

EDUCATION FUNDING COMMITTEE – SEPTEMBER 16, 2024

Education Funding Committee – September 16, 2024

Senior Vice President I-LEAD Futures Workforce: Angel Figueroa

Powered By. I-LEAD USA

EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN  
ADULT EDUCATION

**Contents**

INTRODUCTION:.....3

Delivered by Angel Figueroa .....3

    Economic and Workforce Development Impact .....4

    Strengthening Families and Communities .....6

    A Balanced Approach to Funding.....7

    Call to Action.....8

References .....10

# EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

## INTRODUCTION:

**Delivered by Angel Figueroa**

Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

Good afternoon, Honorable Chairman Schweyer, committee members, and distinguished guests: My name is Angel Figueroa. I am honored to represent I-LEAD INC, an organization dedicated to empowering disenfranchised communities in Pennsylvania through education since 1995. I am here today to advocate for increased funding for adult education programs, which are critical not only to the individuals who participate but also to the overall health of our communities and the growth of our economy.

We come before this body not just as a representative but as someone who has personally experienced the transformative power of adult education. I was once a high school dropout with limited prospects, struggling to envision a future beyond day-to-day survival. In 1998, I decided to earn my G.E.D., which changed my life's course. Since then, I have proudly served in the Pennsylvania National Guard, completed my Bachelor's degree in Business from Albright College, and earned an M.B.A. from Kutztown University. The doors that education opened for me are those countless others are now walking through, thanks to programs like those offered by I-LEAD INC.

At I-LEAD, we provide comprehensive adult education programs to meet the diverse needs of our learners. Our English Language Foundation (E.L.F.) program helps non-native English speakers develop the vocational language skills necessary to thrive in the workplace and become fully integrated members of their communities. Our ***HISSET***® program has expanded in response to the urgent demand from our communities. I-LEAD Futures Workforce operates training and testing centers in Chester, Philadelphia, Allentown, Reading, and Lancaster. Our

## EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

**HiSET®** program enables adults to earn high school equivalency diplomas in six weeks, an essential credential that paves the way to better jobs, higher wages, and continued education. We also offer literacy and numeracy programs, which equip adults with critical reading, writing, and math skills, empowering them to manage their finances, support their children's education, and contribute more effectively at their workplaces.

**Our community faces a crisis amid inflation and economic uncertainty. The need for language education and high school credentials is urgent, and the benefits of these programs are far-reaching.**

Let me tell you about **Cassandra**, a participant in our **HiSET®** program from Berks County. Cassandra is a mother of three who emigrated from the Dominican Republic. She struggled to find employment due to her limited English proficiency and lack of a high school diploma. Through I-LEAD's programs, Cassandra learned English and earned her **HiSET®** diploma. Today, she works as a certified nursing assistant (C.N.A.) for a local hospital, where her earnings help support her family. Her story is one of many that highlight the impact of adult education on individuals, families, and communities.

### **Economic and Workforce Development Impact**

The economic benefits of adult education are profound and well-documented. Studies have shown that adults who earn a high school equivalency diploma see an average increase in lifetime earnings of approximately \$200,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Additionally, those who complete adult education programs are 20 percent more likely to secure employment, with many securing jobs that offer higher wages and better benefits, including health insurance and retirement savings (National Coalition for Literacy, 2022). It translates to greater economic mobility for individuals and a more substantial tax base for the commonwealth.

## EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

In Pennsylvania alone, over **1.6 million adults** lack a high school diploma or equivalent, and many face significant barriers to entering or advancing in the workforce (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). By investing in adult education, Pennsylvania can directly address the skills gap hindering the growth of critical industries, including healthcare, manufacturing, and skilled trades. According to the National Skills Coalition, 52 percent of jobs in Pennsylvania require middle-skills training, yet only 43 percent of the workforce is trained to that level (National et al., 2020).

Our community is facing educational barriers and economic challenges exacerbated by inflation and an ever-evolving job market. In Pennsylvania, rising living costs are putting more pressure on working families, making it even more critical for adults to access education that leads to higher-paying jobs. According to recent studies, individuals without a high school diploma are nearly twice as likely to be unemployed, contributing to higher rates of poverty and economic instability in our state (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). By investing in adult education now, we provide immediate relief and long-term solutions to help Pennsylvanians better navigate this inflationary economy.

Consider the Lehigh Valley, Berks County, Lancaster, Pottstown, and Philadelphia, areas where the impact of educational disparities is acutely felt in minority and impoverished communities. Investing in adult education programs in these regions can reduce the state's reliance on public assistance programs, decrease unemployment rates, and increase the number of residents earning sustainable wages. Individuals who improve their literacy skills are likelier to earn higher wages, with literacy proficiency linked to a 5 percent to 15 percent wage premium across various sectors (OECD, 2013).

## EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

In addition to healthcare, industries like manufacturing, technology, and renewable energy also feel the impact of Pennsylvania's skills gap. More than 35 percent of employers in the manufacturing sector report difficulty finding workers with the necessary skills, particularly in areas like C.N.C. machining, welding, and robotics (Workforce Development Institute, 2022). Technology companies are also experiencing shortages of qualified candidates, particularly as demand for I.T. professionals and cybersecurity experts grows. Meanwhile, renewable energy, one of the fastest-growing sectors, requires workers skilled in electrical systems and green technologies. By investing in adult education, particularly in programs like *HiSET*® and vocational English language training, we can ensure these industries have access to the skilled labor they need to thrive.

Furthermore, as Pennsylvania's population ages, the demand for a skilled workforce will continue to grow. Investing in adult education now is not just about filling jobs today; it is about preparing our workforce for the demands of tomorrow. Programs like *HiSET*® and English Language Foundations are critical to ensuring we can meet this growing need and compete in the global economy.

### **Strengthening Families and Communities**

Beyond the economic benefits, adult education fosters stronger families and more resilient communities. Research shows that children of parents who pursue further education are more likely to succeed academically and aspire to higher education themselves (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). A parent earning a degree or certification sets a powerful example for their children, showing them that education is a pathway to a better future.

Moreover, investing in adult education helps reduce reliance on public assistance programs. Studies show that adults with higher levels of education are less likely to need

## EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

unemployment benefits, Medicaid, or food assistance programs (National Coalition for Literacy, 2022). By helping individuals gain the skills they need for stable, well-paying jobs, we are reducing the financial burden on the commonwealth while creating more robust, self-sufficient families. Our shared goal transcends political differences and serves the long-term interests of all Pennsylvanians.

In addition, adults who participate in our programs at I-LEAD are more engaged in civic life. They vote, volunteer, and advocate for their families and neighborhoods. They become leaders within their communities, helping to build a more inclusive and equitable society. In short, adult education is not just about economic growth but social cohesion and civic participation, which are the bedrock of a healthy democracy.

### **A Balanced Approach to Funding**

I understand that funding is always a concern, but the cost of inaction is even greater. With adequate resources, many adults will be included, and the ripple effects will be felt across our commonwealth. Lower literacy rates, higher unemployment, and greater reliance on social services are the actual costs of failing to invest in adult education (Pennsylvania Partnerships for Adult Literacy, 2021).

To ease the burden on state finances, we propose a balanced approach: reallocate existing resources where possible and encourage public-private partnerships. For example, you could offer tax incentives to businesses that support adult education programs and hire new graduates, particularly those in industries experiencing a skills gap. By bringing the public and private sectors together, we can share the responsibility and ensure that adult learners can access the resources they need to succeed.

## EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

### Call to Action

I am joined today by **Joel Pujols**, a former student from the I-LEAD Futures Workforce Center in Allentown, who is here to share his personal experience. Before joining our **English Language Foundation (E.L.F.)** program, Joel struggled to communicate in English. His ability to speak confidently, interact with others, and pursue better opportunities was limited. However, Joel transformed his language skills with the help of our dedicated teacher, **Ms. Amy Markwood**, and his supportive classmates. He gained the ability to speak, read, and understand English and the confidence to take control of his future.

Today, Joel has more opportunities available and feels proud of his progress. His story is a powerful example of how **language programs** like ours can empower individuals to overcome barriers, improve their lives, and contribute to their communities. Similarly, our **HiSET®** program opens doors for adults who lack a high school diploma, offering them the opportunity to earn a recognized credential that significantly improves their chances of securing stable employment and even further education.

However, Joel will point out, many others in the community want the same opportunity. Without adequate funding for **language programs** and **HiSET®**, too many people remain trapped in low-paying jobs, unable to advance or fully participate in our society. The demand for these programs far outweighs the availability, leaving many adults without access to the education they need to succeed.

Joel's story is not unique; thousands like him across Pennsylvania are eager to learn, work, and succeed. Our stakeholders urge the committee to support increased funding for adult education, particularly for **language programs** and **high school equivalency programs** like



EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN  
ADULT EDUCATION

**HiSET®.** Investing in these initiatives strengthens our communities, ensures our industries have the skilled workforce they need, and fosters economic growth across the state.

**Together, we can ensure that every adult in Pennsylvania has the chance to learn, grow, and contribute to a prosperous future, benefiting not only their families but also the communities and industries that rely on a skilled and educated workforce.**

**Thank you for your time and consideration. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.**

**Respectfully,**

**Angel Figueroa**

# EMPOWERING PENNSYLVANIA'S WORKFORCE: THE CASE FOR INVESTING IN ADULT EDUCATION

## References

- Berks County Workforce Investment Board. (2021). *Ad hoc report on language services and employment opportunities*. <https://www.berksworkforce.com/language-services-report>
- HiSET® Official Website. (2023). *Pennsylvania HiSET® program overview*. <https://HiSET®.org/pa-program>
- Lansbury, R. D. (2010). Foreword. *Journal of Industrial Relations*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185610365622>
- National Coalition for Literacy. (2022). *The economic benefits of adult education*. <https://www.nationalliteracy.org/economic-benefits>
- National Skills Coalition. (2020). *Pennsylvania's middle-skill jobs fact sheet*. <https://www.nationalskillscoalition.org/resources/publications/middle-skill-job-fact-sheets/>
- Pennsylvania Department of Education. (2023). *Adult education in Pennsylvania: Current status and future needs*. <https://www.education.pa.gov/adult-education-report>
- Pennsylvania Partnerships for Adult Literacy. (2021). *The cost of inaction: Why Pennsylvania must invest in adult education*. <https://www.papartnerships.org/reports/adult-education>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2021). *Educational attainment in Pennsylvania: A statistical analysis*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/education-attainment.html>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2020). *The intergenerational impact of adult education programs*. <https://www.ed.gov/adult-education-impact>
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2018). *Educational attainment and earnings data*. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2018/demo/education-attainment/earnings.html>
- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2013). *OECD skills outlook: First results from the survey of adult skills*. <https://www.oecd.org/skills/piaac/>
- Workforce Development Institute. (2022). *Pennsylvania's growing skills gap: The role of adult education in workforce readiness*. <https://www.workforce.org/reports/pennsylvania-skills-gap>