

A Brief History of Urban Adult Literacy Networks

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Background: The following text is adapted from “What We Can Do to Generate Supports and Supporters for Community-Oriented AFE.” This is Book 5 in the *In Community, Strength: Changing Our Minds about U.S. Adult Foundational Education* resource book series by Paul Jurmo, October 28, 2023, <https://pauljurmo.info/writings%3A-us%2C-2019-2023> .

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By the mid- to later 1980s, a number of U.S. cities had established (a) an adult literacy resource center (e.g., New York City’s Literacy Assistance Center, Boston’s Adult Literacy Resource Institute) and/or (b) an urban AFE coalition or initiative (e.g., the Philadelphia Mayor’s Commission on Literacy, Houston READS, the Boston Adult Literacy Initiative). These entities typically provided some mix of public awareness, recruitment, professional development, advocacy, and other supports for local AFE programs and adult learners. Many began as initiatives of their mayor’s office.

Urban Literacy Network: In 1985, a group of AFE activists from major U.S. cities – many representing the above resource centers and coalitions -- created the Urban Literacy Network which served as a national, independent advocacy coalition for urban-based adult literacy efforts. It “represented grassroots and other local literacy efforts at national forums,” “provided a mechanism for learners, providers, and policy makers to . . . learn from each other and define problems which needed attention,” “provided federal legislative and funding information to people in the field who lack the resources to monitor these activities,” “provided information, training, technical assistance and support to urban and state collaborative efforts and local programs representing diverse voices,” and “created a national network of programs and practitioners with shared values” (Literacy Network, November 6, 1991, p.1).

With financing from the federal ACTION agency, the Gannett Foundation, Dayton Hudson Corporation, and B. Dalton Bookseller (with the Minneapolis Foundation as fiscal agent), it created an Urban Literacy Fund to support networking, advocacy, and a grants program. Grants of up to \$40,000 were provided to urban coalitions of literacy programs and community organizations to plan locally-relevant literacy initiatives. The Urban Literacy Network eventually broadened its focus to include state and national coalitions and was renamed “The Literacy Network,” with a tag line of “Supporting Collaborative

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Efforts for Literacy” (Business Council for Effective Literacy, October 1987b & July 1989).²

Its three-day 1989 National Forum on Literacy Collaboration and Policy Issues was organized around three themes: “Seeking Common Ground,” “Collaboration: Why, Who, What, Where and When,” and “Getting Results: Collaboration, Policy, and Advocacy.” One Issue Group presented recommendations related to the “Roles of Adult Learner Leaders.” Participants included representatives of government agencies (including U.S. Senator Paul Simon and Representative Thomas Sawyer), state and community-based adult education providers, and private sector funders. Learners and staff from Bronx Educational Services presented an evening theater performance (Literacy Network, June 15-17, 1989).

As it neared its end in the early 1990s, the Literacy Network provided moral support, travel funds, and seed funding for learner leadership efforts which included creation of the national adult learner organization, VALUE, described below under “Example 5: Learner Leadership Development.”

PLUS Task Forces: The PLUS Campaign of the ABC and PBS television networks (described above under “Example 2: Employer Support for Workplace AFE”) also encouraged AFE organizations to form AFE coalitions at city and state levels. These “PLUS Task Forces” were to plan and coordinate how the city’s or state’s AFE providers would respond to the anticipated increase in learners, volunteers, supporters, and resources that would be generated by the planned series of public service messages, news coverage, and other awareness-raising activities that ABC, PBS, and other PLUS partners (e.g., American Newspaper Publishers Association, American Society of Newspaper Editors, Magazine Publishers Association, etc.) would generate (Project Literacy U.S., 1987).

Many of the members of the Urban Literacy Network were also active participants in the PLUS Campaign at local and national levels. Among other things, they were among the stronger voices who raised concerns about (a) sometimes-misleading messages being sent out by the media and other channels about the source of and solutions for “adult illiteracy” and (b) being overwhelmed by the increased demand for AFE services that was resulting from the media coverage. (These AFE programs felt they were now expected to respond to significant requests for services without having substantially more capacity to do so.)

National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions: By the early 1990s, both the PLUS Campaign and the Urban Literacy Network (which had been renamed the Literacy Network) had closed down. By the mid-1990s, a new organization called the National Alliance of Urban Literacy Coalitions (NAULC) had emerged, composed of many of the urban initiatives that had participated in the Urban Literacy Network and/or PLUS Task Forces. NAULC continued for about twenty years with technical support from Literacy Powerline, a consulting organization based in Houston. NAULC provided training and technical

² Correspondence with Jean Hammink, December 2020.

assistance to support urban AFE coalitions around the country. It produced guidebooks, reports, mailing lists, and other resources that could be adapted for similar efforts today. Among other sources, support for NAULC came from the National Institute for Literacy, which provided funding for a “Community Literacy Initiative” led by NAULC (Doughty & Hart, June 2005). Other major support came from AmeriCorps, which provided volunteers who worked in programs operated by NAULC members. In the early 2000s, NAULC changed its name to Literacy USA because it had begun to serve not just “urban” coalitions but statewide and rural coalitions, as well, and wanted to remove “urban” from its name.

Urban AFE Networks, 2022-2023: In June 2022, a small group of AFE professionals with experience in urban AFE began working with representatives of AFE networks in a dozen U.S. cities to create a new version of a national network of urban AFE coalitions. As of this writing in October 2023, they had created a fledgling (though unfunded) group whose name (“Urban Collaborations for Adult Foundational Education”, aka “Urban CAFÉ”) was being revised. It was to serve as a forum for communication and collaboration among representatives of AFE networks in U.S. cities and counties. A small all-volunteer steering committee discussed how this new national network might host a website (<https://www.urbanallianceforadulthoodliteracy.org/home>), occasional on-line meetings, and an asynchronous on-line discussion group to facilitate communication and collaboration among urban AFE representatives. The steering committee was also seeking technical support from a national AFE organization.

Lessons learned in these urban AFE coalitions: For four decades, representatives of urban-based AFE organizations have seen a value in communicating and collaborating across cities to build their capacities to better serve their communities. They have produced some significant results and left behind models, documents, and other resources that others might adapt for urban AFE efforts and other purposes. A common theme of these efforts has been “community.” These efforts have also shown that, to be successful, a number of ingredients are necessary, including funding, staffing, a vision and corresponding strategies, expertise in both AFE service delivery and organizational development, and leadership able to lead a collaborative effort.

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