



## STREET NEWS SERVICE

### **Illiteracy and Poverty Go Hand in Hand (Street Sense, USA)**

**Matt Siemer**

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Many of those living in poverty cannot read this article. That's a key consideration when thinking of things that force people into poverty in the first place, perhaps even above health care, affordable housing, low wages and the rising cost of food.

A study commissioned in 2003 and published last year by the State Education Agency estimates that just over one in three D.C.-area adults are functionally illiterate, far higher than the national average of roughly 14%.

Studies show that illiteracy has a direct relationship to poverty, and D.C. is no exception. District Wards 7 and 8 (which make up the Anacostia region) have both the highest rates of illiteracy and poverty.

Roughly half of adults in Anacostia qualify as functionally illiterate – 50.4% in Ward 7, 48.9% in Ward 8 – and they hold the highest poverty rates in D.C., one in four and one in three respectively. The SEA study notes that low literacy levels in many cases lead to either unemployment or jobs that pay below the poverty line with almost no access to promotions or benefits like health care.

Education experts emphasize that smaller class sizes and an increased ability to address learning disabilities are crucial to successfully raising reading levels, but factors outside the classroom must also be addressed.

Nancy Schwalb has taught in southeast D.C. for 13 years, and is also the artistic director for the D.C. Creative Writing Workshop based out of Hart Middle School in Anacostia.

“In order to begin to reverse the prevalence of illiteracy in D.C., we need to address the problem holistically,” Schwalb said. “Kids from very poor families have many other possible obstacles to overcome as well, including poor nutrition, poor health care, lack of sleep, and the difficulty that single working parents have in providing supervision after school. Some low-income parents do an absolutely amazing job raising healthy, well-educated children against

the odds, but those odds remain high.”

Once the child becomes an adult, illiteracy has dramatic long-term consequences as he or she tries to enter the job market. The State Education Agency study estimates that roughly 47% of job opportunities in the District require a college or advanced degree. For those with the lowest reading comprehension levels, a return to an educational facility is difficult and requires a major investment of time and money.

Stacey Smith is a social services case manager at Bread for the City, a D.C.-based direct-services nonprofit. Stacey runs the organization’s pre-employment program in Anacostia, and has witnessed how difficult it can be to overcome education barriers.

“Many of the people coming to our program need current skills for an entry level position,” Smith said. “Most don’t have a high school diploma or GED, don’t know how to build a resume, and almost all have to rebuild from the ground up.”

Smith notes that building community engagement and infrastructure is critical to beating the cycle of poverty.

“Continued illiteracy often boils down to a lack of support systems,” he said. “Getting an education is a big investment of time. If you don’t feel like anyone cares whether you fail or succeed, if you don’t have that kind of accountability, then you won’t work toward long-term success. People will find an easier way to fill that need for support like gangs, drugs, or under-the-table jobs.”

Schwalb agrees that the community is important. “Schools don’t operate in a vacuum,” she said. “Our children need better homes, neighborhoods, and opportunities to come home to when the school day is over. They need to be surrounded by concrete examples of the benefits of education, instead of just being punished for their problems in school.”

Reversing the high illiteracy rates in D.C. requires a number of improvements to low-income areas.

“Without improvements in housing, daycare and early childhood education, nutrition, recreational opportunities, neighborhood crime and violence, health care, and opportunities for higher education,” Schwalb said, “kids in poverty will always have an uphill battle.”

*Matt Siemer is the volunteer coordinator for local nonprofit Bread for the City, and has been active in literacy campaigns since 2004.*