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Local News Philadelphia & the Region

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A 'silent crisis' of illiteracy

In Phila., 22 percent lack basic skills. Training is available; demand is high.

By Melissa Dribben
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Rebecca Wagner can't forget the most recent student she lost to humiliation.

He was about 50 and had been brave enough to make his way to the Community Learning Center in Kensington. That alone was huge, says Wagner, director of the nonprofit literacy school for adults. For those crippled by the inability to complete a job application or read a text message, asking for help requires courage.

The man was given 12 reading comprehension questions to help place him in an

appropriate class. He tried to work on them, but then stopped. "He watched everyone else filling out their forms," Wagner says. "Then he walked out and never came back."

Wagner's heart sank, knowing he would be swallowed back into the flood of struggling Americans who lack the rudimentary skills to survive.

The U.S. Department of Education last month released a national report on illiteracy. The study, based on 2003 data, estimates that 22 percent of Philadelphia residents cannot read or write well enough to

handle even elementary school material. They are unable to do simple math like adding deposits into a bank account, or reading a doctor's instructions about what to drink before a medical test.

Statewide, 13 percent of the population is illiterate; the national average is 14 percent. In Delaware, the rate was better (11 percent) and in New Jersey, worse (17 percent).

"This is a silent crisis," said David Harvey, president of ProLiteracy, a national advocacy group. The new report, he said, See **LITERACY** on B7

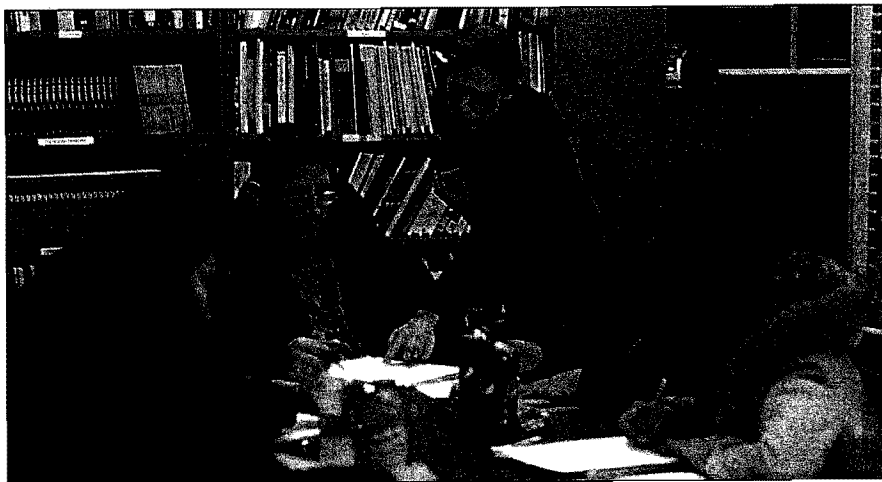


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At the Community Learning Center in Kensington, Venita Forman (left) gets help from director Rebecca Wagner.

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Leigh Anne Scarborough goes over work with Ronald Pujols, one of the students in the math-skills class she teaches at the Community Learning Center in Kensington. The center works to improve adults' literacy in language and math.

Low-Literacy Rates

Estimated percentages of adults in 2003 lacking everyday literacy skills, like the simple math of adding deposits into a bank account, or reading a doctor's instructions about what to drink before a medical test. Percentages include those who can read in another language but are nonliterate in English.

	2003 adult population	Percent lacking basic prose literacy skills
Pennsylvania	9,561,844	13%
Bucks	477,041	9%
Chester	345,597	7%
Delaware	421,634	10%
Montgomery	593,540	8%
Philadelphia	1,109,795	22%
New Jersey	6,610,051	17%
Burlington	338,779	9%
Camden	388,202	13%
Gloucester	205,226	10%
U.S. average		14.5%

SOURCE: National Center for Education Statistics, 2003 literacy survey

The Philadelphia Inquirer

Amid 'silent crisis,' center aims to boost adult literacy

LITERACY from B1

generated barely a cough from the public and policymakers because, unlike AIDS or drunk driving, no grassroots literacy movement demands their attention.

Yet illiteracy, Harvey says, exacerbates virtually every societal ill. Adults who can't read have trouble maintaining their health and caring for their children. When jobs are scarce, they are more likely to become either victims or perpetrators of crime.

According to ProLiteracy, 60 percent of inmates can barely read and write, and "low literacy" is responsible for losses of at least \$225 billion annually from nonproductivity in the workforce, crime and lost tax revenues.

In Philadelphia, more than 60 schools and community groups offer adult literacy training; most are designed to help students with moderate skills earn a GED. Yet there are not enough classes to meet the city's needs.

Those who cannot read words such as *if* or *when* find fewer options. Which explains the long waiting list for Carol Miller's class in the Kensington CLC. The class meets four hours a day, three days a week. Last month, Miller taught her students how to use a ruler, decipher an electric bill and use the Internet.

Adult learners often associate school with failure and embarrassment, so Miller is careful to acknowledge the value of their life experience. She chooses age-appropriate materials and assigns essays on topics such as "the most precious gift you have ever received."

One teenager who didn't want her name used wrote about winning athletic trophies. She did well enough to graduate in 2007 from Martin Luther King High School, and completed a senior project on Lisa Leslie of the WNBA. But her reading skills were limited. Like most CLC students, she has a learning disability.

"Before, when I would sound out words, it didn't come out right," the teenager explains. When she applied to Community College of Philadelphia, she was referred to CLC, where she has made significant progress and was able to move into a culinary-arts training program. As a result, she got a part-time job.

"My students are not mentally disabled," says Miller. Nor, she says, are they stupid, as many were labeled as children. "They have learning differences, but that's different from a low IQ."

Her 18 students are among the most motivated in the school. A half-hour before class starts, they gather in the hallway, waiting for the door to open.

Four had graduated from high school, including one who did not know the multiplication tables. Two have been homeless. A 50-year-old mother attends with her 26-year-old son. Several have spent time in prison. And one, now in his 60s, has had a successful career as a jeweler for 38 years.

Teaching children to read and write is fairly basic. Although the pedagogical tools have been refined since Jane saw Spot run, getting a student to the sixth-grade level

does not require a genome project.

So how, in this 21st century, when education is universal and mandatory, can 32 million Americans — one in seven adults — end up as illiterate as feudal serfs?

The main culprits, research shows, are failing schools, poverty and immigration.

"Children get bogged down and never really develop the literacy they need to function," explains Diane Inverso, director of education for the Mayor's Commission on Literacy. Once they move to higher grades, they are assumed to be proficient, and little literacy is taught.

Resourceful students mask their problems — copying materials verbatim or using multimedia. Others get pushed through the system or drop out. Still others wrestle with English as their second language.

To help students break out of the poverty that generally is linked to illiteracy, CLC offers help writing resumes, conducting job searches and preparing for interviews. It also provides a life-skills counselor to help students transition to college, work or training programs.

"We have to address the barriers," says Wagner. "If they can't walk to class safely, they won't come. If they live with violence in their home, they won't come. If they don't have adequate health care, they won't come."

The center, funded by state

and federal grants and private foundations, started 21 years ago with 67 students. Now more than 400 come to classes.

Their educational backgrounds run the gamut. One student told Miller that his parochial school teachers had him clean the cafeteria some days and called it "life skills."

She shakes her head. "He was just written off."

Miller has a teaching degree and an M.B.A. For 25 years, she worked at Dechert Price, where her last job was as a senior manager.

She volunteered at CLC in 2002 and found the work so rewarding that three years ago, she became one of the center's six full-time instructors and its associate director.

"I see our students make progress. So you have to wonder, what was going on for 12 years when they were in school? And where are the truant officers?"

During a recent class on percentages, one student told Miller, "I always wondered about this percentage thing." He had a credit card and didn't realize he was being charged 24 percent interest. "He had been paying only the minimum amount listed on the bill every month and didn't understand why he owed \$740."

One of the saddest conclusions that experts are drawing from the recent literacy report is that little has changed in the last 20 years.

"The study didn't tell us

anything we didn't already know or suspect," says Michael Westover, acting director of Pennsylvania's Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education.

Gov. Rendell has increased funding, but advocates say it doesn't offset dwindling federal grants and growing demand.

Facing a bleak job market, Miller says, some of her best students feel ambivalent about graduating. Two of the four who were able to move up into the GED classes last year never showed up in September.

"There is a fear of success," she says. They worry that if they become more educated, they will lose their friends. And if they finally earn their degree, they may not be up to new challenges.

"They worry," she says, "what will happen when they're required to take the next step."

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