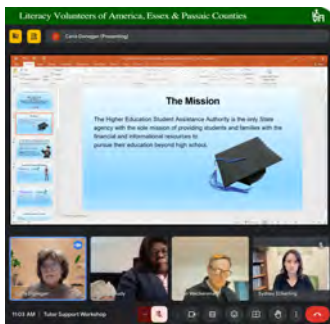




The Insider, the monthly newsletter of LVA Essex & Passaic Counties, will keep you in the loop on all the organization's upcoming events.



We were grateful to Carla Donegan from HESAA Higher Education Financial Aid Resources for taking the time to introduce us to this fantastic organization. During this workshop, participants learned that New Jersey leads the nation in offering the most generous, need-based state grants to help low- and moderate-income students (of all ages) pay for college.

The Insider

Greetings LVA family!

Spring is in full bloom with the cherry blossoms providing a full showing earlier this month nearby at Branch Brook Park. Did you know the park is nationally renowned for its expansive collection of these beautiful trees?

Each month we highlight one of our many amazing students, and the tutors, teachers, and team that support them.

This month we introduce you to Blandon, who created and hosted radio programs, led workshops on leadership and communication, and managed a small community library in his hometown of L'Estère, in Haiti. He was forced to leave his home in Haiti due to political instability and violence and is now working hard at improving his English to go back to broadcasting.

Carol's career in English as a Second Language started with a local church program that needed a teacher. She decided to go back to graduate school to earn her ESL teaching degree and spent over four decades teaching. Now, in retirement, we are lucky to have her as a tutor at LVA. She is passionate and creative in her ways to reach her students and shares teaching ESL is a calling.

This month's featured article highlights a concerning disparity in adult literacy rates across the United States. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, states such as Louisiana, New Mexico, Mississippi, and Texas exhibit the lowest literacy levels. Alarming, 21% of U.S. adults are considered illiterate, with 54% reading below a sixth-grade level. This literacy gap has profound economic implications with estimated annual costs up to \$2.2 trillion.

Thank you for being part of our community. Whether you are a student, tutor, teacher, team member, or supporter of adult literacy and our work, we cannot do what we do without you.

In the News

Copy and paste the highlighted website into an internet search bar to view the following stories.

"Library funding at risk, even as literacy rates drop." MSN. <https://bit.ly/4jd7aNW>

"Digital Pathways: Online Health Literacy Programming for Adults." American Library Association. <https://bit.ly/4lyIYHf>

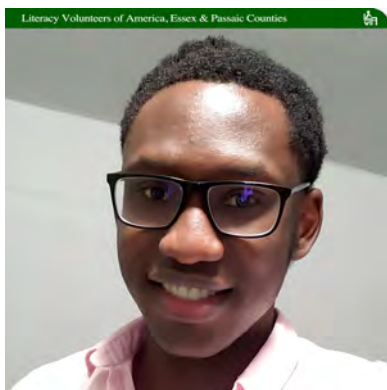
"Community college isn't a backup option: Rebranding higher ed's underdogs." Lumina Foundation. <https://bit.ly/4cCVuS0>

Literacy Volunteers of America, Essex & Passaic Counties

90 Broad Street, 2nd Floor, Bloomfield, NJ 07003
(973) 566-6200, ext. 217 or 225

195 Gregory Avenue, 2nd Floor, Passaic, NJ 07055
(973) 470-0039

Cristhian Barcelos	-Executive Director charcelos@lvaep.org
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Sydney Eckerling	-Education Coordinator seckerling@lvaep.org
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Cheryl Locastro	-Tutor Support Specialist & ESOL Instructor clocastro@lvaep.org
Marisol Ramirez	-Student Coordinator mramirez@lvaep.org



Blandon was forced to leave his home in Haiti due to political instability and violence, arriving in the U.S. in 2024. He knew he needed support improving his English, particularly his speaking skills. He dreams of getting back to his career in journalism broadcasting.

Tutor Training Workshops

Online Training, by TBD

Platform: Zoom (sponsored by LNJ)
Mondays & Wednesdays, 9:30 to 11:30 am
May 19, 21, 28, Jun. 2, & 4, 2025

Online Training, by Barb Hathaway

Platform: Zoom (sponsored by LNJ)
Mondays & Wednesdays 9:30 to 11:30 am
Jun. 2, 4, 9, 11, & 16, 2025

Online Training, by Jo Krish

Platform: Zoom (sponsored by LNJ)
Tuesdays, 6 to 8 pm
Jun. 3, 10, 17, 24, & Jul. 1, 2025

Tutor Support Workshops

"LVA's Approach to Adult Education," with Cristhian Barcelos

Bloomfield Public Library, Little Theater
Tuesday, April 22, 2025, 11 am to 12:30 pm

"ESL Listening Comprehension: The Least Understood and Most Overlooked Language Skill," with Dr. Jan Adversario

Platform: Google Meet
Wednesday, May 28, 2025, 7:00 pm – 8:30 pm

Coffee Hour with Tutors with Cheryl Locastro

Thursday, June 12, 2025, at 3pm (Themed online meeting)

Getting to Know Us

Blandon, LVA student

When Blandon arrived in the U.S. in early 2024, he brought more than a suitcase—he carried a dream.

Back home in Haiti, Blandon was a teacher, a radio journalist, and a community leader. He studied Modern Letters at the State University of Haiti and led a church youth association. In 2022, he was honored as one of Haiti's most influential young people.

But by 2023, political instability and violence forced him to flee. "It was difficult for me to practice my profession," he says. "Armed individuals forced me to leave my residence." Starting over in a new country, with a new language, wasn't easy. But Blandon's determination never wavered.

He found his way to LVAEP in March 2024, after being referred by the Bloomfield Library. "I understood grammar well, but I wanted to speak better," he says. "Now I work every day on pronunciation. I want to understand more expressions and speak freely."

And he's doing just that. With the support of LVAEP instructors—Jalaire Craver, Lidya Mekhail, Rosa Marisol Ramirez, Nancy Jeudi, and Mary Kao—Blandon has not only improved his English but found his footing in a new world. "They give me advice about life here. They help me stay on the path of education."

Blandon studies in the mornings and spends afternoons on computer classes, nutrition, and—his favorite—journalism. His dream is to return to broadcasting, this time in English. "I want to join a TV or radio station in the U.S.," he says. "That's my goal."

He credits his progress to many supporters, from his parents and mentors in Haiti to members of his church and a U.S.-based sponsor family. "Thanks to God and these people, I discovered new roads to realize my projects."

For Blandon, learning English is more than mastering vocabulary. "It helped me meet new people, get a job quickly, and talk freely about myself," he says. "If you come to a country, it's important to speak its language. It opens doors."

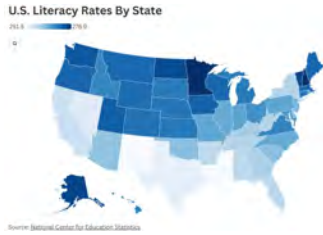
He's especially grateful for the consistent support he's received. "Since I can speak English, I've learned computer skills, taken nutrition classes, and started learning journalism again here."

Today, Blandon's voice is stronger than ever—grounded in faith, fueled by resilience, and ready for the next chapter.

Literacy opens a wide door to life. Help us keep that door open with your donation!

Thanks in large part to you, we are able to aid hundreds of students each year. Please continue your efforts to improve the lives of others by giving the gift of literacy.

<http://www.lvaep.org/donate.html>



Map Reveals US Adult Literacy Rates by State

Newsweek, January 6, 2025
Written by Jasmine Laws

The southern region of the U.S. has a lower literacy rate than states further north, data from the National Center of Education Statistics shows.

In 2024, 21 percent of adults in the U.S. were found to be illiterate, while 54 percent of adults had a literacy below a sixth grade level, according to the National Literacy Institute.

Why It Matters

The literacy rate in the U.S. appears to be decreasing, with it down nearly 10 points since 2017.

According to data released in December by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which is part of the Department of Education, 28 percent of adults in the U.S. ranked at the lowest levels of literacy, compared to 19 percent in 2017, according to news outlet wtrf.com.

Newsweek has contacted the National Center of Education Statistics for comment on the data.

The National Literacy Institute also reported that low levels of literacy costs the country up to \$2.2 trillion a year with 50 percent of those unemployed between ages 16 and 21 not considered to be functionally literate.

What To Know

The data released by the National Center of Education Statistics showed that Louisiana, New Mexico, Mississippi and Texas had the lowest rates of literacy in the U.S., with an average score under 254.

Meanwhile, Minnesota and New Hampshire had the highest rates, with scores over 278.

The scores are calculated as averages that fall between a range of 0 to 500, made up of five levels based on different literacy skills.

State with a score between 226 to 275 are ranked as Level 2, suggesting that the average person is able to make matches between a given text and information, such as paraphrasing or making low-level inferences.

For the full study please copy and paste this link on your browser: <https://bit.ly/3Y0GOpU>

Learning a new culture is more than studying a language. Tutoring is more than learning techniques. Our "Resources" webpage covers everything from legal matters, health care, & scholarships for immigrants, to professional development for tutors. Give us a look: <http://www.lvaep.org/students.html>

Getting to Know Us (cont.)

Carol Swill, Tutor

Carol majored in math at a time when ESL wasn't even a field of study. Graduate school didn't work out at first, but when her church started an ESL program and asked her to teach, it changed the course of her life. That moment began a career that would span more than 40 years.



In her 40s, she returned to graduate school and earned her degree in teaching English as a Second Language. "It's exciting to me," she says. "It's never been just a job—it's something I was meant to do."

She's brought that lifelong dedication to Literacy Volunteers of America, where she has been tutoring for just over a year. "I'd hang out at the library and saw tutoring going on," she recalls. "I realized I still wanted to be involved in ESL and keep my skills fresh." Years earlier, she had helped launch an ESL program at her church with the associate pastor.

Currently, she works with five students. One of them, Harold St. Gene, stood out for his motivation and patience. "He wanted to become a doctor and enrolled in a medical assistant program. He had a sharp mind and would help me with classroom technology. 'Here, teacher,' he'd say with a smile."

Her teaching style blends structure and creativity. She uses films, songs, books, and original games to make learning both educational and fun. After showing Super Size Me, she asked students to write essays comparing food in the U.S. with that of their home countries. "Ariana wrote using a much more advanced structure than I expected. I was so proud."

She also designs Jeopardy games (played for cookies), Wheel of Fortune reviews, and matching activities for grammar. "Some of my students work 15-hour days and still come to class. I want every lesson to count."

Outside tutoring, she enjoys coloring, is active in her church, and is planning to introduce the memoir *Having Our Say* in her class.

"I love being here. I'm open to any student, any level," she says.

At LVA, she's not just teaching English. She's building bridges—with songs, stories, and sometimes cookies—between the world her students came from and the one they're building here.