

**Ideas that Work!** to  
achieve school readiness  
and student success from  
Rhode Island KIDS COUNT  
in partnership with the  
Northeast and Islands  
Regional Educational LAB.



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## Adult Literacy

*Adult literacy programs support child learning by helping parents to become more economically self-sufficient and better able to assist in their child's literacy development and overall academic experience.*

### What Works

Children's literacy levels and academic success are strongly linked to the educational level of their parents. Addressing parental literacy is a key component of supporting literacy development in children and preventing an intergenerational cycle of illiteracy and low academic achievement. Children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores, improve their reading skills and are less likely to drop out of school.

### Background

The National Adult Literacy Survey found that over 40 million Americans ages 16 and over have significant literacy needs. More than 20 percent of adults read at or below a fifth grade level. Illiterate and low-literate adults are disproportionately low-income, minority, and non-native speakers of English. As a result of poor educational experiences and cultural barriers, many economically disadvantaged adults have had few literacy-building experiences in childhood.

Research on both adult education and early childhood intervention programs indicate that a parent's level of education is a key factor influencing a

child's reading and school achievement. Students with parents who have higher educational levels score higher on reading tests. A parent's employment status is also closely linked with a child's school success. Children of parents who are unemployed and have not completed high school are five times more likely to drop out of school.

The federal Adult Education and Family Literacy Act of 1998 reflects the dual goals of helping parents to become more economically self-sufficient and better able to help their children be successful in school. The act aims "to assist adults in becoming literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and self-sufficiency," and "to assist parents in obtaining the educational skills necessary to become full partners in their child's education."

Research shows that low-literate parents, especially mothers, are more likely to positively influence their children's academic performance when they are engaged in improving their own basic literacy skills.

### Promising Program

Dorcas Place is a nationally recognized private non-profit adult literacy and learning center that began in 1981. The

"Most of our parents come to Dorcas Place because they want to be able to read to their children and to assist them with their schoolwork. They tell me that by being in school they find themselves serving as role models to their children and partners in a common endeavor studying together, assisting each other, and as a result strengthening their families."

- Brenda Dann-Messier,  
Executive Director,  
Dorcas Place

center offers a range of programs and services, including classroom and one-on-one tutoring, instruction in basic literacy, GED preparation, work readiness skills, life management and parenting skills, and job placement and supportive social services counseling and referrals.

Dorcas Place helps low-income adults realize their potential through literacy, employment, advocacy and community involvement. There is a strong focus on developing the individual while also supporting the family. The center's programs and services are available to all adults, but priority is given to low-income single parents with minor children. Of the 350 students served by Dorcas Place in fiscal year 1999, 91% were women; 74% were racial and ethnic minorities; 74% were single head of households; and 87% were receiving public assistance. More than two-thirds entered the program at or below a sixth-grade reading level. Sixty-five percent of students improved their reading levels by one or more grade equivalents. Children are engaged in their parent's educational success through family-oriented open houses and participating in graduation ceremonies.

In addition to adult education and literacy programs, Dorcas Place offers a variety of support services for parents and children. It is the lead agency for the Elmwood/West End Community Opportunity Zone which serves children from the Alfred Lima and Gilbert Stuart Elementary Schools. The COZ provides family literacy programs, ESL classes, and adult-child computer training as well as parent education and support services. An on-staff social worker at Dorcas Place provides referrals and counseling on finding child care, housing, transportation, legal and public assistance, substance abuse and domestic violence. The center also offers a Teen Moms Leadership Development program that provides parenting education and helps teen moms to gain skills in public speaking and advocacy.

## Lessons from the Field

Dorcas Place estimates that at least 30% of their students have learning disabilities. To effectively serve students with learning disabilities and to address individual learning styles, staff conduct a comprehensive assessment of assets, skills, and needs to help develop an individualized learning plan for each student.

Research shows that family literacy programs that include adult education, parenting classes, and early childhood education are effective in improving both the parent's educational level and the child's reading skills.

## Resources

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