

David A. Jolliffe
Professor of English, Brown Chair in English Literacy
University of Arkansas
331 Kimpel Hall, 218 McIlroy Street
Fayetteville, AR 72701
479-575-2289, djollif@uark.edu, www.uark.edu/literacy

The Brown Chair Town Hall Meeting: A Roadmap for Understanding and Addressing Literacy in Arkansas

On September 15, 2006, nearly 100 Arkansans met at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville to consider and propose ways to address one of the state's most pressing and all-encompassing economic, social, and educational problems: literacy. Convened by the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy, the meeting was billed as a statewide "Town Hall Meeting on Literacy." Attendees at this meeting included representatives of government agencies, adult basic education programs, local literacy councils, public schools and universities, community councils, and child-care centers. The attendees included both administrators/policy makers from these agencies and teachers/tutors who are involved in direct provision of literacy instruction to adults, school students, and pre-school youngsters. These dedicated participants addressed four major questions:

- What do we know about literacy in Arkansas?
- What do we need to know about literacy in Arkansas?
- What are we doing about literacy in Arkansas?
- What do we need to do about literacy in Arkansas?

This report summarizes the points made in response to these four questions. Ideally, this report will serve three functions:

- A. It will guide the future work of the Office of the Brown Chair in English Literacy, which, since 2005, has been working to foster research, teaching, and outreach activities in four areas of literacy: general adult literacy, literacy and work, academic literacy K-16, and family literacy.
- B. It will bring together literacy professionals and volunteers in adult basic education, local literacy councils, elementary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, and child care agencies so they might unify their efforts.
- C. It will inform governmental officials at the national, state, and local level and representatives of philanthropic organizations about the need to support efforts to improve literacy in Arkansas.

How the Town Hall Meeting Operated

The meeting employed a technique, called "inkshedding," that allowed all participants to contribute to discussions of the four questions listed above. In two groups of four, the members of the Brown Chair in English Literacy Advisory Committee each offered brief remarks related to the questions. After each set of remarks, participants were asked to

write for five minutes, making note of points with which they agreed or disagreed or about which they would like to raise further questions or modify the discussion. Each participant then passed his or her response to another participant, who read the response and then wrote his or her own response to it. This process was repeated a second time, after which the response was returned to its original author, who drew together in a summative comment his or her own ideas with those offered by the other two participants. The inkshed process, thus, facilitated a room-wide “discussion” of the issues raised.

The Brown Chair in English Literacy Advisory Committee consists of nine people—five from Arkansas and four from out of state—who bring great experience and expertise to the areas of literacy work included in the Brown Chair in English Literacy Initiative: general adult literacy, literacy and work, academic literacy K-16, and family literacy. The Advisory Committee includes the following:

- Jim Allen, executive director of the Ozarks Literacy Council
- Deborah Brandt, professor of English at the University of Wisconsin at Madison
- Jo Davis, literacy specialist for the Delta Academic Initiative
- Judy Fox, curriculum specialist, Washington County (Maryland) Schools
- Eli Goldblatt, associate professor of English, Temple University
- Fitz Hill, president, Arkansas Baptist College
- Philip Less, ESL director, Arkansas Department of Workforce Education
- Beverly Moss, professor of English, Ohio State University
- Patti Williford, director of the Southwest Arkansas Migrant Education Cooperative

Seven of the members participated in the September 15 meeting; Jo Davis was detained by a family emergency, and Beverly Moss was recovering from surgery. Following the two 90-minute inkshed sessions and 90-minute workshops led by six of the seven participating Advisory Committee members (Allen and Brandt on literacy and work; Fox on academic literacy for struggling readers; Goldblatt on literacy, the arts, and community activism; Less on adult literacy for English-as-a-second-language learners; and Williford on family literacy), three additional literacy experts—Bobbie Biggs, professor of vocational and technical education at the University of Arkansas; Marie Bruno, executive director of the Arkansas Literacy Councils; and Deborah Coffman, K-12 literacy coordinator for the Arkansas Department of Education—offered comprehensive comments about the entire day’s activities.

The following sections, therefore, summarize the points raised in all these venues: the Advisory Committee members’ remarks, the inkshed discussions, the workshops, and the summative comments.

What Do We Know About Literacy in Arkansas?

We know that the National Adult Literacy (NALS) defines *adult literacy* as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one’s goals, and develop one’s knowledge and potential,” and we know that NALS describes adults’ literacy abilities in five categories: advanced, proficient, intermediate, basic, and below basic. According to 1996 data from CASAS, an independent demographic organization approved by the U. S. Departments of Education and Labor, **22% of adults in Arkansas over age 25 were literate at the below basic level and 56% were literate at below basic and basic levels.** These figures compare as follows with the nation and with the states that border Arkansas:

- Nation: 14% at below basic, 43% at basic and below basic
- Louisiana: 28% at below basic, 61% at basic and below basic
- Mississippi: 30% at below basic, 64% at basic and below basic
- Missouri: 17% at below basic, 46% at basic and below basic
- Oklahoma: 18% at below basic, 47% at basic and below basic
- Tennessee: 21% at below basic, 53% at basic and below basic

We know that the literacy levels are not equally and evenly distributed throughout the state. Consider, for example, the following comparison of six counties in the Arkansas Delta—Lee, Phillips, St. Francis, Monroe, Desha, and Chicot—with two counties in Northwest Arkansas—Benton and Washington.

- Lee County: 45% literate at below basic level, 88% at basic and below basic level
- Phillips County: 42% literate at below basic level, 83% at basic and below basic level
- St. Francis County: 38% literate at below basic level, 78% at basic and below basic level
- Monroe County: 37% literate at below basic level, 79% at basic and below basic level
- Desha County: 35% literate at below basic level, 74% at basic and below basic level
- Chicot County: 43% literate at below basic level, 85% at basic and below basic level

- Benton County: 15% literate at below basic level, 45% at basic and below basic level
- Washington County: 13% literate at below basic level, 43% at basic and below basic level

We know there is a correlation between literacy levels and such demographic indicators as population change, poverty, and educational attainment. For example, consider again the entire state, the six selected counties in the Arkansas Delta, and the two selected counties in Northwest Arkansas:

- The state of Arkansas has gained 4% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living below the federal poverty level is 15.8. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 9.4.
- Lee County has lost 6.8% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 29.9. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 16.9.
- Phillips County has lost 8.1% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 32.7. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 17.3.
- St. Francis County has lost 3.8% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 27.5. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 13.4.
- Monroe County has lost 8.2% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 27.5. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 15.3.
- Desha County has lost 4.4% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 28.9. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 14.9.
- Chicot County has lost 5.9% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 28.6. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 15.4.
- Benton County has gained 21.9% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 5.7. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 7.8.
- Washington County has gained 14.4% of its population since 2000. The percentage of families living under the federal poverty level is 9.5. The percentage of adults whose highest level of education is eighth grade is 7.7.

We know, according to the U.S. Census 2000, that of the nearly 2 million Arkansans over age 18, more than 491,000, or nearly 25% of the adult population, do not have a high school diploma.

We know that of the Arkansas population age 25 and older, 162,464, or 9.4% of adults, have less than an eighth-grade education.

We know that Limited English Proficient adults in Arkansas need to learn English as a second language, that 89,000 adults in Arkansas speak a language other than English at home, and that 43,000 of them speak English less than very well.

We know that the Hispanic population in Arkansas increased from 19,000 in 1990 to more than 86,000 in 2000, a 300% increase in ten years, and that current estimates show this population to be approximately 127,000 as of 2005, a 50% increase in five years.

This population trend also leads to an increase in the number of adults who cannot read, write, or speak English well.

We know that 50% to 80% of students in Adult Basic Education may have learning disabilities, although many have not been diagnosed.

We know that the state of Arkansas has not increased its funding for adult education since 1992.

We know that workplaces in Arkansas—businesses, industries, government agencies, not-for-profit organizations—are becoming more literacy-intensive, as are workplaces throughout the United States. More and more workplaces are requiring more and more reading and writing from their employees.

We know that literacy is a moving target: that the abilities to read, write, and speak well in 2006 are not the same abilities required in years or decades past, that literacy is a *social* activity requiring adults and school children to talk about their reading and writing, to make knowledge via literacy, not simply to consume it.

We know that there is no “silver bullet” to address issues of literacy and illiteracy in Arkansas, that no teaching or tutoring package offered by any vendor will substitute for having excellent, trained, and well-paid teachers and tutors helping adults and children learn to read, write, and speak effectively.

We know that illiteracy can be an invisible problem—that both adults and children are hesitant to admit their difficulties with reading, writing, and speaking and that adults in particular are adept at hiding their difficulties with literacy.

We know that improved literacy generally leads to higher employment rates and earnings for workers. At the national level, there is a \$28,000 difference in the annual earnings of a below basic reader and a proficient reader.

We know that low literacy levels lead to higher health costs. According to the National Academy on an Aging Society, around \$73 billion annually of unnecessary health-care costs can be attributed to poor literacy.

We know that low literacy levels are related to crime and that incarceration is considerably more expensive than literacy education. The National Institute for Literacy estimates that 70% of inmates in state and federal prisons are literate at the below basic and basic levels. Social scientists estimate the annual cost to maintain a prisoner is at least \$28,000. A reasonable estimate to provide literacy instruction for one year to an adult is \$2,000.

We know that there are significant literacy gaps in Arkansas: a poverty gap (students whose parents did not graduate from high school, students who have very young parents, students whose families are poor), an ethnic gap, and a gender gap.

We know that the stronger the relationship between families and the school is, the higher the student achievement in all subject areas, including literacy, is.

What Do We Need to Know About Literacy in Arkansas?

We need to know, in the particular contexts in Arkansas in which literacy is studied and taught—adult basic education centers, local literacy centers, educational institutions, workplaces, and child-care agencies, how different levels of *literacy*, *illiteracy*, and *aliteracy* (the last being an ability but a lack of willingness or motivation to read and write) are defined.

We need to know what the desired outcomes for improved literacy instruction are. Is there a comprehensive plan for economic development in the state? Are there regional and/or community plans for development? Does the state have a goal for improving levels of educational attainment? Is there a goal for high-school graduation rates? Is there a goal for post-secondary enrollment? How does literacy fit into all these plans and goals?

We need to know more about how literacy “circulates” in Arkansas. Typically, schools and homes are seen as the “providers” of literacy and workplaces are seen as “consumers” of literacy. Is there any way we can begin to see workplaces as *sources* of literacy expertise that can be shared with parents, families, and schools?

We need to know how many adults in Arkansas who need literacy instruction do not take advantage of adult basic education programs and local literacy councils, whether they even know such services exist, and how to motivate them to seek the help they need.

We need to know more about the relationships between literacy and demographic variables, particularly about how to break the poverty-literacy connection.

We need to know why gaps in literacy levels related to poverty, ethnicity, and gender continue to resist closing.

We need to know more about the levels of literacy adults who are learning English have in their native language and about the relationship between first-language literacy and second-language literacy.

We need to know more about the nature and scope of problems encountered by English-as-a-second-language speakers in schools and workplaces.

We need to know the number of people with learning disabilities in Arkansas who need literacy instruction and the specific relationship of literacy acquisition to learning disabilities.

We need to know whether students struggling with reading and writing are getting *more high quality* literacy instruction: more time with excellent teachers, extra reading groups with excellent teachers, more time for reading and writing.

We need to know if Title I instruction in local school districts is actually being used *in addition to* regular instruction, not *instead of* regular instruction.

We need to know whether students struggling with reading and writing are actually engaging more of their time in actual reading and writing, not being skilled, drilled, and killed with worksheets assigned and monitored by a paraprofessional, the least skilled teacher in any school or center.

We need to know if the six building blocks of reading are being taught effectively and evenly: phonemic awareness, phonics, the phonemic awareness-phonics relationship, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

We need to know whether struggling students are hissing and spitting at print that is at their frustration level (they can comprehend 80% of it or less) or whether they are being taught using texts with which they have enough command (90 to 95%) to actually learn.

We need to know whether teachers are asking really good questions about text they teach, questions that call for students to construct knowledge and engage higher-order thinking, rather than simply to reproduce the knowledge they encounter in the texts.

We need to know what constitutes effective parental involvement—that is, involvement that will act as a catalyst to change academic outcomes for students.

We need to know about the obstacles that keep parents from engaging their children in early learning experiences and continuing to support the child through the school-age years.

We need to know more about how parental involvement is perceived and demonstrated within different sub-groups (economic and ethnic) and cultures.

What Are We Doing About Literacy in Arkansas?

Arkansas' adult literacy providers offer a variety of programs to meet diverse educational needs, ranging from basic reading, writing, math, and ESL to workplace education. Every adult education instructor has a state teaching license. Every literacy council tutor has been certified in tutor training. All classes and one-on-one tutoring are offered free of charge and on a flexible basis that allows students to start and end when they want and to work around their job schedule.

Arkansas adult literacy providers include 52 adult education centers and 54 local literacy councils. These programs have an impressive outreach as the following statistics demonstrate:

- More than 50,000 adults are served each year, with more than 32,000 enrolled in at least 12 hours of instruction.
- Half of the enrolled students improve their reading or math skills by two or more grade levels each year.
- More than 7,000 Arkansans receive their Arkansas High School Diploma by passing the GED tests each year. Arkansas has one of the highest GED pass rates (86 percent) in the country and is the only state to provide the GED tests free to its residents.
- About 5,000 students (16 percent) are studying English as a Second Language (ESL). Over the past 10 years, Hispanic enrollment and ESL in adult education has tripled.
- Nearly 7,500 goals set by students in Arkansas' adult literacy program were met in 2005 and 2006 fiscal years. The Adult Education Section reports that the state exceeded all national averages for educational gains and student goals.

Arkansas receives \$6 million in federal funding under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act. Arkansas legislation provides \$17 million for adult education. Therefore, the average amount of funding per adult student is only \$460 annually. The state appropriation for adult literacy education has not been raised by legislators since 1992.

In 2004-2005, over 1,500 Arkansans gave nearly 67,000 hours as volunteer literacy tutors and another 7,200 hours assisting their literacy councils. The value of a volunteer hour is \$17.55 (independent sector). Literacy volunteers gave over \$1.3 million dollars worth of service to their communities and their state.

Arkansas was the first state to initiate a teacher-training workshop in adult education and was a leader in developing teacher certification and graduate degrees in adult education. The Arkansas Adult Learning Resource Center continues to offer high quality teacher training workshops for adult educators.

Arkansas was one of the first states to develop training for teaching adults with learning disabilities.

The Arkansas Department of Workforce Education makes worker literacy programs available to businesses and industries to provide classes at the industry site to help employees upgrade their basic skills, learn English as a Second Language, and acquire their GED diplomas.

Workforce Alliance for Growth in the Economy™ (WAGE) is a work-based certificate program conducted by Adult Education in Arkansas. WAGE includes 112 basic skills competencies based on the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Needed Skills (SCANS) competencies, determined as essential by the nation's and Arkansas'

employers. WAGE offers three state-related certificates: industrial, clerical, and employability. The industrial and clerical certificates include all 112 competencies with additional requirements for the respective certificates. The employability certificate allows for local alliances' flexible choices of competencies and grade-level equivalency goals. Participating employers allow adult educators to perform literacy task analysis on positions that rely on foundation skills for maximized employee performance. Adult educators use the literacy task analyses to customize competencies within the context of local employers. Many participating employers agree to give added consideration to WAGE students in hiring; given all other candidate qualifications are equal. Some employers provide various incentives to encourage employees to complete WAGE: sign-on bonus, increase in hourly rates, release time for classes, or a prerequisite to be enrolled in next-level workplace training.

Eleven two-year colleges in Arkansas are currently offering Career Pathways courses, programs that vary in length and prepare students to enter such careers as nursing, emergency medical technology, computer maintenance, welding, automotive maintenance, and industrial maintenance. Literacy instruction in these courses is integrated with instruction in the particular craft or trade.

Correctional classes provide educational opportunities for inmates at regional facilities and the Department of Correction. Incarcerated adults can take adult basic education, general adult education, and ESL classes funded by the Adult Education Section.

The Arkansas Adult Learning Resource Center (AALRC) provides professional development training for adult education and literacy providers. Year-round opportunities exist for teachers and administrators to attend training sessions, and each summer, AALRC and the Adult Education Section hold the ESL Summer Institute, an intensive teacher training on practical ESL teaching techniques.

The K-12 Literacy Unit of the Arkansas Department of Education, working in conjunction with the Arkansas Educational Service Cooperatives, are developing expert teachers of literacy by offering staff development to school districts through the services of the reading specialists employed throughout the state. Professional development in literacy instruction is organized in the following four categories: Early Language Learning in Arkansas for grades K-1, Effective Literacy for Grades 2-4, the Smart Step Literacy Lab Project for grades 5-12, and Smart Step (grades 5-8) and Next Step (grades 9-12) Strategies for Literacy in the Content Areas.

The Arkansas Statewide Family Literacy Initiative allows state agencies, with both state and federal resources, to provide a multiplicity of services for pre-school children and their families. Family literacy programs are provided in collaboration with early childhood service providers and/or recipients of family literacy grants such as Even Start. Adult education programs provide the adult literacy component to the parent, grandparent, or guardians in the families involved. These adults upgrade their basic skills, learn English as a second language, acquire their GED diplomas, and/or earn WAGE certificates.

What Do We Need to Do About Literacy in Arkansas?

First and foremost, we need to bring together powerful representative from various sectors in the state—state government, local governments, adult basic education, literacy councils, colleges and universities, public and private K-12 schools, child-care centers, libraries, local economic councils, and philanthropic organizations—to foster an open, frank discussion about the nature and scope of literacy and illiteracy issues and problems in Arkansas and goals and plans to alleviate these problems.

We need to motivate state and local leaders in all ethnic communities to address issues and problems of literacy and illiteracy.

We need to use television, radio, and celebrity endorsements to increase public awareness of adult education and literacy services.

- Many potential students are not aware of the free literacy classes, ESL classes, GED testing, and other services provided at adult education centers and literacy councils.
- Many employers also are not aware of workplace education classes that can meet the literacy needs of their employees.
- Many people are not aware they can become volunteer literacy tutors and help change people's life by teaching them how to read

We need to help alleviate some of the biggest barriers to attending classes – the lack of adequate and affordable child care and public transportation

We need to increase state funding for adult literacy providers. The programs today are functioning with the same amount of grant money they have been receiving for 14 years without one single increase from legislators. As a result, program directors have been forced to not renew teachers' contracts, close satellite offices, and cut basic literacy services and classes just to make their budgets balance because of cost of living salary increases and inflation.

We need to build capacity for literacy tutoring and coaching throughout the state. Local literacy councils always need more tutors. Schools and child-care centers can benefit from the services of well-trained and conscientious literacy tutors.

We need to create better, higher-quality jobs in Arkansas that demand solid literacy abilities.

We need to tap into the rapidly evolving literacy of workplaces and share the literacy expertise being developed there with schools, families, and community organizations.

We need to work harder so that both pre-service and in-service teachers—in *all* content areas, not just English and language arts—in Arkansas can understand literacy more fully and become excellent teachers of it.

We need to bring together all the social service agencies that deal with clientele in Arkansas who may need literacy instruction and break down any “turf” divisions that might exist among these agencies.

We need to establish literacy connections with arts organizations. Children and adults in Arkansas should read and write about music they perform or hear, plays they perform in or attend, art they create, museums they attend.

We need to establish literacy connections with STEM (science, technology education, and mathematics) organizations, helping their leaders realize that science makes knowledge by writing about it, not simply by doing the science.

We need to encourage local governments, libraries, and not-for-profit organizations to sponsor more public literacy (for example, all-city reading campaigns), public readings, and public writing projects.

We need to connect literacy to sports, outdoor activities, and local culture in the cities and towns of Arkansas. Children and adults should read and write about these activities, not just do them.

We need to provide parents—both prospective and current ones—with effective models of parenting that stress developing rich, productive literacy abilities in homes and schools.

A Final Word

Change is hard and slow. The beautiful bonsai tree, which has become a work of art, was gently and slowly shaped in the hands of a skilled botanist, shaped in gentle increments with soft wire, pruned sparingly at both limb and root, and placed in a safe environment to grow more beautiful with each passing year. With each passing day, the botanist continues to plan for the tree’s evolving shape. We must be like the botanist with literacy in Arkansas.