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Letters To the Editor

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Adult English Literacy Services Are Crucial

As the school year begins, many educators recognize that parental involvement is a key factor in getting children ready to learn. But what happens when parents are unprepared with the literacy and English language skills needed to support their children's learning?

Recent media coverage has pointed to the growth of English language learners in Washington suburbs such as [Montgomery County](#). According to the 2006 American Community Survey, more than 125,000 county residents, close to 14 percent of the population, report speaking English "less than very well." Close to 15,000 English for Speakers of Other Languages students attend Montgomery public schools. According to national research by the Urban Institute, four in five have parents who are also limited in their English skills. New data also point to the prevalence of school-age English language learners who are native-born. These statistics reinforce the critical need to focus on parents through English language and literacy instruction.

Recognizing the importance of adult English literacy services as a critical community need and workforce development opportunity, the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy works to coordinate and improve services; provide resources and technical assistance to expand capacity; and educate the community at large about the vital importance of literacy and adult ESOL classes. The coalition also compiled the county's first comprehensive directory of adult English language instruction programs, available at <http://www.mcael.org>. The directory highlights that more than 50 organizations provide English and literacy services to more than 15,000 individuals annually.

Learning English can be daunting. Even in intensive programs, it is estimated that most students need at least 100 instructional hours to advance a single level. Facing many barriers, such as the need for transportation, child care and low-cost classes, learners might become discouraged without the availability of convenient, relevant and high-quality instruction. Programs offered at schools or community centers, or that provide child care, help to reduce barriers and create a sense of community. Several programs offer family literacy activities, in which parent and child learn together.

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One adult learner in a coalition-funded program recently reflected on his experience: "My son started second grade this year, and I take him to school every day. I can talk to his teacher and find out his progress in class. We pronounce together the new words and numbers that he learns in school, and I just love the feeling that comes when you can share moments like this in your family. One hundred years from now, people will still come to America, and these programs will give them the opportunity to improve the quality of their lives. After all, America is the land of opportunity."

Rachel Glass

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