

**Testimony before the Montgomery County Council
on the FY 2010 Operating Budget
By Rachel Glass, Executive Director
Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy
Wednesday, April 15, 2009**

President Andrews and Members of the County Council:

Good evening; my name is Rachel Glass, and I am the Executive Director of MCAEL, the Montgomery Coalition for Adult English Literacy.

Our organization has its roots in the work of this Council, and has succeeded because of your championship. On behalf of the Coalition and our Board of Directors, I want to thank you for your continued investment in MCAEL, and in our community's greatest asset: our people.

With resources, training, collaboration, and advocacy, MCAEL strengthens a vibrant, county-wide network of over 60 adult English literacy providers who collectively employ over 1,500 paid and volunteer instructors, and annually help over 20,000 adult learners improve their English literacy, language and workforce skills.

Thanks to your partnership, county-funded programs supported by MCAEL have enrolled more than 11,000 students in classes that build the language and literacy skills that are foundational to overcoming poverty and isolation.

During these times of hardship, as the distance grows ever wider between rich and poor, and between those who are connected and those who are isolated from the resources and opportunities of the community, a bridge is needed. And the building blocks of that bridge are language and literacy, which have the power to give each of us the tools to communicate and connect, and which offer the promise and hope of who we can be, individually, and as a community, when each of us reach our full potential. Literacy and language bridge the aspiration to make better lives for ourselves with the skills to be successful.

More than a single voice, we are the many voices of diverse Montgomery County residents who, with your support, can be employable, engaged, and empowered by literacy to reach their full potential.

And tonight, they share their thanks in a collection of letters that are part of the packet in front of you. You may not hear from these constituents often, but they are the parents, the workers, the future civic leaders of our community. They are grateful, for the opportunity to earn better wages, and communicate with a boss or coworkers on the job. To become more engaged in a child's education, or to read to a grandchild. To communicate their needs to a doctor. To enjoy the simple pleasures of owning a library card, speaking with a neighbor, or participating in civic life. These are the foundations of opportunity, and of a thriving community.

For many adult English language learners, community begins in the classroom. Whether learners come from Cameroon, Cambodia or Costa Rica, whether they are trained doctors in their home countries or stepping into a classroom for the very first time – the social fabric of community is knit through learning, building relationships with each other and with neighbors, and by connecting to the broader community safety net and to civic life– often for the very first time.

As a coalition, MCAEL enables diverse organizations that offer community-based classes to connect to each other, and to improve their capacity and quality by sharing tools, resources, and ideas. In this time of economic hardship, we can all be more efficient and effective when we leverage a combined infrastructure and work together. So, when a church in Germantown; an employer in Silver Spring; or a school in Wheaton recognize a need, a network - and not a silo - is in place to mobilize a stronger response.

This is the basis for a community that is connected.

But we must do more. Today, 1 in 7 residents in the county is limited English proficient.

- Based on national averages, 12,000 MCPS ESOL students are likely to have parents who are limited English proficient. These children are more likely to be “left behind” no matter what we do in the schools if we do not also help parents to develop the skills to become more involved in their children’s education and better advocates for their families.
- According to the American Medical Association, when family members or untrained interpreters are used to assist with communication, an average of 31 translation errors are made in a single health care visit. In the healthcare sector, and throughout the community, addressing linguistic isolation and low literacy can reduce costs and lead to better services and improved health outcomes.
- Our communities must attract businesses by offering a globally competitive workforce. And, local businesses depend on workers who are prepared with the language and literacy skills necessary to safely and effectively perform their duties and to meet today’s workforce needs. In Montgomery County, one in three workers is an immigrant, and we are home to more than 40% of the foreign born workforce in the state. According to the Urban Institute, **a fluent English-speaking immigrant earns nearly double that of a non-English speaking worker. That equates to higher spending and taxes paid.**

The economic and social equation is simple. We all benefit when adults reach their full potential through English literacy. And *your* support is what enables the County to reach *our* full potential, as a connected, vibrant and prosperous community.

Thank you.