



September 16, 2024

House Education Committee

Chairman Schweyer, Chairman Topper, and Distinguished Members of the House Education Committee:

Imagine what it would be like if you couldn't read the directions on a prescription, help your child with homework, apply for a job, find the bus route to the hospital, write a check to pay bills, or ask police for help. These are just some of the everyday challenges that people with low literacy levels face. They are simple but essential tasks that many of us take for granted.

### **Community Need**

More than 51% of people who live in Allentown speak a language other than English at home ([2023 American Community Survey](#)). A large percentage of these adults attended college and have work experience from their home countries. But their inability to speak, read, and write in English inhibits their professional growth and limits their economic opportunities. Because of their limited language skills, they frequently work one or more low-wage, part-time jobs. Without English language proficiency, these adults lack the ability to return to their professional fields and improve their earning power.

Approximately 22% of Allentown residents aged 25 and older do not have a high school diploma and over 7,500 Allentown residents have less than a 9th grade education ([2023 American Community Survey](#)). There are many reasons why people are unable to complete high school, including the need to work to support their families, bullying, learning disabilities, and feeling unsafe at school. People who do not complete high school are more likely to struggle with employment, live in poverty, be dependent on welfare benefits, have poor physical and mental health, and engage in criminal activity more often than those with higher education levels ([Healthy People 2030](#)).

Studies have shown that those without a High School Diploma earn up to 24% less than those who have completed high school ([Healthy People 2030](#)). The economic consequences of dropping out of high school do not stop with the individual. Society also pays a high price. The average high school dropout costs the economy approximately \$272,000 over his or her lifetime in terms of lower tax contributions, higher reliance on Medicaid and Medicare, higher rates of criminal activity, and higher reliance on welfare ([National Center for Education Statistics](#)).

### **The Literacy Center**

The Literacy Center (TLC) is a leader in community-based adult literacy education built on innovative, cost-effective instructional services that ensure excellence in student outcomes. TLC is

***Education for Work, Family and Life***

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addressing the concerns above by delivering high-quality programs in English as a Second Language (ESL), High School Equivalency (GED), and Workforce Development. We firmly believe that adult education and training can positively transform lives by opening the door to limitless opportunities.

Year after year, TLC consistently achieves excellent student outcomes. This is thanks to an exceptional team effort from our board members, volunteers, instructors, support staff, administrative staff, partners, and vendors. Everyone is fully committed to empowering struggling adults through education. Serving the Lehigh Valley since 1977, our mission is to deliver high-quality instruction, training, and support for adults who are experiencing language, education, and employment barriers.

A primary reason why our student retention rates are so high is because of our Student Support Services. We provide students with support counseling and referrals to partner organizations for assistance with housing, food insecurity, medical issues, mental health, domestic violence, legal issues, transportation, childcare, and other obstacles they may be experiencing. We also provide an annual community resource fair, regular information sessions on community resources, citizenship preparation study groups, financial literacy instruction, and health literacy workshops.

### **Our Students**

Almost half of our ESL students have college degrees and professional experience from their home countries. They worked as accountants, computer programmers, medical professionals, economists, electricians, engineers, lawyers, mechanics, psychologists, and teachers. Becoming proficient in English allows them to return to their chosen fields and bring their skills and expertise to local employers.

Our ESL graduates without degrees and experience are just as motivated and eager to display their hard-working skills in the workplace. They enroll in our Digital Literacy Program to improve their computer skills. ESL graduates participate in our Administrative Professional Training Program to develop job skills. They work with our Career Counselor to find employment. And ESL graduates interested in post-secondary education enroll in our College Access Program, which helps students apply to and enroll in college and other training programs.

Over the last five years, TLC has tripled the number of students served and currently helps over 1,500 adults a year. Despite this dramatic increase, the need for English classes continues to rise at a startling rate. As of September 12, 2024, our current waitlist for ESL classes stands at 1,742 adults.

TLC has also witnessed a significant enrollment increase for our GED Program over the last few years. More adults need to obtain their high school equivalency diploma to further their education and employment opportunities. GED graduates also utilize our College Access and Workforce Development Programs. They are eager to prove their resiliency and work ethic for local employers.

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### Our Request

TLC respectfully requests additional funding so that we may expand our services to include the 1,742 students on our waitlist. This would unleash a goldmine of talent and skills for Pennsylvania employers. TLC graduates are positively transforming Allentown and the Lehigh Valley, with many more waiting in the wings.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of expanding Adult Literacy instruction for our community.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jennifer M. Doyle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of the first and last names being capitalized and prominent.

Jennifer M. Doyle, MPA  
Chief Executive Officer  
The Literacy Center

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