

## ***Testimony to the House Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness***

**Gretchen Wilson**

Hi. My name is Gretchen Wilson, and I'm here to tell you about how important the adult education program has been to me.

I was one of many teenagers who was forced to leave home and school at a very young age. And for most people, education takes a back seat to work and financial commitment almost immediately. I know this because I was one of those people. I struggled financially until I was almost thirty years old, and the impossible dream came true. I became a mommy...and a major recording artist for Sony Records. After having been blessed with a life that most people only dream of, there was still something missing, a piece of me that was incomplete. I chose to continue my education not only for myself, but also for my daughter, Grace. She's in second grade now, and she's getting ready to start doing long division.

I realized that, as she got older, I would have to address important issues with her, including the educational needs that had not been met in my own life. I knew that she would be curious about things that I valued, such as an education, and that she would ask me probing questions like, *if school is that important, then why didn't you graduate?* I also knew that she would need to ask me to help her with much more difficult math problems than long division, and I wanted to be ready to meet the challenge. I wanted to set a good example for her. I was determined to complete my high school education by finding a local adult education program and earning a GED, and I am proud to stand before you today and say that I did. I'm not only blessed, but also relieved that I'll be able to help her with her homework next year.

Going back to school was an eye-opener for me in many ways. After talking with others who had gone back to school, I realized that I was only one person out of many people in need of a GED credential. Not only was I among nearly 6,500<sup>1</sup> adults in Wilson County that lack basic education skills, but also among 577,000 adults in Tennessee and 93 million adults in America

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<sup>1</sup> NAAL State and County Estimates: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/estimates/StateEstimates.aspx>

with basic skills deficiencies<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, one in five adults have not completed high school<sup>3</sup>, and nearly 7,000 high school students drop out every school day.<sup>4</sup>

Why do young people leave school in your Congressional districts? For many reasons, and the reasons may surprise you. Perhaps a family member was sick, or they had to quit school to work for their family's survival. Some had to travel with their parents who were in the military or who were otherwise mobile because of job requirements. Their education, as a result, was fractured. Credits that counted in one school system would not count in another. They realized they did not have enough credits to graduate, and they felt they had no alternative but to quit. These are only a few examples out of the many diverse reasons why young people leave.

In talking to people, my heart began to ache. There are so many people struggling to make ends meet and they cannot because they do not have high school diplomas. Their parenting skills are lacking. Many do not have the basic education skills themselves nor do they understand that they need to nurture and encourage their children to become well educated. They do not have the social skills needed to navigate the workplace, they feel inferior to their cohorts, and they often just give up. People need the tools to succeed in America, and, at the very minimum, a major tool on the road to success is a high school diploma or GED. All Americans deserve a basic education so that they can take advantage of opportunities otherwise not open to them.

Adult education and literacy is a silent epidemic that has been growing for years. It isn't easily recognized like poor health or hunger, although it can alleviate both. For example, nearly half of all American adults—90 million people—have difficulty understanding and using health information<sup>5</sup>. In order to get good health care and to raise healthy families, adults need to be able to understand the health information available to them. That understanding increases as adult literacy increases.<sup>6</sup>

Educated parents help children succeed and break the cycle of educational deficiencies in families. Adult education and literacy issues are invisible to America because most people who

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<sup>2</sup> National Assessment of Adult Literacy: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/>

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Census: [http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?\\_lang=en](http://factfinder.census.gov/home/saff/main.html?_lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education: [http://www.all4ed.org/files/NCLB\\_HighSchools.pdf](http://www.all4ed.org/files/NCLB_HighSchools.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Institute of Medicine of the National Academies: <http://www.iom.edu/?id=19723&redirect=0>

<sup>6</sup> National Assessment of Adult Literacy: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/>

suffer are ashamed of it, try to hide it, and will not speak out. Adult education and literacy is not a priority for our country, but if you have had your eyes opened like I have, then you see that it should be.

The sad truth is, if my dream hadn't come true, I probably wouldn't have been able to afford to take off work in order to get my GED. A lot of Americans out there who really want and need to continue their education can't afford it, either.

Those who do go back to school, in between work and family responsibilities, may be put on waiting lists. In a recent survey<sup>7</sup>, 80,000 adults (in 41 of 46 states reporting) confirmed students on waiting lists in their state, not counting waiting lists with community-based organizations that do not receive federal funds. There is no excuse to wait list people. What would parents say if they were told their child had to wait three months, six months, a year or more to enroll their child in school? Americans would be in an uproar! Parents would not tolerate it. Why do we tolerate it for adults?

Adults are wait listed for adult education and literacy programs because these programs are severely underfunded. We invest heavily in K-12, Head Start, and Early Head Start but the amount spent on adult education and literacy is significantly less. Invest more in educating the parent, and you'll educate the child and break the cycle of illiteracy for generations to come. The reality is, you wait list people, turn them away, and they're probably not coming back. You've just added more undereducated adults to the statistics. The cycle continues.

Talking to adult educators, every year they are under a cloud of threats for closure or diminished funds. I can only imagine how difficult it would be to work under that type of stress. These highly educated and very dedicated men and women already work on a dime and get more bang for their buck with the dollars spent on their programs than on most federally-funded education programs. I challenge you to show me another program out there anywhere in America that does so much for its people with so little.

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<sup>7</sup> National Council of State Directors of Adult Education. 2007-2008 Adult Student Waiting List Survey: [www.ncsdae.org](http://www.ncsdae.org)

Less than an hour ago, I delivered thousands of letters from Tennesseans to Tennessee Congressmen requesting additional funding for adult education. Many of those who wrote are students, sharing their educational goals and aspirations. Here are just a few examples of why adult education is important to them (refers to stack of letters, reads a sentence or two from them):

- *I lost my job after nine years because my plant moved to Mexico, and I need to get my GED.*
- *I'm the son of military parents who were constantly on the move which kept me from receiving many credits, and I'd like to complete my high school education.*
- *I'm a single dad with two young boys. I come from a bad side of the city where drugs and gangs run the streets. I want to turn my life around through adult education.*
- *I went from a person who could not read or write to an operation's manager for a major company thanks to this program.*
- *I came to America to get my education; I would like to open a business here and help my community.*
- *I had a traumatic head injury and lost my ability to read and write.*

These are just a few examples of hundreds of thousands of stories told to Congress yearly about adult education and literacy. Why does Congress seem to pay so little attention to this issue, when year after year it is raised?

Last, I have been amazed at the numbers of lives I have personally touched as a result of achieving my own GED. You have no idea how many people approach me at my concerts to say that I have inspired them to continue their own education. That knowledge inspires me, invigorates me, and compels me to ask you to join me in championing adult education and literacy. Begin now by urgently funding services to help adults increase their skills and reduce waiting lists. Shape legislation that truly meets the need. Raise this issue on every front. Advocate for it in every hall. Be the pioneer that brings this silent epidemic to light.