

*C. The Republican
Springfield, Mass.
May 20, 2007*

Leading the charge for literacy, our future

Editor's note: This essay was published on May 20, 2007, on the editorial pages of The Republican in conjunction with a series called "Closing the Literacy Gap," a seven-part series published in The Republican from May 20-26, 2007.

By MARIE P. GRADY

More than a decade ago, in my previous incarnation as a journalist, I assigned a story that had taken root in my mind with a rather routine Election Day report. Voters in a large Western Massachusetts city had approved a Proposition 2 ½ override to fund improvements to a senior center but had rejected a similar measure to provide badly needed funds for education.

Since the young would one day support the old, it occurred to me that these youngsters would eventually be supporting all of us – our social security and health-care systems. Our economy.

At the time, the youngsters in this particular city were different from the older voters. Most were born into poor, migrant families, many from Puerto Rico.

The cities they were transplanted to also were changing, from thriving industrial centers where immigrants could find jobs in factories to provide a better life for their children to an urban wasteland, where once humming factories were silent, where storefronts were shuttered and schools were abandoned by the immigrants before, who had moved up and moved out.

Immigrants are still coming to our cities, but unlike our parents or grandparents, they can't find jobs in mills that paid a decent wage but didn't require a mastery of the language or education to operate complex machinery. The factories have given way to an economy that either requires advanced language and educational skills for decent paying jobs or few skills at all for service jobs that pay next to nothing.

With immigrants and others who do not speak the English language well making up the largest increase in the workforce, the region has reached a critical crossroads when it comes to literacy and education. Either the workforce becomes more literate and educated or a cycle of poverty that is already drawing a circle around our largest cities expands.

Businesses are already feeling the impact. The number of job vacancies in Massachusetts increased by 18.5 percent between the second quarters of 2005 and 2006, according to the Massachusetts Division of Career Services. The most rapid increase occurred in the Pioneer Valley, where the number of vacancies rose by 35 percent, or 2,200.

Forty three percent of all reported job vacancies statewide required at least an associate's degree; bachelor's degrees were required for nearly 30 percent of all openings.

As businesses search for educated workers, funding for adult education programs faces a \$4 million, or 12 percent, cut, as the Legislature grapples with a tough budget year.

Money alone is never enough to solve a problem, as the billions pumped into state schools under the 1993 Education Reform Act proved. As this newspaper reported in a series called “The Forgotten Class” in 2004 – long before school districts had to make the figures public under federal law this year – nearly half of high school students in our largest cities don’t graduate.

They say that all politics is personal, but visionary leadership moves beyond immediacy and expediency, focusing not just on the present but on the future. To reverse a tide, a society’s most influential leaders must lead the call for change.

That is why 20 leaders from the business, non-profit and educational fields banded together recently to form the Hampden County Literacy Cabinet. Among the busiest people on the planet, they found the time to join this group because they know that education and literacy form the foundation upon which rests the future of this region.

The group was formed under the umbrella of the Literacy Works Project, funded by the Irene E. and George A. Davis Foundation and the state, and the Hampden County Regional Employment Board, whose executive director, J. William Ward, has long promoted literacy as key to the future of the economy and the region.

In February I took over as director of the Literacy Works Project after eight years as managing editor of *The Republican*, a position I decided to leave last year, in part, to pursue my own education. At the newspaper I was privileged to work for a publisher and editor who gave me free rein and full support to investigate the most pressing issues of our times. I also was fortunate to work with a staff that cares deeply about the community it covers.

As a journalist – and I will always be one – I know that the literacy gap confronting our region is among the most important stories of our times.

It is my hope that the formation of this Literacy Cabinet is just the opening chapter in a story which ends with a brighter future for all of us, whether we are the poorest of immigrants or the most powerful business executives in the county.

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