



October 19, 2020

Dear MCAEL Community

Our organization, our programs, and our learners and their families have all been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic over the past six months. It's been a most unusual time for MCAEL, as it has been for everyone.

I want to provide a detailed look into the world of what the MCAEL coalition has been doing since March. This may appear to be a long read, but I hope you can stick with it since the story of our last seven months is not one that fits neatly into two paragraphs. How have adult ESOL programs and learners as well as MCAEL staff - adjusted to our new way of being? What adaptations have we made? How do we shape our priorities going forward?

**ADULT ESOL PROGRAMS and INSTRUCTORS** successfully switched to virtual classes in March and were able to hold 92% of the classes they had planned this past Spring. While we know many learners were not able to continue with classes, many were and there certainly were some silver linings for some of them.

For example, Akuavi made significant progress in language learning, becoming more confident in her speaking and in her ability to understand and use more complex grammar. Thanks to the online format, Akuavi did not need to find childcare for her small children, thus allowing her to attend the class more easily. *She also did not have to deal with fears related to her health and contracting COVID-19. The online format provided more benefit to Akuavi than she and her teachers expected.* Some of the ESOL instructors, like many of their students, do find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide, limited by device options, internet access, and basic digital literacy. While many learners have been able to continue, we do know that some have had to pause their attendance for many reasons as they struggle with the challenges of changed work opportunities, family obligations, health issues and, of course, the loss of loved ones.

Not only have ESOL program staff worked tirelessly over the past months to provide food, emergency assistance, wrap around services, and case management, but they are committed to continuing to provide ESOL classes online, too. As one program manager said to me, "We are working much harder than ever before."

There are many bright spots. MCAEL is supporting and training creative and dedicated ESOL instructors to develop new curricula to keep adult learners engaged in the online classroom. Learners are registering for classes that they previously could not attend due



to geographic or transportation challenges. ESOL programs are developing new ways to recruit learners and methods to assess their skill level so they can be placed in appropriate classes.

**ADULT ESOL STUDENTS** are typically in populations disproportionately affected by the pandemic—not only in terms of infection rates and economic impact, but in their lack of computers or tablets in the household, access to internet service, and limited digital literacy.

The pandemic underscored the key role adult English literacy plays in the daily lives of so many of our neighbors, and the value of our programs to the community. English literacy skills, especially in crisis times, are even more imperative. Acquiring English skills is critical for health and safety; it could be what determines if someone lives or dies. English literacy skills are a key component to our recovery as a community.

Many families that adult ESOL providers serve are facing daily survival challenges. They have lost jobs. Some are relying on food donations to feed their families. Many are facing loss of housing. Still others are reeling from losing loved ones to COVID-19 helping children with online school, trying to file for unemployment or seek new jobs, and the list goes on. They are also experiencing the trauma and ongoing oppression of systemic racism in our country. Physical and mental health incidents are on the rise in their communities.

[The research shows that more literate families are healthier families.](#) After a few months of English classes, an adult will gain enough words to describe how they are feeling; after a year or two they can put that description into a full sentence and after a few more years they can read a whole pamphlet about a health condition or treatment.

A Washington Post article laid bare the inequities of who has been affected by COVID-19 in Montgomery County (July 15, *"In this Maryland suburb, 74 percent of new covid-19 patients are Hispanic"*). At that point in time, "the data showed that Montgomery County's 200,000 Hispanic residents accounted for more than two-thirds of new infections, even though they are just a fifth of the county's population."

MCAEL programs serve adults who speak over 100 languages, but about half of adult ESOL learners are Spanish (or dialect) speaking Hispanics. Thus, supporting these neighbors in their quests to learn English is supporting all of us having a healthier community.

**MCAEL STAFF** have worked virtually from home since mid-March and after a smooth transition we have been able to maintain all of our work and expand in some areas, too. The team first used Zoom in November to facilitate virtual participation in advisory group meetings – part of our ongoing strategic plans to recruit and train more ESOL instructors. With the onset of the pandemic, it's become the standard fixture in our technology platform for online trainings, meetings, and information sharing for the 60+ programs in the coalition. Our pandemic response programming from March–May



occurred weekly and served almost 120 unique individuals representing most of the adult ESOL programs across the county. I'm proud of the team and their performance in the new environment while they are also balancing commitments to their families. Our [FY20 Annual Report to Montgomery County](#) has detailed information on our accomplishments.

## **WHAT'S AHEAD**

As a community, we have short term, pressing needs and longer-term pressing challenges.

- We continue to meet the pressing needs of food, shelter, clothing and healthcare for people now.
- We will invest in our collective long-term success by continuing to support and enhance a cohesive system of adult English literacy, digital literacy, and workforce development. MCAEL will provide enhanced online teaching training and systems for adult programs to reach current and new learners.
- We will work with other organizations, businesses and agencies to address the digital divide -to ensure that both children and adults have the internet access, hardware, and digital skills to optimize online school, work, health appointments and other aspects of daily living.
- MCAEL will continue to assess coalition needs to ensure that there are instructors and programs in local communities to provide English classes that will be a key part of the county's economic recovery.

MCAEL's overarching strategic goal, "21,000 by 2021" – is to increase the numbers of learners served from about 15,000 annually a few years ago, to 21,000 annually by 2021. Although we are not sure yet exactly where we will land, and we might fall short in terms of the numbers of students we can reach this year, we are committed to maintaining our current work and innovating approaches that the current times call for. While our outcomes measurements might look different in a virtual world, we will work to ensure that our programs and learners make progress and can experience the change they are looking for from English classes

In summary, MCAEL—a Coalition for a Connected Community—is performing well even while facing the challenges of the times. We remain committed to our work as the hub of the coalition. We are proud to be recognized in this year's class of Catalogue for Philanthropy vetted organizations worthy of your support for our continued work in the community. When adults have the tools they need to participate as parents, workers, and civic leaders, we create a better, sustainable community for all of us.

*Kathryn Stevens*

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Executive Director

