



Chair Kunze, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee: I am Bonnie Entler, Executive Director of Seeds of Literacy. Seeds is an award-winning adult literacy program in Cleveland, and is the only nationally accredited literacy program in the state.

Today, I am honored to be here on behalf of over 900 adult students and 225 volunteer tutors of Seeds of Literacy. My testimony stems, in part, from Seeds' loss of State funding this current fiscal year. The State will only fund traditional classroom-style programs, but Seeds uses a one-to-one instructional model. My testimony will provide comment on the current version of Sub House Bill 166 and those provisions specifically related to funding for adult education programs. It will show the dangerous rates of adult illiteracy in Northeast Ohio, particularly for communities of color and those living in poverty; establish Seeds' successful method serving underserved populations who have great economic potential; and show impact a Seeds education can have that crosses generations.

Third-World Illiteracy Rates Right Here in Ohio

On May 3, 2019, Governor DeWine told the annual meeting of Team NEO, "You know that 40% of the economy of the state comes from Northeast Ohio. So how Northeast Ohio goes, so goes Ohio."

Cuyahoga County, the largest in Northeast Ohio, has a 42% adult illiteracy rate. Cleveland, the largest metropolitan area in Northeast Ohio, has a 66% adult illiteracy rate. And in some Cleveland neighborhoods, adult illiteracy rates are as high as 93%. That is higher than the illiteracy rate of Afghanistan, the poorest nation in the world, whose illiteracy rate is 69%.

These statistics are almost unimaginable – it is difficult to imagine places in Ohio where parents cannot help their children with multiplication tables. Where job seekers cannot pass employer tests written at an 8th grade level. And where grandmothers cannot understand directions on a bottle of cough syrup.

Seeds reaches those in Greatest Need – who have the Greatest Potential

Seeds offers free, one-to-one instruction in basic education and high school equivalency (HSE) prep to adults. We provide more registrations and class sessions than any other program, and are open year-round. Frequency, flexibility, and individual instruction are key to reaching those adult students most in need of education. Last year:

84% of Seeds students lived at or below the federal poverty line, versus 46% of students enrolled in ASPIRE programs in Cuyahoga County.

70% of Seeds students were African-American, 17% were White, and 11% were Latino.

76% were between the ages of 24 and 59, and 50% of Seeds students had dependent children.

Seeds students came from 57 different zip codes, attending classes at two Seeds locations.

You may be surprised by the incoming educational levels that we see every day at Seeds: 67% of new students entered reading below a 9th grade level. 93% had math skills below a 9th grade level, and 66% lacked any computer skills when they started classes at Seeds.

The Award-Winning Difference

Seeds reaches those adults left behind – sometimes twice – by traditional classrooms: as a child who did not finish junior high or high school, and as an adult who did not complete traditional GED® or basic education classes.

Seeds' model is based on educational research showing that one-to-one instruction is the most effective teaching method for non-traditional students. We follow National Common Core State Standards and GED Benchmarks in our curricula, and teach the computer skills most requested by employers with a national standards-based certification.

Seeds' uniqueness lies in our one-to-one tutoring method, which allows students to work at their own pace and level, personally assisted by volunteer tutors. All students take the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to benchmark both math and reading levels, a holistic approach that no other provider offers. Staff create an individual education plan for each student based on TABE results, then match

student needs with tutor abilities. Staff provide and monitor curricula, track student progress, and adjust methods and curricula to ensure skill mastery. Students are reassessed every 60 days to ensure we are tracking their progress effectively.

Seeds Succeeds Where Others Fail

One-to-one instruction works for our students, and Seeds is the only remaining literacy provider based on this model. Our students thrive and succeed here. Last year, 951 students enrolled at Seeds. We saw 660 increases in grade levels. Students passed 244 GED section tests, with a 76% section pass rate. 184 students passed at least one GED section test, and 57 students passed all four GED section tests to receive their credential. These outcomes exceeded those reached before the GED became computerized in 2014, causing graduation rates to plummet nationwide.

State Funding Loss & Our Response

The State funded Seeds from 2014-2018, supporting our one-to-one instructional model during that time. Annually, Seeds received \$176,872, or about 14% of our cash-only budget, from the State. These funds opened and supported Seeds East, located in a neighborhood with an 85% illiteracy rate. Its residents and social service providers had asked Seeds to open a site in this neighborhood for years, and State funds made that possible.

Since 2014, Seeds East flourished, with morning, afternoon, and evening classes that now serve over 300 students each year. Seeds East student outcomes and organizational achievements have received regional and national recognition, winning a Dominion Energy Community Impact Award in 2015, and the first National ProLiteracy Hero Award in 2018. The Cleveland Foundation and Saint Luke's Foundation have made significant investments in Seeds East, with \$730,000 in grant dollars awarded to Seeds over the past five years, as well as additional funds from smaller investments from The Abington Foundation, Bruening Foundation, and the Northeast Ohio Harvard Business School Club Foundation, among others.

With the help of Senator Williams, we met with Chancellor Carey and his staff in July 2018, and asked for a clearer explanation of the State's choice to fund only traditional classrooms. We did not receive an explanation, nor was there an appeal process or a reversal on this decision. Where did the traditional classroom requirement come from?

Since then, we have met with several members of the state legislature and other elected officials and advocates with information about Seeds and its successful educational method for a critically underserved population. We have hosted meetings at Seeds with:

- Senator Williams
- Senator Dolan
- Senator Antonio
- Senator Eklund
- Representative Smith
- Representative Skindell
- Representative Howse
- Representative Upchurch
- Michelle Gillcrist (Liaison, Office of Ohio Governor DeWine)
- Derek Harley (Chief of Staff, Congressman Wenstrup)
- Alex Roth (Staffer, Congressman Joyce)
- Nicole Dailey Jones and Nicholas Turner (Press Secretary and Representative, Congresswoman Kaptur)
- and Rob Frost (Republican Party of Cuyahoga County and Capital Partners).

We reached deep into our reserves and made severe personnel and organizational cuts in order to continue services this year. Our Emergency Funding Appeal raised funds to fill this year's gap left by the loss of State funds: \$65,000 from the Cleveland Foundation, above current capacity-building grant of \$300,000; \$50,000 from The Bruening Foundation; \$19,030 from individual donors, with \$18,000 of that from 5 individuals; \$15,000 from the Saint Luke's Foundation, in addition to a current, capacity-building 2-year award of \$125,000; \$15,000 from the George and Pamela Humphry Fund; and \$10,000 from the Third Federal Foundation, in addition to a current operating grant of \$5,000.

The Shifting Landscape & State Funding Impact

State funding is critical for the health of Seeds, to continue our successful services to students who need it most. Seeds has seen an increase in low-level readers over the past year, as more classroom-style ASPIRE programs refer students to Seeds for our one-to-one instruction. Since November 2018, 81% of our incoming students have reading levels under the 8th grade, and 10% of those are reading under a 3rd grade level. We have added programming for beginning and struggling readers this year, and are seeing promising results.

We also connect Seeds students with workforce programs. As our students raise their literacy levels, they may now enter workforce programs, most of which require reading and math levels of 8th grade or higher. In February 2019, we began a formal partnership with Goodwill Industries. They now provide job search assistance, resume and cover letter creation, and job application and interview preparation, twice monthly at each Seeds location. Student response has been fantastic.

State funding not only supports operations, but also allows Seeds to leverage other public and private dollars. We work hard to achieve a diverse revenue stream, with investments from foundations (55%); donated services (27%); special events (6%); individuals (7%); corporations (3%); and city government (2%). This diversification creates a fiscally strong program for our students and shows funders that we are diligent stewards of their investments.

Literacy Converts Poverty into Possibility

These achievements are imperative for better lives for all Ohioans. We are asking for a relatively small funding amount, \$200,000 annually, to address a large societal need with great impact.

Adult literacy annihilates poverty. It is the first step to economic self-sufficiency, better health, and the academic success of children.

Economic Impact:

According to a ten-year longitudinal study of adults by the National Institute for Literacy, literacy proficiency affects both the level of initial earnings as well as earnings growth.¹

Health Impact:

Adults with low literacy proficiency experience more medication errors, longer hospital stays, healthcare costs that are four times higher, and increased mortality rates.²

Generational Impact:

¹ Reder, Steven. (2010) *Adult Literacy Development and Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

² *What Is Health Literacy? Fact Sheet #1*. Hamilton, NJ: Center for Health Care Strategies.

A National Institutes of Health study of 3,000 families showed that a mother's reading level is the greatest determinant of her children's academic success, outpacing family income and neighborhood.³

Finally, an investment in adult education pays dividends. According to the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, every \$1 invested in adult education brings \$60 to the community in reduced social service costs and taxpayer dollars.⁴

Conclusion

Chair Kunze, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Williams, and honored committee members, thank you for this invitation to provide testimony today. Please consider allocating State funds for Seeds of Literacy to ensure that critical adult literacy services – delivered by a proven, successful one-to-one instructional method – reach those Ohioans who need them the most.

I would now like to introduce one of our graduates, Margo Hudson, who has become a widely recognized adult literacy champion. I have known Margo for more than fifteen years, and have seen her transform from a timid student to an amazing advocate for adult literacy.

Margo spent 11 years at Seeds of Literacy, studying for the GED. She took the test 6 times before finally passing it in 2012. Margo now tutors twice a week at Seeds, helping students like herself. She is an inspirational example of what is possible when you persevere.

Margo Hudson's Story

Chair Kunze, Vice-Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Williams, and members of the Senate Higher Education Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today as part of Seeds of Literacy's public testimony in regards to the current version of Sub House Bill 166.

Today, I am honored to share my story of how adult literacy at Seeds of Literacy transformed my life.

³Sastry, Narayan and Pebley, Anne R.(2010) Family and Neighborhood Sources of Socioeconomic Inequality in Children's Achievement. [Demography](#).

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<http://static1.squarespace.com/static/55a158b4e4b0796a90f7c371/t/5722e1d72fe1315d391d3387/1461903847231/2.+Adult+Basic+Education+Needs+Factsheet.pdf>

I grew up on the South Side of Chicago. I had a hard childhood, with abuse in the home. I left home when I was 16. I didn't finish the 9th grade, or high school. I went right to work.

I had a lot of jobs, but none of them paid very well. I worked in nursing homes, fast food restaurants, as a home health aide and a housecleaner.

By the time I was in my 40s, I was working at the airport, cleaning airplanes. It was hard work. You were out in the elements and had to work fast, cleaning planes between flights.

I wanted something else, but I didn't think I had anything to offer anyone. I didn't have my GED. I didn't have much self-confidence. I cleaned airplanes, and didn't think I had anything in common with people who were flying on those planes. I never stood out.

I didn't feel good about myself and was going through depression. I thought to myself, "I've got to do something with my life."

I wanted to get my GED and check that off my list. I had tried programs before, but I didn't finish. I came to Seeds of Literacy because it had one to one tutoring. I was determined that this time would be different.

I worked on my GED for 11 years at Seeds. I studied every chance I got: on my lunch break, 15-minute break, while waiting on my ride. On the bus, in the doctor's office. I didn't give up. During the time I was working on my GED at Seeds, I got a better job working in the President's Club at the airport.

I took the GED 6 times before I passed. I will never forget the phone call from Chris at Seeds, telling me that I passed.

And my life changed at that moment. I didn't know it at the time, but my life would never be the same. I thought I would be proud to finish the GED and get it off my plate. I would have never imagined what would happen next.

I started to read more. I started to think I had something to offer others. I had more self-confidence. I started volunteering at Seeds. I thought I could help with filing, but they asked me to tutor! So for the past 7 years, I've been tutoring students twice a week, on my days off. My specialty is fractions.

I had always wanted to play music, so I started taking keyboard lessons and practicing every day. I learned to make candy, knit ruffly scarves, and duct tape crafts. I kept learning new things.

I started talking to my customers at the Club. I felt that I had something to share. We talked about books we read, and our families, and I shared my story with them. Many of my customers are in business and government, and I would have never thought I had things in common with them. But I do.

In 2016, I won the National Learner of the Year Award. I attended a conference in Dallas to accept the award and participate in workshops. Governor Kasich gave me the Courage Award, and I was invited to lead the pledge of allegiance at a session of the Republican National Convention in Cleveland.

I was named one of Cleveland's Most Interesting People in 2017 by *Cleveland Magazine*. The Cleveland Foundation chose me as one of Cleveland's Place Makers in 2018, and I was a speaker at one of Cleveland's Creative Mornings sessions.

Best of all, I am now a literacy ambassador. Over the past three years, I have shared the story about how literacy changed my life with people at homeless shelters, recovery programs, health fairs, back to school events, library programs, Senators and Congresspeople. I want to give back to the community, and I can do that by sharing my passion about literacy and how the GED changed my life. I am blessed to be out talking to people.

I would never have imagined doing these things before I got my GED. I see opportunities now that I didn't before. When we feel shy or afraid, we miss opportunities, and the chance to share ourselves.

Seeds of Literacy made this possible for me. Their one-to-one method opened the door to a limitless life. I am a different person, with a different life now. I am always learning. I am always looking for what's next. I know I have more to offer now, and I am looking for the chance to do that.

Adult literacy changes lives. Please keep my story in mind as you consider funding Seeds of Literacy and adult education. Thank you.