



PA ADULT EDUCATION ADVOCATES WANT \$7M BOOST AS WAIT LISTS GROW



**By Anthony Hennen,
The Center Square**

After dramatic increases in spending on K-12 education, some advocates hope to get a “rounding error” boost for adult education, programs which they say get overlooked.

“It’s an area of education that we don’t necessarily think enough about up here,” Rep. Peter Schwyer, D-Allentown, said during a House Education Committee hearing last month. “This is something that falls through the cracks. We have to start elevating this conversation, so we are able to find additional support.”

Adult education ranges from helping people earn their GED and prepare for college to learning English and gaining a credential.

“What I want to share today is the importance of considering education and workforce development as the same,” Rochelle Cooks, director of workforce solutions at Beyond Literacy in Philadelphia, said. “Adult education sits between K-12 and college initiatives.

It’s an often-overlooked sector — and yet it’s one that trains up our job seekers to make sure they’re able to get family-sustaining wages.”

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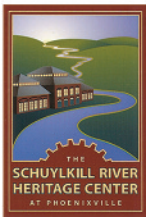
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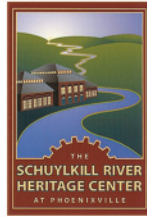
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Cooks argued people don't lack motivation — what's holding them back is their lack of credentials that get in the way. Missing out on occupational training or not having the right tech skills, for example, holds people back.

"Adult learners are vital to the prosperity of Pennsylvania and our economy," she said. "The return on investment when you support adult literacy programs goes into higher employment rates, lower reliance on social services, a more competitive workforce, and an increase in consumer spending power."

Advocates want a \$7 million boost for adult education funding in next year's budget to bring total spending to \$30 million by fiscal year 2026-27.

"It won't take much to expand the capacity of adult education," said Michael Lamb, a board member of Literacy Pittsburgh. "That's not even a rounding error in the Department of Education's budget. With your support, we can make the modest investment and move more working-aged adults into meaningful work while helping our employers fill job openings."

Current programs can't meet demand, Lamb argued. Every month, 400 people

are on Literacy Pittsburgh's waiting list. Other testifiers noted they had more than 1,700 people on a waiting list in Allentown and more than 2,000 in Reading.

In Pittsburgh, the majority of students are immigrants, who are held back from fully contributing to the economy. Other Pennsylvania cities have a high demand for those programs from immigrants, too.

"Over the last five years, the literacy center has tripled the number of students served and typically helps 1,500 students per year," Jen Doyle, CEO of the Literacy Center in Allentown, said. "A large percentage of our ESL students attended college and have work experience from their home countries. With additional ESL classes, more of these adults could return to their professional fields — this would unleash a gold mine of talent and skills for Pennsylvania employers."

Though the potential gains are real, state funding isn't the only issue. Instead, it's making sure people can access classes and programs. "In adult education, reducing barriers is huge," Cooks said.

Those barriers are often practical problems, like having transportation to classes or finding a babysitter to provide childcare.

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