



## The Republican.

### Literacy boosters seek state funding restoration

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HOLYOKE - From a certain perspective, adult literacy is more about numbers than letters.

For example, a \$2,000 investment in adult education for one person generates more than \$7,000 in annual income, according to statistics presented yesterday at a literacy legislative breakfast. "When you multiply that, it's millions and millions of dollars in income and tax revenue," said Marie P. Grady, director of the Literacy Works Project of Hampden County and organizer of the event, dubbed "Breakfast of Champions."

The event at the Delaney House brought together lawmakers, educators and heads of industry with students who said they discovered reading proficiency was a vehicle to transport them out of hopelessness and poverty.

"When I realized about college, it was like time stopped," adult education student Ruth Roman, 22, of Holyoke, told the crowd yesterday. "I realized, if I study, I could get out of poverty. I don't have to be on welfare. I don't have to work at McDonald's."

As a teen mother, Roman received literacy training and other support at The Care Center in Holyoke. She worked fast food jobs and had little interest in school before then, she said. Now, Roman is a sophomore at Holyoke Community College and holds a clerical job.

Former literacy students Julia A. Guzman, 31, a mother of seven from Holyoke, and Russian immigrant Misha Grigoryan, 63, of Westfield, also implored state lawmakers to support and help restore funding for adult education.

"I know it's hard to find money for programs like this, but remember what it did for my family," Guzman said.

The Legislature recently proposed to cut about \$3 million from the statewide adult education budget. It was then restored by a unanimous Senate vote. The figure was previously \$32 million and was reduced to \$29.5 million.

Grady urged House members in the audience yesterday to sustain the momentum when the budget reaches that body for a vote.

State Rep. Thomas M. Petrolati, D-Ludlow, who was among about 10 legislators in attendance, said youth education and public safety take priority in tight economic times. But advocates for literacy in Western Massachusetts have created a groundswell for adult education.

"I am cautiously optimistic" the funding restoration will survive the House vote, Petrolati said yesterday.

State Rep. Cheryl A. Coakley-Rivera, D-Springfield, who also attended, said the challenge on Beacon Hill for area lawmakers lies in their relatively small numbers.

"We're only 13 percent of the voting delegation," she said. "We don't have the population numbers, but we have the need."

During a presentation yesterday, Grady illustrated the magnitude of that need.

The statewide high school graduation rate is 80 percent, statistics show. Springfield's high school graduation rate is 50 percent; Holyoke's is just over 47 percent.

Adult education advocates estimate current literacy training locally serves just 4 percent of those in need. There are 1,000 Hampden County residents on waiting lists for adult education programs, according to Grady.

Among honorees yesterday was Peter Rosskothan, owner of the Log Cabin and Delaney House, who donated the venue and the breakfast offerings.

Holyoke Mayor Michael J. Sullivan and Hampden County Sheriff Michael J. Ashe Jr. were presented with "Literacy Luminary" awards.

Sullivan has pushed legislators for more state funding and helped cement the Juntos Collaborative in Holyoke, an adult education network.

"It is one of the building blocks of our community," Sullivan said of adult education yesterday.

Elected in 1972, Ashe began a movement away from so-called warehousing of inmates in favor of counseling, training and education. He is often quoted as saying he takes advantage of the "leg irons and paddy wagons" to encourage inmates to turn their lives around.

But yesterday, he credited the adult students in the audience, including a former inmate who is now studies civil engineering at Springfield Technical Community College.

"I am humbled just to be in your company," Ashe said.

J. William Ward, executive director of the Regional Employment Board, said the students' success stories should buoy the cause.

"We need to celebrate the commitment. We need to use this success to energize us," he said.

A newly created literacy cabinet has been established locally to keep the issue at the forefront. Its 20 members include business and community leaders, Grady said.

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