

Literacy Assessment Executive Summary for Greater Utica



LITERACY ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LITERACY IN THE GREATER UTICA AREA

Utica is a community with strong assets and possibilities. It has a plentiful supply of affordable housing, a vibrant mix of cultural and ethnic diversity, and a wide variety of vocational and recreational opportunities. ***The Utica community is challenged, however, by a silent crisis: nearly half of Utica's residents suffer from low literacy skills, a fact that severely limits the potential for future growth and prosperity.***

The literacy crisis is not unique to Utica. The National Commission on Adult Literacy recently reported that the U.S. *is the only one out of thirty leading free-market countries* where young adults are less educated than their parents. Facing this situation, every American community wants high level, high impact changes to improve education, and Utica is no exception.

BACKGROUND

Literacy is the ability to read, write, comprehend, compute and problem solve. People often think of literacy solely in terms of reading and writing, but there are many aspects of literacy that are broader than just the basic skills. These include health literacy, workforce literacy, financial literacy, computer literacy, family literacy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). See further definition at the end of this Executive Summary.

Local leaders across the country know that successful individuals are essential to building stronger communities, and so are coming together to explore the benefits of collaboration in the field of literacy. The problem of literacy is so large and complex that no single organization can tackle it alone. They draw their power from civic leadership, funding partners, service providers, and families most affected by low literacy, working together with a shared vision of 100% literacy through 100% community engagement.

Every city is different, however, and it is important for Utica to recognize and capitalize on its own local strengths in planning its collaboration. The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties has stepped forward to play an initial convening role in starting the local dialogue, and to provide the leadership necessary to rally the community to action. The Foundation commissioned a needs assessment, current service assessment and funding analysis in order to begin the process of understanding the problem and exploring possible solutions.

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PURPOSE AND PROCESS

The purpose of the three reports is to provide the community with baseline information for planning.

Needs Assessment – determine community need for literacy activities

Current Services Assessment – evaluate current services, their effectiveness and impact

Funding Analysis – identify and analyze resources to cover the costs of current and proposed services

FINDINGS

Need: Low literacy in Oneida County is a crisis.

Current Services: Despite an array of dedicated organizations providing literacy services, literacy levels in Oneida County have remained largely unchanged for over fifteen years.

Funding: Oneida County is not receiving its fair share of literacy resources.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The results of the assessment confirm what many in the community already knew – that there is an urgent need to form effective partnerships to increase literacy in the area.

1. An estimated 92,000 adults read at or below the 8th grade level in Oneida County. 35,000 adults' literacy levels are critically low meaning they are at or below a 3rd grade level. However, only 2,000 people enrolled in adult education services in 2007/2008. (pp. 78-79)
2. As many as 30% of youth drop out of Utica and Rome high schools with limited skills and no diploma and this number rises to 42% for those with learning difficulties. (pp.70 & 72)
3. Utica has high levels of children living in poverty and these children are at risk of not having the pre-literacy skills necessary for kindergarten success. In 2000, Utica reported 44.5% of children under age 5 living in poverty; this rate is double the state average. (pp. 29-30 & 49-50)
4. Areas of Utica with the lowest literacy levels are those with the highest levels of poverty. The small African American population is concentrated in this area as are families with limited English language skills. (Census tracts 201, 203, 207.1, 208.02, 208.03, 209, 210, 211.01, 211.02, 211.03, 212.01, 213.01 and 215) (pp. 44,46, 80-81 & 86)
5. There are no adult literacy services in the county outside of Utica and Rome. (p. 82)

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CURRENT SERVICES ASSESSMENT

Utica does have many of the building blocks that could create a strong successful system to improve literacy in Oneida County however; the components listed below are not yet in place.

1. **Retention of learners** once they are enrolled in programs is the major concern of all the providers. (pp. 28)
2. **No centralized tracking or coordinated evaluation** of the impact of local literacy services is in place. (pp. 22-23)
3. **Outreach efforts of providers are fragmented and insufficient** to attract substantial numbers of learners, volunteers or donors. (pp. 22 & 24)
4. **Many providers need training** in targeted curricula and best practices for workplace, health, financial, family, and computer literacy. Training and curriculum support is available from BOCES (Board of Cooperative Educational Services) and the Regional Area Educational Network, but usually only those funded by that funding source has access. (pp. 22 & 24)
5. **There are few literacy services for higher than average number of parolees** in the community which would reduce risks and costs downstream. (p. 18-19, 22)
6. **Out of school youth have few programming alternatives.** (p. 15, 18-19)
7. **No systematic communications/transition plans to communicate kindergarten standards and expectations** between early child care providers, parents and kindergartner teachers thus ensuring success for the child. (pp.23-24, 30-31,35-36)
8. **An early childhood literacy program for child care providers, proven and operated** in Madison County by Mid-York Child Care Coordinating Council, **has not been introduced into Oneida County.** (pp. 23)
9. **There are few effective after school programs** that tie the activities close to the child's literacy and school needs. (pp. 15, 31, 36)
10. **There are few vocational and workplace training programs** to meet the demand of employers for skilled workers. (pp. 21-22, 37-39)

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FUNDING ANALYSIS

1. **No broad knowledge or accessing of funding resources** that are available. (pp. 14-16, 36-38)
2. **Literacy providers, once informed of *whom* to ask, do not have a collective strategic plan** to inform them what would be in the *best interests of the community* to pursue - *when and for what and by whom*. (p. 14)
3. **Seventy-four federal funding streams** have been identified as having literacy in part or in whole as an eligible activity. **Thirty-seven of the funding streams have been identified as coming into Oneida County**. (pp. 12, 30-38)
4. **From New York State there are thirty-two funding streams** made available by the State legislature and **seven were accessed by some of the Oneida County school districts. Nonprofit literacy providers accessed only a couple** of these opportunities. (pp. 12, 36-38, 88-98)
5. **A review of corporate and national foundations identified seventy-one funders** with a specific interest in literacy related activities. Based on our interviews, the community survey and review of funders' websites, **none of these national literacy partners have been engaged in the Greater Utica area in the recent past**. (pp.102-147)
6. **Local funders** that have supported literacy in the last year or so included The Community Foundation of Herkimer & Oneida Counties, Inc., Bank of America, Kiwanis, Oneida Nation Foundation, United Way of the Valley & the Greater Utica Area and Utica National Group Foundation. The local Rotary clubs is a wonderful volunteer supporter of literacy in the Utica area. (pp. 36-38)

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STRENGTHS

In Utica, many of the most effective programs are those providing contextualized curriculum specifically developed to meet critical information and education needs, and in many cases are not even billed as ‘literacy’ programs. The needs assessment identified several programs as good examples of collaboration and best practices, including:

1. **Read to Me at St. Luke’s** birthing center providing new books for newborns in partnership with Rotary
2. **Story time programs at libraries in Oneida County** that also brings families into the learning environment of the library
3. **Utica Volunteer Reading Tutoring Program** in elementary schools, including the Rotary supported program at Columbia Elementary.
4. **Parents as Reading Partners** encouraging families to share the joy of reading in the **Utica School District**
5. **Young Scholars Program** helping students to effectively transition from school to college
6. The **Kernan Elementary School program in collaboration with the United Way**
7. **Parenting programs at Catholic Charities** that support parent education and presented in context with easily readable materials.
8. **Working Solutions, the Workforce Investment Board programs** building employment skills and job training
9. **Johnson Park Center’s** neighborhood based community learning center programs
10. Financial literacy and home buyer education at **NeighborWorks HomeOwnership Center**
11. **Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES)** adult education programs attained a high performance rating on the New York State Report Card
12. The **Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugee’s and Adult Learning Center’s numerous partnerships** to address issues of workforce training and preparation, literacy and language skills and life skills.

All these programs represent some of the outstanding work being achieved in the community. Utica has many of the puzzle pieces to solve this problem but it does not have the capacity to bring the programs to scale.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Create a community literacy plan** to set the goals and targets to make Utica a highly literate and employable community. Priority attention should be given to the following:
 - a. English as an ESOL and Vocational ESOL service
 - b. High needs sections of Utica
 - c. Workplace and vocational literacy programs
 - d. Financial literacy services
 - e. Health literacy services and network
 - f. Computer centers and instruction
 - g. Services for the incarcerated and newly released
 - h. Literacy services outside the urban areas
2. **Develop a literacy coalition** to provide a coordinated decision making and implementation structure. The coalition should support the community in the following early actions:
 - a. Develop quality indicators to manage performance
 - b. Implement centralized tracking to measure impact
 - c. Establish evaluation and accountability practices
 - d. Establish shared standards
 - e. Identify key intervention points (kindergarten readiness, third grade, transition to middle school, eighth grade, adult) based on community results and coordinate response
 - f. Develop a centralized information and referral system
 - g. Coordinate aggressive fund development activities
 - i. Apply for New York State Department of Education Literacy Zone grant application
 - ii. Identify and secure public and private funding
 - iii. Infuse literacy into local funding practices

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RECOMMENDATIONS (cont'd.)

- iv. Identify and replicate partnerships that have successfully secured competitive grant funds to bring service delivery efforts to scale
 - v. Create opportunities for literacy service providers to collaborate with non-literacy organizations in order to leverage additional funds, and foster partnerships between organizations that can provide complementary services
 - vi. Target funds made available through large national foundations that have identified literacy as a funding priority
 - vii. Pursue a greater share of federal funds through collaborative efforts among local literacy providers
 - viii. Expand use of federal and state funding by school districts
 - ix. Diversify sources of funding for many programs/organizations
 - x. Secure resources for earlier interventions based on community indicators
3. **Launch a hard-hitting public awareness campaign to:**
- a. Increase numbers of volunteers
 - b. Increase number of donors
 - c. Increase number of students
 - d. Increase public knowledge of the economic impact and other aspects of the issue
4. **Build the capacity of literacy providers to serve more students more effectively**
- a. Create a literacy providers network
 - b. Provide high quality professional development, curriculum and instructional techniques to providers at all levels
 - c. Increase the number of family literacy programs available
 - d. Introduce creative opportunities for scheduling classes
 - e. Explore an innovative and improved process to encourage ESOL learners, and especially refugees to continue classes over time even after they have accessed employment

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RECOMMENDATIONS (cont'd.)

- f. Provide distance learning
 - g. Increase childcare programs in adult literacy locations
 - h. Train childcare providers to help parents support children's learning
 - i. Build literacy learning environments with lots of pre-reading support materials
 - j. Expand the Mid-York Child Care Coordinating Council's Early Literacy Program into Oneida County
 - k. Create universal pre-kindergarten in Oneida County
 - l. Create a systematic communications/transition plan between early child care centers, parents and kindergarten teachers to communicate kindergarten standards and expectations thus ensuring success for the child
 - m. Increase training to home-based and group childcare programs
 - n. Train home visit specialists in supporting pre-reading skills
 - o. Get books into the hands of children in need of reading materials
 - p. Support the school districts plans that are in place to increase kindergarteners skills
 - q. Explore pre-kindergarten summer school for at-risk children
 - r. Increase the numbers of volunteers trained to read to children
- 5. Develop a coordinated literacy infrastructure:**
- a. Increase the number of adult students who are recruited, retained, and complete their course of study
 - b. Formalize and streamline the pipeline from school to college and work for ease of access and navigation by learners
 - c. Build the role of the community college as a stepping stone to career success and create an environment where college is an option for all
- 6. Strengthen the literacy component of community programs**
- a. Infuse literacy into programming; assist in developing curriculum

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RETURN ON INVESTMENT

Not only does literacy pay huge dividends in quality of life but the dollars and cents add up, too:

1. By increasing high school graduation rates each graduate will earn on average \$267,000 more than a non-graduate over a lifespan.
2. By reducing the number of people receiving welfare support there is a lifetime savings of \$127,000 per person.
3. By increasing vocational information and skills training more people will embark on a career ladder rather than get stuck in a dead end low paying job.
4. By infusing literacy goals into non-literacy programs the community can grow its capacity to serve learners at little additional cost.
5. By increasing literacy levels unnecessary health care expenses that are attributable to low literacy will be reduced by \$73 billion annually on a national level.
6. By partnering on education and training for inmates and re-entry programs, formerly incarcerated people will be able to earn family-supporting incomes.

By developing a culture of literacy, Utica will build high expectations, high quality programs and high quality results in a literate community.

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NATIONAL LITERACY SCENE

There are close to 80 literacy coalitions in the country. Literacy Powerline has worked to build and strengthen a majority of them.

On average, a community has 152 literacy programs and Literacy Powerline has impacted over 10,000 of these programs in the United States.

OVERALL TRENDS

Positive Increases	Challenging Issues
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lifelong learning focus• Accountability and impact measurement• National attention from key stakeholders• Funder interest, affinity network forming• High level leadership in coalition governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Limited marketing efforts• Fledgling business collaborations• Inadequate K-12 partnerships• Uncoordinated fund development• The quantity & quality of services are not meeting the need

REGIONAL LITERACY ACTIVITIES

- Read to Succeed Buffalo, a project of the Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo, convened literacy providers, stakeholders and community leaders in a comprehensive planning process and developed a citywide literacy plan. Read to Succeed Buffalo is focused on the lifelong learning spectrum with primary initiatives in kindergarten readiness in a targeted zip code, workforce literacy and skills training. It has raised over five million dollars in the initial two years.

The coalition received \$4,111,507 for an Early Reading First Grant. This grant supports efforts to enhance the early language, literacy, and pre-reading development of preschool age children, particularly those from low-income families, through instructional strategies and professional development based on scientifically based reading research. They have already demonstrated achievements with this grant.

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REGIONAL LITERACY ACTIVITIES (cont'd)

- The Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County, incubated in the Central New York Community Foundation, aims to raise literacy levels across the lifespan with proposed outcome areas that include, kindergarten preparation, increased high school graduation rates, and increased program quality.

In Syracuse, the Regional Workforce Action Agenda, partnering with the literacy coalition and its providers, has a Literacy Across the Lifespan component. This is a good example of how literacy has been infused into the community. Under this plan, the Greater Syracuse Chamber of Commerce, in collaboration with four local employers, the Onondaga-Cortland-Madison BOCES, the WorkKeys Center at Syracuse University, Literacy Volunteers of Greater Syracuse and other organizations have been awarded a New York State Department of Labor grant of \$486,280 to improve the workplace literacy skills of ESOL learners.

Other coalition activities across the region include:

- The mayor of Rochester, Robert J. Duffy, led that city's literacy initiative and built a coalition of stakeholders to address key literacy needs. The Rochester Area Community Foundation is providing funding to staff the coalition and assist in supporting the first round of coalition projects. As a predecessor to the coalition, the Foundation supported Early Childhood project resulted in more than 80% of children having scores above developmental expectations.
- Madison and Oswego counties are exploring the possibilities of formal coalition development.

Utica's participation in this growing upstate collaboration will strengthen both the city and the region.

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NEXT STEPS

Where to start:

1. Lead the development of a community literacy plan.
2. Oversee the coordination of a literacy provider's network, building on the strong results achieved to date.
3. Participate in the collaborative New York State Department of Education Literacy Zone application process when the request for proposal is made available.

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WHAT IS LITERACY?

The Workforce Investment Act defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” All of these abilities are outlined and measured by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which tested a sample of over 19,000 American adults in 2003 and found that literacy levels had changed very little since the previous assessment in 1992.

People often think of literacy solely in terms of reading and writing, but there are many aspects of literacy that are broader than just the basic skills. These include health literacy, workforce literacy, financial literacy, computer literacy, family literacy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

The definition of literacy has broadened over time because of the changing nature of society. With the growth of technology and the need for higher skill levels in the workplace, students who might once have succeeded effectively in life with an eighth grade reading level and a minimum package of basic skills must now have a high school diploma and college coursework demonstrating a more diverse and complex set of abilities.

The definition of literacy has also expanded from just adult literacy to include lifelong learning, including children’s acquisition of the pre-literacy skills needed for success in kindergarten, such as understanding the relationships between symbols and sounds, and the early concepts of numeracy. Research shows that children who are unable to gain these pre-reading skills are unlikely to catch up with their peers during the elementary years and are more likely to drop out of school when they are older.

Community literacy involves establishing a process of shared problem-solving that unites communities around the vision of 100 percent literacy with 100 percent community engagement. Community literacy includes all family members and all community stakeholders in order to facilitate literacy infusion, the practice of incorporating literacy in all community initiatives. Incorporating literacy into diverse community efforts helps to promote literacy more effectively and increases the general awareness and understanding of the issue of literacy. The implementation of community literacy is both bottom up and top down. It can change the way literacy is viewed at all levels, from the local level to the national.