

Literacy 2.0:

Building Adult Literacy in the Digital Era

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Jimmie Williams, CEO, Washington Literacy Center (left) with Hon. Zachary Parker, Ward 5 Member, D.C. Council (right)



Washington, D.C. is home to a diverse community of businesses, nonprofits, educational and political institutions and more that rely increasingly on digital platforms and workspaces, but the opportunities created through access to digital tools and services have yet to reach everyone in the nation's capital. Increasingly, digital literacy is an essential skill required to fully participate in D.C.'s cultural and commercial vibrancy. Confronting the digital divide requires supporting communities with the tools and skills they need to navigate the digital world as well as expanding access to technology and connectivity.

On October 6, 2022, the Washington Literacy Center (WLC) convened the Digital Literacy Roundtable during Digital Inclusion Week to discuss this problem and ways to address challenges people face when trying to access digital resources and participate in the digital economy — from older adults to those without a high school diploma to business owners, and so many more.

Difficulties accessing digital tools and services can impact everyone and pose a particular challenge for already marginalized communities. Research shows over 119,000 adults in the District read below the first-grade level, with 49.8% of that group residing in Wards 7 and 8; and it's estimated that 15% of households in D.C. lack a broadband subscription. Advocates believe the public, private and nonprofit sectors can work together to address barriers to both literacy and connectivity, thereby working to improve access to opportunity.

WLC invited a cross-section of leaders and advocates from across the District to join the roundtable. Their perspectives contributed to a picture of both persistent barriers to digital literacy and the opportunities for overcoming them.

The participants were:

Hon. Allister Chang,
Ward 2 Member, D.C. State Board
of Education

Kim Dreux Kelly,
Executive Director, Think Local First D.C.

Matthew Gayer, Co-Executive Director,
Catalogue for Philanthropy

Ashley Greenspan,
Public Affairs, Crown Castle

Ella Hanson, Legislative Aide to Hon. Brooke
Pinto, Ward 2 Member, D.C. Council

Benjamin Merrion, Literary Specialist, D.C.
Public Library

Hon. Zachary Parker, Ward 5 Member, D.C.
Council (at the time of the Roundtable,
serving as Ward 5 Member, D.C. State
Board of Education)

Jimmie Williams, CEO,
Washington Literacy Center

Roxanne Williams, Executive Director,
Urban Ed

Kim Dreux Kelly, Executive Director, Think Local First D.C., recalls the early days of the pandemic when she worked with retailers and restaurant owners to transition operations online.



“One week you learn mouse skills, the next week you use the keys on the keyboard, and the next week you just go online.”

Benjamin Merrion
Literary Specialist, D.C. Public Library

Illiteracy Isn't Always Obvious

Though traditional literacy is closely connected to digital literacy, digital literacy skills encompass much more than reading and writing. According to the American Library Association's Digital Literacy Task Force, digital literacy is the ability to use technology to find, evaluate, create and communicate information and requires both cognitive and technical skills.

In other words, everything from using social media to connect with friends and family to attending school in a remote learning environment to finding directions to a local pharmacy or vaccination site requires digital literacy. In today's increasingly online world, those lacking in digital literacy face additional barriers to essential activities such as finding a job or accessing healthcare, education or housing. Students, young adults, business owners and older populations can all struggle with digital literacy in different ways.

The Road to Digital Literacy

Panelists highlighted that achieving digital literacy is not always as simple as enrolling in the right class. For many, it is a journey that begins with developing an understanding of how technology works, progresses to getting utility out of it, and eventually evolves to critically evaluating the breadth of information available online.

Benjamin Merrion, Literary Specialist, D.C. Public Library, said people sign up for basic computer skills classes but quickly discover they first need computer comfort lessons. “One week you learn mouse skills, the next week you use the keys on the keyboard, and the next week you just go online. This comfort class has been our most popular one.”

Kim Dreux Kelly, Executive Director, Think Local First DC, recalls the early days of the pandemic when she worked with retailers and restaurant owners who had challenges transitioning their operations online.

This challenge was also clear across government efforts to support businesses through the transition to a remote and hybrid environment. Often, discomfort and embarrassment around lacking core digital competencies played as significant a role.

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“Connectivity bridges the gap from literacy to fluency.”

Ashley Greenspan
Public Affairs, Crown Castle

Ella Hanson, Legislative Aide to D.C. Councilmember Hon. Brooke Pinto noted, “When we tried to provide training to businesses, there was a shame about showing up... that’s why working with nonprofits and business improvement districts for business training is really important.” She added that the District is working on a comprehensive plan, expected in March 2023, to address this issue.

Advocates stressed that resources need to meet people where they are to generate the desired impact. Matthew Gayer, Co-Executive Director, Catalogue for Philanthropy, noted the irony of needing to go online to sign-up for digital literacy courses.

While government and community leaders work to address digital literacy gaps among adults, educators are focused on starting early to build a strong foundation of digital skills. Roxanne Williams, Executive Director, Urban Ed, pointed out the importance of incorporating digital skills in early education, emphasizing the need for technology to be integrated into teachers’ lessons to help prepare the workforce for 21st century opportunities.

Strengthening communities’ digital skills, however, is only one piece of the equation. Allister Chang, Ward 2 Member, D.C. State Board of Education, cited his time with the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, which breaks down access as people having the digital tools they need, tech skills to use the tools and adaptive media literacy (for example, being able to distinguish fact from opinion).

Access to Technology

Panelists discussed the importance of having access to technology to build digital literacy skills. D.C. Councilmember Hon. Zachary Parker highlighted a program launched by D.C. Public Schools (DCPS) Empowered Learners Initiative. This comprehensive three-year commitment aims to offer students in grades 3 –12 equitable access to technology through a 1:1 student-to-device ratio. The initiative also ensures DCPS educators are equipped with the skills and knowledge needed to support students in leveraging technology for learning.

Other populations face similar challenges. Hanson reported that during the pandemic “a lot of older folks reaching out to our office [in Ward 2] to say, ‘I don’t know how to get a COVID vaccine because I don’t have the internet at home.’”

Connectivity

Moving from digital literacy to fluency requires ubiquitous internet access. Jimmie Williams emphasized the connectivity issues throughout the District, while Ashley Greenspan, Public Affairs, Crown Castle, highlighted the importance of being able to get online from anywhere to reinforce the skills gained from digital literacy efforts, and to share those learnings with family and friends. She also highlighted that nearly 40% of Americans mostly get online via smartphones and that 80% of 911 calls are made on a cell phone, making wireless networks critical for connectivity and public safety.

Hanson raised the city’s public-private partnership to add 200 wireless access points where they are most needed according to data collected by the Office of the Chief Technology Officer, an effort she hopes can be expanded.



Ashley Greenspan, Public Affairs, Crown Castle (left) and Roxanne Williams, Executive Director, Urban Ed (right).

Solutions and Best Practices

To help people navigate the online world, WLC offers Digital Literacy for the Workplace, a 10-week in-person and online learning course to improve introductory computer and digital skills. Topics include Google and Microsoft tools for the workplace, maintaining a secure online presence, and details about digital certifications. Through its Connected by Good initiative, Crown Castle recently made a grant to WLC that will allow approximately 50 more adult students to participate in the digital literacy course.

Yet there are still hurdles. Hanson shared that during the transition to digital learning, DCPS reported its remote learning system for students was working, but users at home still struggled to access it, either due to technical difficulties or poor bandwidth. DCPS had a support center, but people often didn't know it existed. The DCPS Digital Equity Act of 2022, passed on October 21, 2022, seeks to address these challenges and mandates the creation of a student technology plan to close the digital divide locally and modernize school IT protocols, with feedback from families and educators.

More broadly, advocates say D.C. officials can take critical steps to ensure businesses and residents have world-class connectivity. For example, Gayer underscored that nonprofits look to the D.C. government to create policies and rules such as the Digital Equity Act to support the wireless infrastructure that is required to support this vision.

Greenspan explained that one easy way to build the networks we need quickly is to enact policies that allow for the use of innovative construction methods, with microtrenching as an example. Microtrenching uses a narrow cut in the roadway to install fiber. Once the fiber is installed at the bottom of the trench, it is backfilled and sealed. The entire process takes only hours, can be completed without road closures, and once filled, is barely noticeable.

Microtrenching is already utilized as a faster, safer and environmentally friendly way to expand connectivity. Last year, California enacted legislation that allows for the use of microtrenching for more efficient broadband deployment.

Dreux Kelly identified Wards 7 and 8 as perfect candidates for microtrenching, as the needs for connectivity are so great in those neighborhoods. Roxanne Williams concluded, "Wireless is king, and we can talk about all kinds of policies, but first we need to talk about the infrastructure that is needed... We need D.C. to lead."

As officials look to develop and roll out new programs to improve digital equity, inclusivity will be critical to the success their efforts. Trusted community-based partners can help surmount barriers by partnering with government to design and implement programs that meet communities where they are.

According to Councilmember Parker, empowering ambassadors in communities can help people at all levels of digital literacy feel safe, represented and welcome across programming and in the digital world. "Strengthening access allows us to reach everyone and reduce the stigma for those who are not digitally literate." Parker added that, at a basic level, D.C. needs to set a goal, create a plan and "let the people who are experts in the space do the work."

"Strengthening access allows us to reach everyone and reduce the stigma for those who are not digitally literate."

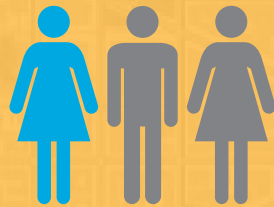
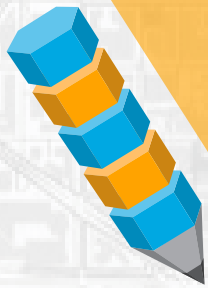
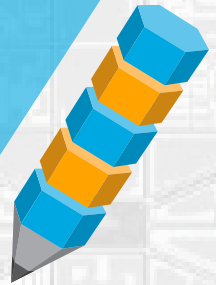
Hon. Zachary Parker
Ward 5 Member, D.C. Council

LEFT BEHIND: DC's LITERACY DIVIDE



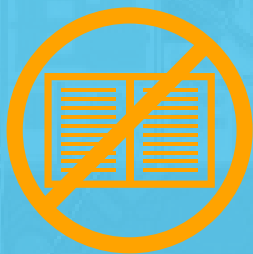
1 in 4^{*}
119,304

DC residents, ages 16 to 74,
are at or below Level 1
Reading Literacy



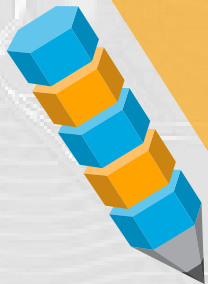
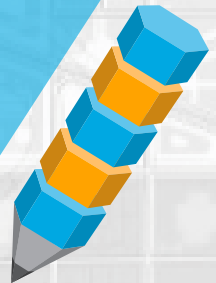
1 in 3^{*}
179,844

DC residents, ages 16 to 74,
are at or below Level 1
Math Literacy



49.8%

average illiteracy rates of
Ward 7 & 8 residents



17.4%

DC adults are
living in **POVERTY**

* In April 2020, the National Center for Education Statistics published the U.S. PIAAC Skills Map, an interactive mapping tool that allows users to access estimates of adult literacy and numeracy proficiency in all U.S. states and counties. These estimates are based on data collected in three rounds of U.S. PIAAC data collection (in 2012, 2014 and 2017) and data from the American Community Survey (2013-2017). Additional data compiled by Margaret Becker Patterson, PhD from Research Allies for Lifelong Learning at www.researchallies.org

The Washington Literacy Center (WLC) has been helping DC residents with the greatest barriers and fewest resources learn to read since 1963. Starting off as an all-volunteer initiative, the WLC has grown into a dynamic nonprofit focused on teaching skills necessary to thrive in the 21st century. We help students overcome some of the most difficult challenges including dyslexia, reading, math, and other barriers to education. We began more than 50 years ago with a mission: to raise the literacy level of adults in Washington, D.C., so they may function on the job, in the family and in society. For more information or to donate, please go to: www.washlit.org