

**IS SUGAR TOXIC?**  
 Presenter: JENNIFER FLOM, DO  
 FREE PROGRAM  
 CLICK TO REGISTER

Opinion

Home / Timeschronicle / Opinion

[http://www.montgomerynews.com/timeschronicle/opinion/george-nation-needs-to-support-critical-literacy-programs/article\\_48f2545b-ee95-528f-9e5f-73b6c23c5701.html](http://www.montgomerynews.com/timeschronicle/opinion/george-nation-needs-to-support-critical-literacy-programs/article_48f2545b-ee95-528f-9e5f-73b6c23c5701.html)

**GEORGE: Nation needs to support critical literacy programs**

By Linda George Oct 10, 2018

“Speak English!” a fellow customer implored my student, a woman from Costa Rica, while she conversed with her sister in a supermarket line. This scene, epitomizing the “you don’t belong in America” sentiment, typifies the rising pressure on immigrants to communicate in English — all while funding for programs that teach English disappears.

Three years ago, I began volunteering at the Adult Literacy Program at the Abington Free Library (ALPAFL). The program aims to help adults — some from all over the world — improve their literacy and academic skills so they can provide for their families and become fully integrated into our community. My director paired me with a delightful, ambitious middle-aged woman with a sixth-grade education who mostly spoke Spanish.

I also teach an English as a Second Language (ESL) class at ALPAFL, where attendees improve their English while learning about U.S. culture. A sampling of students includes a young mother from South Korea, who wants to read to her children; a grandmother from India, who wants to fill out medical forms without relying on her physician son; and a Romanian woman with a huge smile, who simply wants to communicate with the people she meets every day, such as her mail carrier, dog’s veterinarian and neighbors.

As students in my ESL class introduce themselves to each other, I roll out a worn world map on a broken easel to show them the location of their country of origin. From the front of our tiny classroom in the library’s basement, I note their rapt attention as they take notes and eagerly raise hands to ask questions — qualities most teachers would envy in any classroom. Despite its huge success, this program’s minimal public funding for a part-time director, books and supplies will soon run dry.

“Most of the program’s students, both English-speaking and speakers of other languages, enroll to get a better job,” comments ALPAFL Director Elizabeth Sperling. She cites examples: the certified nurse assistant from Jamaica, who struggles to read her patient’s prescriptions labels but aspires to become a licensed practical nurse, or the man from Honduras, who busses tables for \$25 a day but wants to upgrade to a server. “How are they supposed to acclimate to the United States and contribute to their communities if we cut off the avenues to help them do so?” asks Sperling, ALPAFL’s director.

Despite eight years of meager funding, Sperling has managed to host well-attended adult literacy programs — one the few existing in Montgomery County, the third most populous

largest county in Pennsylvania. She also supervises more than 80 tutors who, like me, she pairs with adults in need of help — those who struggle with poor reading, writing and academic skills, as well as foreign students. Last year, more than 165 adults, many overcoming formidable challenges, came to this library to learn what most U.S. students learn in first grade.

The last government study on adult literacy levels in the U.S. dates to 2003, during President George W. Bush's term, when approximately 42,000 of Montgomery County's 600,000 residents could not read restaurant menus, a parking ticket or even their child's report card. Then President Bush wanted to expand the nation's literacy rates, so he directed federal funding for community literacy programs. ALPAFL, like many of those programs, adopted the most cost-effective model possible — training volunteer tutors and parsimoniously reusing textbooks — to help adults improve their literacy skills.

While ALPAFL has consistently helped individuals improve their skills and seen its students achieve impressive personal and employment goals from their participation in the programs, overall the need for adult literacy increases. But instead of supporting this inexpensive yet proven model, both state and federal funding has been cut since 2011.

According to a study conducted in April 2017 by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, 32 million adults in the U.S. cannot read — 14 percent of the population. The Department of Justice states, "The link between academic failure and delinquency, violence and crime is welded to reading failure." When inmates who left school before receiving a high school diploma were asked the main reason they dropped out of school, about one-third reported they lost interest or experienced academic difficulty. More than 80 percent of inmates are high school dropouts.

Illiterate people have mastered the art of deception, claiming that they cannot read the restaurant menu, for example, because they "forgot their reading glasses."

Children whose parents have low literacy levels repeat the cycle, having a 72 percent chance of getting poor grades, displaying behavioral problems, having high absentee rates, repeating school years or dropping out, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research. Yet, despite all this information, our current administration is recommending a \$9.2 billion, or 13.5 percent, cut in funding for the U.S. Department of Education for 2018. Government cuts hit literacy programs, such as ALPAFL, hard since private funding for adult education is insufficient to support even those modest programs.

During the week of Sept. 23, our country's calendar highlighted National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week. Yet without stable funding, programs, such as ALPAFL, that offer life-enhancing skills now face extinction, with some resorting to crowd funding for their survival. Unless we, as a society, pay more than lip service to promote literacy, more Americans will continue to struggle to "speak English."

*Linda George is an Elkins Park resident.*