



House Bill 96: FY 2026-2027 Biennial Operating Budget  
Senate Finance Committee  
Senator Jerry Cirino, Chair  
Thursday, May 29, 2025

**Bonnie Entler, President and CEO, Seeds of Literacy**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and members of the committee, I am Bonnie Entler. For the last 21 years, I've had the privilege of leading Seeds of Literacy as President and CEO. Seeds of Literacy is a unique, award-winning adult literacy and GED preparation program based in Cleveland and serving students across Ohio. Seeds is the ONLY literacy program in the state with national accreditation from ProLiteracy, reflecting our commitment to best practices and the delivery of the highest quality services.

My testimony stems, in part, from an increased need that has quickly outpaced our resources. We were previously allocated funding through a legislative amendment to the state operating budget in 2019, and since then, our annual student enrollment has grown by 75%. We are now serving more than 1,600 students annually. This growth has necessitated added staff and a larger operating budget.

**I am honored to be here on behalf of our students and the 350 volunteer tutors supporting our work to urge you to support an amendment to the Ohio Department of Higher Education's state operating budget that would allocate \$250,000 per fiscal year to Seeds of Literacy.**

**RESPONDING TO A PRIORITY ISSUE FOR ALL OF OHIO**

In February 2025, during the Dayton Development Coalition Meeting and Economic Review, Governor Mike DeWine emphasized the importance of education in Ohio's workforce development, stating: "I think our biggest challenge is to make sure that we have a workforce and to make sure that every Ohioan has the ability to live up to their God-given potential."<sup>1</sup>

Achieving this goal requires consideration for all Ohioans. **In our state, nearly 1 million adults are without a high school diploma or equivalent – a significant pool of candidates to educate, train, and transition into meaningful, sustainable careers.**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Governor Mike DeWine's quote on workforce and education was shared during the unveiling of his \$218 billion budget proposal on February 2025.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment in Ohio," data.census.gov, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table?t=Educational+Attainment&g=040XX00US39>.

Approximately **18% of Ohio adults are at or below level one literacy**, struggling with basic comprehension.<sup>3</sup> Around **10% of Ohioans over the age of 25 lack a high school diploma or equivalent**.<sup>2</sup> For those without a diploma, **the poverty rate is an astounding 30%**, more than double the 13% state average.<sup>4</sup>

**Unemployment, crime, health, poverty, civic engagement - every important social issue is impacted by low literacy.**<sup>5</sup> Here are a few real-life examples of the impact:

- **A discouraged father who remains unemployed** — not due to a lack of skills – but because his limited literacy prevents him from navigating the hiring process.
- **A mother trapped in the cycle of poverty**, leaving school to work and support her parents, only to find herself struggling to support her own children with low-wage jobs.
- **A young man unable to secure a livable wage** due to his lack of education, turning to petty theft as a desperate means of survival.
- **A diabetic who can't read the warning label on a new prescription**, suffering severe side effects that lead to higher healthcare costs, worse health outcomes, and preventable emergencies.
- **A young woman eager to vote for the first time but overwhelmed** by confusing issues and processes, leaving her voice unheard and her civic engagement stifled.

According to ProLiteracy, **adults without a high school diploma are more than twice as likely to be unemployed, stuck in low-wage jobs, living in poverty, and reliant on government aid programs than those with higher education levels.**<sup>6</sup>

A surprising and often overlooked fact: a mother's reading skill is the greatest predictor of her children's future academic success—more so than neighborhood or family income. **A mother's reading proficiency is the number one factor in her children's ability to thrive in school.**<sup>6</sup>

These examples highlight that adult literacy is not just an educational issue—it's a critical economic, health, and social imperative.

## **A UNIQUE RESPONSE WITH LASTING RESULTS**

At Seeds of Literacy (Seeds), we serve adults who have been left behind—*often more than once*—by traditional classrooms. Many of our students struggled in school as children, and later found that conventional GED® and basic education programs did not meet their needs.

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<sup>3</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC): Skills Map," U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/>.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, "Educational Attainment, Income, and Poverty in Ohio: 2023," data.census.gov, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT1Y2023.B17003?t=Educational+Attainment:Income+and+Poverty&g=040XX00US39>.

<sup>5</sup> ProLiteracy, "Adult Literacy Facts," ProLiteracy, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://www.proliteracy.org/resources/adult-literacy-facts/>.

<sup>6</sup> ProLiteracy, "Adult Literacy Facts," ProLiteracy, accessed February 23, 2025, <https://www.proliteracy.org/resources/adult-literacy-facts/>.

Seeds has given much time and attention to ensuring its program is accessible and responsive to the needs of all adult learners. More than half of students begin the program reading at or below a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, and 30% below a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade level. Many students face multiple barriers to success, as 99% reside in low-income households, 20% do not have reliable transportation, 50% are parenting at least one child (31% are single parent head of households), and 40% are working. Many students have had criminal justice involvement. Last year, 150 students reported previous incarceration, 145 were on probation, and 23 were on parole.

Our one-to-one tutoring model is rooted in educational research, proving that personalized instruction is the most effective method for non-traditional learners. Our curriculum is aligned to the Science of Reading and GED® Benchmarks, while also teaching essential computer skills tied to a nationally recognized certification—equipping students for today’s workforce.

**What sets Seeds apart is our individualized approach to learning:**

- **One-on-one tutoring** provides students with personalized support, allowing them to progress at their own pace with dedicated volunteer tutors.
- **Comprehensive assessment** using the Test of Adult Basic Education (the TABE test) establishes clear benchmarks for math and reading levels—offering a holistic evaluation.
- **Customized learning plans** tailor instruction to each student’s unique needs, ensuring targeted support based on their TABE results.
- **Ongoing progress tracking** by staff includes continuous curriculum adjustments and reassessments, ensuring measurable growth and mastery.

Further, Seeds of Literacy offers students flexibility. Tutoring is provided year-round every Monday through Thursday, with morning, afternoon, and evening sessions. Enrollment occurs weekly and there are no cutoff scores for participation or required timeframe for earning a GED®. While in the program, students receive more than tutoring—they also have access to resource referrals, a health empowerment group, an emerging readers program, a book club, and support for transportation and GED® testing fees.

In addition to our two Cleveland locations, Seeds launched a Virtual Classroom in 2020 in response to the pandemic. The Virtual Classroom has been extremely successful, removing barriers like childcare and transportation and expanding access across Ohio. **Today, our Virtual Classroom is serving hundreds of students residing outside of Cuyahoga County.**

Seeds’ impact extends beyond basic education. In our classrooms, students develop soft skills, set long-term goals, and map out their futures. Our Director of Student Success provides guidance toward postsecondary education, workforce training, and sustainable careers. Acting as a bridge, we connect students to a network of community partners and resources, offering direct referrals and warm handoffs to support enrollment, financial aid, and the often-overwhelming first steps.

**This award-winning model, the only of its kind in Ohio, delivers real results**, empowering adults to gain the skills they need to achieve economic self-sufficiency and transform their futures. Seeds has worked hard to develop its comprehensive approach to supporting students, producing the following annual results:

- At least **1,600 students enroll** in the program
- More than **120 earn their GED** and **250 pass at least one section** of the official GED exam
- Over **500 official GED sections are passed**
- More than **600 students improve basic skills by achieving measurable gains** in at least one subject
- At least **200 students participate in career planning** and more than **100 are connected to workforce training programs, postsecondary education, and/or careers**

Beyond the numbers, the true impact is in the personal journeys of students like:

- **Patrick, who, upon learning he was going to be a father, knew that securing his family's future started with a GED.** Today, he serves as a Combat Engineer in the Army.
- **Desire and Jewels, Seeds graduates who recently earned associate degrees in Human Services and Medical Assisting**, paving the way for better-paying jobs to support their children.
- **Iris, a dedicated STNA, working toward her GED to advance her career** and increase her income.

## **IMPACT OF STATE FUNDING TO LEVERAGE PRIVATE DOLLARS**

**We urge you to support the amendment for Seeds of Literacy in the state operating budget because this funding will strengthen Seeds' capacity to meet growing enrollment while enhancing the long-term impact and benefits of our program for students and their families.**

Each year, Seeds receives less than 20% of its \$1.9 million operating budget from public investment (Ohio Department of Education and Workforce - Aspire, Governor's Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives - TANF, and City of Cleveland - Public Services Grant), making us highly dependent on philanthropic support. Approximately 54% of our total revenue comes from foundations, 16% from individual and corporate gifts, and 10% from special events.

Philanthropic partners and the greater community are significantly invested in Seeds' sustainability. Contributions have been annually received from The Cleveland Foundation and Saint Luke's Foundation, providing a combined over \$1.3 million over the past five years. Additional support has come from the Abington Foundation, Bruening Foundation, Harvard Business School Club of Northeastern Ohio, and national partners like the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, Charter Communications, and Kia America.

Seeds' budget is heavily supplemented by volunteer time. Operating on a lean budget with minimal staff, we rely on a dedicated team of over 350 volunteer tutors who work directly with students. The value of this volunteer service exceeds \$800,000 annually.

## **A MORE EDUCATED OHIO CANNOT WAIT**

The time to invest in a more educated Ohio is now. A literate Ohio is stronger, healthier, and more prosperous. That is why we are requesting a modest yet vital investment of **\$250,000 annually to address this pressing societal challenge with far-reaching impact.**

**Adult literacy is the foundation for economic stability, better health, and stronger families.** Without it, poverty persists across generations. With it, individuals gain independence, businesses gain skilled workers, and communities thrive.

### **Economic Impact**

**Literacy proficiency directly affects both starting wages and long-term earnings growth.** Skilled workers drive local economies forward.<sup>7</sup>

### **Health Impact**

**Low literacy leads to four times higher healthcare costs, more medication errors, longer hospital stays, and increased mortality rates.** Investing in literacy reduces these burdens and saves taxpayer dollars.<sup>8</sup>

### **Generational Impact**

**Without intervention, illiteracy passes from parent to child,** affecting economic mobility, educational success, and overall well-being for generations. Breaking the cycle of low literacy lifts entire families.

**Finally, an investment in adult education pays dividends.** For every 1,000 adults who earn a high school diploma, we gain \$6.25M back in tax revenue and reduced expenses.<sup>9</sup>

Our request will make a meaningful difference, empowering more Ohioans to support their families, contribute to the workforce, and lead healthier lives. We urge Ohio to invest in literacy—because when adults succeed, the entire state thrives.

## **CONCLUSION**

Chair Cirino, Vice Chair Chavez, Ranking Member Hicks-Hudson, and honored committee members, thank you for allowing me to provide testimony today. As demand continues to rise and enrollment grows, we urge the allocation of State funds to Seeds of Literacy to expand access to vital adult education services, delivered through a proven one-to-one approach.

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<sup>7</sup> Reder, Steven. (2010) *Adult Literacy Development and Economic Growth*. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy.

<sup>8</sup> *What Is Health Literacy? Fact Sheet #1*. Hamilton, NJ: Center for Health Care Strategies.

<sup>9</sup> Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE), "The Return on Investment into Adult Education is Undeniable," COABE, accessed January 23, 2025, <https://coabe.org/the-return-on-investment-into-adult-education-is-undeniable/>.