

Jobless dropouts head back to school for basic skills

By Christopher Connell
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LOUISVILLE -- The push to return unemployed workers to the nation's payrolls is hamstrung by a decades-old legacy of poor schooling that has left tens of millions of Americans without the basic reading or math skills necessary for today's jobs.

They are people such as Sherry Carr, 56, a high school dropout who spent years working at printing presses but struggled to stay employed after that industry went into decline. She recently found work delivering food trays to patients in a hospital here, but the job came with a catch: To keep it, the hospital required that she get a GED. Even such basic tasks as knowing which patients are diabetic require an ability to read.

That's why Carr spends two mornings a week in a computer lab at the Jefferson County public schools' Ahrens Learning Center with adults half her age. "I'm getting close. My math is what I'm doing here. That's my worst subject," Carr said.

Adult education classes, a patchwork system operated by public schools, colleges and charities, have space for only a small fraction of those who need help learning to read, passing the GED test or learning basic English.

Enrollment shrank by nearly half a million, to 2.3 million, during a budget freeze imposed by the Bush administration. Resources aren't the only problem. It typically takes years to move from basic literacy to college or career training. Few adults stick with it that long. In the 2008-09 school year, fewer than 48,000 entered postsecondary education or training.

"It's a crisis in the U.S. workforce," said Cheryl King, president of Kentucky Wesleyan College and head of the National Commission on Adult Literacy, which in 1984 called for "a fundamental transformation" of adult education. The commission said the country needs to enroll five times as many adults in education and job-training classes as capacity dictates.

The Obama administration and Congress boosted job training in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and the \$500 million adult education budget was increased for the first time in years. Because of the federal deficit, it seems unlikely that more money will be spent to address the shortage of adult education classes.

About 1 million adult students are in basic literacy and math classes, 1 million are taking English as a second language, and 300,000 are dropouts seeking their GEDs. Some take classes at night while working during the day, often at low pay. Some are dislocated workers, welfare recipients or prison inmates.

The government's 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy estimated that 30 million Americans lack basic literacy skills. Education Secretary Arne Duncan says that the number of people in need of more schooling and training -- counting dropouts, the unemployed, immigrants who speak little English and middle-aged workers in declining industries -- is three times as large.

"We can either retain our people or face the potential burden of a large and growing underclass," he told the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in November.

Jobs might not be waiting for those who acquire these skills. The unemployment rate in Kentucky is 10.7 percent, higher than the 9.7 percent national figure. In the District of Columbia, it is 12 percent, in Maryland 7.5 percent and in Virginia 6.9 percent.

Carr is fortunate to be living in a city and state that aggressively try to give adults who failed school the first time -- or were failed by the schools -- a second chance. Kentucky's adult education programs have been hailed as a model for teaching job skills and the language of the workplace, not just grammar and math. An innovative partnership between Louisville's public schools and its biggest community college allows adults to brush up on basic skills and take college courses at the same time.

Kentucky, worried about the loss of its mining and manufacturing base, began bolstering its adult education programs a decade ago. It ranked 44th among the states in a national literacy assessment in 1992; by 2003, the latest assessment, it had moved up to 27th.

Still, the state has a long way to go. Nearly 1 million Kentucky residents struggle with poor reading skills, and one in five adults lacks a high school diploma, according to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

The Jefferson County public schools' adult education program offers free classes at more than 50 locations, teaching basic literacy and math skills as well as GED test preparation and job skills.

Barney H. Crawford, 50, bikes to an elementary school where he is learning to read. He was a horse walker at Churchill Downs before a motorist ran a red light and hit him in 2008. Now he's hoping to learn enough to get a hospital job like Carr's. "I'd like to have some kind of skill," he said. "I ain't going to walk no more horses. You've got to walk horses seven days a week."

Some adult education classes are held on the downtown campus of Jefferson Community and Technical College. The college used to offer remedial classes to adults who scored at an eighth-grade level or below in reading and math on placement exams. But students had to pay tuition and, if needy, use up some of their eligibility for federal higher-education assistance.

When Julie Scoskie, director of adult and continuing education for the Jefferson County public schools, approached the college almost a decade ago about teaming up on developmental education duties, the college was apprehensive about losing tuition money. Members of the faculty were concerned that adults who were referred to Scoskie's free classes would never find their way back.

That changed after Anthony Newberry took over as president of the college in 2002. Newberry, who holds a doctorate in history, started his own college education in remedial classes. He told Scoskie that helping students save money was a "no-brainer."

Today, 750 students a year who apply to the college are referred to those classes. Nearly 90 percent of the adults progress to the college's higher-level remedial classes. Those students tend to stick around longer, and the college's enrollment has risen, although educators do not know how many will end up with degrees and in higher paying jobs.

"The partnership is very cost-efficient for us," Newberry said. "We do very well with developmental students who may be at the 10th- or 11th-grade level but pitifully with students who have serious basic skills deficiencies."

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