

ADULT LITERACY IN INDIANA

by Julie Diesman, Paul Moffett,
Amie Thomas, Michael Twigg



BACKGROUND

Mary McLeod Bethune, an African-American educator and adviser to U.S. president Franklin D. Roosevelt, has been quoted as having said, “The whole world opened to me when I learned to read.” Unfortunately for many in Indiana, the “whole world” may be closed to them because of illiteracy.

According to the Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition in 1989, 12% to 19% of Hoosiers over age 25 could not read or write at a functional level. As early as 1930, illiteracy was recognized as an issue within the state. An article in the *Indianapolis Star* dated September 25, 1930, headlined that over 50,000 Hoosiers were illiterate (“52,034 in state,” 1939). It is natural to assume that at some point Indiana developed a robust statewide initiative to address the problem of illiteracy amongst its citizens. One might imagine a program that over time slowly but surely reduced the number of Indiana citizens who struggled under the mantle of illiteracy; however, myriad reasons and circumstances have conspired to prevent that from happening. Instead of a forceful statewide program, numerous segmented efforts by local or regional entities with modest support from various federal, state, or non-profit organizations are more apt to be found.

DEFINING LITERACY

One of the chief issues in assessing adult literacy programs on a statewide basis is the problem of defining literacy. The definition and the means of assessment tailored to that definition has changed frequently over time resulting in a bewildering statistical disjuncture. The U.S. census provides one example of how complicated it can be to obtain answers to what seems to be a simple statistical question. The 1840 census asked each head of household to self-report the level of literacy of family members. This would allow each individual to determine what he or she considered literate or illiterate to mean (Gordon, 2003, p. xvi). Thirty years later the census only considered the literacy levels of children between the ages of 10 and 19. In 1900 the census again changed its definition to indicate illiteracy “as a

person 10 years of age or older unable to read and write in a native language” (Gordon, 2003, p. xvi).

So what are some popular definitions for literacy? Kirch and Jungeblut’s *Literacy: Profiles of America’s Young Adults* defined literacy as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge potential” (1986). *The Workforce Investment Act of 1998* in part defined literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, and speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family and in society” (United States Department of Labor). Other definitions are also often used and may vary in their meaning and implication.

STATEWIDE LITERACY PROGRAMS

Two notable statewide literacy studies are particularly significant. Both were conducted around the same time and give a detailed statistical picture of literacy efforts in Indiana. Deborah G. Bonnet and Teresa Elston wrote *An Evaluation of Adult Literacy Efforts in Indiana*. This 31 page spiral-bound study was commissioned by the Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition to examine adult literacy programs offered in Indiana. The study took eight months to complete and recommendations were made for areas of improvement. The study was interested in the impact of collective efforts, local groups, and national literacy programs. A database was developed listing literacy programs available.

The U.S. Department of Education Division of Adult Education and Literacy conducted a second study. The *National Adult Literacy Survey* is the result of a nationwide survey conducted in 1992. Twelve states including Indiana participated in the voluntary study. The results are included as well as supplemental information and presentation overheads.

AN ANALYSIS OF AVAILABLE CENSUS DATA RELATING TO LITERACY LEVELS IN THE STATE

As discussed earlier, the census data is very difficult to compare due to the inconsistency of the questions posed on the survey. From the 1870 census until the

1930 census (omitting 1880, 1890, and 1900) one census question asked for the “number of illiterate persons ten years of age and over” (University of Virginia Library, 2004). As early as 1920, the census question had evolved into “number of persons between the ages of x and y attending school” (University of Virginia Library, 2004). However, by calculating data available from 1870 to 1930 in Marion County, Indiana, the percentage of illiterate males was decreasing from a peak of 20% in 1870 to the low of 3% in 1930 (University of Virginia Library, 2004). The reasons for the decline are not clear; however, it may have been due to the urbanization of Marion County or perhaps even more stringent school attendance standards.

Today, the statistics for secondary education in Marion County reflect the importance of education in our society. In the 1990 census, Marion County had 118,600 adults over 25 who did not have their high school diploma (23.2%). However, 158,958, or 76.8%, did have their high school diploma (Indiana University Kelly School of Business, n.d.). From the 2000 census data a slight increase is found in the number of high school graduates, with 81.6% having a diploma (Indiana University Kelly School of Business, n.d.). It is important to realize, however, when looking at these statistics that they do not necessarily reflect a functional level of literacy. Exceptions exist and the definitions of literacy still vary widely.

THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL FUNDING AND LEGAL INITIATIVES

John F. Kennedy once said, “Our progress as a nation can be no swifter than our progress in education. The human mind is our fundamental resource” (Quoteland.com, n.d.). It was during the term of President Kennedy, and later President Johnson, that education for adults in the U.S. became a focus. In the fall of 1964, Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, Title II B of Public Law 88-452 (Eyre, n.d.). This law, which created the first Adult Basic Education program as a state grant, focused on basic education skills for adults who had not completed secondary education. During the first year, states were given \$18.6 million to fund the program (Eyre, n.d.).

While there were several amendments to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, along with other minor acts, there were no real strides made in national literacy funding until the National Literacy Act of 1991. This bill increased authorization for literacy programs, established the National Institute for Literacy, authorized state literacy resource centers, created national workforce demonstration projects, established literacy programs for incarcerated individuals, created “indicators” of program quality, and required “Gateway Grants” to public housing authorities (Eyre, n.d.). As a result of the National Literacy Act of 1991, the National

Institute for Literacy or NIFL was created (National Institute for Literacy, n.d.). The National Institute for Literacy provides several important services that promote literacy including administering LINCS (Literacy Information and Communication System, an Internet-based communication and information system for literacy), Bridges-to-Practice (a research guide on improving services for adults with disabilities), promotion of adult literacy reform, administration of America’s Literacy Directory (an online searchable database), and provision of NIFL publications to organizations. NIFL also offers policy information for several government agencies (National Institute for Literacy, n.d.).

In 1998, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (Title II) came into existence as part of the Workforce Investment Act (The Iowa Literacy Resource Center, 1999). This act’s main objective was to loosen restrictions on allocation of state monies for literacy and education programs. States are now able to prioritize funding for local programs that are successfully operating within state requirements. In addition, “core indicators” or assessment standards are required for annual evaluation (The Iowa Literacy Resource Center, 1999). The Adult Education and Family Literacy Act was reauthorized in 2003. This bill authorized programming monies to Adult Basic Education, which includes literacy education, at \$584.3 million for fiscal year 2004 (National Association of Workforce Agencies, n.d.).

The state of Indiana does have one statewide program that administers literacy programming – the Indiana Adult Basic Education Division or IABE. Funded with federal and state monies, IABE, the product of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, provides Adult Basic Education (which includes basic skills, English literacy, and life skills), Adult Secondary Credit (opportunity for students who did not finish high school to return as adults and earn credits toward a high school diploma), Even Start Family Literacy Program (whose goal is to improve educational opportunities of low income families by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy or basic education, and parenting education), and Indiana GED Testing (General Education Development Program allows adults to acquire their high school diploma) (Division of Adult Education, 2004). In addition to the IABE, Indiana also formed the Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition in 1986. Their goal is to promote lifelong learning for Indiana residents so that they may participate fully in family, community, civic, employment, and education opportunities as well as to encourage the coordination of state agency activity related to adult literacy (Division of Adult Education, 2004). There are six state agencies that appoint ex-officio members who are then approved by the governor: State Library, Department of Workforce Development, Department of Correction,

Family and Social Services Administration, Department of Commerce, and Department of Education. Members serve two-year terms.

Another federally funded literacy connection is the Indiana LINCS website. This website is part of Midwest LINCS which serves as a hub for literacy resources. It is administered by the NIFL and is managed by the Adult Education Professional Development Project. Their website has many valuable resources including Web design and development, Web hosting, graphics design, electronic discussion lists, LINCS cataloging, audio and video distribution, database development and support, and training and presentations (Indiana LINCS, n.d.).

Finally, it is important to consider some of the larger not-for-profit literacy organizations that are in Indiana. One such organization is the Indiana Literacy Foundation. This Indianapolis-based organization works with 300 volunteer literacy programs across Indiana (Indiana Literacy Foundation, n.d.). Providing the Literacy Accountability System, a centralized, aggregated database that produces useful information about what programs actually achieve, they also have developed the Literacy Success Network for practitioners to identify and share guidelines for good practice through listservs, websites, distance education, conferences, workshops, etc. The Indiana Literacy Foundation awards gifts and grants to volunteer literacy programs (Indiana Literacy Foundation, n.d.).

AN INVESTIGATION OF A LOCAL LITERACY PROGRAM

One local adult literacy program model, The Indy Reads program sponsored by the Indianapolis Marion County Public Library (IMCPL), is the largest such program operating in Indiana today, and helps an average of 500 students per year. Indy Reads estimates that approximately 100,000 adults in Marion County read below a sixth grade level and nearly 700,000 statewide have a similar reading ability (Indy Reads, 2003).

Indy Reads students set their own goals within the program which is able to accommodate their reading needs up to a sixth grade reading level. From there they are encouraged to attend more advanced adult education classes. Indy Reads offers English as a second language (ESL) tutoring as well. Funding for resources, programs, and materials is supported through grants and fundraising activities while IMCPL is responsible for funding staff and office space. The Indy Reads Board of Directors is also responsible for fundraising (Indy Reads, 2003).

CONCLUSION

While Indiana has a strong commitment and provides significant financial support to early literacy

programming through the public schools, robust, overarching state programs targeted at addressing adult literacy were not found. A wide variety of regional and local programs have grown up in the absence of a centralized state program. Public libraries in particular have developed strong programs. One such example, referenced above, is the Indy Reads program at the IMCPL.

IMPORTANT DATES IN INDIANA ADULT LITERACY

Important Dates in Indiana Adult Literacy

Date	Description
1924	American Library Association (ALA) establishes the Commission on the Library and Adult Education (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
1928	ALA meets at West Baden; one of their three main activities is adult education, which seeks ways and means of offering assistance through libraries to millions of adults engaged in self-education ("2000 librarians," 1928)
1930	52,034 in State are illiterate; Crawford County classified as the most illiterate county in the state with 4.9%; Steuben County as the least illiterate with only three-tenths of 1% ("52,034 in state," 1939)
1946	Adult Education Division established within the Public Library Division of the American Library Association (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
1951	Fund for Adult Education of the Ford Foundation awards ALA \$150,000 for the American Heritage Project directed by Grace T. Stevenson, secretary of the Adult Education Board (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
1966	Adult Education Act (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
1972	Grant to aid illiterates; Homebound program for adult education was awarded \$60,000 from the United States Department Of Health, Education and Welfare's Office of Education. Grant is one of 52 experimental adult basic education projects across the country, funded at \$5 million under the Adult Education Act of 1966 (Allen, 1972)
1979	White House Conference on Library and Information Services includes life-long learning as a theme. Resolution

- on literacy calls for the expansion of literacy programs at the community level, identification of effective adult literacy programs, coordination of library programs with other adult education programs, cooperation among public educational agencies, and joint planning (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
- 1981 National Coalition for Literacy founded by ALA. Executive Director, Robert Wedgeworth and Peggy Barber work with the Ad Council and with the American Association of Advertising Agencies to launch the National Coalition for Literacy with Jean E. Coleman, Director of the Office for Library Outreach Services (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
- 1983 Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition forms as a Governor's Task Force
- 1986 Indy Reads program starts at IMCPL
- 1986 Indiana Adult Literacy Coalition founded
- 1986 Gannett Foundation makes funds available to support the initiatives of several state literacy coalitions (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
- 1986-1995 Library Literacy Program, Title VI, LSCA, provides over \$65 million in grants for literacy programs at public libraries
- 1988 116 different providers of adult literacy programs identified in Indiana: 64 State administered Adult Basic Education (ABE); 39 Volunteer organizations; 4 Private Industry Councils; 4 Indiana Vocational Technical College (IVTC); 5 Others
- 1991 National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) created by the National Literacy Act (Barber & McCook, n.d.)
- 1992 NIFL publishes its National Adult Literacy Survey; it establishes five reading levels used to describe adults' literacy skills
- 1995 NIFL creates three LINC hubs in the West and Midwest. LINC is an electronic network of the national, regional, state, and local partners, including NIFL
- 1998 Workforce Investment Act of 1998 authorizes the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)
- 1998 Indiana Department of Education (IDOE) establishes the Adult Basic Education (ABE) under the Workforce Investment Act
- 2003 Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003 amends the WIA of 1998, and reauthorizes the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act and the NIFL

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Julie Diesman is currently the manager of career services at the Indiana University-Kokomo campus. She will finish her SLIS degree in August 2006 and plans to continue working in academic libraries.



Paul Moffett is a student at IUPUI.

Amie Thomas graduated from the SLIS program in May 2005. She is the public services team librarian at Brownsburg Public Library.



Michael Twigg is the monograph acquisitions supervisor at Ball State University. He graduated from the SLIS program this past December with his MLS.

