

Proliteracy Worldwide Fills Void in Adult Literacy Advocacy

November 20, 2003

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Proliteracy Worldwide, the premier national organization for volunteers in service to adult literacy education held its annual meeting for 2003 in Washington, DC, November 13-17. Before the meeting I was informed that Robert Wedgeworth, President of Proliteracy Worldwide, would deliver an important new speech that would advocate strongly for adult literacy education.

I was unable to attend the annual meeting but I have found a copy of the speech recently posted on the web at www.proliteracy.org/conference. Entitled, "The Number of Functionally Illiterate Adults in U.S. Is Growing," the report is the first in what is intended to be annual reports on the state of adult literacy in the U.S. It offers a powerful argument for more attention to adult literacy education by policy makers, funding organizations, business, industry, and citizens in general. With this dignified, thoughtful, and deliberate speech, Proliteracy Worldwide has moved boldly to fill a deep void in national advocacy for adult literacy education.

Two of the major arguments that the report makes are (1) the number of functionally illiterate adults is growing due to factors such as increased immigration and increased drop-outs and push-outs from K-12 in response to student mobility and contemporary educational reform standards, and (2) the overemphasis upon children's literacy development to the detriment to literacy services for the children's parents is actually harmful to the promotion of children's literacy too, and is a shortsighted policy for overall literacy development in the United States.

Written in a personal manner, the report presents research and statistical data in a friendly, understandable manner and offers profuse footnotes to document the claims the paper makes for the role of adult literacy education in relationship to children's education, corrections reform and effectiveness, health of adults and children, and economic development in the workplace.

The report calls attention to facts showing "... how literacy solutions for children and adults are inextricably connected." It goes on to note that, "Curiously, although all of this research is readily available and comes largely from work outside the literacy field itself, very few social commentators or public policymakers have yet embraced the comprehensive approach our national literacy crisis requires, namely one that balances both the children's and adult sides of the literacy equation."

The report presents conclusions and recommendations that are aimed at advancing the field of adult literacy education and the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the United States (Sticht, 2000). Following is a brief extract from the conclusions and recommendations of the report.

"Attaining and maintaining high literacy levels among adults is an ongoing process, especially in the U.S. where immigration and family mobility rates are high. Our current national focus on the children's side of the educational and literacy equation puts enormous pressure on school systems to succeed with children whose parents lack the educational or cultural resources they need to support their children or the school. Balancing the equation requires cross-cutting strategies from our policy-makers, our health, education, labor and welfare system, our prison system and last but not least, business and industry.

To begin this process we urge immediate action by the Congress to reauthorize the Workforce Investment Act (WIA Reauthorization H.R.1161). However, longer term we suggest a more comprehensive approach.

Building on the Action Agenda of the National Literacy Summit 2000, and consistent with the intent of the UNESCO Decade of Literacy program, ProLiteracy Worldwide proposes that the Congress develop and pass a new Adult Education and Literacy Act that:

- creates an awareness of and recognizes the existence of the network of agencies and non-profit organizations that form the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) of the U.S.
- provides performance standards for AELS
- provides funding that will assist new or existing agencies and organizations in meeting the performance standards
- creates a referral system that encourages social service agencies, hospitals, labor unions, employers and prisons to identify low literate adults at federal literacy levels I or II and above age 18 who can be referred to AELS for training
- provides funding to support each qualified low literate adult who enrolls in an AELS program
- Provides a tax credit for volunteers who devote at least ten hours each month as a teacher or tutor in the AELS.
- Provides a tax credit to employers who hire graduates of the AELS.
- Appropriates at least \$1 billion annually for the next ten years with a 50% matching provision for states to be eligible to receive the funds.

The release of the 2004 National Adult Literacy Survey findings will be an opportunity to redirect our efforts toward an all-out effort to sharply reduce functional illiteracy in the U.S. We are long overdue for a public policy that ensures the opportunity for adults in the U.S. to overcome functional illiteracy thereby becoming better parents, better workers, and active contributors to a democratic society."

This is an especially important report and places ProLiteracy Worldwide at the forefront of national advocacy for adult literacy education. Hopefully, the report will also be presented at a national press corps meeting and distributed widely to news organizations, policy makers, legislators, funding organizations and others. Through this means it can promote a national understanding of the importance of adult literacy education and the need to develop and support a world class Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) that can meet the literacy and learning needs of millions of adults throughout their life spans.

This is a report literacy advocates have been waiting for!

Footnote: Sticht, T. *The Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) in the United States: Moving from the Margins to the Mainstream of Education*, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada: Natl. Adult Literacy Database, 2000.