



Strategic Plan

November 2005-2008

About D.C. LEARNs

Our Mission:

To lead an active coalition of Washington, DC literacy programs, learners and supporters, and work with them to strengthen literacy services and present a strong unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community.

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Introduction

D.C. LEARNs is a 501(c)(3) organization, whose membership includes more than 60 organizations providing literacy instruction to over 34,000 children, youth, and adults in Washington, D.C. Most of these organizations are community-based nonprofits. The coalition's membership also includes individual, ancillary, and corporate members.

D.C. LEARNs is modeled after successful literacy coalitions operating in many other cities and states. As a coalition, D.C. LEARNs does not provide direct literacy instruction, but rather engages in supporting and strengthening the work of the organizations that provide literacy services. Because we represent a broad cross-section of literacy providers and supporters, we are positioned to efficiently gather and disseminate citywide information on literacy services, help residents locate programs that will meet their needs, identify volunteer opportunities, and work collaboratively with our members to improve the quality of literacy services across the city. For policymakers and funders, we are able to provide comprehensive information on the city's literacy activities and needs.

While we offer specific member benefits to our organizational members, we strive to support the efforts of all literacy providers in the District and improve literacy services for all D.C. residents.

As of October 2005, the coalition is governed by a nine-person Board of Directors and employs four full-time staff members plus a steady rotation of interns and Ameri*Corps VISTA members.

Our History

The name D.C. LEARNs was originally adopted in 1995 by a group of adult literacy providers convened by Dr. Cynthia Bell, then-Director of the District of Columbia Public Schools Office of Adult and Vocational Education, in anticipation of—and then reaction to—drastic budget cuts made to adult literacy in the District at that time.

In May of 1996, D.C. LEARNs was incorporated as a non-profit organization, and joined the National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions (now known as Literacy USA), a newly formed umbrella organization for urban literacy coalitions. Charter members of D.C. LEARNs included the Academy of Hope; the D.C. Public Library's ABE Office; Literacy Volunteers of the National Capital Area; Metropolitan/ Delta Adult Literacy Council; Notre Dame Adult Education Center; PLAN (Push Literacy Action Now); the Private Industry Council of DC; Sacred Heart Adult Education Center; the SED Center; and the Washington Literacy Council. This group was the first to propose the development of a true system for adult education services in the District.

Despite the original focus on the issues of adult education, the vision and service population of D.C. LEARNs soon expanded to include programs providing literacy services to children, youth, and families.

The D.C. Public Library, which had—and continues to have—a strong commitment to the development of programs and structures that support literacy in the District, was able to host D.C. LEARNs during its first seven years. In June of 2003, D.C. LEARNs moved to separate quarters and hired its first executive director. In 2004, Jeff Carter became D.C. LEARNs first full-time executive director. Prior to his appointment, Mr. Carter spent six years as a member of the Literacy Division of World Education in Boston, managing projects that were designed to help strengthen the capacity and improve the quality of literacy and adult basic education programs in the United States.

The Current Literacy Landscape

There are more than a hundred programs—both large and small—here in the District working to help our children, youth, and adults improve their literacy skills. However, most of these programs are small community-based organizations with limited means. While government support has increased, most literacy programs in the city are not government-funded. As a result, their successes often go unnoticed due to a lack of visibility, and efforts to improve the quality of their services often suffer from a lack of resources.

Over the last several years Washington, D.C. has experienced impressive economic growth. Unfortunately, many D.C. citizens continue to lack the basic skills they need to take advantage of this robust economy. While it's difficult to determine the precise number of citizens in the District who lack sufficient literacy skills, researchers estimate that 37% of adults in the District lack the reading, math, and problem-solving skills that most Americans would likely consider necessary to be considered functionally literate. These individuals are far less likely than their more literate peers to be employed full-time, to earn high wages, and to vote. Moreover, many are not able to access the information they need to protect their health, safety or legal rights. And far too many are unable to read to their children.

The city has recently responded by increasing support for adult literacy and school preparedness. Efforts to establish and enforce uniform data collection and program quality standards for government-funded adult literacy programs are underway. A new D.C. public school superintendent, hired in 2004, has identified literacy as a priority. While these efforts are important, we believe that lasting change hinges on the active participation of our coalition members, who make up the largest concentration of literacy expertise and experience in the city.

Overarching Principles

In light of the current realities, and in response to feedback from our members and literacy supporters throughout the city, the Board of Directors and staff of D.C. LEARNs have clarified our mission and vision and adopted a new three-year strategic plan.

Our new goals and activities are guided by the following overarching principles:

- D.C. LEARNs is committed to supporting Washington D.C. organizations and communities build and sustain high quality and effective literacy services, as defined by the best and most current research and practice in the field.
- We believe our work must promote and support an identifiable, integrated *system* of literacy services in the District, not just for adults, but for adults, children, youth, and families as well. In our view, such an integrated system is characterized by:
 - Strategic linkages and coordination among literacy providers and related services at all levels;
 - The adoption of accepted and recognized standards of program quality;
 - Strategically coordinated allocation of resources from both the public and private sector;
 - Sufficient resources to support professional careers in the literacy field (including competitive compensation, benefits, and opportunities for professional growth);
 - Ongoing and high-quality professional development for all instructors at all levels;

- Well-funded, comprehensive, and broadly accessible services for children, youth, and adults at all levels of literacy, with multiple points of entry and mechanisms for smooth transitions between components.
- This system should be respectful of, and responsive to, the actual stated needs of those requesting literacy services.
- Although it was adult literacy providers who originally founded the coalition, D.C. LEARNs must now equally commit to strengthening child, youth, and family literacy programs. One of the unique strengths of our coalition is the inclusion and participation of literacy organizations that serve all levels, from pre-school to adult literacy.
- Wherever possible, our activities should encourage and support strong, participatory roles for learners. In particular, we support the growth of adult learner leadership in adult literacy programs and in citywide policy decision-making.

Our Core Values

Our goals and activities are also guided by our core values:

Honesty: D.C. LEARNs will tell the truth and never intentionally mislead. We will not say we know or have answers when we do not; we will be open to learning. We will openly share information whenever possible.

Diversity: D.C. LEARNs will strive to promote inclusive learning environments where differences are valued and treated with respect and dignity. Our own practices, policies, and hiring will be designed to support and retain a diverse staff.

Resourcefulness: D.C. LEARNs will be wise stewards of our resources, carefully managing our finances to ensure that there are adequate resources to accomplish our mission, and creatively managing our time to ensure that we best serve the needs of our members. We will encourage, recognize, and reward resourcefulness in our employees.

Integrity: D.C. LEARNs will act with integrity by emphasizing transparency and mutual accountability in all our activities.

Participation: D.C. LEARNs will seek the guidance and participation of our members, board, staff, and the greater literacy community in all of our activities.

Collegiality: DC LEARNs staff and board members will respond to requests for information or assistance from our members, the general public, and each other with courtesy. Congeniality while working with our members and each other will be a goal for all employees and board members.

Trust: In all of its activities, DC LEARNs works to earn and maintain the confidence of its members.

Respect: D.C. LEARNs values the inherent potential and dignity of individuals by encouraging growth and opportunity.

Our Revised Vision and Mission Statements

Vision:

Washington, D.C. will become a city where effective and innovative literacy services are available to all, guided by the leadership of the literacy providers themselves, and supported by a community that is committed to the education of all its citizens.

Mission:

To lead an active coalition of Washington D.C. literacy programs, learners, and supporters, and work with them to strengthen adult, family, and children's literacy services and present a strong, unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community.

Our Revised Goals and Objectives

In support of our mission, the Coalition will pursue the following strategic goals and objectives over the next three years:

GOAL 1: Become a leading source for adult, child, and family literacy information, statistics, research, and professional development opportunities in Washington, D.C.

Objectives:

- Support and maintain a detailed, up-to-date, publicly accessible database of all known D.C. area adult, child, and family literacy services and resources.
- Publish at least three reports annually on local and federal policies and statistics related to adult, child, and family literacy.
- Expand our research capacity and build linkages to other related social and educational policy research through one or more strategic partnerships.

GOAL 2: Promote adult, child, and family literacy to D.C. policymakers as a core vehicle for economic improvement, health, and wellbeing for individuals, families, and neighborhoods.

Objectives:

- Deliver relevant and reliable adult, child, and family literacy policy analysis to our members, (via our Web site and via a minimum of six quarterly policy briefs annually), that support local adult, child, and family literacy advocacy efforts.
- Develop the capacity of D.C. LEARNs members to advocate for sound adult, child, and family literacy policy in the District of Columbia by holding two literacy policy advocate training institutes annually for members of the literacy community.
- Establish and maintain a public policy committee, consisting of at least three members each from the literacy service provider community, related community-based organizations, the business community, and the philanthropic sector.
- Advise the coalition on at least six key public policy issues of concern to adult, child, and family literacy stakeholders in the District annually.
- Facilitate the development of consensus recommendations by the policy committee on the issues above, and consult regularly with public policymakers on committee recommendations.

GOAL 3: Promote or pilot professional development and/or technical assistance that address unmet needs and that promotes and builds on the best practices of our members.

Objectives:

- Identify outstanding teaching practices among our coalition members, and promote and advance these practices to the greater D.C. literacy community at four quarterly member meetings per year and via a quarterly professional journal, *The Knowledge Builder*.
- Identify training and technical assistance gaps, and promote or pilot at least one new professional development and/or technical assistance program to address those gaps annually.
- Develop and implement an annual training institute to assist new and emerging programs, (particularly those outside of government funding streams), to meet the program quality standards and data collection standards established by the government for funded programs.
- Design and deliver an annual training and technical assistance institute on how to use data for program improvement.

GOAL 4: Identify, support, and pilot efforts to address gaps in literacy services, and increase coordination between literacy programs and related issues and services.

Objectives:

- Identify geographical areas in the city (especially in Wards 7 and 8) where there are significant gaps in adult, child, and family literacy services in relation to demand, and support or pilot at least one initiative to address those gaps annually.
- Identify specific content areas (such as learning disabilities or family literacy) or potential linkages (such as workforce development or health) where there are significant gaps in programming, and support or pilot at least one initiative to address those gaps annually.
- Convene and support special interest groups (at least four annually) consisting of adult, child, and family literacy practitioners and representatives from related fields (such as workforce development, housing, homelessness, and public health) to develop a collaborative proposal that addresses the relationship between literacy and each of these issues.

GOAL 5: Strengthen the visibility of D.C. LEARNs and its role in the community through initiatives that also raise public awareness of and community involvement in all D.C. adult, child, and family literacy programs.

Objectives:

- Beginning with our 10th anniversary year in 2006, develop an ongoing public awareness initiative that promotes D.C. LEARNs' activities as well as member successes.
- Develop and implement a plan for board members to increase the visible presence of D.C. LEARNs in Washington D.C. communities by the first quarter of 2006.
- Develop and implement a strategic communications plan, (by the first quarter of 2006), that includes developing media contacts and creating a systemic approach to disseminating information about our activities to constituents, members, funders, and the general public.

GOAL 6: Recruit and retain a diverse staff and board that reflect the cultural and ethnic make-up of Washington, D.C.

Objective:

- Draft and implement, (by the end of 2005), board, staff, and volunteer recruitment plans aimed at recruiting more diverse candidates for these positions, especially those from neighborhoods of Washington that are unrepresented on the staff and board.

GOAL 7: Ensure the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the coalition.

Objectives:

- Maintain an organizational membership of at least 75% of all D.C. literacy programs.
- Register at least 100 new personal memberships.
- Register at least 20 new ancillary and corporate members.
- Hold at least four membership meetings per year.
- Develop and disseminate an agreed-upon list of mutual expectations between members, board, and staff of the coalition.
- Increase the use of our electronic communication tools (Web site, e-mails lists) for active communication between coalition members and staff by at least 50%.
- Establish (by the end of 2005) and maintain an advisory group (that meets at least quarterly) from our membership to provide staff with feedback on both existing operations and new initiatives.
- Develop and implement an annual fundraising plan.
- Develop and implement an annual board development plan that includes provisions for professional development and board self-evaluation.