



Nellie Mae  
Education  
Foundation

Opening Doors to Tomorrow

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## **ADULT LITERACY ISSUE BRIEF**

According to “Rising to the Literacy Challenge,” a report by Jobs for the Future commissioned by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, 41 percent of adults in New England do not have the basic skills needed to succeed as workers, citizens and parents in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Adult basic education programs in New England currently serve more than 80,000 adults. This figure represents just 2 percent of New Englanders who need these programs to develop the literacy skills essential for success in today’s knowledge-based society. In Rhode Island, only 8 percent of adults are in these programs.

The Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s Adult Literacy initiative is committed to discovering approaches that help adults obtain the literacy skills they need to create a better life for themselves and their families. We know that adults need more than a GED to succeed today, so one of our strategies is to invest in programs that help GED graduates make the transition into college. The Foundation currently supports 25 programs in collaboration with colleges and universities that prepare more than 1,000 GED graduates throughout New England to make a successful transition to college.

Because adults benefit from participating in their children’s education, and children’s achievement has been linked to parents’ success in adult education, we also support eight family literacy programs that foster intergenerational learning. The New England Literacy Resource Center is a key partner in all of our literacy programs, providing training, technical assistance and program evaluation.

### **Research Based Statistics**

- Earning power rises with educational attainment – the average annual income for high school dropouts is \$18,900; \$25,900 for high school graduates; and \$45,400 for those with a bachelor’s degree (“The Big Payoff” Educational Attainment and Synthetic Estimates of Work-Life Earnings,” projections of 1999 earnings, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, 2002).
- Children’s ability to learn to read in school is related to the support provided by parents before children enter school and during the first three grades (“Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children,” National Research Council, 1998).
- College graduates ages 25-45 are 70% more likely to vote than high school graduates of the same ages, and high school graduates are twice as likely to vote as high school dropouts (“Voting and Registration in the Election of November,” data from 1996 election, U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, 2002).

## **Dorcas Place Offers Innovative Workplace Literacy Program**

by Philippa Mulford

The first thing you notice about the green and white, single story building on Elmwood at the intersection of Peace and Plenty Streets in Providence is the welcoming atmosphere. People smile and ask if they can help. Staff and students at Dorcas Place seem genuinely glad a stranger has dropped by.

The second thing you notice is how busy Dorcas Place is. The classrooms are filled with men and women learning to read and write English well, and master geometry and algebra in order to pass the GED (General Equivalency Diploma) exam. Other adults study independently, some with tutors in the Learning Resource Center, which receives grant support from the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, and is open during day, evening and weekend hours to accommodate individual work schedules. At the far end of the building, staff in the Clothing Collaborative, which provides business attire to Dorcas Place graduates and community members at no charge, help people choose outfits to wear to work.

On a recent Monday, the auditorium is packed with students and teachers as U.S. Senator Jack Reed is awarded the Dorcas Place Government Service Award. Student Carleen Ferland speaks immediately after the Senator. “Thank you, Senator Reed, for helping Dorcas Place help me,” she says. “In 1971, I graduated from high school. I left with a diploma, but no education. I could not read or write. I got a job, but because I could not read or write, I got fired. I finally found my way to Dorcas Place.” Ferland began as an Adult Basic Education (ABE) student at Dorcas Place two years ago. She aspires to enroll in the Bridge to College program, also supported by the Foundation, in conjunction with the Community College of Rhode Island. Eventually, she plans to go to the University of Rhode Island to earn a B.A.

Talk to any of the more than 600 students annually who take ABE, Bridge to Work or Bridge to College classes at Dorcas Place and you will hear similar stories about graduating from high school unable to read, or dropping out, or being an immigrant struggling to learn English and find decent employment to earn enough to support a family. Regardless of the individual circumstances, all Dorcas Place students, 95% of whom have family incomes below the poverty level, dream of having a better life for themselves and their children. To most, a college education seemed unattainable...until they found their way to Dorcas Place.

“When I first came here, I was very nervous, but they made me feel at home,” Katherine Pichardo says. She enrolled in the Adult Basic Education program last April and is also in the Workplace Literacy program, which is part of the continuum of education at Dorcas Place – from ABE classes to the Bridge to College program in conjunction with the Community College of Rhode Island. Silja Kallenbach of the New England Literacy Resource Center, which acts as the Nellie Mae Education Foundation’s intermediary, managing 25 ABE to College Transition programs and eight adult and family literacy program throughout New England, calls the Workplace Literacy program innovative because it infuses adult education with workplace readiness.

“It’s uncommon for an ABE program to have an integrated workplace readiness program,” Kallenbach says. “The adult education field must go in this direction to meet students’ needs.” She credits Dr. Brenda Dann-Messier, Dorcas Place President, for understanding what low-income, very low literacy level students need, as well as finding the funds to hire Robin Adams, who designed and piloted the Workplace Literacy program now in its second year.

The program provides students with a simulated workplace that resembles an office rather than a classroom. Students are given assignments and deadlines they must meet to satisfy their “employer,” in this case their teacher, Joan Anthony. On this particular day, the class is working on an assignment to develop a new product named Nice & Easy. In addition to developing the product, the students have created a marketing plan that includes designing badges to wear to classes the week before the formal product launch and demonstration during a student assembly. Pichardo is one of six women in the class.

She says she dropped out of school in her senior year because she got pregnant. She and her husband are parents to a three-year old and a two-year old. After six months in ABE classes and the Workplace Literacy program, Pichardo feels she is ready to take the GED exam next month. Dorcas Place requires all students to develop an education plan, so she has thought through not only what she wants, but how to get it.

“After I get my GED, I plan to enroll in the Bridge to College program,” she says. “Then I plan to transfer to Johnson and Wales University where I want to get a business degree. I’ll get a second shift job in a retail store. My husband will take care of the kids at night. He has his own business and also works for a rental car agency. I would tell anyone in my position that having kids is not a problem. You can get them into child care and go to school.” Dorcas Place provides support services for its students including child care through the YMCA.

Claris Page, a single parent of six, is also in the Workplace Literacy program. She echoes many Dorcas Place students when she says, “I think my going back to school encourages my kids to stay in school. Dropping out throws you back. It makes living hard. All my children take school more seriously because of what I’m doing. I am setting an example—getting up early and hurrying to get to school on time.” She smiles shyly, adding, “I hope they’re proud of me.”

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