

Time for Maryland to make adult education a priority

By Jason Perkins-Cohen

March 21, 2005

JOHNNY CAN'T READ. Neither can his parents, and if they are in school trying to learn to read, government is about to tell them to go home and not bother.

One in five adult Marylanders reads at less than a fourth-grade level. This means they can't understand simple directions or locate an intersection on a map. Another 25 percent of the state's adults read below eighth-grade level. This means they are not yet able to prepare for General Educational Development or help their children learn to read.

Taken together, about 45 percent of adults in the state read at the eighth-grade level or below. Without opportunities to upgrade their level of education, these individuals are doomed to a lifetime of low-wage jobs, and businesses will be unable to find Marylanders to fill their high-skilled jobs.

Perhaps the only thing more shocking than the state of adult education is our government's response. President Bush's budget calls for a 73.6 percent cut in federal funding for adult education in Maryland. Since the vast majority of adult education funding in Maryland comes from the federal government (88 percent in 2002), this severe budget cut will be devastating to current and future students. If enacted, 18,000 students in our state - nearly half of those currently enrolled in adult education - will be denied the opportunity to continue their education.

With the federal government sending a clear signal that it intends to pull out of adult education, the time is now for Maryland to step up and invest in its future. Maryland spends merely \$2.3 million on adult education, about \$60 per student. Massachusetts contributes more than \$1,000 per student. In other words, though Maryland is a wealthier state than Massachusetts, we spend merely 6 percent of what Massachusetts spends on each adult student.

Adults in Maryland want more education. Currently, 36,000 adults are enrolled in an adult education program. Thousands more are on lists waiting for their opportunity to go back to school. Maybe they know what our government seems to have forgotten - that an investment in adult education pays big dividends both to the individual and to the economy. Obtain a high school diploma or its equivalent and you can expect to double your lifetime earnings. Acquire an advanced degree and you can expect to quadruple your lifetime earnings.

Businesses consistently express concern that they are unable to find the skilled workers they need to remain competitive. Current projections suggest this will only get worse. As more baby boomers retire and leave the work force, businesses will not have enough skilled workers to meet demand unless we start to invest in educating and training our adults.

A bill has been introduced in the Maryland legislature that would increase funding for adult education by \$1.5 million. It would not fix the problem, but it would allow about 5,000 adults to stay in school. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. should actively support this legislation and keep these adults in school. His leadership is needed to develop a long-term plan that consistently invests in adults and their future as well as Maryland's.

No one admits to being opposed to adult education. It is always a matter of priorities. But with nearly 50 percent of our adults reading at an eighth-grade level or below and a business community starving for skilled workers, funding for adult education needs to move to the top of the class.

Jason Perkins-Cohen is executive director of the Job Opportunities Task Force, based in Baltimore.

Columnist Steve Chapman will return Wednesday.

Copyright © 2005, The Baltimore Sun