

Report exposes state's education gap

A new study shows that while Maryland has the nation's second-highest percentage of college-educated adults, 16 percent of residents lack a high school diploma.

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Yvonne Butler has seen high school dropouts weathered by Baltimore's drug corners progress from being illiterate to joining book clubs, graduating from college and working decent jobs.

Yet for every successful student who completes her GED preparation classes at the Learning Bank in West Baltimore, there are hundreds waiting to get in the door.

The Learning Bank's waiting list is 700 names long - about as many students as the nonprofit organization teaches in a year. Students wait up to three months to start courses, double the waiting time from two years ago.

"It's always a downer when we don't have enough funds for more teachers and tutors," said Butler, who has taught adult-education classes for six years. "A lot of times we have to tell students, 'We don't have the tutor to help you with this.' Teachers end up doing double and triple duty."

Funding cuts and high dropout rates have crippled adult-education programs statewide, leaving them with more people in need and less money to help them.

Maryland spends less on adult education than half the states in the nation, and it ranks 46th nationwide in unemployed adults who receive work-force training, according to a new study, "Working Hard, Falling Short: America's Working Families and the Pursuit of Economic Security."

Although the state boasts the second-highest percentage of adult residents with a college education, 16 percent of residents lack a high school diploma, said the report, part of an initiative by the Annie E. Casey, Ford and Rockefeller foundations focusing on 15 states, including Maryland.

Beneath the often-cited rankings placing Maryland among the nation's wealthiest and most highly educated states is a widening gap between the high school dropouts and the Ph.Ds. Meanwhile, a growing immigrant population is changing the state's work force and placing an increasing demand on English as a Second Language programs.

The result: waiting lists for basic skills programs and tens of thousands of high school dropouts who are not getting the training they need to lift themselves out of poverty.

"We do well by many measures," said Deborah Povich, executive director of the Baltimore-based Job Opportunities Task Force, which advocates for training for low-income workers. "But what these numbers also do is hide some of the poverty problems and the problems of low education."

The state has consistently underfunded adult-education programs in favor of programs that invest in high-skill jobs, Povich said.

While Maryland receives high marks on the quality of its adult education from federal agencies, it simply doesn't have enough to go around, said Katharine Oliver, assistant state schools superintendent for career, technology and adult learning.

Maryland relies on federal money to serve adult learners, spending \$18.45 in state funds per adult without a high school diploma, according to the Casey Foundation study. But Connecticut, which competes with Maryland for the title of wealthiest state in annual rankings, spends \$136.57 per adult.

As a result, Oliver said, Maryland's adult-education programs serve only 5 percent of the state's 613,000 residents in need of a high school diploma. About 4,500 people are on waiting lists statewide for adult education, an increasing number of them young adults 15- to 24-years-old.

It's not just basic skills courses and General Educational Development preparation. English as a Second Language courses also are in short supply. The courses can be crucial for new immigrants striving for better jobs.

"There are people who can't read in their own language, who have a real difficult time moving out of the entry-level jobs," said Meintje Westerbeek, associate director of ESL and special programs at Baltimore City Community College.

The State Department of Education recently formed a task force to study the problem. Meanwhile, some employers are responding by offering or expanding on-the-job training programs, but advocates say businesses could do more.

A decade ago, Johns Hopkins Health Systems invested in a program with a grant from the State Department of Education, and a handful of administrators kept it going on a small budget. The state recently awarded Hopkins \$3 million to expand the program, said

Deborah Knight-Kerr, director of community and education projects at Johns Hopkins Hospital.

The program offers basic skills training, GED classes, ESL courses and skills training for low-wage workers such as housekeeping staff. There is also a nurse training component, where workers are paid for full-time work, but attend school part time.

Knight-Kerr credits the courses with cutting the staff turnover rate in half. The program's success convinced skeptics that it helps employees as much as it improves the bottom line, she said. "The high retention rate said more than anything else to our president," she said.

The value of adult-education programs is immeasurable, said Tomeka Clifton, a student in Butler's literature class at the Learning Bank, which is an arm of the community group Communities Organized to Improve Life Inc.

"The teachers stay on you and tell it like it is because they really care," said Clifton, 27, who has attended two GED preparation programs since dropping out of the ninth grade, but has not yet earned a diploma.

When Butler told her she had a gift as a writer, Clifton didn't believe it initially but has since started working to improve her grammar.

"I never thought I could express myself in writing. I figured it would sound kind of stupid," she said. "But now I know more about myself. And in order to keep it up, I know I need to apply myself."

In this hardscrabble West Baltimore neighborhood, education can mean the difference between life and death, said Learning Bank Director Dolores Bramer.

"These are people who have gotten derailed at some point, and are starting over, but they are the lucky ones because they are alive," she said. "They made a choice to come here and learn, while there are others out there who are shot dead on the streets."

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