We Can’t Read!

The Center for Literacy Wants to Eliminate Philadelphia’s Adult Literacy Problem, One Student at a Time

by Qwerty Editor

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Like six percent of Philadelphians, Shaquanda Clemons, 26, dropped out of high school in the ninth grade. She moved around Philly all her life, going to three different elementary schools, three middle schools and two high schools. By the time she made it to University City High School – barely passing, taking two buses to get to school, sitting in unchaperoned classes – she’d had enough.

“I was like, ’listen I’m not about to commute 45 minutes every day to come sit here with no teacher, when I don’t have to,’” said Clemons. “It was just like, I’m done.”

When Clemons dropped out, she wasn’t thinking about what her life would be like in ten years. She thought she had everything she needed living with her mom. Out of her seven siblings, no one had finished high school. She didn’t have another plan and nobody offered her a different vision for her future. Until her mother did something rather unexpected. She went back to school. It wasn’t long before Clemons decided to join her.

“At first it was, you know, it was alright,” said Clemons about returning to the classroom to get her GED in 2011. “I was out of school for about four years after I dropped out. I had to
relearn a few things that I already knew and kind of catch up. And then once I realized — oh yeah, I like learning — it became easy," she said.

Like her mother, Clemons started taking GED classes at the Center for Literacy in Old City. There she got personal attention and was more engaged in her education than she had been in high school. She felt it was her decision to be there not someone forcing her to go as it had been in her childhood. Clemons was so inspired by the impact of education on her life, she's been trying to get her siblings to return to the classroom as well. Of seven, only two have gotten their GED.

The People

The literacy rate in Philadelphia is among the worst in the country. It is estimated that almost 40 percent of adults in the city have “low literacy,” meaning they struggle with basic skills that require reading. Not surprisingly, 40 percent of the adult population also lacks a high school diploma.

Of the adults that seek education, 67% of them re-enter classes with somewhere between a 4th and 8th-grade reading level. And these are not just adults who've dropped out of high school, but also those with diplomas who've been passed through the system without truly retaining the information. Aggravating the problem, many of these adults don't have access to technology or basic computer skills. Without these skills, employment prospects are relegated to low-paid jobs with minimal security and low-to-no benefits.

While multiple mayors have made literacy a priority in Philadelphia, it continues to be an unsolved problem. The cycle of poorly educated youth growing into low-literacy parents is compounded by adults feeling stigmatized with labels of lazy or dumb for dropping out or graduating with low literacy.

Often the image one calls up of someone struggling with literacy is a person who can’t read a book or newspaper, but it can be much more crippling than that. Even beyond job placement, literacy can affect whether a person can read a bus schedule to navigate the city, take the right amount of medication based on the prescription instructions on the label, or whether they are able to support their children through their own education.

Clemons experienced that scenario with her own mother. By the time she hit the 8th grade, she had to struggle with her homework on her own because it was beyond her mother's abilities. "My mom would try to help, and then I just figured, 'let me make sure I know how to do this before I come home.' That's what it came down to," Clemons said.
The Outreach

Michael Westover, president & CEO of the Center for Literacy. photo by Center for Literacy

Unfortunately, this is a story Michael Westover, President and CEO of Center for Literacy, has heard before. There are often multiple generations in one family with low literacy rates. Clemons and her mother were fortunate to both be able to fit classes into their life. Many students have a mass of barriers to overcome before they can take that step. Westover said there are two main issues he commonly sees: barriers to participation and level of capacity. Obstacles for students to come to class include transportation, childcare, health issues, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and/or not enough literacy to search, find and start a literacy program. And then each of these issues can be compounded. For example, transportation could be a combined barrier of reading a schedule to get to class plus, getting the minimum $10 it costs to take public transit twice a week to get to class.

"Often we will have somebody mandated to be here by a judge, and their literacy levels are very low – third and fourth-grade readers. And they were in front of the judge because they have a substance abuse problem, so what do you do? How do you work on eliminating all those barriers?" said Westover.

Center for Literacy is primarily focused on adult education, but to do that, they still need to make it easy for people to learn. They need to know what’s going on in students’ lives for context and improvement. It can’t be tunnel vision as Westover has learned.

"At one time, there was a culture here where your focus was on education, and that was it. When I came in 2013, I encouraged people to ask questions. So, if a student was sitting in the computer lab all day, why is that? Are they that dedicated, or do they have nowhere else to go? Often we find they have nowhere else to go," said Westover.
The Center for Literacy is a campus of the My Place system from the city of Philadelphia’s Office of Adult education (OAE). It runs as its own entity but is a part of a network of organizations dedicated to adult education. OAE has been working on improving the city’s literacy rate since the early 80’s. Once Mayor Kenny took office, he renamed the commission — formerly known as the Commission on Literacy — and re-established its purpose by executive order. Now, it focuses on uniting adult education programs to give students accurate records and a clear place to seek help.

“We’ve created these centers, these hubs, where there is this an opportunity to talk to somebody like a learning coach,” said Diane Inverso, Executive Director of OAE. “There is the opportunity to understand what an assessment test is... that means [for students there is] this little bit of rigor that you have, to make it to that first appointment.”

Before My Place, adult education classes were hosted by organizations scattered across Philadelphia with little to no connection to each other. Finding classes that fit your needs in your neighborhood was difficult. Now, all someone would have to do is walk into a campus or library or call the OAE to set up an assessment appointment. Programs include basic skills education, GED classes, professional development, equivalency certifications, ESL classes and digital literacy classes.

Because of the ease of finding information and the abundance of connected locations, OAE is seeing better retention and persistence in their programs. But the students taking these classes aren’t always able to prioritize them. If they get a job, have health concerns, struggle with addiction, can’t get childcare, they may need to stop classes and pick them back up later. Now with the My Place system connecting all these organizations, students have records of their classes and can restart a class without being penalized or starting over. Though it doesn’t alleviate the stress of stopping and starting programs, it eliminates the difficulty of re-entry into the system.
Beyond the Book

Adults dealing with low literacy skills have problems beyond the page. When they’ve grown up struggling to read, they approach the world as non-readers and that is reflected in how they perform everyday tasks, including at work. Something as small as knowing how to look at a posted schedule can cause issues. Westover gives the example of one Center for Literacy student who, at her first job, had a boss that said, “see you tomorrow,” every day of her first week. On the day he didn’t say anything, she didn’t come in the next day. She was fired until a Center for Literacy teacher stepped in to explain to the employer that the woman didn’t know she needed to read the schedule.

“What happens in business is you don’t get managers or HR people who are sensitive about issues around poverty, race or education. They’re just like, ‘you’re fired.’ You didn’t come to work,” said Westover.

After students get the classes they need and they work to get a job, some employers still see them as undereducated and don’t want to invest in helping them acclimate to a new environment. “We have a lot of people who are looking for work, and unfortunately they still can’t get the jobs,” said Inverso.

Finally, OAE’s capacity for adult learners is also an issue. The OAE has been successful at maintaining little to no wait for classes except when it comes to English as a Second Language (ESL). “Improve my English” is the second most reported answer for the question “what is your main goal for learning?” in the OEA intake forms. Enrolled students come from a total of 130 different countries of origin, and only 57 percent of students are from the United States. There is still a waitlist for these classes and a need for more programs and teachers.

With all these issues, plus the low literacy problems affecting the youth in Philadelphia, the city’s low literacy rate doesn’t look like it’s getting any better. But by building the capacity of the system, stripping the barriers to students starting and finishing adult education courses and encouraging business to invest in the OAE students, we can expect to see improvements.
Shaquanda Clemons and her son, Caleb. Courtesy of the Center for Literacy.

After getting her GED with help from the Center for Literacy and taking professional development classes with Urban League, Shaquanda Clemons got a job at the Center for Literacy. Starting with answering phones and sitting at the front desk, she soon was given more responsibility and is now a Senior Data Specialist for the organization. The staff worked with her to teach her what was expected at a job and she has since become a real asset to the team.

"[Being at the front desk] felt good because I was just here as a student," said Clemons. "When people would come to me and be like, you just don't understand, I would be like, little do you know, I do. I do understand, and I know that you can do it too."

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