



Mission

To advance literacy within the Kansas City Metropolitan area through direct services, advocacy, and collaboration.

Vision

Literacy For All

Our Approach

Literacy KC offers a welcoming community for adults and families to improve literacy skills and enhance quality of life. With support from volunteers, donors, partners, and the community at large, Literacy KC invests in Kansas City's greatest asset – our people.

Each term, staff, tutors, volunteers, and instructors build a collaborative learning environment where adult students expand their reading, writing, math, and digital skills. The personalized approach allows students to shape the instruction they receive and delivers a balanced curriculum, leading to improved literacy and life skills.

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Literacy Statistics

Kansas City Metropolitan Area

- There are over 225,000 low-literate adults in the Kansas City Metropolitan area (National Center for Education Statistics).
- Between Kansas & Missouri, there are 828,841 adults that do not have a high school diploma or GED/HiSET. (PIAAC).

United States - www.proliteracy.org

- 43% of adults functioning at the lowest literacy level live in poverty.
- Children of parents with low literacy skills have a 72% chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves.
- An excess of \$230 Billion per year in health care costs is linked to low adult literacy.
- Low-literate individuals have a higher rate of unemployment and earn lower wages than the national average. Low literacy costs the U.S. \$225 Billion each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime & loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.
- Every year, one in six young adults- more than 1.2 million- drop out of high school.
- Low-literate adults have an unemployment rate 14.5% higher than the national average.
- 75% of state prison inmate did not complete high school and can be classified as low-literate.
- Of adults that earn less than \$30,000 per year, 46% have no internet at home.



Brief History of Literacy KC

Literacy KC began as a dream and grew out of a passion to help people. In 1985, a group of volunteers led by Catherine Mathews perceived a need and created a tiny organization to provide literacy tutoring for adults. They had become aware of several adults that struggled with literacy skills and felt that there was an answer to help them gain new skills and improve on the limited skills that they had. With a handful of students, Catherine embarked on a new journey by negotiating the use of a portion of the basement of Country Club Congregational Church located at 205 West 64th Street, Kansas City, Missouri. She identified several individuals willing to volunteer their time and affiliated with the National Laubach Literacy Council to start a literacy tutoring program for adults. The affiliation with Laubach provided the organization access to curriculum and materials. The program was first called Kansas City Laubach Literacy Council.

For several years, the program was operated with an all-volunteer staff. As the program grew in numbers and funding was secured, an Executive Director was hired.

1994: First Annual Corporate Spelling Bee. The Corporate Spelling Bee, which remains a significant source of fund raising for Literacy KC, brings teams from corporations in the Kansas City area together to compete in a live spelling bee. They pay a significant entry fee and many bring “cheer squads” to compete for the spirit award. During the Bee, silent and live auctions are held. All proceeds go directly toward support of Literacy KC’s general operating expenses.

2006: Office relocated to 211 W. Armour Boulevard. It is significant to note that at the time of the move, the organization was paying \$1,000 per month in rent to the church and the new monthly expense would be approximately \$5,000. The board approved the move based on information that \$50,000 had been raised to support the move. However, all of the needed financing was not actually available to Literacy KC and the increased expenditure quickly began to prove a challenge. This appears to be a starting point for the financial struggle that Literacy KC faced for the next several years. By the end of 2006, the board was called on to make a cash infusion to make payroll.

2008: Near demise. In the summer, Interim Director Cliff Schiappa and Board President Mark Schweizer called a meeting to discuss the current standing of the organization. In the year prior, board members had pitched in financially in order to keep the doors open and to be able to continue paying staff. The Bee, although successful in its own right, was not enough to fund the programs and other funding



was not coming in as anticipated. Literacy KC was facing another financial crisis. At the meeting, a former board member raised the issue of “personal financial debt” that individual board members would be responsible for if the organization remained in the financial situation and the doors were closed. As there was no apparent “relief” in sight at that time, the discussion of possibly closing the doors of Literacy KC ensued. A handful of board members were almost ready to do so, however there was not enough agreement to go ahead with this drastic measure.

Earlier that year, Interim Director Cliff Schiappa had crafted a grant proposal for the Human Foundation. It was shortly after the above mentioned meeting that it was learned the organization was a finalist for this potential \$100,000 grant. In the end Literacy KC did not win the overall grant, but as one of the three organizations among the finalists, received \$10,000. This money was enough of a “shot in the arm” to keep the board motivated to move forward.

2013: Focus began to zero in on data, outcomes, and program effectiveness. We began a paperless conversion project, along with a data consolidation project that migrated all data into a single database and allowed valid recording and reporting.

Priorities continued to be internal stability and capacity building, and the beginning of the Literacy KC AmeriCorps VISTA program (through CNCS) supported these efforts through the addition of full-time cost-effective staff members.

2015: Launch of the Ticket to Read program model. This community literacy model achieved a number of things that Literacy KC had been struggling with: It gave tutors and students a peer group, reinforcing the benefits of social and peer-to-peer learning; it provided relevant, dynamic, and appropriate curriculum; students access academically and geographically appropriate classes; and achieved strong outcomes through trackable metrics.

This year, our first Fund Development Manager was hired, and this investment brought exponentially valuable returns. We won the UMB Big Bash award, along with our second multi-year William T. Kemper investment. Partnerships included the Kansas City Public Library, Mid-Continent Public Library, Kansas City Parks & Recreation, Kansas City Public Schools, and more. We also became founding members of the Kansas City Digital Inclusion Coalition, and launched Career Online High School program, a nationally unique partnership with Mid-Continent Public Library and Kansas City Public Library that offers students the convenience of an online platform to earn a fully accredited high school diploma with an attached career certificate.

2016: At the 2016 Spelling Bee, the new and improved Literacy KC was revealed. The new logo highlights both the different facets of literacy – reading, writing, math, and digital skills – while representing the diverse community that plays a crucial role in building a legacy of literacy in our community and changing lives



beyond words. The open doors invite you in as a student or supporter, and the books represent the boundless information and opportunities available through literacy. The organization's name was shortened from Literacy Kansas City to Literacy KC.

2018: Literacy KC moved to our new home at 3036 Troost Ave. Literacy KC has been on an incredible growth trajectory, transforming its programs, infrastructure, and identity to become a leader in the adult education field, garnering regional and national attention for its success. This progress and drive culminated in a capital campaign that will allow Literacy KC to establish itself firmly among the nonprofit and educational landscape in Kansas City. Literacy KC is ready to launch into its next chapter at our new forever home and to continue to build its suite of services to accommodate learners of all types and levels, with its now signature quality and unbeatable student experience.



Gillian Helm Executive Director

Gillian received a Bachelor's in English Literature with a minor in Spanish from Park University. After doing extensive research in Latin America on non-governmental resources available to women in poverty as a graduate student at the University of Kansas, she decided that her focus should remain closer to home in order to address the needs immediately around her, and completed a Master's degree in Public Administration with an emphasis in Nonprofit Management from the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Having always sought out opportunities that combine two of the things she cares most about, education and nonprofit work, Gillian joined the Literacy KC team in September 2011 as a Program Coordinator. Later, her work as Director of Programs allowed her to combine her interests and be inspired daily by the dedication of students and volunteers, while continually looking for new and better ways to provide much-needed services. Gillian then became Literacy KC's Executive Director in October 2015, and continues to dedicate her time and talent to the improvement of services, the diversification of programming, and to meeting the needs of each adult learner who comes to Literacy KC in the best way possible. Gillian loves reading, running, DIY projects, and would like to own her own restaurant one day. She also does her best to keep up with her busy and brilliant husband, her rambunctiously charming four-year-old, and hilarious little tank of a toddler.