

# Breaking Barriers to Adult Literacy Access: Insights from Adults with Low Literacy Across the United States

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**ALL IN**

The Adult Literacy &  
Learning Impact Network

## Table of Contents

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I. Introduction .....	4
II. Why Now? Addressing the Adult Literacy Challenge in the U.S. ....	5
III. Methodology .....	6
IV. Insights from Adults with Low Literacy .....	9
V. Key Takeaways .....	10
VI. Now What? How We Take Action .....	14
VII. The Path Forward .....	18
VIII. Acknowledgements .....	19
IX. References .....	20

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## About FTI Consulting

FTI Consulting is the leading global expert firm for organizations facing **crisis and transformation**.

Each practice area of FTI Consulting includes leading experts defined by their **depth of knowledge** and **track record of delivering client value when it's all at stake**.

Collectively, FTI Consulting offers a comprehensive suite of services designed to assist clients across the business cycle — from proactive transformational opportunities to providing rapid responses to unexpected crises and dynamic environments.

## About the Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network

The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN) is a collective impact initiative, convened by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, that is dedicated to expanding access to high-quality services for adults with low literacy skills.

Guided by the [National Action Plan for Adult Literacy](#), a groundbreaking multisector initiative supported by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, ALL IN aims to increase access, quality, and uptake of adult literacy services and support. We focus on transforming adult literacy among two interconnected groups: eligible adult learners and the education providers who serve them.

## I. Introduction

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We take for granted how many times a day we rely on the ability to read, write, learn, and understand in everyday life. We consume news online. We email coworkers. We read instructions on medications. We register our kids for school or soccer. We access online bank accounts.

Literacy is essential to navigating the world. It provides individuals with the confidence to pursue their goals, support their families, and to achieve success and well-being in work and in life. Strong literacy skills are now clearly linked to higher income,<sup>1</sup> better job opportunities,<sup>2</sup> positive health behaviors,<sup>3</sup> increased voter turnout,<sup>4</sup> and enhanced language and literacy skills for children.<sup>5</sup> Yet, nearly 59 million adults in the United States struggle to read basic sentences.<sup>6</sup>

The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network (ALL IN) is committed to raising awareness and advocating for change in adult literacy. We first partnered with FTI Consulting to conduct [market research](#) among 500 employers and 200 policy influencers to gauge their perspectives on adult literacy issues. Employers overwhelmingly reported that low literacy affects team productivity, introduces challenges with communication, leads to greater turnover, and causes some employers to overcompensate.<sup>7</sup> Policy influencers, on the other hand, vastly underestimated the scale of low literacy, believing that current efforts are working and that the United States is outperforming other member countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).<sup>8</sup> In fact, that is not the case. The United States now ranks 36th among OECD countries in adult literacy rates.<sup>9</sup>

FTI Consulting’s landscape research, while deeply informative, only tells part of the story. To transform literacy access, we knew it was critical to talk directly to those who are most impacted: adults with limited literacy skills. We wanted to understand their perspectives, their challenges, and above all, their aspirations and ideas for better program design and delivery. Our primary population for this study includes adults who are eligible for adult education programs, such as adult foundational education, high school equivalency, career and technical education, or English language classes, but are not currently enrolled in services.<sup>10</sup> For clarity, we refer to participants as “adults with low literacy” throughout this report.

Our study shows that adults with low literacy recognize the value of education and want to improve their skills. **Nearly all adults surveyed (84%) indicated a strong or moderate interest in developing their skills, but few (20%) reported knowing about existing programs in their communities.** Most reported barriers to enrolling, especially the perceived cost of services, even though the vast majority of adult education programs are free or low-cost.

We hope this study will empower local programs and educators with evidence-based strategies to: 1) more effectively reach and support adults with low literacy, and 2) communicate the value of their work to funders for greater investment and community-level impact. We thank our partners at FTI Consulting for designing a rigorous, comprehensive survey that captured the experiences of 2,000 adults with low literacy.

Thank you for your attention to this issue – here is what adults with low literacy have to say.

– The ALL IN Coordinating Council



## II. Why Now? Addressing the Adult Literacy Challenge in the U.S.

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### Understanding the Challenge

Adult literacy is at the root of today's national challenges like workforce readiness, military eligibility, health outcomes, and educational attainment, yet it remains a largely invisible issue.

Based on the [2023 Survey of Adult Skills](#), 28% of U.S. adults aged 16–65—58.9 million U.S. adults—can read only simple, short sentences.<sup>11</sup> Adults with low literacy struggle to comprehend everyday texts, such as utility contracts, registration forms, or medical bills, or make informed decisions about their health, work, or their child's education. Adults with the lowest literacy skills are much more likely to live in poverty than those with the highest level of skills.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to its negative impact on millions of individuals, low literacy affects the entire workforce and the costs are staggering. According to [our nationwide employer survey](#), one in three employers say their average employee lacks the literacy skills needed to perform their job effectively, while two in five acknowledged that low literacy is widespread in their companies.<sup>13</sup> The result is billions of dollars lost in potential revenue annually. In fact, low literacy costs the country an estimated \$2.2 trillion a year – 10% of the gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>14</sup>

Low literacy affects whole families and persists across generations. Children of parents with low literacy have a 72% chance of experiencing low literacy themselves.<sup>15</sup> According to the [2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress \(NAEP\)](#), 70% of eighth graders read below grade level.<sup>16</sup> In less than five years, these young people will be exploring higher education or entering the workforce, but will they have the foundational skills needed to thrive in work and in life?

Adult education strengthens our capacity to address workforce shortages, boost national security, enhance public health, and fuel economic growth. But capacity remains a challenge. While federally funded adult education programs provide free services to more than a million adult learners annually,<sup>17</sup> this is less than 10% of those in need of upskilling in foundational reading, numeracy, and digital skills.<sup>18</sup> While research shows that the demand for skill development remains high among employers, policy influencers, and the American public, investment in our adult education system has not kept pace.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, we have not had a clear enough understanding of the individual experiences, perceptions, and needs of adults with low literacy. How do they feel about learning? What kinds of skills do they want to improve? Do they know about available services? What are their preferences in

terms of learning formats or modalities? What motivates them to engage in learning opportunities? What prevents them from participating?

Our study surveyed 2,000 adults with low literacy (74% of whom were not previously or currently enrolled in an adult education program) and uncovered key barriers to reaching education and career goals. The lack of awareness about free and low-cost programs among respondents was widespread. We learned that 80% of survey participants did not know about adult education programs in their community. Once informed, 84% expressed strong or moderate interest in enrolling. Participants shared the skills they were most interested in improving. They also revealed the types of programs, services, and learning modalities that would be most accessible and engaging, such as hybrid or fully online learning options. This knowledge will help educators and policy influencers, as well as employers, prioritize strategies and resources to remove obstacles to learning (both real and perceived) and provide more adults with the skills they need to succeed in work and in life.

**Low literacy is a problem we can solve.** Our research shows that adults with low literacy are motivated to learn, and they want to develop confidence and new skills. Now is the time to reexamine not only how we design adult education programs to meet current needs, but also how we reach and recruit potential learners through innovative marketing and communication approaches. We've gathered input from all relevant stakeholders, and now we have a clear, comprehensive understanding of what needs to be done to improve literacy nationwide.

### III. Methodology

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#### Overview and Objectives

ALL IN collaborated with our long-term partner, FTI Consulting, to conduct a study employing a mixed-methods approach. Through focus groups and a quantitative survey, we explored the perspectives of adults with low literacy across the U.S. Contacting adults with low literacy who were eligible for, but not enrolled in, adult education programs required extensive effort in designing the methodology. This population may include individuals without a high school diploma, long-term un- or under-employed people, single parents, English learners, incarcerated individuals or returning citizens, or adults with learning differences, for example. Here's how we did it.

The data collection process included:

- **Partnering with an advisory council** of adult literacy experts to develop focus group screeners and a discussion guide
- **Recruiting focus group participants** via phone, using an approved screener survey
- **Conducting four 90-minute focus groups** online with current adult learners across generations, plus job seekers, to inform survey design
- **Developing a survey questionnaire** for a quantitative study, leveraging focus group insights to provide strongly grounded and robust data with a large sample of adults with low literacy who are not enrolled in services
- **Fielding the survey** via phone, text, and online, in both English and Spanish

## Survey Approach

### Design

Using a rigorous and comprehensive screening process, FTI Consulting conducted the survey between September 4–26, 2024, among n=2,000 current and potential adult learners across the United States. In collaboration with ALL IN expert advisors, FTI Consulting designed screening and survey protocols with the audience in mind, using plain language at an appropriate reading level, structuring questions in a straightforward manner, and ensuring that the process would take no more than 10 minutes to complete.

FTI Consulting conducted two pilot launches of the survey among n=160 adults with low literacy to ensure that the questionnaire design and framing of the questions were clear and understandable. When providing feedback, respondents confirmed the appropriateness of the study, with some expressing great interest in the subject of adult education, even to the point of signing up for classes:

“ I’m thinking of going to online college now.”

“ I’m going to look into a program to better my skills.”

“ I didn’t know there were classes to help people like me. I’d be excited to join.”

### Fielding

FTI Consulting fielded the survey via text, phone, and online, in both English and Spanish. Text and phone fielding helped ensure that those without reliable internet access were included. To ensure that participants were eligible for adult education programs, FTI Consulting validated their skillset through a brief comprehension test and verified that participants lacked certain foundational literacy skills (e.g., read and understand food/medicine labels, fill out forms). FTI Consulting also checked participants’ educational background as part of the screening process.

Quotas helped ensure inclusion of respondents from a variety of backgrounds, so that the sample of participants was statistically representative of the actual population of adults with low literacy in the U.S. (based on latest national data on adult literacy rates), including:

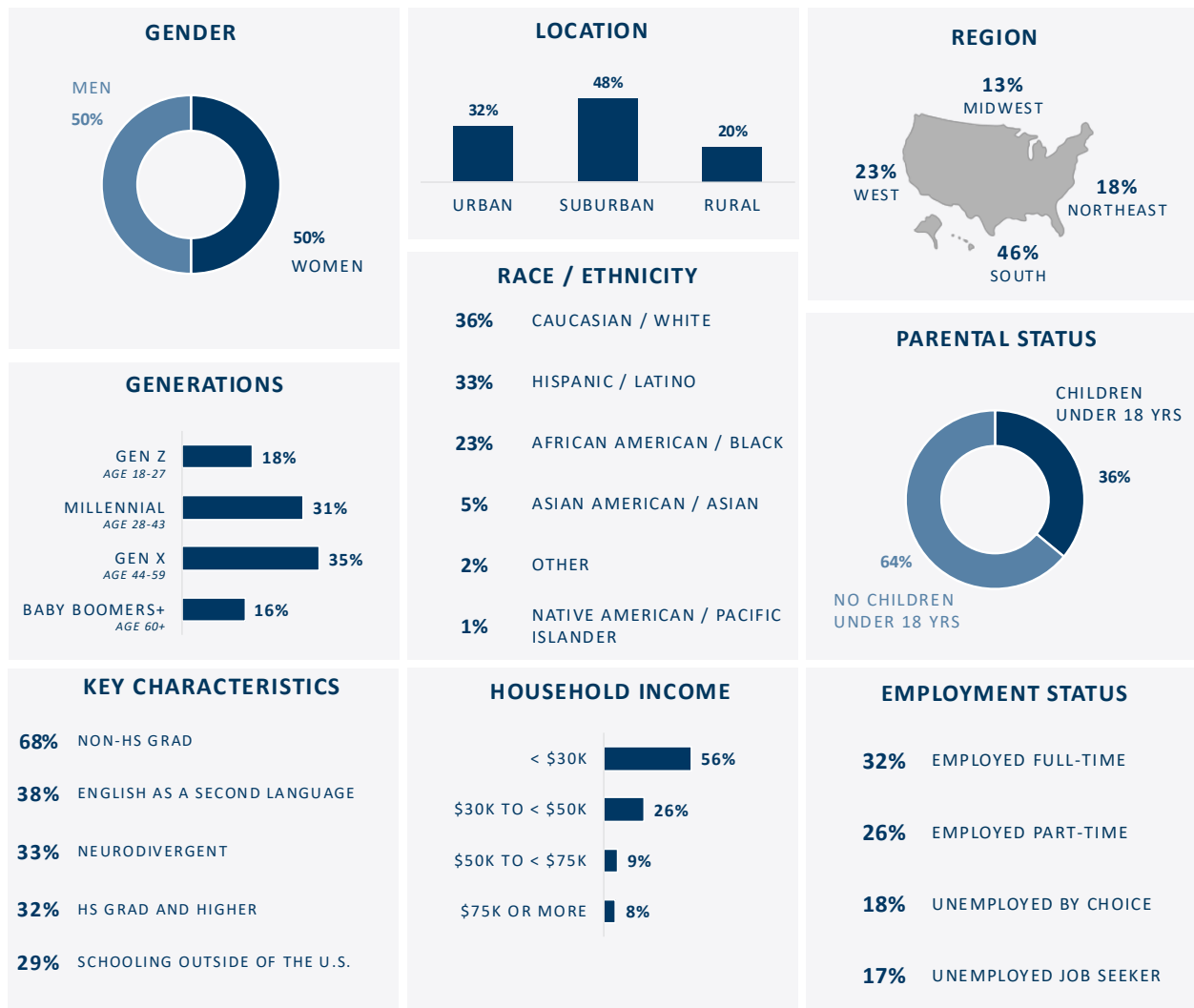
- Native speakers of English, Spanish, and other languages
- A wide range of income, race/ethnicity, gender, and parental status
- Different regions and geographic areas throughout the U.S. (e.g., rural, suburban, urban)
- Various educational backgrounds

Data patterns and responses were carefully reviewed to ensure data quality.

## Demographics and Key Characteristics

In conducting this study, great care was taken to reach the people most impacted by this issue. More than two-thirds (68%) of all participants did not complete their high school diploma. Many of the adults with a high school diploma or higher identified as English learners, while others had not developed comprehensive literacy skills during their time in school. Notably, 36% were parents with children under 18 years old, 58% were employed part- or full-time, with an additional 17% actively seeking a job, and 38% spoke English as their second or other language. More than half of participants (56%) reported earning less than \$30,000 a year.

Participants were evenly split between men and women. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 79 years old, with the sample spanning multiple generations, from Gen Z (18–27) to Baby Boomers (60–79). Intentionally, 74% of respondents were not previously or currently enrolled in an adult learning program, to capture the often-overlooked perspective of adults with low literacy who may be unaware of available learning opportunities. Note that respondents only represent the population of adults with low literacy in the U.S., not the general population. We were not able to include the experiences of currently incarcerated individuals, those who cannot understand any English or Spanish, and those who are inaccessible via phone or online.





## IV. Insights from Adults with Low Literacy

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Nearly every adult surveyed (94% of respondents) recognized the value of education and the importance of improving their skills. Adults without a high school diploma, as well as younger learners and job seekers, were particularly likely to say that improving literacy skills is very important. Below are the key findings shared by 2,000 adults with low literacy, drawn from both the quantitative and qualitative data collected in this study. Throughout the research, it became clear that participants were highly motivated to expand their skillsets, with many eager to engage in conversations about this issue. A significant number expressed excitement about potential education opportunities, with one participant even stating, “I’m thinking of going to online college now.”

Survey respondents demonstrated a remarkable determination to learn, even in the face of barriers to accessing the resources they need to succeed. They expressed enthusiasm about building confidence and improving their skills, particularly in areas like communication, vocabulary, and public speaking. Here’s what they shared with us:

### **Most respondents were interested in adult education programs, but few were familiar with existing options.**

- 80% of respondents did not know about available adult education programs in their community.
- Once informed about available programs, 84% expressed strong or moderate interest in enrolling.
- Younger adults, parents with children under 18, and those with reported learning differences were more likely to express interest in a program.
- The perception of high program costs was the greatest barrier to enrollment in education services, especially among Gen X and Baby Boomers.
- Other hurdles included fear of failure, lack of confidence, or simply constraints on their time and travel abilities.

### **Respondents recognized that learning would help them build confidence in their professional lives and personal lives.**

- 68% of respondents did not have a high school diploma, yet were enthusiastic in wanting to learn and continue their education.
- Key aspirations included improving skills around communication, including understanding more words and speaking in public.
- 51% said improving their skills would make them feel more confident; 40% said it would help them get more work done.

### **Respondents often preferred flexible learning options, including hybrid learning environments (leaning more online), with self-paced learning components and class options in mornings or evenings.**

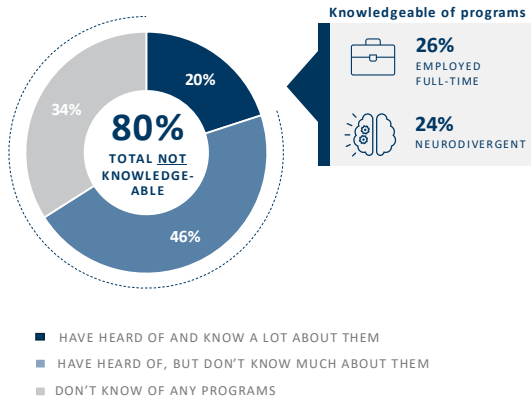
- Adults with low literacy are most likely to attend classes two to three times per week, for between 30 minutes to 2 hours per class.
- Across all age groups, online learning or hybrid (in-person and online) model is strongly preferred.
- While many want time to learn on their own, they value time with a supportive teacher in a small group setting.

## V. Key Takeaways

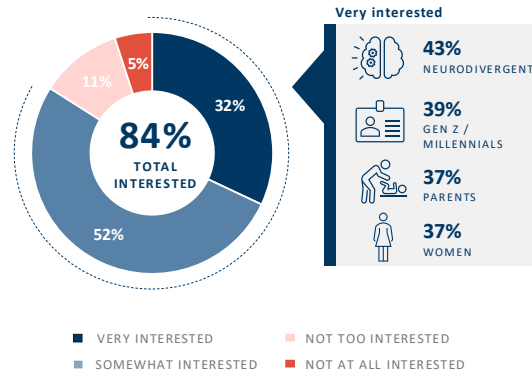
### Takeaway #1 – Knowledge of Adult Learning Programs is Low, but Interest is High

The study found that while **80% of respondents were unfamiliar with adult learning programs**, once informed, **84% expressed strong or moderate interest in enrolling**. Participating adults with reported learning differences, women, younger adults, and parents were most likely to show strong interest.

**AWARENESS OF LEARNING PROGRAMS**  
*Among those not currently or previously enrolled in adult learning programs*



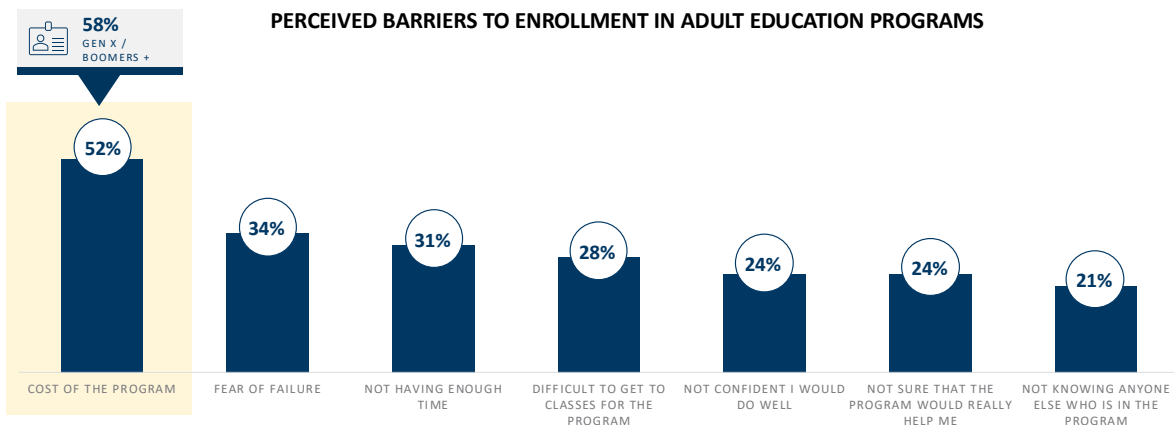
**INTEREST IN ENROLLING IN LEARNING PROGRAMS**  
*Among those not currently or previously enrolled in adult learning programs*



### Perceived costs are a barrier to enrollment, even though most programs are offered for free

While the cost of adult learning programs typically ranges from low to free, the majority (52%) of the respondents perceive high cost as a formidable barrier to enrolling. This misperception may be exacerbated by association with expensive learning programs, like community college or other skills training courses.

Perceived “costs” include not only the program fee, but the fear of failure, the time investment, transportation logistics, and other factors. In a focus group, one millennial learner said, “[I want] the ability to [participate in a learning program] because a lot of times, with today’s society, financially, you can’t afford it or you don’t have the time because you have to work so much to provide for your family.” These findings suggest we must not only raise awareness that adult learning programs exist—and that most are free—but also directly address the practical concerns of adults with low literacy.

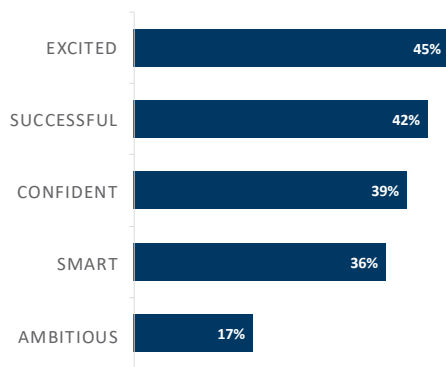


## Takeaway #2 – Adults With Low Literacy Seek Self-Confidence Through Education

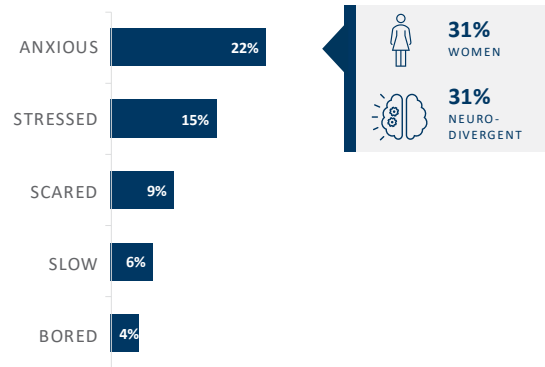
The survey found that adults surveyed feel predominantly positive when it comes to learning. Even though 68% of respondents had not completed a high school diploma, they expressed enthusiasm about wanting to learn and develop their skills, debunking the misperception that those without a high school diploma are lazy or simply disengaged in education.<sup>20</sup>

When asked how learning new things makes them feel, those surveyed frequently described feeling excited, successful, and confident. Negative emotions were much less common, though a sizeable minority reported feeling anxious or stressed, especially younger adults, women, and adults with reported learning differences.

### POSITIVE EMOTIONS TOWARDS LEARNING



### NEGATIVE EMOTIONS TOWARDS LEARNING

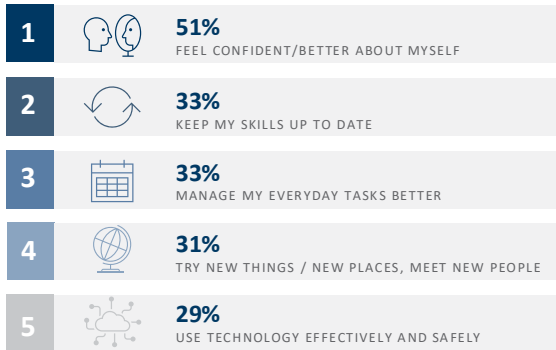


**51% of respondents consider increased self-confidence to be a top benefit of learning.** Secondary benefits include staying current with skills and better managing personal tasks. In a professional setting, improving productivity and collaboration with colleagues are key benefits.

Respondents emphasized the wide range of benefits from more education, ranging from expanding their sense of agency and capabilities to setting an example for their children. While career benefits were mentioned, most have a more holistic view of the benefits of education. In a focus group, one potential learner stated, “I think that the more skills I learn, the more my son will follow that, and I’ll be a positive role model.”

However, professional development still matters. Our [Nationwide Employer Survey Report](#) showed how low literacy impacts team morale, efficiency, and productivity. Nearly 9 in 10 employers say that they have employees unable to reach their full potential due to low literacy, and 3 in 4 say low literacy directly leads to lower productivity. In this study of adults with low literacy, respondents validate this by pointing to the ability to get more work done as a top professional aspiration.

### PERSONAL POTENTIAL



### PROFESSIONAL POTENTIAL

*Excluding those for whom the question does not apply*



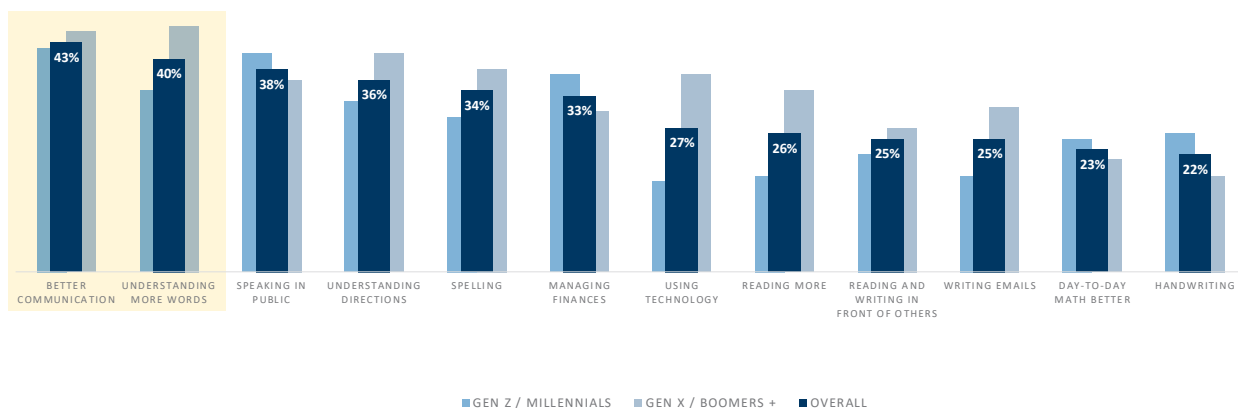
## Understanding of “literacy” differs based on individual needs and desires

Employers and policy influencers didn’t share the same idea of what literacy means. [To most employers](#), adult literacy means basic reading and writing skills, as well as comprehension of written material and functional literacy. [Policy influencers](#), on the other hand, primarily associate adult literacy with English literacy, financial literacy, and digital literacy.

Adults with low literacy also have a variety of ideas about what literacy means to them and which skills they most want to learn. Some of these, such as public speaking, are not currently addressed in adult learning programs and should be explored further by program administrators for potential inclusion in their curriculum. Older adults with low literacy seek to improve a wider array of skills compared to younger learners, with better communication ranking as the top skill (in line with the near [two-thirds of employers](#) who say the ability to listen carefully and speak clearly are very important skills for employees).

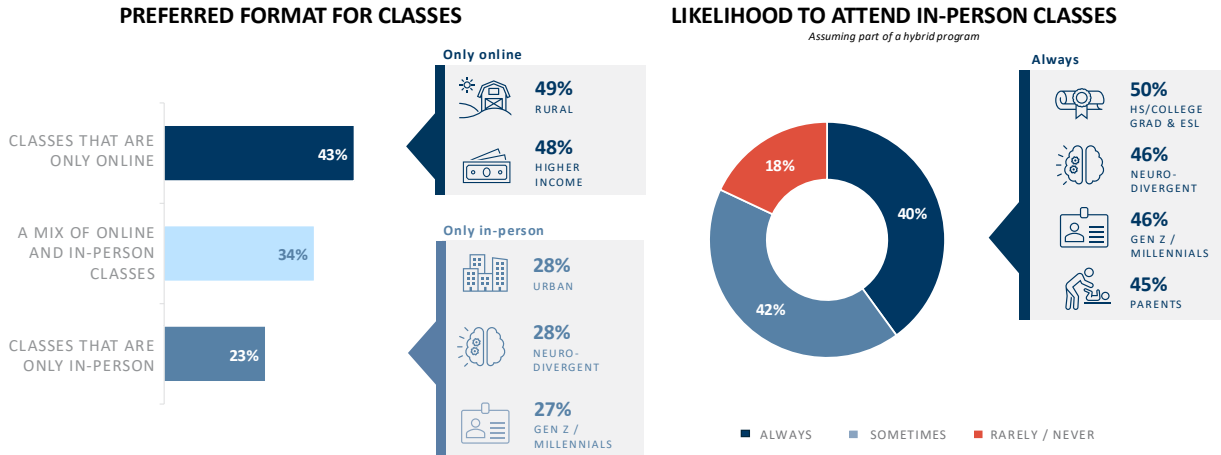
Younger adults with low literacy particularly want to improve public speaking and finances, while older adults with low literacy emphasize digital literacy. Interestingly, 1 in 5 want to improve penmanship – a point that also came up multiple times during the focus groups.

### TOP SKILLS ADULT LEARNERS WANT TO IMPROVE

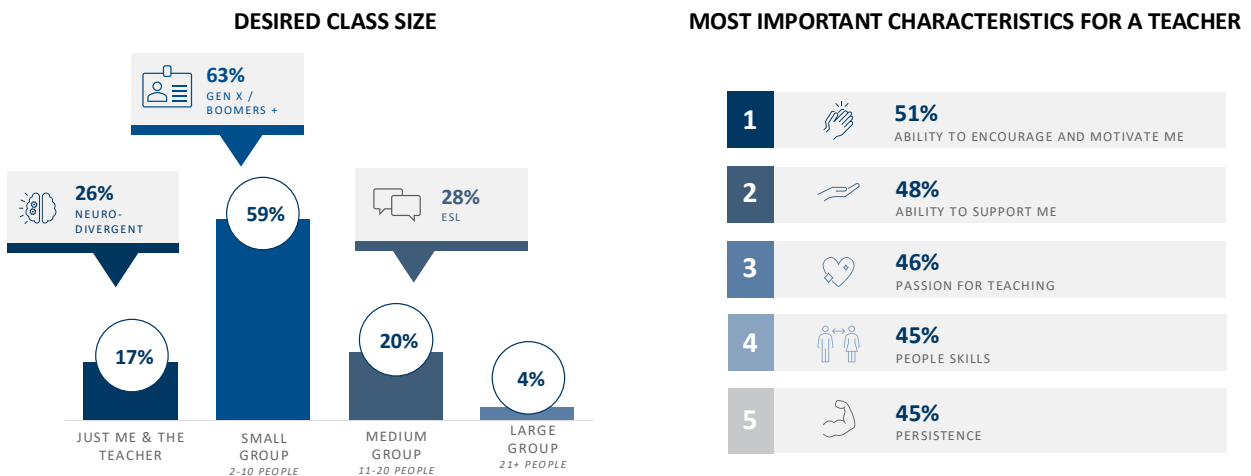


### Takeaway 3 – Potential Learners Favor Flexible Classroom Options to Accomodate Their Needs

Preferences of adults with low literacy vary based on factors such as location, education level, and age. Even so, there are evident patterns across all groups – the primary thread being a desire for flexibility. **The majority of participants prefer a hybrid (in-person and online) or online-only classroom, with few preferring in-person only classes.**



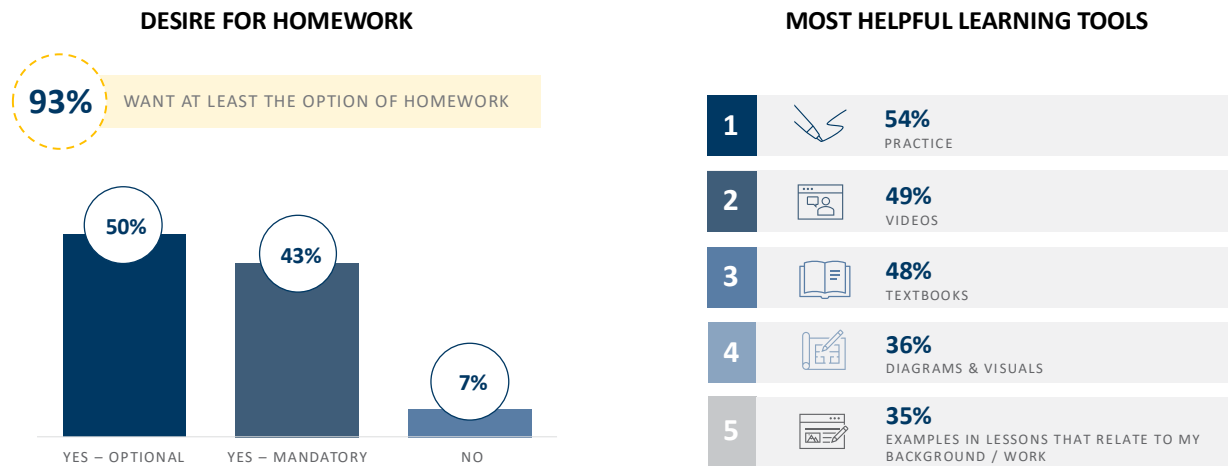
Overall, adults with low literacy would like a smaller group of students in their classes (between 2 to 10 people), enabling more interaction with a supportive teacher. However, those who live in rural areas tend to favor independent study, while those in suburban areas prefer a mix of self-directed and teacher-led learning. Adults with reported learning differences and parents are most likely to prefer having a teacher.



Adults with low literacy generally prefer programs lasting between 5 to 8 weeks, with the **ideal class length ranging from 30 minutes to two hours**. When it comes to frequency, most learners prefer at least one class per week, with two to three classes per week being ideal. Preferences for scheduling are divided between weekday-only and mixed weekday-weekend options, but the study found that most favor classes in the late morning or early evening.

## Learners Want Homework, but Many Believe it Should be Optional

Both focus groups and the survey showed that across generations, adults with low literacy recognize the value of homework in solidifying skills and enabling practice. Desire for homework to be optional reflects this audience’s need for flexibility. In fact, the simplest learning tools—more time to practice, video content, and textbooks—are seen as most helpful.



## VI. Now What? How We Take Action

The data is in. [The National Action Plan for Adult Literacy](#), convened by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy and implemented by ALL IN, puts forth a national, coordinated strategy to ensure that every adult can easily access high-quality, effective support to improve their reading, writing, digital, and numeracy skills. As noted in the plan, “achieving transformative improvement in adult literacy in the U.S. will require fundamental changes in the way literacy support is shaped, funded, and delivered – along with major infusions of new resources, energy, and innovation.”

Grounded in partnership, evidence-based practices, and practical solutions, this collaborative plan has three overarching, mutually reinforcing goals related to 1) access, 2) quality, and 3) uptake for literacy programs and services. This research brings to light critical perspectives of adults who are navigating everyday life with low literacy, making clear the need to invest in new program design and outreach methods to more effectively reach those in need of upskilling.

**Here’s what leaders across the field can do to make a difference in the lives of adults with low literacy.**

### Adult Education Providers

Program directors, providers, and educators now have more information to design and tailor their services according to the needs and aspirations of adults with low literacy. Now is the time to prioritize program visibility, value, and sustainability to secure greater investment and reach more learners. Primary takeaways include:

## 1. Tailor program design to learner preferences

- Design adult learning programs according to location. Learners in urban areas tend to prefer in-person classes, while those in rural communities favor online learning. Suburban learners typically gravitate toward a hybrid or Hyflex model, which includes online learning supplemented with in-person or live virtual sessions to foster connection and support.<sup>21</sup> In all locations, it's effective to have a supportive, well-trained teacher available with some self-paced learning opportunities.
- Determine the needs, goals, and preferences of adults with low literacy in your community and ensure that educators and volunteers are equipped to meet diverse learner needs using evidence-based assessment and instructional practices. Continuously adjust the class model to lead to the best outcomes.

## 2. Run learner-centric campaigns to raise awareness of adult learning programs and their capacity to change lives, as resources allow

- Make it simple for potential students to understand your programs. Offer clear descriptions of what each program entails, including cost, class descriptions, schedules, time commitments, registration processes, necessary documents, and any required testing. Enhance this information with short videos featuring students and teachers sharing their experiences. By clearly communicating the value and expectations of your program, you'll attract informed candidates better prepared to succeed.
- Demonstrate the benefits of learning through real-life success stories. Testimonials from those with similar backgrounds, and those who have graduated from programs, are most impactful when it comes to motivating learners to enroll. For example, the Dollar General Literacy Foundation and the Ad Council released a series of [public service advertisements](#) to inspire adults to complete their high school diploma or equivalency, for themselves and their communities.
- Highlight the personalized learning opportunities offered by adult learning programs and increase familiarity with program offerings. People have different ideas of what online learning means (apps vs. video-based classes), so be clear when you reference this. Where possible, provide multiple options to increase participation – some learners may benefit from an easy-to-use app when they are unable to attend class.
- Meet learners where they are through strategic marketing placements on platforms like Google (i.e., search ads), Instagram and other social media, YouTube, streaming services, and audio advertising via channels like local radio or podcasts to amplify visibility and engagement within key markets.
- Leverage national campaign toolkits, language, and resources to “get on the map” as an available program in your community, such as the [#MoveAheadwithAdultEd campaign](#) from the Coalition on Adult Basic Education and the National Association of State Directors of Adult Education.
- Register your program with the [National Literacy Directory](#), provided by the National Center for Families Learning and ProLiteracy, and generously sponsored by the Dollar General Literacy Foundation, to assist potential students and volunteers in locating programs in your community.

## 3. Address enrollment blockers and social-emotional barriers head-on

- Stop using terms like “Adult Basic Education” and other words, slogans, or messages that do not resonate with potential adult learners. Apply what the Florida Literacy Coalition calls a [customer service-based approach](#) to understand the motivations, concerns, and assumptions that factor into learner decision making. Seek adult learners’ advice on how to effectively reach others in need of adult education services in your community.<sup>22</sup>

- Highlight free or low-cost program enrollment upfront. Adults with low literacy are often concerned about the cost, so emphasizing affordable or free options helps eliminate a major barrier and encourages enrollment.
- Understand that fear of failure and negative past experiences with learning, especially among young adults and those with learning differences, can deter enrollment. Create welcoming, judgement-free environments that emphasize progress over perfection and celebrate small wins aligned to individual learning goals.

## Policy Influencers

It's time to push for policies that prioritize accessible learning opportunities and support systems that empower adults to break the cycle of low literacy. Here's how you can make a difference in this critical national issue:

### **1. Increase public awareness and promote investment in adult education and family literacy programs**

- Advocate for local, state, and federal funding to be allocated specifically for marketing and outreach efforts. Currently, these funds are often restricted from being used for promotional purposes, which limits the ability to raise awareness about available programs. Targeted campaigns that reach those most likely to express interest in these initiatives, particularly younger adults and those with reported learning differences, will help break down barriers to enrollment.
- Secure funding for and access to high-quality education research, data, statistics, and evaluations in adult education, including research on increased self-confidence and other outcomes among adults with low literacy. Promote evidence-based instructional and assessment practices across the field. This data would highlight the positive impact of these programs and demonstrate the importance of supporting the personal and professional growth of adults with low literacy. Support preparation of more Americans for in-demand, high-earning jobs through Integrated Education and Training (IET), providing foundational skills, workforce preparation, and training for adults, including adults with reported learning differences. Build capacity of adult education programs and teachers to serve more adult learners, ensuring that they have access to tailored learning environments and resources that meet their unique needs.

### **2. Promote flexible learning models**

- Encourage the adoption of hybrid learning programs with self-paced online components and flexible class schedules. This will help learners manage their time effectively and reduce the fear of failure by allowing them to learn at their own pace.
- Ensure that adult educators have ongoing professional development programs, budget for technology in the classroom, and access to broadband for learners.

### **3. Incorporate literacy into broader workforce and economic policies**

- Guarantee foundational digital skills for all, including upskilling for current workers and rapid re-skilling for un- or under-employed individuals. Prioritize education-industry partnerships that connect workers with small businesses and employers in key industries.<sup>23</sup>
- Tie adult foundational literacy efforts to workforce development strategies, emphasizing the role of improved communication, comprehension, and digital skills in boosting employability and economic growth.



## Employers

Employers play a significant role in helping to train adults with low literacy. [ALL IN's employer research study](#) found that 84% of employers are willing to provide general literacy training for their employees. Here's how you can help:

### **1. Integrate learning programs into the workplace**

- Offer hybrid learning opportunities tailored to employee schedules, such as short classes before or after work, or provide time during work hours for self-paced learning. This approach helps employees improve literacy without sacrificing work-life balance, and develops the long-term talent pipeline your organization will benefit from.

### **2. Partner with adult education and literacy programs**

- Collaborate with local, state, and national literacy programs, such as [COABE's Behind Every Employer program](#), to receive free or low-cost resources, including training materials, on-site teachers, and access to online learning tools for employees.
- Provide access to distance learning programs for employees, such as the [ProLiteracy partnership with Guild Career Opportunity Platform](#).
- Consider funding and facilitating partnerships between adult learning organizations and technology companies that have the infrastructure and tools to develop and launch effective hybrid or online adult learning programs at scale.

### **3. Create a supportive learning environment**

- Foster a culture where learning is celebrated. Recognize achievements in ways that resonate with employees, such as personalized acknowledgment or supportive and direct feedback, rather than public awards (which are less likely to motivate adults with low literacy).
- Incentivize skills development for employees with internal career pathways and promotion opportunities, increased wages, and/or other benefits.

## Current and Past Learners

For those who have received the education they need to succeed in their personal and professional lives – now you can help others whose position you were once in:

### **1. Share your story**

- Inspire others to take the first step toward improving their own skills through sharing your journey as an adult learner. Whether through program testimonials, community events, or social media, you can encourage others to overcome their fears and pursue learning opportunities. Personal stories help create a sense of community and show that success is achievable, even in the face of challenges. Your stories will also help organizations that might fund learning programs understand that their investments would be worthwhile.

### **2. Stay connected with your teacher or program manager**

- Share your thoughts with your teacher or program manager about what methods or resources worked well for you and what could be improved. Honest feedback helps programs evolve to meet learners' needs more effectively, making future learning experiences even more impactful.

## Adults Who Want to Improve Literacy Skills

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To get started on your learning journey, follow these steps:

### 1. Explore flexible learning options

- Look for a program that fits with your schedule. It could be self-paced learning, small-group or large-group classes, or one-on-one time with a teacher. There are options available to you. Learn more at the [National Literacy Directory](#).

### 2. Ask questions about costs and benefits

- Don't let the fear of high costs stop you from exploring learning programs. Many adult education programs are free, low-cost, or offer free resources. Ask about available programs in your area at your local library or career one-stop [centers](#).
- Talk to friends, coworkers, or family members about their education and workforce goals. What steps did they take to develop their skills? Find out what programs or supports, like childcare or free access to high-speed internet or digital devices, for example, may be available.

### 3. Build confidence through learning

- Improving reading and digital skills can increase confidence and sense of well-being, and open new opportunities in both work and life.
- Learning is a journey – take the first step, even if it feels challenging.

## VII. The Path Forward

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Adults with low literacy have told us what they need. Now, it's time to act.

Collectively, it's our duty to do a better job of addressing and investing in this colossal issue. By spreading awareness and providing access to adult learning programs that are equipped for success, we strengthen our economy, improve health outcomes, create better job prospects, and support safer, more equitable communities. Most importantly, we help break generational cycles of poverty and low literacy, offering a path forward for individuals and families to build a brighter future.

The key to a more prosperous tomorrow for our communities, our workforce, and our nation is in our hands. To tackle today's biggest societal challenges, we first need to address the nation's low levels of adult literacy. Literacy means more than words. For our progress, it means everything.

### Learn more about our work:

[Nationwide Employer Survey Report](#)

[DC Policy Influencer Survey Report](#)

[ALL IN - The Adult Literacy and Learning Impact Network](#)

## VIII. Acknowledgements

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