

More skilled workers needed

Editor's note: This is the first of a seven-part series called "Closing the Literacy Gap" published in The Republican from May 20-26, 2007.

By HOLLY ANGELO
hangelo@repub.com

More than 1,000 people in Hampden County are on waiting lists for adult education programs.

When machinist Peter R. Beadle was offered free literacy training by his employer Sealed Air in Holyoke last year, he didn't hesitate to sign up for the six-month program.

The Jamaican-born Beadle said his writing skills were "not all that great," and he knew the classes would help him accomplish his goal of becoming a technician some day.

So, he and 25 other Sealed Air employees, who wanted to improve their English writing and speaking skills, became students with the help of a state grant, training provided by Holyoke Works, and an employer who realized the importance of having a skilled, literate workforce.

"In the islands we speak broken English. Here, we speak proper English," the 41-year-old Springfield resident said recently.

The English lessons, he said, "increased my knowledge more. When people come around you can explain yourself clearly. Now I pronounce it, and I spell it right."

There are more than 1,300 Hampden County residents waiting to participate in state-funded adult education programs similar to the one Beadle completed.

The dozens of literacy programs available are only serving about 4 percent of the people in need, leaving the rest stuck in a seemingly unending cycle of hope and disappointment that is the literacy gap.

The Massachusetts Career Development Institute, in partnership with Springfield Technical Community College, has state funding for 212 slots a year for adult education, but has a waiting list of more than 200.

The Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Springfield offers about 80 adult education and English-as-a-second-language classes, with a waiting list of over 100.

"The irony of this is the demand is greater than the supply," said Stephen A. Davis, a senior trustee of the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. "You have a group of people who are hungry to become literate."

Add to this equation of supply and demand the following factors:

- A proposed \$4.7 million cut to the state's adult literacy funding; a high school dropout rate of 50 percent in Holyoke and 49 percent in Springfield.

- A 6 percent unemployment rate in Hampden County in March; and a 35 percent increase in job vacancies in the Pioneer Valley between the second quarters of 2005 and 2006.

- An increasing immigrant population; and 34 percent of Springfield residents and 51 percent of Holyoke residents living in high poverty neighborhoods.

With these statistics and facts in mind, Literacy Works Project Director Marie P. Grady recently organized a 20-member cabinet of business people, nonprofit organizations and community leaders to shape the public agenda on literacy and get the attention of state lawmakers.

"The county is really risking its future if it doesn't address it," said Grady, a former managing editor at The Republican.

"To me, the overriding issue has been the impact of the future of the region and the economy when you have a workforce that is increasingly unequipped."

Literacy Works was established in 2003 by the Regional Employment Board of Hampden County and is now funded by the state and the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation. It includes 15 adult education providers.

The literacy gap isn't confined to Hampden County. The Literacy Project, which serves Hampshire and Franklin counties, has about 650 people enrolled in adult education classes, with hundreds on waiting lists. For example, the 2000 U.S. Census reported 14 percent of adults in Greenfield didn't have a high school diploma.

Asked if the literacy gap is creating a crisis situation, Robert J. Schwarz doesn't hesitate to respond, "absolutely."

As executive vice president of Peter Pan Bus Lines, chairman of Literacy Works and chairman of the new literacy cabinet, Schwarz is passionate about solving the problem.

He readily admits Literacy Works has failed to form public, private partnerships during its first four years.

"One of the goals of the cabinet is to change that," Schwarz said. "To really develop champions of literacy and get legislators' attention we need people to say literacy is important. If we can not increase capacity, we're dead in the water."

While the population growth in the county is modest at best, much of it is due to the influx of immigrants and other non-English speakers, said Allan W. Blair, president of the Western Massachusetts Economic Development Council.

More than 26 percent of Holyoke residents and almost 20 percent of Springfield residents are foreign-born or native of Puerto Rico.

"To get full participation in the workforce, we need to close this literacy gap," Blair said.

Blair made his comments during a telephone interview, while he was attending the BIO International Convention in Boston earlier this month. Sitting inside the huge exposition center surrounded by biotech companies from around the world, Blair said his region's problem really hit home.

"This is the future of economic growth and job opportunity for people," Blair said.

"Everything about these jobs is knowledge-based. We have to have a workforce that is capable of learning the skills of this industry, or any other industry that comes along. I think there's an urgency about this subject that we can't ignore."

Companies looking to locate in Massachusetts will pass on Hampden County if that region's dropout and poverty rates don't improve, Blair said.

"When people look to locate a business, they look at demographics and they look at poverty," said Paul J. Robbins, a consultant to Literacy Works, the Regional Employment Board and the Davis Foundation's Cherish Every Child initiative. "We're at a really critical point."

Gone are the days when manufacturing jobs required little or no understanding of the written and spoken English word.

Jobs today are more demanding. Workers need to be able to explain what's wrong with their broken machine, enter quality information into their computers, and speak with vendors.

"To operate successfully, we need to operate in English and so do our employees," said Greig Elliott, plant manager at Sealed Air. "All their schedules are in English and the computers are in English."

Sealed Air's commitment to literacy includes a college tuition program that matches up to \$3,000 a semester.

Elliott said the company, which makes bubble wrap and other related products, hires an employee with the expectation that the employee will be promoted at least two or three times.

"We have to hire from the workforce that's available to us. There is not any huge skilled labor force waiting to get hired," Elliott said. "A lot of that unskilled labor force does not have a GED. That's the hurdle. That's why they can't get a good job."

Companies that don't step up and offer their employees educational opportunities are "cursed" by their own inaction, Elliott said.

Those are strong words, but many say the situation calls for such warnings. But, the question remains how to close this literacy gap that continues to affect the region's economy and the lives of thousands of residents.

"We are all, as stakeholders in this, equally responsible to do a better job in communicating this," said J. William Ward, executive director of the Regional Employment Board.

The literacy gap, he said, "has to be translated into an economic development issue."

"If our labor force doesn't grow, our economy doesn't grow. It's as simple as that. It's time for somebody to come up with a major, major effort like they did when they came up with the G.I. Bill."

Ward said area legislators need to understand the impact of the literacy gap on the region's economy. The idea of education can no longer be restricted to K-12 and higher education.

Adult literacy programs also need to be funded, he said.

"It's much more of a government responsibility," Ward said. "The Legislature needs to step up."

Closing the literacy gap will require different players in the region working together, organizing and bringing more revenues in from the state, said John R. Schneider, interim director and chief executive officer of Mass Inc.

Schneider said a public-education campaign about the importance of literacy is needed, and creative thinking has to take place on how to connect adults to literacy programs.

"It's organizing to bring more resources together," Schneider said. "Clearly the connection between the ability to speak English and get a decent job is obvious, but it's real."

Blair said there also needs to be an understanding of the composition of the workforce, and the public schools need to improve student performance rates.

Holyoke Mayor Michael J. Sullivan said his city has taken an aggressive approach to combating the literacy gap through the 11-year-old Juntos Collaborative, which includes eight literacy programs that offer more than 300 state-funded seats for adult education.

He said agencies and schools need to look at how they spend their money.

"We need to rethink how we make investments and incentives," Sullivan said. "Education is the counter balance to poverty. We either invest in education or we let poverty flourish."

Doris M. Ransford, the president of the Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce, said the answer to closing the literacy gap is serving one person at a time. The chamber has offered literacy programs for years, including Holyoke Works.

"Unless you have a skilled workforce of people who can make a living, you won't have a prosperous city," Ransford said. "If you have a population that is poor and uneducated and speaks a different language, you really have a problem."

Many of the 75 adult learners at Gray House, a nonprofit organization that serves mostly residents from Springfield's North End, participate in one-on-one tutoring sessions because they want a better life, whether it's to improve their job status or be able to read a prescription label.

"I was having problems reading and writing, filling applications out, helping my kids with homework," said Springfield resident Geneva C. Daniels, who has been tutored at Gray House for the past eight years.

When Daniels started her studies at Gray House she was at a third- or fourth-grade reading level. Her job as a school bus driver for the public schools has changed over the years, requiring her to take an annual test. Before, someone would read her the questions. Now, she can do it on her own. She's now studying for her GED. Her goal is to take college courses someday.

"I feel like a different person," Daniels said. "I can express myself."

There are hundreds of people in the area who aspire to feel like Daniels does. But, the challenge to serve those people is great.

"If the budgets are cut, it means a class is cut, which means that many more people don't get help," Gray House Executive Director Dena A. Calvanese said. "It just sort of spirals."

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Immigrants follow road to new life

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By SUZANNE McLAUGHLIN
smclaughlin@repub.com

LUDLOW - Some lived here 20 years or more, clinging to their Portuguese heritage as they worked at factories and put their children through school.

While their children learned English at school, these immigrants continued to speak their native language, Portuguese, at jobs they held at Ludlow Textiles in the old Ludlow mills.

When the factory closed last year, the Portuguese immigrants faced the prospect of looking for new work without advanced training skills and, in many cases, without being able to speak English proficiently.

Ludlow Textiles, the former Ludlow Manufacturing Associates, once employed 4,000 workers. In its more than century long history, including when it was once the largest jute factory in the world, it provided immigrants of many different ethnic backgrounds with a living through which their children could grow up, acquire job skills, marry, buy homes and make it into the middle class.

When the factory that still provided jobs for more than 100 Portuguese and Polish speaking employees finally closed last year, it took away what had once been a prime source of income for the community.

Kermit K. Dunkelberg, program director for the Ludlow Area Adult Learning Center, a program of Holyoke Community College, said he realized the laid-off employees needed English literacy instruction and job training.

He asked Holyoke Works, which is experienced with providing job training programs, to offer English language instruction along with employment training to come to Ludlow.

The literacy program is provided with federal funds through the state Division of Career Services.

Maria J. Sanches had worked for 12 years in the textile factory where everybody spoke Portuguese, she said.

Today, at 41, she is looking forward to training as a hair stylist - "my dream" - at the Jolie Hair Academy on Sewell Street. She's progressed rapidly in learning English at the adult learning center.

Larry Bay, director of Holyoke Works, said one of the reasons Sanches has progressed so rapidly is she practices English with her daughter, Jessica, a 10-year-old student at East Street School.

Most immigrants' children and grandchildren speak better English than they do, Dunkelberg said.

Sanches said her daughter dreams of being a doctor, something she hopes she will achieve one day.

"She is very smart," the proud mother said.

Rosa M. Tereso, 51, also laid off from Ludlow Textiles, is having a difficult time learning English. Tereso, a widow, needs to get a skilled job, and hopes to be able to improve her English enough to enter training to be a nursing assistant.

"I am trying to learn English better," she said.

They, like others and those who teach them, know they will not return to the type of job they once had at Ludlow Textiles. And, learning English and becoming literate are keys to success.

"There are jobs in the food-service industry, but it is difficult to support a family on a food-service job," said Dunkelberg.

Manufacturing jobs are on the decline in the area, and immigration is increasing. Bay said money for highly skilled bio-tech jobs is not going to help immigrants who are non-English speaking and lack technical skills.

Bay spends a lot of time trying to persuade employers to give the former Ludlow Textiles employees a chance.

"These people have a good track record and a good work ethic," he said.

Rachel W. Tarr, an English as a second language teacher to the students, said she loves teaching them because "they are so eager to learn."

"They give a lot back," said Tarr, who began her career with a job as an English teacher in Spain. She speaks broken Spanish, so she realizes how difficult it is for the Portuguese students to learn English.

She encourages her students to get out in the community to practice their English. "I tell them to go to the grocery store and practice," Tarr said.

But, she has found herself "dispelling the myths" which some of her students have about English. One student asked her why when she looks for something in a store, the clerk always says, "It's over there, man."

"She said to me, I am not a man, and I realized she was hearing ma'am."

Holyoke Works is able to provide companies funding to assist in teaching employees English, according to Bay. His agency can provide 50 percent of the salary during training and a tax break for a company that agrees to hire someone for a minimum of 30 hours a week and provide benefits.

Any company interested in hiring the laid off manufacturing workers who are improving their English skills should contact Bay at Holyoke Works at (413) 532-2683.

Schooling a lesson in life for inmates

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By PATRICK JOHNSON

pjohnson@repub.com

Sheriff Michael J. Ashe began offering classes to inmates on a voluntary basis in the mid-1970s at the old York Street jail, and seven years ago decided to make the classes mandatory for those lacking a high school diploma.

"With inmates coming to us having only completed the ninth grade, and with a fifth-grade reading level, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that they should improve their education while they are in our custody.

At one point early in high school, Emmanuel M. Ortiz, of Holyoke, thought of someday becoming an architect.

"I took a computer design course. I was good at it," he said. "But then I felt school wasn't for me."

Ortiz dropped out of school in the 10th grade, choosing to hang out on the streets with the wrong crowd. Whatever thoughts he had of architecture, or any other career, faded.

"I thought why think of making money in the future when I can make money now," he said.

Today, he's 22 and being in Ludlow held at the Hampden County Correctional Center where he awaits the July 18 start of his trial on charges of distribution of cocaine and other drug charges. But Ortiz is also back hitting the same books he walked away from as a teen.

From behind bars, he is trying to pass the General Educational Development, or GED, exam. He even talks about going to college whenever he is free again.

"My mom said, 'We're going to enroll you. If you get your GED, we'll send you to community college,'" Ortiz said.

Ortiz is one of those at the jail taking adult education classes.

The adult education classes were created as a voluntary program in the mid-1970s, but since 2000 have been mandatory for all inmates who do not have at least a high school diploma.

This works out to about one out of every two inmates, said program director Andree Duval.

"Fifty percent of our population has not finished high school," she said. The average inmate at the facility has at most a 10th-grade education, she said.

The adult education program has in its more than 30 years compiled a pretty impressive track record, Duval said.

As of last month, 3,693 past and present inmates have passed a GED exam. Jail officials are able to identify 152 former inmates who after earning their GED have gone on to take college courses at Springfield Technical Community College or other schools, she said.

The education program, like the jail's anti-substance abuse or job training programs, seeks to give inmates the means to turn their lives around upon release, Duval said.

"Education is a key to that," she said.

The jail offers all levels of instruction based on the needs of inmates, she said.

"If you come to us not knowing how to read or write, we offer classes. If you need your GED, we have courses for that."

Many inmates are not fluent in English, so courses are provided to make inmates comfortable enough with English to be able to hold a job, she said.

Sheriff Michael J. Ashe said education can be the difference in former inmates returning to a life of crime or not.

It was Ashe who began offering classes to inmates on a voluntary basis in the mid-1970s at the old York Street jail, and who seven years ago decided to make the classes mandatory for those lacking a high school diploma. "With inmates coming to us having only completed the ninth grade, and with a fifth-grade reading level, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that they should improve their education while they are in our custody," Ashe said.

"That's what corrections, as opposed to 'warehousing' is all about," he said. "We provide the tools and the directions for an inmate to build a law-abiding life."

Based on the jail's own figures for recidivism rates, or the numbers of inmates who after serving a sentence are convicted of new offenses and sent back to jail, the program may be making a difference, according to Duval.

In 2000, before classes were made mandatory, the recidivism rate was about 25 percent, she said.

Today it is 21 percent.

William R. Toller, a retired corrections assistant superintendent, was hired in 1976 to help launch the adult education program. He said that 30 years ago the idea of teaching inmates was considered quite radical.

What was radical back then seems pretty obvious now, he said.

"If you don't want the jail to be a revolving door, you've got to give them the skills to find high-paying jobs and not to become repeat customers," Toller said.

Initially, classes were two days a week and affiliated with the Springfield adult education program Onward with Learning, he said.

In the early 1980s, the jail was able to secure grant money to make it a full-time program with permanent instructors, he said.

Today, the program has seven full-time instructors and six part-time, Duval said. There are also two staff people who help inmates who have been released before earning their GED to hook up with an adult education program in their home community.

The evolution of the program from its days at York Street to a modern classroom wing at the new correctional center is like going from a one-room schoolhouse to a modern high school, Toller said.

On the inside, the classrooms look like those in a typical high school. Maps of the world and the United States hang on the wall, alongside photos of the nation's presidents. An extra-credit geometry question occupies a corner of the chalkboard.

Where it differs from a high school is on the outside where 16-foot fences adorned with razor wire are a few steps past the main entrance.

Inside one of the classrooms, taped to the cork board is a laminated quotation from author Victor Hugo: "Those who open a school door close a prison."

Ortiz said when he was initially brought to the jail and told he had to go to class first thing each morning, it was the last thing he wanted to do.

"It's hard for someone like me to get my brain back to hearing everything I learned in high school," Ortiz said.

Over time he came to appreciate the classes for breaking up the monotony of jail life, and said he is now committed to earning his high school equivalency.

He said he's taken the GED exam once, failing the science portion by 10 points, but is resolute about taking it again and this time passing.

Darren L. Flucker, 31, of Springfield, said he has also taken the GED exam once but came up short in geometry.

A ninth-grade dropout who was arrested in 2002 for possession of cocaine with intent to distribute, Flucker said he is also intent on passing the test.

"This is my No. 1 goal," Flucker said.

His second goal once he is released from jail, he said, is to find a steady job.

"I got kids I have to take care of. Three kids. That's my focus," he said.

He said once he gets things squared away and is able to take care of his family and still has time, he may try college.

Susanne D. Campagna, an adult education instructor for more than 20 years, has been a full-time instructor at the jail for the last 18 months.

She said it is good that the inmates go to classes five days a week, instead of two or three times, which is the norm for most programs on the outside. "It's very beneficial for the learners," she said.

The main differences between teaching at an outside program and a jail is what she called "the degrees of motivation." At most adult education programs, the students are there by choice, she said.

"Here, not everyone is here by choice, so the motivation can be a challenge," she said.

Holyoke program a valuable resource

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By JEANETTE DEFORGE
jdeforge@repub.com

HOLYOKE - After losing her home in a Florida hurricane two years ago, Edith I. Crespo moved back to Western Massachusetts and decided there should be more to life than her constant financial struggle.

So the 32-year-old, who dropped out of school in ninth grade, enrolled in the fall in adult basic education classes to pursue a high school diploma.

Then she waited. And waited. And waited.

"I waited seven months just to get into a class, and I started three weeks ago," she said in mid-May. "I heard there might be (budget) cuts, and it scared me this might be taken away."

Crespo, of Chicopee, is one of many enrolled in GED preparation classes through the Juntos Collaborative, which offers a variety of adult education programs through eight Holyoke agencies.

The organizations together technically have 304 classroom slots, but as many as 900 people are served in a year, because an open enrollment policy allows students to start and finish at any time, said Martha I. Owen, adult education director for Holyoke Public Schools and Juntos coordinator.

Still, 400 people are waiting for an English language class, basic adult education or job training through the collaborative, officials said.

"We try to make use of the limited funds to meet the needs the best we can," Owen said. "The idea is not to duplicate services; it is to expand services."

Teachers and directors say the need is dramatic and question the wisdom of the proposal by Gov. Deval L. Patrick and the Legislature to cut adult education by 8.7 percent statewide, reducing the budget to \$29.5 million.

The 2000 U.S. Census shows in Holyoke, the state's poorest city, 30 percent of the about 40,000 residents do not have high school diplomas. The 2006 graduation rate in Holyoke is among the lowest in the state, with 49 percent earning diplomas.

The programs also provide assistance for residents in other communities, many of which have no free adult education.

Crespo is horrified over the budget cuts and is talking about protesting with a petition drive.

Now living on federal Supplemental Security Income, she said she checked with community colleges and private schools when she learned about the waiting list, but found the average \$220 charge per class was far more than she could afford.

She now attends a free program run by Holyoke Community College and hopes to pass the GED exam by the summer. After that, she plans to enter the paralegal program at HCC.

She said it is equally important to set an example for her children and show them school is valuable.

"There are a lot of low-income families, and the cycle never stops if you don't have programs like this," she said.

A confirmed advocate of adult education, Holyoke Mayor Michael J. Sullivan said it is crucial to the long-term economic survival of the city, as well as its residents.

While some talk about attracting jobs from the biotech industry to the so-called gateway cities such as Holyoke, Sullivan said it will only work if residents have the necessary job skills.

"To move the jobs here is wonderful, but the people we are talking about are not going to be able to access the jobs except in a very peripheral way," he said.

Now, 65 percent of city employees live elsewhere. Holyoke Medical Center, for example, is the city's biggest employer, but few can work there without a high school diploma. A mortgage company that debated moving here found many unemployed residents could not fill the jobs, he said.

He called the Juntos Collaborative a valuable resource.

The collaborative, which joins the eight agencies under the Holyoke Public Schools, receives a total state grant annually that is divided among seven of them. The Distance Learning Project receives money separately, Owen said.

For this fiscal year, which ends in July, the collaborative received \$579,244 from the state. The Holyoke Public Schools, which is always supportive of the programs, also contributed \$205,696 in matching funds, she said.

Several agencies provide English language classes and basic GED classes, but they focus on unique populations. The Care Center, for example, offers programs for teen parents, and the New England Farm Workers Council provides literacy and math in Spanish so residents can take the GED in their native language. Some offer day programs, and others, evening programs.

Agencies coordinated classes to allow students to easily move up the levels to reach their final goal, whether it be earning a GED degree, going to college or training for a job, Owen said.

The number of agencies involved makes it easier for the group to modify its classes to meet changing needs, she said.

"We can't forget a community that is changing is going to require (us) to adjust the services we provide," she said. "That's what we do best is to be flexible."

Budget cuts are hurting. Several programs, including Holyoke Works and Holyoke Community College, were able to expand classes this winter with extra state money, but will have to cut them come July.

Even Start, a comprehensive program providing English language lessons and literacy to the parents of 3- to 7-year-olds, runs through the Holyoke schools and is affiliated with the collaborative by using its wait lists and networking, may be completely eliminated.

Even Start, which serves 18 families, learned this year the federal grant will only fund three to five programs. There are 22 in the state, Coordinator James J. Lescault said, all of them working to break the cycle of poverty by educating children and parents.

One of the bigger partners is Holyoke Works, which is now run through the Greater Holyoke Chamber of Commerce.

It receives about \$65,000 from the state Department of Education money to run English language classes. It also receives federal job training grants, said Larry Bay, executive director.

In total, its budget is \$500,000, and last year, it served more than 300 people. Still, there are long waiting lists, he said.

"Juntos is one of the best collaboratives, and we can serve about 5 percent of the population; meanwhile, employers are screaming for people," he said. "We could easily have five times that amount and not be able to serve everyone."

One of the biggest needs is English language classes. In his current classes, there are many professionals from 11 countries and Puerto Rico, including nurses and electricians, who cannot pass certification tests until they learn the language, he said.

There are four nurses studying English in one of the classes, while area hospitals are struggling to fill those jobs. One of his nurses from Puerto Rico had to wait six months to enter an English language class, Bay said.

The program is flexible. It can combine job training and English or GED courses to help meet different needs, he said.

It also provides job training programs to meet area needs. For example, one of the biggest successes is its certified nursing assistant class, which recently placed 32 of its 33 graduates almost immediately. That, too, is facing funding cuts, Bay said.

"If there is any single market group that is shut out, it is young Latino males," he said. "It is a horrible situation. These kids have no hope; they have nowhere to go."

Many will take any job, and because it is low-paying, they are locked into poverty without better job training, he said.

In the night class Crespo attends, there are 35 slots that range from very basic literacy to GED preparation. When extra funding allowed it to create a high-level GED class for nine students, the slots filled in 10 days, said Aliza Ansell, program coordinator and teacher.

"Some want to go to college; some cannot get a raise until they get their GED," she said. "Some are doing it because they really want to accomplish this, and a lot of people want to do homework with their kids."

Ivelisse E. Zayas, 17, of Holyoke, dropped out of high school this year. Because her family had moved back and forth to Puerto Rico, she stayed back several times and realized she would not graduate until she was 21. She said she did not want to wait that long and turned to adult education classes to earn her diploma so she could teach kindergarten.

"I want to do better and go to college and get a chance to do what I want," she said.

For P. Enid Quinones, 23, adult classes are a way to become a professional artist. Now, she works in day care from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. and tends bar at night. Twice a week, she runs from one job to classes to the second job, all so she can attend college.

Quinones has passed the math, science and social studies portions of the GED, leaving only the English portions, which are the most difficult since Spanish is her first language.

"I look at it like a challenge. It is like a video game. I have to pass to get to the next level," she said.

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Kids find homework a little less daunting

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By Elizabeth Roman
eroman@repub.com

Sitting at a small table, her brow furrowed in concentration 10-year-old Thalia Vasquez, a fourth-grader at Holyoke's H.B. Lawrence Elementary School, is working on a list of vocabulary words in a room at Immaculate Conception Parish House on North Summer Street.

"Some words I know, but some of them I don't," she said.

Her mentor, Anne E. Cressotti, of Southamptton, is beside her, ready to help.

"We do multiplication, reading, math, writing, and I get help with my grammar," Vasquez said.

"We" includes her twin sister, Alexandria, who also gets tutoring help.

The Vasquez sisters are just two of the 84 students who participated in Homework House twice a week this year. The volunteer program at two sites allows students at elementary schools in Holyoke to basic skills such as reading and writing.

"This is an independent space where students can get a fresh start," said Sister Jane F. Morrisey, who with Sister Maureen A. Broughan, started the program in February 2006.

"Initially we opened Homework House of Hermano Pedro in a space at Immaculate Conception Parish House, basing it on a program out of California where students who were really struggling in school could come and do their homework with the help of volunteer tutors," Morrisey said.

Starting with two tutors and two students, the program continued to grow with the support of community grants and private donations.

In September, they opened a second site at Our Lady of Guadalupe, for students from H.B. Lawrence. The school had a list of more than 40 children in need of help.

"This program is meant for students who are not turning in their homework, and just not getting the concepts," Broughan explained.

"Many of the students are living in poverty level and barely passing in school when they come to us," Morrisey said.

The program relies on volunteer tutors to work with the children.

Jesse S. Ortiz is a retired professor of public health at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and has been a regular volunteer at Homework House.

"It was difficult for me at first since I'm used to teaching adults, but now I love working with these little ones. They each have very individual personalities," Ortiz said.

Bryan J. Duart, of Ludlow, is a freshman at Elms College in Chicopee. He started tutoring as part of a work-study program now offered at Elms.

On a recent afternoon, Duart sat with Ryan W. Larkin, 11, a fifth-grader at Sullivan Elementary School, reading from the book, "White Fang."

"I bring my homework, and when I'm done, I will usually read a book for fun," Ryan said. "He helps me with the words I don't know," he said, referring to Duart.

Over at Our Sister of Guadalupe, Luis A. Lopez, 10, a third-grader at the Lawrence School received help making a card for his mom.

His tutor, Terryon Sobers, of Hartford, is a freshman at Elms College.

"At first I came here thinking it would be an easy work-study program, but now working with the kids I actually enjoy coming and seeing them develop," Sobers said.

The students seem to enjoy it, too.

"We try to keep them occupied even after they finish their homework, with educational games and activities," Broughan said.

"It's fun, and it's better than sitting at home," Larkin said.

Lawrence W. Duprey, vice principal at the Lawrence School, said the program has been a great help.

"Mostly we have noticed that children who participate in the program want to stay with the program. I walk them over to the building every day after school and they are excited about attending," he said.

Teachers at the Lawrence school also have seen a big difference in their students.

Fourth-grade teachers Jennifer L. Arnold and Laura A. Lunney have been happily surprised by the program.

"Students in the program always bring their homework in," Arnold said.

"And because they have help from a tutor, we know they are understanding the concepts," added Patricia S. Huff, another fourth-grade teacher. "A lot of them were failing because of not handing in the work, now that's no longer an issue."

Mary Lee Gillmeister, of Westfield, tutors Guillermo Godreau, 11, and Kiara Vasquez, 10, both of whom are in the fifth-grade at Lawrence.

Guillermo's mom, Maria Rivera, has seen the change in her son.

"He comes home excited, wanting to talk about the program and what he's been doing. His homework is always done, even on the days he doesn't stay after school," she said.

Vasquez's mother, Diana Del Valle, is also proud of her daughter. "She is getting "A"s in school now, she is doing really well," she said.

Gillmeister said the students have taught her as much as she has taught them.

"I was nervous at first about working with young children and being able to relate to kids living in a community of poverty. It's hard to explain what these students have brought into my life . . . mostly it's joy." The need in Holyoke is great and the number of students who want to participate in the program is growing.

"If we had more people like Sister Jane and Sister Maureen, the literacy and education problems in the city would be nonexistent," said Mayor Michael J. Sullivan. "This has been an incredibly beneficial program for the city."

The problem is getting money and manpower for the program.

Currently the budget for Homework House is more than \$83,000 for the school year. That money so far has come from donations by groups such as Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Holyoke's Community Development Block Grant program, and the Bickford Foundation.

"We always need volunteers and donations. It's what keeps the program alive," Morrisey said.

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Literacy a healthy habit in North End

Editor's note: This is the sixth of a seven-part series called "Closing the Literacy Gap" that was published in the Republican from May 20-26, 2007.

By NATALIA ARBULU
narbulu@repub.com

Milta M. Franco has seen adults in Springfield's North End neighborhood mark an "X" instead of signing their names because they cannot read and write.

Franco, director of the North End Outreach Network, said she runs into people who are illiterate all the time.

In this predominately Latino community, home to the state's poorest neighborhood, literacy takes a back seat to food, shelter and health needs.

But the outreach organization, with the help of community leaders and a partnership with Smith College, in Northampton, hopes to bring literacy to the forefront by tying it to the health and well-being of residents.

Smith, in collaboration with the outreach network, is using a three-year \$90,000 "Literacy for a Healthier Community" grant from the National Institute of Health to determine what the barriers to literacy are and how to best improve the education level of North End residents.

Franco said raising the level of achievement in the North End is a serious battle. Only 57 percent of Hispanics statewide who entered high school in 2002 and graduated four years later.

"This is to stress the importance of literacy and combine it into health and say what is a healthy child and a healthy parent," Franco said.

The outreach network is a collaboration of the Spanish American Union, the New North Citizens' Council, the Gandara Mental Health Center, and the Brightwood Health Center.

The organization's outreach workers - who go door-to-door seeking to connect residents with services like health care and counseling - have surveyed 150 people on their educational needs.

Focus groups have also surveyed residents, teachers, community organizations, and social service and health providers on what needs to be done to improve the achievement level of students, Franco said.

"The big question we are interested in exploring with NEON (the network) is what are the barriers to people living in the North End of Springfield to becoming engaged in literacy services. We know from a survey that parents care about their children's education and care about their own opportunities, so what are the barriers to being able to participate," said Gail E. Scordilis, the college's director of educational outreach.

Smith College students will create a report based on information from the surveys and focus groups. The report will be used by officials to create programs, like a family literacy center, that cater to the community's needs.

More discussions within the community are scheduled to take place during the third and final year of the grant, but the partners have already taken actions they hope will make a difference in pushing the literacy agenda forward.

Smith College students tutor students in after-school programs at German Gerena Community School and Chestnut Accelerated Middle School.

Smith's relationship with the outreach network began four years ago as a result of its existing relationship with Gerena school, which opened its doors to Smith students who wanted the experience of teaching in an urban setting.

Smith is also supporting Gerena's transformation into a public Montessori program, which would make it the second school in the district with such a program following Alfred G. Zanetti Montessori School.

About six Smith education graduates will join Gerena teachers this summer for their Montessori training, according to Gerena principal Analida Munera.

Gerena will open in September with 12 Montessori classrooms for pre-schoolers and kindergartners, with all grade levels being run under the Montessori program within four years.

"We will be offering an outstanding education to children in the North End. The beauty of Montessori is the life-long love of learning children acquire and finding out the best way that they learn," Munera said.

Munera said that most Gerena parents do not know what Montessori is since the program is usually only offered by private schools that cost thousands of dollars in tuition.

The Montessori philosophy fosters independence and self-discipline in the classroom. It was developed by Italian educator Maria Montessori in the early 1900s.

Rebeca Escalera, the mother of three children at Gerena, said adopting the Montessori program is a positive move for the school. After hearing what school officials had to say about the program, Escalera said it will benefit her 6-year-old son, Manuel, who is hyperactive.

"It will be good for him because he won't be sitting in a chair all day, he will have more freedom in the classroom, but will continue to learn," Escalera said.

Parent information sessions on Montessori have had low turnouts, but Munera said school officials will continue to try to reach out.

One way they have been getting the word out is through the "Coffee Hour," a weekly meeting where parents of local schoolchildren can talk about their concerns and ask questions.

Coordinated by school officials and the outreach network, the meetings are run by Orlando Santiago, who is both the network's assistant director and a parent facilitator at Gerena.

Santiago said that the school system needs to double its efforts to provide materials to parents in their native language if they expect them to read them.

"They (parents) receive letters in English and throw it out because they can't understand it. They feel that if the school system doesn't bother to print something in Spanish, it is not important for them to read," Santiago said.

Santiago noted that the Latino community in the North End is so transient that if someone learns English, they will soon move and be replaced by another person who only speaks Spanish.

In 2004, the outreach network launched a digital storytelling project known as TOLD, an acronym for Telling Our Legacies Digitally, that tells the stories of residents using their own voiceovers, photographs, and video.

Vanessa Pabón, Franco's daughter and the outreach network's digital storytelling director, said that the program is used as a literacy tool and a way to build community.

More than 100 stories have been created primarily by North End residents who talk about everything from being a single parent to their bouts with depression.

"Not only are people telling their stories, but they also may be touching the computer for the first time. We realized that this could be the key to engagement that could open to door to so many things," Pabón said.

To view digital stories created through the Telling Our Legacies Digitally Project by citizens of Springfield's North End neighborhood, go to www.massimpact-ds.org/albums/15.aspx

Literacy boosters seek funding restoration

Editor's note: This is the last in a seven-part series called "Closing the Literacy Gap" published in The Republican from May 20-26, 2007.

By STEPHANIE BARRY

sbarry@repub.com

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 Rosskothien, 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.