

# WHAT THE DETROIT ECONOMIC MOBILITY GRANTS CAN TEACH US ABOUT STRENGTHENING THE ADULT FOUNDATIONAL SKILLS SYSTEM IN DETROIT

Corporation for a Skilled Workforce | March 2021



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## Key Findings

- 87% of the 644 who enrolled in the 10 projects successfully completed their programs.
- 247 participants earned a workforce or postsecondary credential or certification--almost 75% of those enrolled in such programs.
- 93 out of 307 of those seeking a high school credential achieved this credential within a year and a half, a large number in a city in which only 300 Detroiters/year obtain a GED from regular programs, where it typically takes two or more years to attain the GED, and where testing centers were inaccessible towards the end of the grant period due to the pandemic.
- 287 participants gained employment during the program, which exceeded program proposed goals by almost 200 placements or 219%.
- The average wage at employment was \$13.05/hour, which was almost 10% (\$1.05) above the proposed average wage of \$12.00/hour.
- Ten monthly professional development offerings in 2020 strengthened system-wide capacity with total attendance of 200, averaging 20 per session and, for some sessions, as many as 45 attendees.
- Program operators liked and embraced new delivery models of contextualization, acceleration, and integration, and continued to use them after the Economic Mobility Grants ended. Their learning about the new models was supported by substantial training and technical assistance.
- Forming trusted partnerships and achieving close coordination among adult education, workforce development, support service providers, and other partners proved essential to providing the education, training, and supports students need to succeed.

## Introduction and Summary

A 10-grant Detroit pilot program operating from mid-2018 through 2020 has demonstrated that adult education and occupational training programs can work together to substantially improve learner results by accelerating instruction and contextualizing it to work.

The Detroit Economic Mobility Grant initiative was launched in mid-2018, with nearly \$1 million funded by the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund (including support from JPMorgan Chase, General Motors, United Way for Southeastern Michigan (UWSEM), and Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation (DESC)). The City of Detroit Office of Workforce Development and DESC, in partnership with Reading Works and Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) formed a partnership to ensure grant success. Ten organizations or pairs of workforce and adult education organizations received funding to pilot four evidence-based program models intended to accelerate the development of foundational skills for adult learners and connect them more closely to workforce training and employment.

The momentum for these grants grew from local stakeholder realization that the foundational skills challenge in Detroit was hindering employment success for almost half of the city's working adults. In 2017-2018, the City of Detroit Office of Workforce Development convened a strategy group of leading adult education providers and workforce service/training providers to review this challenge, research national best practices for more effective and scaled approaches to adult education, and share input on solutions for Detroit specifically. Based on the work of the strategy group, the Economic Mobility Grants were made available to both strengthen existing programs and pilot new programs designed using four innovative program models found in the research. The grantees included:

- **Integrated education and training (IET)**

- ◆ EDSI with Matrix Human Services
- ◆ SER-Metro

- **Career pathway bridges**

- ◆ Leaps and Bounds Family Services with Dominican Literacy
- ◆ Detroit Public Schools Community District with Emerging Industries Training Institute (EITI)

- **Accelerated high school diploma or equivalent**

- ◆ Matrix Human Services
- ◆ St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center
- ◆ Southwest Solutions

- **Employment-based programs**

- ◆ 482 Forward with Mercy Education Project
- ◆ The Empowerment Plan
- ◆ T.E.A. with Rebel Nell

The 10 programs enrolled **644 participants**, nearly 500 more than the number proposed.<sup>1</sup> These participants had similar characteristics and economic circumstances to the Detroiters in need of foundational skills development identified by the earlier research. However, there were more women and young adults in the programs in comparison to demographics represented in the research, and the cohort as a whole had somewhat higher educational functioning levels.

Out of the 644 participants, slightly less than half (46%) were enrolled in a workforce training program connected to

<sup>1</sup> Proposed by UWSEM to funders in grant applications.

adult foundational skills education, half were enrolled in an accelerated high school diploma or equivalent program, and the rest were in employment-based programs. Overall, **87% of the participants completed the program** in which they were enrolled, and **75% of those who proposed to earn a workforce or postsecondary credential did so**.

**Foundational skills** are the basic, entry-level skills that are common across most workforces and industries, upon which most occupational skills are built. They are prerequisites for success in most jobs and careers. They include reading, math, and English language proficiency; work readiness and basic professional skills; digital literacy skills; and career management skills.

**93 GED/HSE participants earned their high school credential**; however, the COVID-19 pandemic caused GED testing centers to be closed in the final quarter of the grants so many students could not take the test upon completion of their program.

The employment outcomes were highly promising. **287 participants gained employment in the program**, which exceeded proposed program goals by almost 200 placements. **The average wage at employment was \$13.05/hour**, which was \$1.05 above the average proposed wage.

Several themes emerged during this initiative, including the **importance of forming trusted, productive partnerships** between adult education, workforce development, support service providers, and other partners to provide the education, training, and supports students need to succeed. However, the content, length, and timing of partners' services might not always align, underscoring the **need for close coordination and communication**.

In addition to participant outcomes, **this initiative strengthened the longer-term capacity of adult education and workforce providers** through technical assistance and professional development and through the experience and relationship-building they gained in implementing the four evidence-based models. For example, Reading Works hosted monthly workshops attended by more than 60 organizations throughout the year. All these efforts help to strengthen the overall system of adult education in Detroit.

The partnering organizations supporting the grants identified several take-aways from the Economic Mobility Grant initiative, including that building a connected and coherent system of adult foundational skill building is a **fluid and organic process**, which requires a **strong intermediary** to help coordinate the collaboration. Other important components included a **variety of technical assistance**—from research on best practices to professional development—**shared outcome measures, clear expectations on data requirements, and braided funding by both the grantors and grantees**.

**Public and philanthropic funding was key to this effort at multiple points** including supporting the strategy group and best practice research at the beginning to lay a solid foundation. Significant investment to scale up proven models and pilot new ones was essential to help organizations move in new directions or to deepen their budding innovations. Future sustainability was bolstered with investments in an intermediary, capacity building, relationship building, and professional development. However, this is **an on-going process that requires funding to continue to achieve and to scale up these positive results**.

The data show that the Economic Mobility Grant **initiative has been a success**. The coronavirus pandemic has been a major challenge, but it did not derail the success and progress these organizations have made. In fact, the relationship-building, regular communication, and peer knowledge built during the Economic Mobility Grant initiative has helped the grantee organizations and partnerships weather the coronavirus pandemic, as witnessed by weekly Zoom calls to share ideas from experts and advocate for students and programs. **The adult foundational skills development system in Detroit is stronger than before and is poised to continue building on intentional investments**.

## The Adult Foundational Skills Challenge in Detroit

Data from 2018 indicated that nearly half of working age Detroiters did not have essential foundational skills necessary to get a job or succeed in a career. This included 83,000 who did not have a high school diploma or equivalent and about 110,000 who had a high school credential but lacked basic foundational skills required for employment.<sup>2</sup>

Even before the pandemic and recession, the consequences of the foundational skills gaps were profound. For employers, it further constrained their already limited pool of entry-level job candidates. For job seekers with skill gaps, it meant their opportunities for getting a job with family-sustaining wages and having opportunities to advance were few. For the city, it meant a large proportion of residents struggled to sustain themselves and their families, and many had to rely on public assistance to survive.

The events of 2020 have elevated the importance of adult foundational skills. Adults need skills in reading, math, and English, as well as employability skills, financial and digital literacy, and career management skills to navigate the health and economic crises we as a nation are facing. The COVID-19 pandemic also has revealed our country's inadequate investments in shoring up these adult basic skills and the devastating consequences.<sup>3</sup>

Post-pandemic, the need for strong adult foundational skills will be even greater. Although the shape and length of the COVID-19 recession is uncertain at this point, we do know that at the end of May 2020, more than 40 million people—the equivalent of one out of every four American workers—had filed for unemployment benefits, which is on par with the worst levels during the Great Depression.<sup>4</sup> The unemployment rate in Detroit rose from 9.3% in March to 38.5% in April although it had dropped to 20.3% by December 2020.

We also know that workers with lower levels of education will struggle to find family-supporting employment as the nation begins to come back from the economic shutdown, that primarily affected workers in the service industries. Workers with a high school diploma or less tend to have higher unemployment rates. In 2019, the national unemployment rate for workers with a high school diploma was 3.7%, compared to 2.2% for those with a bachelor's degree. Early data from the pandemic-forced economic slowdown indicates an even larger difference of employment risk is resulting – high for those with a high school diploma or less, and low for those with a degree. Even if there is a quick, healthy rise in employment after the COVID-19 crisis begins to abate, there will be hundreds of unemployed lower-income Detroiters with less education and fewer credentials in need of employment and income.

## Convening a Strategy Group and Researching What Works

The City of Detroit Office of Workforce Development convened a strategy group of leading adult education providers and workforce service/training providers in Detroit four times from late summer 2017 through spring 2018 to review the challenge, examine research about national best practices for more effective and scaled approaches to adult education, and share input on solutions for Detroit. Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) provided research and strategy support, and JPMorgan Chase was involved with the strategy group to inform potential future grant making.

<sup>2</sup> All data in this section are found in the report: [Detroit Adult Foundational Skill Development: Challenges and Solutions](#), June 2018, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce.

<sup>3</sup> <https://corp4skilledwork.medium.com/why-adult-foundational-skills-matter-now-more-than-ever-6e53dfd133c8>

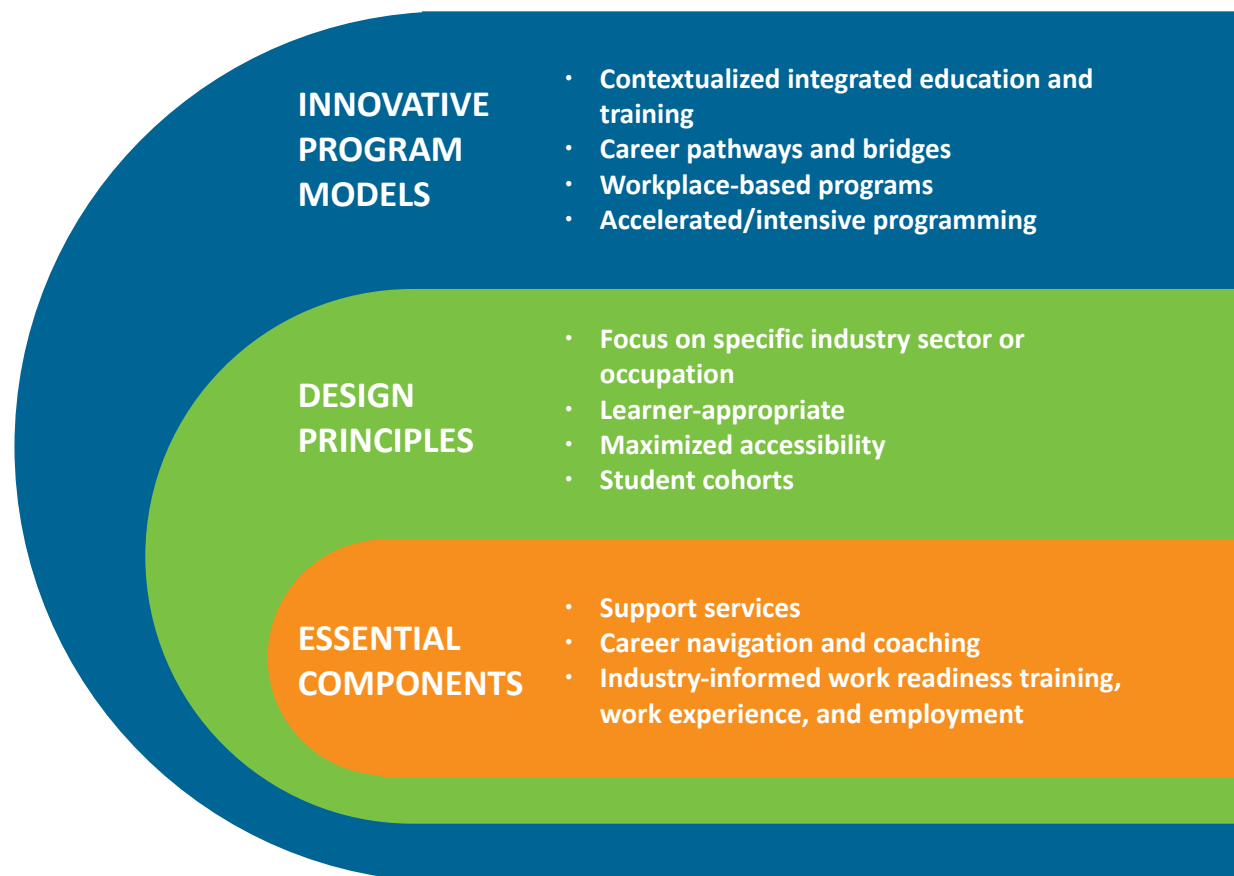
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/28/business/economy/coronavirus-unemployment-claims.html>

At the time, the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) provided about 40% of the adult education in Detroit funded by state and federal funds, and so the school district was a key participant. Another 35% of the adult education was delivered through about a dozen community-based organizations (CBOs), so the strategy group included six of the leading groups representing a cross-section of CBOs: Dominican Literacy Center, Focus: HOPE, Goodwill Industries of Greater Detroit, Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), SER-Metro Detroit, and Southwest Solutions.

About a quarter of adult education has been delivered by postsecondary education institutions, so Wayne County Community College District and Wayne State University were important strategy partners, as well. The city's MichiganWorks! agency, Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation (DESC), were involved to help provide linkages between adult education, training, and employment. The local adult education intermediary organization, Reading Works, also participated.

The strategy group reviewed research on best practices in adult education from a national scan CSW conducted. Four models of effective practice in improving adult foundational skills have emerged over the last 10 to 15 years. The figure below outlines these innovative models, which stress building basic skills in the context of work and accelerating programs. CSW published a report in June 2018 that provides more details on each of these elements and models, [Detroit Adult Foundational Skill Development: Challenges and Solutions](#).

*Figure 1: What Works in Adult Education*



## Initial Investments in Evidence-based Models and Building a System

Based on the work of the strategy group, the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund, JPMorgan Chase, and DESC launched the Economic Mobility Grants, providing nearly \$1 million in funding to both strengthen existing programs and pilot new programs using the four innovative models found in the research. Chase also provided an additional \$500,000 of support to RW, CSW and UWSEM/DRWF to work together to provide coordination and technical assistance. The partners in this project had a broad vision of system integration at the outset of the grants and formed a “hub structure” to ensure that this vision became reality. They wanted to show the success made possible when foundational skills programming was closely teamed with occupational and workplace training. Partners encouraged new partnerships between providers and identified opportunities for alignment and collaboration on service-delivery. Each of the members of the hub structure partnership had roles, including providing technical assistance and professional development as well as administrative and financial oversight of the pilot to align with, and reflect the integrated outcomes sought for the participants. The hub structure partners were as follows:

- The City of Detroit Office of Workforce Development and DESC.
- DRWF – a regional collaborative that funds innovative and comprehensive workforce development programming for harder-to-serve populations.
- UWSEM – a regional non-profit with administrative, operational, and fiduciary experience and capacity in grant management.
- Reading Works – a subject matter expert and leader of a local adult education and training collaborative.
- CSW - A non-profit workforce policy group well-versed in integrated adult education and training policy, research, best practices, and national trends.

Philanthropic and public funds were combined to provide wraparound supportive services for participants. Braided and leveraged funding takes a great deal of coordination to maximize its benefit for the participant, and the hub structure worked hard to support the grantees to maximize every resource.

Economic Mobility Grant Funding Sources	Amount
Detroit Regional Workforce Fund (Private)	\$660,784
Detroit Employment Solutions Corporation (Public)	\$250,000
<b>Total Grant Amount</b>	<b>\$910,784</b>

There were two types of grants, those that supported the strength of existing programs that needed a small amount of funding to improve, consistent with the four models, and those that supported innovative new programs based on the models. This approach recognized both existing success and new creative ideas. The Detroit Regional Workforce Fund, housed at the United Way for Southeastern Michigan, managed the application and grant process in close working partnership with the City of Detroit Office of Workforce Development, DESC, Reading Works, and CSW.

The solicitation included two phases. During the first phase, interested organizations attended information sessions conducted by the hub partners and were asked to submit answers to six questions about their strategy or idea in a letter. They could submit multiple ideas if desired. In all, 72 ideas were received. The second phase was invitation-only, with 42 highly promising programs asked to provide a full proposal by the end of August. During that period, the invited

applicants were provided more in-depth informational sessions and technical assistance about the models. In early 2019, the funders and partners were thrilled to announce that nearly \$1 million had been granted to 10 organizations or partnerships—including four full grants and six mini-grants—all piloting or expanding evidence-based best practice models!

## Participant Demographics

The participants in the Economic Mobility Grant programs had similar characteristics and economic circumstances to the Detroiters in need of foundational skills development identified by the earlier research, with two exceptions:

- The Economic Mobility Grant programs attracted proportionally more women and young adults than there were in the pool of adults in need of foundational skills development in Detroit.
- The Economic Mobility participants also had somewhat higher educational functioning levels. City-wide, only 15% of adult education students entering programs are above 8th grade, but 52% of those who tested at intake tested at a 9th grade EFL or above.

Of the 644 enrolled participants:

- 54% were unemployed at intake.
- 81% of those who reported income earned less than \$25,000/year. The average annual household income was just over \$18,000.
- 37% were receiving some sort of public assistance.
- 90% were Black or African American, 4% were white, 3% reported as two or more races, and 3% were Asian, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Middle Eastern, or reported as “other”.
- 62% were female and 38% were male.
- 11% were under age 18, 27% were 18-24 years old, 16% were 25-29, 19% were 30-39, 15% were 40-49, and 12% were 50 or over.
- 30% had dependent children; and
- Of those with reported literacy levels at intake:
  - ◆ 13% had entering levels at the 4th-5th grade
  - ◆ 29% at 6th-/8th grade
  - ◆ 22% at 9th-10th grade
  - ◆ 30% at 11th-12th grade

## Economic Mobility Grants

The Economic Mobility Grants initiative funded programs using all four evidence-based models: two integrated education and training programs, two career pathway bridge programs, three accelerated high school diploma/equivalency programs, and three employment-based programs, as summarized in Figure 2 below and described in more detail below the figure.

Figure 2: Detroit Economic Mobility Grant Adult Foundational Skills Programs



### Integrated Education and Training (IET)

*Adult foundational skill building is combined with occupational training and credentialing; connects participants to employment opportunities*

- EDSI, with Matrix Human Services
- SER-Metro



### Career Pathway Bridge

*On-ramp adult foundational skills programs that connect to progressive levels of education, training, and employment to build careers and economic success.*

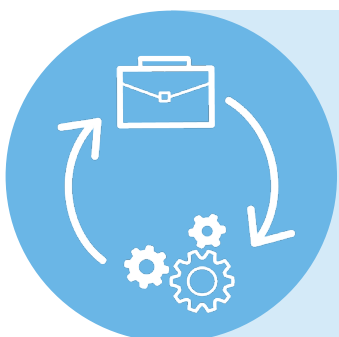
- Leaps and Bounds Family Services, with Dominican Literacy
- Detroit Public Schools Community District, with EITI



### Accelerated High School Development/Equivalent

*Programs that accelerate high school diploma/equivalency attainment; ideally connect to employment and/or next-step occupational training and credentials.*

- Matrix Human Services
- St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center
- Southwest Solutions



### Employment-based

*Adult foundational skills program at or connected to employment; supported by employers with space, time-off, and/or compensation.*

- 482 Forward, with Mercy Education Project
- The Empowerment Plan
- T.E.A., Rebel Nell

## Summaries of the Detroit Economic Mobility Grant Programs



### Integrated Education and Training (IET)

*Adult foundational skill building is combined with occupational training and credentialing; connects participants to employment opportunities*

- EDSI, with Matrix Human Services
- SER-Metro

**EDSI (Educational Data Systems, Inc.)**, a national workforce development and consulting company, partnered with Detroit-based **Matrix Human Services** to run two cohorts of an IET Manufacturing Boot Camp, providing math, language, and reasoning skills contextualized for jobs in the manufacturing industry. Initially, the curriculum was designed for those with skills at the 8th grade level and above, but EDSI staff quickly realized most participants functioned closer to a 6th grade level, and most lacked a high school credential. So, they redesigned their materials accordingly and developed relationships with employers that agreed to interview individuals at that level, with the understanding that they would receive ongoing educational support after hire.

EDSI worked closely with employers to tailor the contextualized IET training program to their skill needs, which enabled employers to change their hiring policies and hire skilled job seekers without a high school diploma or equivalent. Matrix Human Services provided wraparound services, including credit coaching, a clothes closet, and a food pantry. The peer support within the cohort was also important for the students. Twenty-five percent of the training program focused on foundational skills, and many of the students continued their education post-employment through Matrix's online high school credential program. Out of 81 participants served, 62 completed the occupational training and 38 were placed into employment.

**SER Metro's** grant supported its IET YouthBuild Learning Academy by contextualizing its high school equivalency program for opportunity youth to the information technology industry and blending it with IT training. Students had the opportunity to work in paid internships, working 120 hours, earning \$9.00 per hour, which enabled them to focus on education without worrying about lost wages. SER Metro worked closely with employers to tailor the curriculum to their needs and to develop internships.

Initially, the recruits were challenged by the IT curriculum and seemed to lack sufficient background to succeed in the training. SER Metro adapted the intake process to include human-centered restorative practices, motivational interviewing, and trauma-informed care, which led to stronger and better adapted cohorts.

Eighty-six participants earned a workforce credential, which was 72% higher than proposed, 60 gained employment by the end of the grant period. Building from this grant, SER Metro began conversations with the Ballmer Group, securing a three-year grant at almost a million dollars to fund the career pathway bridge program and a full-time adult basic education director. Students will have a college like schedule with one full day of occupational training. Those who test in at lower EFLs (6th grade and below) will use the other 4 days for an adult basic education block.



## Career Pathway Bridge

*On-ramp adult foundational skills programs that connect to progressive levels of education, training, and employment to build careers and economic success.*

- Leaps and Bounds Family Services, with Dominican Literacy
- Detroit Public Schools Community District, with EITI

**Leaps and Bounds Family Services** integrated foundational skills into its Child Care Development Associate (CDA) training program to help participants with educational levels at 9th grade and above succeed in the program. The organization partnered with **Dominican Literacy** to provide a contextualized bridge education program for participants interested in the CDA training but who needed to bring their academic skills up to the 9th grade level. This was done by integrating child development language and concepts into the foundational skills training. They also provided lower-level learners with a coach to help support them to persist.

Recruitment was not a challenge for Leaps and Bounds, as they typically have a waiting list for training. The program was designed to serve individuals already employed in the licensed childcare industry who want the national CDA credential. In October 2019, Leaps and Bounds Family Services and United Way for Southeastern Michigan were awarded the prestigious CDA (Child Development Associate) Gold Standard SM Award from the Council for Professional Recognition. The Council granted the award in recognition of the organizations' expertise in providing exceptional CDA training toward preparing students for successful careers in early childhood education.

The 120-hour CDA training covered all aspects of early child development and classroom management, observation while on the job, and a national credentialing test. 59 out of 69 individuals earned the national credential. Funding from this grant was critical to providing opportunities for Detroiters, a population that was previously underrepresented among credentialed workers in this field. Having this funding gave Leaps and Bounds the capacity to open a class in Detroit at a well-established anchor institution, Matrix Human Services.

**Detroit Public Schools Community District** (DPSCD) partnered with **Emerging Industries Training Institute** (EITI) to provide contextualized call center customer service training for their students. Employers hiring participants from the program required a high school diploma or GED, so DPSCD identified students who were very close to completing their GED and recruited them into the program. DPSCD assisted students in accelerating their GED preparation and testing while they completed the five-week EITI training. Students were promised a private employer call center job upon completion of the GED and training, which was a strong incentive. Those who could not finish the GED in time were hired at the DESC call center.

DPSCD also provided on-site babysitting at no cost to the participant, which helped with persistence and completion. DPSCD instructors and staff participated in trainings around contextualized instruction and virtual learning. Instructors received professional development on themes of contextualized instruction to enable them to incorporate fundamentals taught in the call center training program into daily lessons, including business writing and math. They also participated in a Virtual Best Practices for Effective Instruction workshop that provided resources and strategies for teaching in a virtual learning environment.



## Accelerated High School Development/Equivalent

*Programs that accelerate high school diploma/equivalency attainment; ideally connect to employment and/or next-step occupational training and credentials.*

- Matrix Human Services
- St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center
- Southwest Solutions

**Matrix Human Services** used the grant to increase enrollment in its online high school equivalency program and enhance coaching and support services for participants. Prior to enrolling, each student was required to earn a short-term online occupational certificate to give them a chance to experience online study and, by completing, to show commitment to the program. The instructor oversaw the daily activities and interacted with the online learners, adapting to each learner's learning style and schedule. If a student did not engage in the online lessons within one week, the instructor and assigned career coach touched base by phone or email. All 50 seats in the program were filled, with a waiting list of over 40 people. 12 individuals completed the program in the first twelve months, six months ahead of schedule.

Several aspects of this program proved to be essential. The career coach and other staff continuously encouraged students to commit and recommit themselves to this hard work. This was critical as many students experienced disruptions to their education due to various life crises. Small successes were celebrated to keep learners focused on long-term goals. The online aspect of the program provided flexibility, allowing participants to put in study hours at home around their schedule of family and work.

To address students' limited access to the internet, Matrix Human Services recommended Comcast's Essentials internet program, which cost \$9.95 per month. The learners were also encouraged to use computers in the Detroit Public Library. Matrix found that learners who were also enrolled in EDSI's occupational training program had improved retention because the steps to success were visible, and the employment outcome was within the learner's reach.

**St. Vincent and Sarah Fisher Center (SVSF)** created a hybrid classroom-online model by expanding its GED individual tutoring hours to evenings and weekends and adding an online GED component to provide supplemental homework for students. In an interesting twist, the SVSF program starts with math to help students tackle the most difficult subject first. Successful completion of the math GED test boosted their confidence, helping them progress through the remaining subject areas. SVSF targeted adult learners 25 to 40-years-old, who had been out of school for some time, had built some life experience, and were now motivated to do the hard work of earning a high school equivalent.

SVSF extended their hours to include evenings and weekends to accommodate working parents, making it possible for the adult learner to go into the center during off-hours as well as get online instruction when it was convenient for the learner. The online component became a critical point of preparedness in managing the pandemic and the Center's program has continued, without interruption, and enabled them to keep enrolling students throughout the shutdown. SVSF added to their offerings the HiSET, a newly state-approved High School Equivalent (HSE) credential as an alternative to the GED, and Essential Education, an online high school equivalency preparation program.

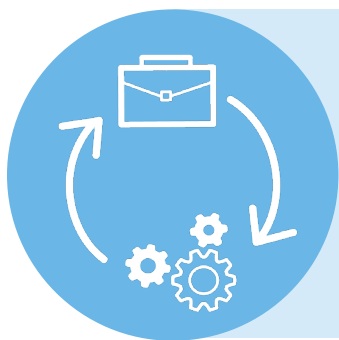
By the end of the grant period, SVSF had assisted 226 adult learners in the program, surpassing its goal of 200. Of these, 155 improved three Educational Functional Levels (equivalent to six grade levels) in six months, 25 earned their HSE, and

SVSF reported that their accelerated approach cut down the time to earn a GED from 18 months or more to 12 months. Participants in the accelerated program studied for the GED four hours more per week than without the program.

**Southwest Solutions (SWS)** piloted an innovative MathUp intensive math instruction program to help students pass the GED math test. The math class was structured as intense, accelerated programming in a classroom environment with additional online instruction. Each student agreed, in a signed contract, (important for setting clear expectations and improving retention) to participate in classes two to three times per week and study on their own for additional hours at home. SWS added a Saturday morning class for students looking for more weekend/evening courses. Students were paid a stipend of \$9/hour for up to six hours per week for this time. The learners appreciated the stipends and particularly benefited from the intensive support from well-matched instructors, both in the classroom and one-on-one.

The most substantial aspects of SWS's strategy centered on increased adult engagement and intentional focus on achieving a specific credential in a short, designated time frame. This makes the goal something within the learner's reach. In addition to receiving supportive services, completing the hardest GED test boosted learners' confidence and helped them persist to complete any remaining GED tests. One lesson learned is that, even with accelerated programming and additional hours, passing the GED takes time.

Of the 31 learners who participated in the program, twelve took the math test (which was their last of four), passed and earned their GED. Two additional students passed the math test only. 18 of the students retained employment after 90 days. The MathUp program was highly responsive to participant feedback and made adjustments that incorporated feedback to improve retention, such as adding Saturday classes to increase participation.



### Employment-based

***Adult foundational skills program at or connected to employment; supported by employers with space, time-off, and/or compensation.***

- 482 Forward, with Mercy Education Project
- The Empowerment Plan
- T.E.A., Rebel Nell

**482 Forward**, a nonprofit citywide education organizing network, partnered with **Mercy Education Project** to embed foundational skills development into its Community Leadership advocacy skill development program. The goal was to help members develop foundational and leadership skills and prepare for careers in related fields e.g. human services, non-profits, city and local government, and environmental protection services. The project's career navigator partnered with Henry Ford College to facilitate credit for its Community Leadership Program, making this also an IET career pathway bridge program. This employer-based workforce development model allowed fellows to get work experience while developing essential job skills and personal growth. Fellows took on responsibilities that included completing neighborhood projects as well as engaging other community members in these initiatives.

Fifteen fellows entered and completed the program with the following outcomes: one ran for elected office; three

are graduating with an associate's degree and applying to a four-year college; three more are still working towards an associate's degree; seven are employed full time at an average hourly wage of \$19; and ten obtained a workforce certification.

**The Empowerment Plan** is a social enterprise that makes sleeping bags that double as coats for those who are homeless. They hire homeless single adults, a majority of whom are low-income, single mothers of color. The Empowerment Plan is a highly successful program, with all employees having permanently moved out of homeless shelters. The Empowerment Plan used its grant to incorporate foundational skills into its work-based training program that included intensive support services, educational programming, and career development assistance. Working learners spent 60% of their day in on-the-job training, producing the sleeping bag coats, and 40% on learning foundational skills.

The Empowerment Plan hired a Career Advancement Manager to work with individuals to identify and address skills gaps, develop realistic career advancement plans, provide guidance, and support and connect the individual to a meaningful career. All 15 individuals who participated in career advancement programming completed the program and were employed at either The Empowerment Plan or with another organization, with an average hourly starting wage of \$14/hr.

As part of their unique program model, all participants enrolled received the following: case management, GED classes (where applicable), trauma informed care education, domestic violence support, nutrition and access to supportive services such as housing, transportation and childcare, monthly 1:1 meetings with a financial coach, and soft skills/employability training. In addition, participants had the option to participate in restorative yoga and mindfulness classes as well as a match savings program.

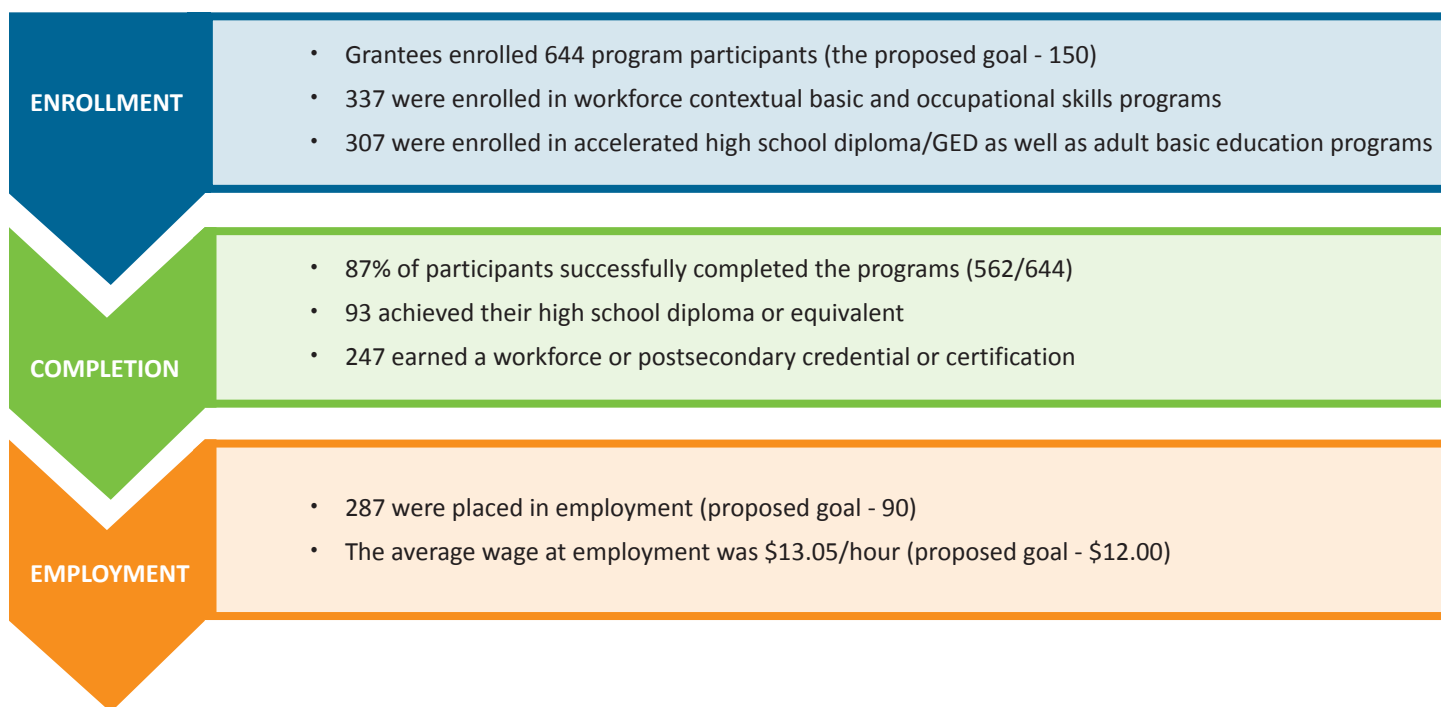
**T.E.A. (Teach. Empower. Achieve.)** is a 501c3 organization that offers programs and support for women facing barriers to employment in Detroit. T.E.A. works in close collaboration with existing companies to build community and create educational opportunities that support women from all walks of life on their pathway to full-time employment and independence – often women living in shelters, or who are refugees or returning citizens. T.E.A.'s first and biggest partnership is with **Rebel Nell**, a for-profit workforce- and social justice-focused enterprise that hires women as part of a temporary, full-time transitional jobs program where they earn wages by 1) attending T.E.A. programming focused on financial management, life wellness and entrepreneurship and 2) creating Rebel Nell jewelry from fallen graffiti in Detroit, Flint and Chicago.

T.E.A. incorporated digital literacy and customer service training into its work-based training, career pathway, and entrepreneurship program. The program served ten participants. By the end of the grant, seven out of the ten participants improved their digital literacy and customer service skills and secured paid positions outside of Rebel Nell, where they earned between \$13 and \$15 per hour, plus benefits. One participant was able to take her digital literacy and IT tech support skills and obtain a full-time position at DTE. T.E.A. found that to achieve success, the participants needed to be at a point in their lives where they were ready to do the hard work of personal growth. The online instruction was helpful, but it needed to be paired with personal or traditional classroom teaching. Also, the cohort model worked well to support the women in each group.

## Detroit Economic Mobility Grant Outcomes

Most of the Economic Mobility grants concluded in the first quarter of 2020, with the rest completing their programs by November 2020. The program produced positive outcomes, as aggregated, and summarized in the figure below. High percentages of participants completed the programs and earned credentials. Participants exceeded employment goals and proposed<sup>5</sup> wage levels.

*Figure 3: Economic Mobility Outcomes*



At the end of the program, participants were surveyed, and 75 across nine programs responded with the following results:

- 98% indicated the program helped them gain jobs skills and/or increase wages in their current jobs.
- 64% reported improving their math skills, reading skills, or both.
- Participants who reported being part of a learning cohort indicated they were more motivated, supported, and connected because of moving through the program with a group of other participants. 25% said that the cohort helped them complete the program.
- For those who gained employment, additional training, interviewing practice, and transportation assistance were cited as the top resources to help them enter employment.
- 99% said that they would recommend the program to friends and/or family members who are looking for a job and/or want to gain job skills.

<sup>5</sup> Proposed by UWSEM to funders in grant applications.

## Capacity Building

The Economic Mobility Grant initiative was intended to improve the foundational skills of hundreds of Detroit adults through increased capacity in the system and use of proven effective models that integrated with workforce training. It also was intended to strengthen the capacity of adult education providers through professional development and the experience they gained in partnerships with occupational trainers and social enterprises. Implementation of the four evidence-based models strengthened the system of adult foundational skills development in Detroit.

Reading Works,<sup>6</sup> with support from CSW, took the lead on professional development, offering sessions for grantees with resources and ideas as well as provided them opportunities for those in leadership positions to present their programs to their peers, fielding questions and discussing successes and challenges. The workshops extended beyond the ten grantees, engaging more than sixty organizations in learning about the four models and an array of practice improvement subjects. Topics included the following:

- Accelerated HSE Programing
- Partnership & Collaboration
- Integrated Education & Training
- SNAP 50 50 TA
- Contextualized IET
- Employer Engagement
- Building an Economy that works for Everyone
- Career Pathways/Bridge Programs
- LINCS Resources
- Student Recruitment, Retention, and Motivation
- Employers, Partners, and Work-based Learning

In addition, the annual Wayne State University Harris Literacy Program PULSE conference, organized with Reading Works, took inspiration from the grants and provided workshops that supported the grant goals.

Through the PD offerings, Reading Works more than doubled its membership including adult education and occupational training providers, as well as social enterprises, all who use evidence-based educational models to empower adult learners with improved foundational skills. Combined, these service providers (listed in the appendix) support approximately 4,000 adult learners.

Reading Works continued to host monthly professional development workshops through 2020 and, during the pandemic, convened network members weekly to discuss challenges, innovations, and plans (see appendices for topics and membership). Reading Works formed member committees to identify content for professional development, issues for advocacy, and funding opportunities for adult education.

A grantee survey with 100% participation revealed that most grantees found the capacity-building supports helpful. Participation in this grant required a greater level of systems engagement than is typically asked of grantees, i.e., grantees were required to participate in quarterly site visits, learning community convenings, etc. Eighty percent found the quarterly site visits very helpful or extremely helpful. Ninety percent found the workshops very useful. All respondents found the foundational skills learning community meetings helpful, with the session focused on career pathways identified as most useful.

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<sup>6</sup> The global pandemic significantly challenged Reading Works, which provided critical intermediary functions for this project. The organization closed in December 2020. Southwest Economic Solutions will continue to convene the network of adult education providers in the Detroit region, and the Harris Literacy Program at Wayne State University will continue to host the PULSE professional development conference. For more information on Reading Works and its legacy, see [The Reading Works Story, 2011-2020](#), by CSW.

## Observations from the Grant Initiative

Several themes emerged from the Economic Mobility Grants regarding programming, including:

- Strong partnerships between workforce, adult education, and support services organizations to provide a multi-faceted program for students contributed to positive outcomes.
- Social enterprises were well-positioned to offer foundational skills during the workday at the work site, and this helped with productivity and retention.
- Organizations with limited and targeted service offerings were challenged to meet the varied educational, digital, support services, financial coaching, case management, career navigation and job development needs of their clients.
- Focusing on the math test in the GED battery is an effective strategy for accelerated completion. Students often pass the three other tests and are stymied on the math. Providing more intensive classroom and online education on this single subject enabled completion by students who might otherwise have given up. This intensive support can be provided either after all other GED tests have been passed to help students with a final hurdle or before taking other GED tests as a strategy to “get the hardest test out of the way first” and build student confidence for the remaining tests.
- Online options increased the time students put into their education, hastening their progress to some extent, but they also needed classroom contact to stay motivated. For online instruction to be successful, the following needs to be in place: a productive learning space and atmosphere in the home, an up-to-date functioning device, reliable internet access, technical support, digital literacy, and appropriate online curriculum.
- The timelines for achievement in adult education and workforce training are different, which can be challenging for programs integrating these two areas of content. Achieving a short-term workforce credential can take five to eight weeks, while improving foundational skills, even in accelerated programs, can take months or years, especially when a student is starting at a lower educational functioning level, as many are in Detroit. Grantees who focused on placement in employment worked on foundational skills for the duration of the short-term training, but employment usually occurred before major educational gains. This indicates that adult foundational skills programming may need to be extended even after a student gets a job, requiring more intensive partnership with and support from employers. This scenario is true in a tight labor market but will be different when unemployment is higher.

## Key Takeaways from the Detroit System-Building Experience

In addition to observations about the grant programs specifically, reflecting on the Detroit foundational skills building experience since the launch three and a half years ago in mid-2017 offers several take-aways:

- **Building a connected and coherent system of adult foundational skill building is a fluid and organic process.** It requires constant fine-tuning while also building structural elements, e.g., strategic plans and committees; it also requires partners to be flexible and responsive to change.<sup>7</sup> Constant relationship building and

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<sup>7</sup> Donella Meadows calls this “[Dancing with Systems](#).”

communication are vital. This is particularly true when there is high turnover and mobility of staff in partner organizations.

- **Employer engagement** is key to success, but difficult to foster and sustain. Future iterations of the hub structure should consider adding employer/industry representatives to the hub structure or creating an employer advisory group. Doing so might also lead to additional funding sources.
- **Integrated collaborative work** requires clearly defined scopes of authority and responsibility, and well-established working norms and workflows that are also dynamic and fluid.
- **A variety of technical assistance provided at opportune moments can be key** for supporting system building and keeping it moving forward. This includes research and analysis support, strategy development, practical professional development and TA for practitioners and organizational leaders, and operational support.
- **Shared outcome measures and clear program data expectations across funders make life a lot easier for grantees**, freeing up time to focus on good programming and participant success, rather than crunching data in different ways for different reports.
- **Braided funding is needed and takes time and effort.** Comprehensive programs are rarely fully funded by one funding source; organizations are used to braiding together multiple funding streams to provide all the programmatic and service elements necessary for success. However, this takes staff time – which is really money – and knowledge of the funding sources and how to braid them effectively and appropriately. Braided and leveraged funding takes a great deal of coordination to maximize its benefit for the participant and is a difficult function for which to raise funding. It's important to leverage public services to offer comprehensive support for barrier removal and mitigation, and seamlessly integrate support into programs.

As we reflect on the Detroit foundational skills building experience, we see several key ways in which public and private funders can support effective adult foundational skill development in Detroit and other cities. To grow and sustain effective adult foundational skill development, funders can provide the following support:

- **Fund research on the scope of the challenge** within specific cities or regions. It is critical to understand the scope of the need, supply of programs and related services, and the gaps to understand baseline information, what reasonable rate of improvement could be, and realistic goal setting.
- **Fund research on best practices nationally and locally (or regionally).** In Detroit, there are many organizations and programs focused on building foundational skills, but the four strongest models in the country were minimally in use in Detroit and many providers weren't even aware of them. None were reaching the scale and effectiveness needed to significantly improve the situation. Stakeholders needed to understand the most effective program designs and practices, and the extent to which they were currently implemented locally, as a base for building more.
- **Fund and scale up evidence-based program models and practices.** There is solid research and evaluation evidence supporting the program models described in this article. However, they are still not operating at scale to serve enough learners in Detroit or across the country. Funding is lacking, as is the knowledge and experience in the field to design and implement these models. Although it is always more tempting to fund new, innovative ideas; given the depth and serious consequences of the foundational skills challenge nationally, a wiser investment strategy would be funding and scaling up what we know works.
- **Fund research on what works in online learning** for adult learners/foundational skills learners and in online workforce development programming.
- **Support intermediary organizations bringing together stakeholders** to develop an overall strategy for improving and scaling programming and build a sustained system. Now that stakeholders in Detroit have

a handle on the challenge and solutions, it is essential to continue an ongoing network of providers and partners to craft and implement an intentional plan for growing those solutions.

- **Support provider capacity building** with professional development, technical assistance, and operational support. National and local research revealed that many foundational skills practitioners and managers are stretched and underserved with professional development, but they are highly dedicated to providing the best education and services possible. The Detroit strategy included monthly professional development opportunities (including peer information exchange and networking) and ongoing technical assistance as needed by organizations.
- **Support intentional sustained connections and relationship-building between adult education providers and workforce/occupational training providers, as well as the intermediaries that facilitate them.** The success of the evidence-based foundational skills models depends on foundational skills development providers and training providers working closely together. However, this is not easy and not common. There are many differences between these two fields, including different lengths of time to accomplish key goals, different types of programming, and different performance expectations. Building these connections and relationships and helping them succeed requires time, intentional matchmaking, shared vision and language, joint funding, and shared or at least coordinated performance measures.
- **Support programs that incorporate** trauma informed care, bridge programming, digital literacy, and financial capabilities integration as standard components in the program design.

## Looking to the Future: What's Next in Detroit?

The Economic Mobility Grant initiative was a success. It supported hundreds of Detroiters in improving their foundational skills, earning high school equivalents, and attaining occupational credentials. It provided professional development and capacity building for dozens of adult education professionals and their workforce development partners on leading edge adult education program models, including acceleration, contextualization, and integration. Adult education organizations tested innovations in online learning, which proved to be critical when the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

The initiative helped partner organizations across adult education and workforce development better integrate their efforts and deepen partnerships. Perhaps most importantly, it helped to tighten and strengthen the network of providers and system partners, which in turn helped them rally and face a global pandemic and economic shutdown together (see appendix).

DESC has continued to move forward with incorporating adult foundational skills into its recently expanded network of nine Detroit at Work career centers, enabling easier access for residents. DPSCD and DESC are engaged in a joint venture in which the school district's adult education instructors are now based at the Detroit at Work centers and are focusing on substantially increasing high school completion and equivalencies, leveraging workforce supports from the center staff. Given the reality that much adult education instruction will be provided either online or in a hybrid approach in the coming months, DPSCD and the city are simultaneously securing devices and Wi-Fi for adults who want to continue their education online. Beyond that partnership, most of the other Economic Mobility Grantees have also moved aggressively to identify equipment, internet access, technical assistance, and online curriculum for adult learners.

Throughout 2020, Reading Works ramped up its coordination and support for its network of adult foundational skills providers and their workforce and support service partners, including but not limited to the Economic Mobility grantees. Reading Works provided communication and coordination support, professional development, connections for members

to leaders in the field, advocacy for funding and supportive policies, and facilitation of new and productive partnerships. Although Reading Works will transition to a volunteer-led organization in 2021, the foundation is there for ongoing success.<sup>8</sup>

The health and economic impacts of COVID-19 have been devastating, exacerbated by the racial injustice and police brutality that reached a boiling point in 2020. A strong adult foundational skills development system is essential for addressing all these challenges. We hope the story of the Detroit Economic Mobility Grants and the lessons learned and presented in this summary report help city leaders, administrators and organizational executives, practitioners, employers, and funders continue to build on this momentum at this crucial time.



<sup>8</sup>For more information on Reading Works' legacy and transition, see the report, [The Reading Works Story](#), 2011-2020, by CSW.

## Appendix A

### The COVID-19 Pandemic and Detroit's Adult Foundational Skills System

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic struck the United States, and Detroit was hit hard. As in other parts of the country, African Americans, Hispanics, and low-income populations were disproportionately harmed by both the health and economic crises, reflecting, and exacerbating the racial and socioeconomic inequalities in our communities and across the nation. Especially in the initial months of the pandemic, Detroit suffered a disproportionate number of cases and deaths as compared to the state population.

Detroit's adult education providers have been unsung heroes as they rally tirelessly to ensure that their adult education students are safe, healthy, supported, and engaged in their education. As an intermediary for this community, Reading Works helped provide communication, networking, sharing of best practices, and continuous learning opportunities for providers and administrators.

#### COVID-19 Challenges Adult Education Students and Providers

On March 12, 2020 Governor Whitmer announced the first school closings, with a follow-up announcement on April 2, 2020 that schools would be closed for the remainder of the school year. The mandate had an impact on adult education and training programs throughout the state, including Reading Works' twenty-eight Network Service Providers. Providers organized to contact their adult learners, move instruction online or to a hybrid of online and paper study packets. The pandemic thrust educators into a futuristic time machine, bolting them light years ahead in working online with students.

##### Challenges adult learners faced include:

- Lack of devices for online learning
- Lack of internet access
- Low digital literacy skills
- Struggling to meet basic needs to sustain their family such as food, paying rent, etc.
- Learning the skills needed to homeschool their children and implementing home-schooling

##### Challenges adult educators faced include:

- Insufficient knowledge, capacity, and technology to provide significant online learning
- Inability to train mid-crisis and mid-semester on online teaching
- Unable to enter school buildings to get access to materials and supplies.
- GED testing labs closed and no online option
- Constraints on transitioning occupational training with hands-on components to online

#### Reading Works and Adult Education Providers Implement Creative Responses

##### Check-in Calls

As organizations shut their doors, Reading Works immediately established weekly check-in calls for the Service Provider Network to share challenges, ideas, resources, and support. Participation in the calls expanded over time with between 15 and 42 organization representatives participating on each call. Community-based organizations quickly developed responses to these challenges and shared them with each other. Examples of creative responses included:

- Loaning and/or giving devices to adult students to engage in online learning
- Advising students and peer organizations on where and how to access free internet
- Providing technical assistance to move teaching and learning online
- Providing drive-up educational testing
- Development of tools for documenting attendance, student progress, and teacher effort
- Trainings for instructors on how to use Zoom and other digital tools such as Facebook Live, You Tube, Google Classroom and Moodle
- Expanded use of online curriculum such as North Star Digital Literacy Assessment, Aztec, and Burlington English
- Dozens of one-on-one tutoring sessions at literacy centers moved online almost without interruption. In fact, tutoring seems to have had the most successful transition.

In addition to enabling peer sharing of knowledge, strategies, and resources, the check-in calls became an opportunity for adult education and occupational training providers in Detroit to receive updates and guidance from national, state, and city leaders. Examples of guest callers providing timely and valuable information included:

- Brian Frazier and Erica Luce from the Michigan Department of Labor and Educational Opportunity's Adult Education team discussed WIOA and Section 107 revised deadlines and possible amendments.
- Nicole Sherard-Freeman, Group Executive – Jobs, Economy & Detroit at Work, shared information about Connecting Futures, the digital literacy campaign in Detroit and efforts to support small businesses.
- Patrick Brown from Michigan Association of Community and Adult Education updated providers on online high school equivalent testing options.
- Kevin Johnson from SEMCOG gave an overview of the impact of the pandemic on the labor market.
- Jane Eguez from CASAS shared the timeline within which online CASAS testing would be piloted and available.
- Michael Matos, the regional representative from Coalition of Adult Basic Educators (COABE) highlighted opportunities for advocacy at the federal level.
- A representative from Comcast informed about the free or low-cost Wi-Fi access opportunities available during the pandemic.
- Adora Beard from GED testing division gave a presentation for adult educators on the pilot programs and progress of online testing.
- A Detroit Chamber of Commerce representative gave an overview of Detroit Reconnect, a program to encourage and incentivize college completion.
- COABE conference information was shared by those who attended.
- Macomb Community College shared their online offerings and how they have transitioned students to hybrid learning.

### Data-driven Responses

As an intermediary with its finger on the pulse of the regional adult education community, Reading Works collected system-wide data to inform adult education responses to the pandemic. The organization conducted multiple surveys of community-based adult education providers, including data on how many adult learners without K-12 children needed laptops to report an accurate count of how many devices were needed in a request from a potential funder. Reading Works also pooled information on how many organizations were offering remote instruction, what percentage of students were participating, how many would make use of a group subscription to North Star Digital Literacy Assessment, and development of summer and fall program plans.

## Appendix B

### Reading Works Members December 2020

#### Reading Works Members as of December 2020

- 482 Forward
- ACCESS
- All Saints Literacy
- Dearborn Adult Education
- Detroit Public Library
- Detroit Public Schools Community District
- Detroit Training Center
- Dominican Literacy
- EDSI
- EITI
- The Empowerment Plan
- Focus: HOPE
- Goodwill
- International Institute of Metropolitan Detroit
- Macomb Community College
- Matrix Human Services
- Mercy Education Project
- Oakland Literacy Council
- Per Scholas
- SER Metro
- Siena Literacy
- Southwest Solutions
- Streetwise Partners
- Saint Vincent and Sara Fisher Center
- Teach.Empower.Achieve. (T.E.A.), Rebel Nell
- Troy Continuing Education
- Wayne State University Harris Literacy Program
- Zaman International