

"I came to the U.S. in 2004 from Ecuador, after my husband was offered a job here. I

had no family and could understand no one. I had a degree from Ecuador, but I needed English," said Ms. F.L., an adult learner at the Carlos Rosario International School. "I began to take English classes at Carlos Rosario and it changed my life. I can communicate with people about my son and I feel better about myself. I used PLATO to practice my English. It's a great tool that lets you review and get feedback that you learned it right and I have learned a lot. On a scale of 1 to 10, I would rate PLATO a 9.5."

"I am a grandmother with two grandchildren, ages 17 and 16," said Ms. L.C., a student at the Living Wages Learning Center. "I did not know how to use the computer at first, but I was helped one-on-one and now I can work the computer and I love PLATO. I'm learning a lot and plan to go to college."

Mr. B. H., a learner at the Gospel Rescue Mission learning center, said, "Most guys in the mission don't know anything about computers before they come there. I quit high school but felt bad when I could not help my 9-year old son with his homework. I did not like being in a class, but I like learning at my own pace. What I like is that PLATO helps you learn computer skills and academics at the same time."

### Improving Literacy to Improve Lives

In its first year, the Initiative established a city-wide stakeholder group to support decision-making and continue relationship building across the various sectors. The first year efforts in standards development, in partnership with the National Institute on Literacy, lead to the beginning linkages between literacy and workforce development. Available slots for adult literacy services were increased by more than 50 percent, including funding 14 outcome-based programs in existing service providers. Four new Lifelong Learning Centers were established in the

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areas of greatest need by partnering with District agencies, private businesses, and the publicly-assisted housing community. Twenty high performing literacy coaches were placed in service providers to enhance the capacity of community-based organizations. Most significantly, in the first year, the Initiative provided services to 1,000 more adults than it had in the past.

In the second year of operations, the Initiative continued to improve its literacy offerings and the data showed that the community was responding. The Initiative continued to increase available slots in adult literacy programs and established three additional Lifelong Learning Centers. The Initiative also finalized a strategic plan for the next three years that included the following anticipated outcomes:

- increasing GED pass rates from 43 percent to 75 percent by 2007;
- increasing literacy services by 10 percent across the District, with a 30 percent increase East of the river within five years;
- improving learner performance by 50 percent among those served in all major measures;
- achieving level gain in reading or math, attainment of GED or high school diploma, and the percentage of students who attain their own goals by 2006; and
- increasing literacy services by 25 percent for parents.

While the numbers speak for themselves, it is the comments from those who have used the programs that truly show the Initiative's impact.

"The Family Literacy Program has helped me to communicate in English," said Silvia Aguilar, an adult learner at the Carlos Rosario International Career Center and Public Charter School. "With my new skills, I am

able to help my children with their homework and understand what they need for their education. I am also able to communicate better at work and in my community."

"The new Life Learning Center in our community (Brookland Manor) has helped me to learn new skills on the computer and reading literature which will allow me to get a better job and help my son with his school work," said Sophia Braxton, an adult learner at the Comcast Lifelong Learning Center

### District-Wide Access Creates Opportunities for More Learners

In 2006, the Initiative took a major step forward in improving adult literacy across the District. In partnership with Verizon Communications and PLATO Learning, the Initiative launched ACCESS LITERACY provides access to educational tools and materials, including PLATO Learning's courseware, at access points across the district, free of charge to residents. Access points will include coffee shops, libraries, literacy centers, and many other locations, and will be designated with a special logo to indicate the free educational resources. By reducing the barriers to access, ACCESS LITERACY will help the Initiative provide literacy services the residents of their community.