Making the Case: 
Linking Adult Literacy with K-12 Literacy for 
United Way’s Education Campaign

Tackling the education challenge requires reframing education on a birth to 21 continuum … children who succeed need good early learning experiences and nurturing adults.
—United Way

One of United Way’s core building blocks is education. The local targets for this building block are often centered on kindergarten readiness and third and fifth grade literacy goals. But the only way to create a truly literate world is to include goals associated with underserved adult students and the literacy programs that serve them.

Literacy programs help adult students to
- Take and pass their high school equivalency test
- Obtain and advance in jobs through learning new skills

Adult illiteracy cannot be seen as a singular social problem in isolation from children’s literacy. Most “emergent literacy” emphasizes the familial dimensions of early literacy and underscores the connections between child and adult literacy, regarding learning, skill levels, and practices.

Education data indicates the following:
- Children whose parents reported literacy difficulties had a 72 percent chance of being in the lowest reading level in school tests (compared to 25 percent of children in the lowest reading level overall).
- Low-skilled parents tend to have lower expectations and aspirations regarding education for themselves and their children.
- Low-skilled parents cannot read to their children, nor encourage a love of learning. When low-skilled adults improve their literacy skills, this impacts the literacy of their children. With these new skills they can help a child with homework, read notes sent home from school, understand the school system their children engage in, and guide and encourage them.
- Children of parents who are not involved in their education are more likely to display behavioral problems, get poor grades, have a high-absentee rate, repeat school years, or drop out of school.
- Children from the poorest homes are almost a year behind their middle-class counterparts by the time they start school.
- Children with parents who hold professional jobs hear more than 33 million words by the time they begin school, compared with 10 million words for children from more disadvantaged groups. This had a significant impact on vocabulary growth and standardized test scores during a child’s early years.
• Educated mothers have been shown to be more likely to send their children to school, and it has been widely reported that a mother’s level of reading skill is the greatest determinant of her child’s academic success.
• Children of parents who had not completed high school scored lower in vocabulary assessments than children of parents with a high school degree or equivalent.
• Parents with a high school diploma or high school equivalency certificate engage more in early childhood education activities with their children.
• Only 27 percent of parents with below-basic literacy levels report reading to their children five or more times a week.
• Parents with a high school diploma or a high school equivalency certificate are 11 percent more likely to assist their children with homework than those who did not complete high school.
• Both literate and non-literate parents believe strongly in education for their children, although literate parents are more likely to support their children in practical ways, such as meeting teachers and discussing progress with children.

In general, research finds that parents actively work to support their children’s literacy even when their own years of school education are limited. Home literacy practices blended with literacy practices in schools create collaborative literacy practices rooted in a culture or neighborhood. Literacy courses introduce parents to ways of helping children in school and the school curriculum, resulting in greater social benefits.

Sources:
“Connections between Child and Adult Literacy, Regarding Learning, Skill Levels and Practices,” Mastin Prinsloo, 2005
The Social Benefits of Literacy, Anna Robinson-Pant, 2005
National Institutes of Health, 2010
National Center for Education Statistics, 2003