



wisconsin
literacy



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health
literacy

March 24, 2021

Dear Governor Evers,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to reach out to you to share about a really important population in our state that is a key link in supporting your signature phrase, "What's best for our kids is what's best for our state, and that begins with education." I could not agree more with this statement having spent my entire 35-year career supporting higher education and adult education. It has been rewarding to witness your deep commitment to the children of our state and their education.

As I know you are well aware, their success in school is inextricably linked to their parents' educational status and commitment to the value of education in their lives. We know 40% of children with a mother who has not graduated high school will not graduate themselves from high school on time, compared to only 2% of children from mothers with a bachelor degree. And, children of parents with low literacy have a 72% chance of being in the lowest reading level themselves. While this is not new information to you, I share it here as a reminder about a population that has been left out of the funding discussions of both federal and state dollars for adult and family literacy.

When most people read or hear about Wisconsin's educational system, they think of K-12, technical colleges or our strong university system. Yet, there exist a smaller statewide educational network serving a critical population that is engaged in life-changing learning at 70 community-based adult and family literacy agencies in 86% of Wisconsin counties. This statewide network of community-based literacy is providing language acquisition, high school completion, job readiness, U.S. citizenship preparation, health literacy, financial know-how, and computer proficiency--*all at little or no cost to their students.*

A majority of the nearly 16,000 students served (86%) come from communities most impacted by the triple threat of the pandemic, racial injustice, and the economic downturn. Many of our students are parents and essential workers, have lost employment, or will seek new jobs that require very different skill sets, including digital proficiency. They represent communities of color, immigrants and refugees, tribal nations, justice-involved individuals, and families with low to moderate income. They are motivated, determined and persistent. Against many odds, they strive to gain new skills, improve their lives and provide for their families.

My reason for writing to you is to ask where in your 2021-23 State Budget do you see funding to support this critical population that is the link to decreasing the intergenerational nature of low literacy and improving the equity and digital divide that exist in adult education?

I appreciate the fine work of several members of your administration such as Deputy Secretary Chris Patton and Derek Campbell who have listened to me and given me their valuable time and sensible suggestions. However, with the budget process moving along, I feel a renewed sense of urgency to seek solutions to heightening adult literacy. It is the key to economic development and the key to a high quality of life for all in our state.

As the state umbrella organization that disseminates capacity-building support, resources, training and advocacy, Wisconsin Literacy, Inc. and its local members are the conduit to connecting this population with their local technical

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colleges, W2 agencies, workforce development boards and their training programs. ***We are connecting the dots*** between several state agencies that address the well-being of children, parents, job seekers, justice-involved individuals, low-income families and new Americans. ***We are a feeder system into our state's technical colleges*** preparing a pipeline of prepared learners with foundational literacy and math skills who otherwise would not know about broader educational or career pathways. ***We are a pivotal ON-RAMP for populations otherwise not even close to getting on the WIOA Highway through the Wisconsin Technical Colleges and workforce partners.***

The ROI of the work of community-based literacy is measured by National Reporting System standards and GED completions for most of our members doing this critical work in their communities, the same standards used by our technical college system, yet in several measures producing higher literacy achievement gains with a more challenging population and with far more limited resources. *Now more than ever, this population needs dedicated and consistent support in the state budget and more equitable access to the federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act funds to allow them to continue their work in decreasing the digital divide, as they have also switched to a virtual service delivery model to adults with limited computer access or know-how.*

While I recognize your office tried to direct CARES Act funding in November 2020 to Adult Literacy, most of our programs were disqualified to apply due to previously applying for PPP loans in order to pay their rent and staff. As you may remember from your time as State Superintendent, Wisconsin Literacy receives a very small amount of DPI funding for curricula resources to share with our 70 agencies (\$83,200) and an additional grant we compete for from DCF to serve TANF-eligible adults and justice-involved individuals to complete their GED (\$216,600). Shared statewide with many agencies, you can see how this funding is insufficient to meet the need. For FY21, WTCS leadership cut our funding by 25% so we had to cut staff hours and salaries. Remarkably, our resolve to serve our member agencies never wavered as we knew adults needed to learn digital skills in short order to continue their learning. The attached Excel spreadsheet shows how Wisconsin fares in sharing state and federal funds with community-based literacy. I am hopeful we can climb out from the bottom half.

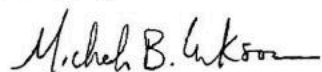
Through the generosity of over 4,500 professionally trained community volunteer tutors, over 100 paid instructors, and the passion of program leadership, Wisconsin Literacy's coalition is an extremely affordable and unique delivery model for adult education, with low overhead and half the cost per student that is spent in other delivery models. It changes lives and puts our most vulnerable Wisconsinites on a pathway to educational and career success, with their families and children reaping the benefits, which takes me back to your tag line mentioned above.

Literacy is not a one-time thing. It gives people the means to reach their goals, to build strong families and a strong workforce, and to contribute to the greater community. *It is a lifelong tool which carries forward for generations.*

To tweak your tagline a bit, what is best for our great state, is what is best for our kids *and their parents* who strive to increase their own education and career opportunities, to assimilate to this country, and to engage as productive and invested citizens, all so that their kids will do the same for generations to come.

Thank you for your thoughtful considerations on the critical importance of community-based adult and family literacy as it relates to your 2021-23 State Budget. I look forward to hearing more about your plans for our kids and their parents at the Badger Bounceback listening session on education on the evening of April 8th.

Sincerely,



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