

A photograph of the Houston skyline at dusk or dawn, featuring several prominent skyscrapers. A faint rainbow is visible in the sky above the buildings. In the foreground, there are green trees and a road with some vehicles. A solid red rectangle is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the title text.

# **Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**Inspiring. Empowering. Transforming.**





# Message to the Houston Community

## Dear Fellow Houstonians,

A systemic issue threatens our city's economy and challenges the prosperity of individuals and families now and for generations to come – low literacy. While literacy is a fundamental right of every Houstonian, it has not been a reality for many adults in Houston. A startling one in three Houston adults is functionally illiterate, lacking the literacy skills needed to engage in the workforce, support their family, or participate fully in society. This is simply unacceptable.

Low literacy impacts all of us. Low literacy rates have been linked to higher crime and poverty rates, poorer health, wider digital disparity, and lower economic growth. To put it simply, low literacy rates directly impact the current and future workforce, the wellbeing of our neighborhoods, and the next generation of young learners. The reality in Houston is that this challenge impacts all of us, and the time to act is now!

It is my belief that hope and freedom exist in literacy. It has the power to change and strengthen lives, families, communities, workplaces, industries, and cities. That is why I was proud to create the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy in 2019, the only office of its kind in the nation, and tasked it with partnering with the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation to create a comprehensive strategic plan to change the reality of low literacy for the more than one million Houstonians who are impacted by it today. Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint is the result of this partnership and a product informed by research and reflective of input from dozens of cross-sector leaders across our city.

I envision a Houston where every Houstonian has equitable access to the opportunities to gain the skills they need to succeed in life. Adult literacy must be prioritized, acted upon, and sustained by the full community. A strong Houston relies on all individuals having the skills they need to participate fully in society, and that depends on each and every one of us committing to take action.

I am grateful to the community and business leaders who through the investment of their time, talents, and thought leadership have made this effort possible. Now, let us approach this challenge to eliminate adult illiteracy boldly, together, and, as always, Houston Strong.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading 'Sylvester Turner'.

Mayor Sylvester Turner

It is my belief that hope and  
freedom exist in literacy.

# Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint

## PURPOSE

In 2021, the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy and the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation embarked on a joint initiative to engage the community in developing this Blueprint to serve as a strategic and coordinated city-wide plan to ensure that more adults in our community acquire the literacy skills they need to succeed in all aspects of life.

This Blueprint is created in alignment with the National Action Plan for Adult Literacy developed by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy.

## STAKEHOLDER INVOLVEMENT

A diverse group of over 100 individuals, representing the City of Houston, the business sector, non-profit organizations, adult learners, and other groups provided thought leadership and expertise in the design of this Blueprint through a series of interviews and focus groups, a community survey, and a strategy lab conducted over a five-month period. We are grateful for their commitment of time and talent in the development of the Blueprint.

## A SPECIAL THANK YOU

The development of Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint was made possible through financial support provided by Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation, EOG Resources, Greater Houston Community Foundation, Phillips 66, and the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy.

We wish to extend our gratitude to Deloitte Consulting LLP for synthesizing data, research and insights from leaders and facilitating the design process for the Blueprint.

The development of this Blueprint could not have been achieved without the research and data shared by so many organizations, including the Houston-Galveston Area Council (HGAC). Additionally, we are indebted to the many organizations who made their findings available for our use including, but not limited to, the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, Gallup, the Kinder Institute for Urban Research, ProLiteracy, the Coalition on Adult Basic Education, and the National Center for Education Studies.

## Blueprint Leadership

**Julie Baker Finck, Ph.D.**

Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation

**Federico Salas-Isnardi**

Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy

**Nicole Robinson**

Houston Public Library

**Jacqueline Aguilera**

Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy



## MAYOR'S OFFICE FOR ADULT LITERACY

**The Houston Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy (MOAL)**

In September of 2019, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner launched the Mayor's Office for Adult Literacy (MOAL) to focus on enhancing adult literacy advocacy and awareness and its impact on our economy, communities, families, and individuals—the only office of its kind in the country.

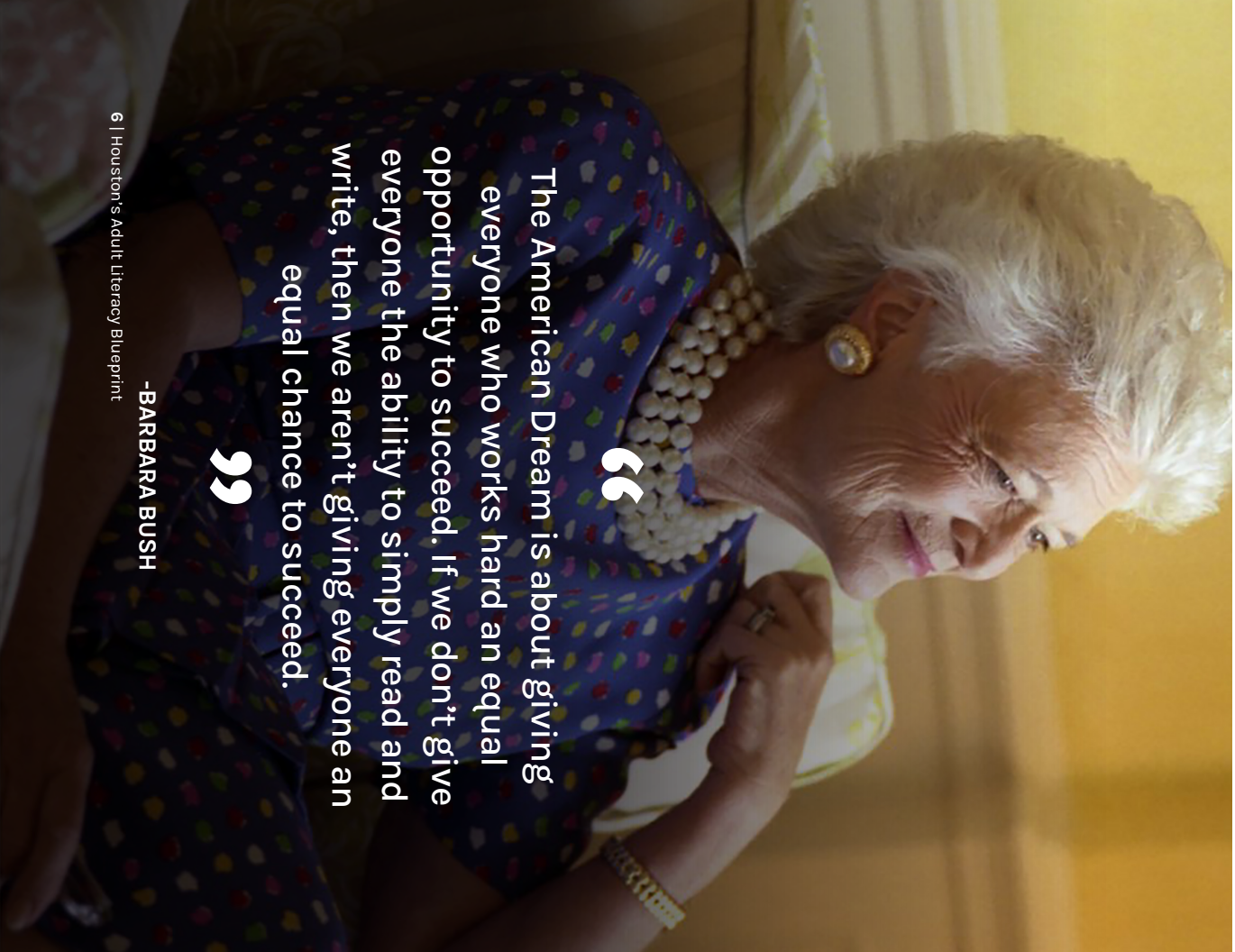


**BARBARA BUSH**  
HOUSTON LITERACY FOUNDATION

**The Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation (BBHLF)**

The Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation advocates for literacy as a fundamental right for everyone and views literacy as a necessary skill to achieve individual, family, and community success. It is founded on the belief held by former First Lady Barbara Bush: "If you help a person to read, then their opportunities in life will be endless."





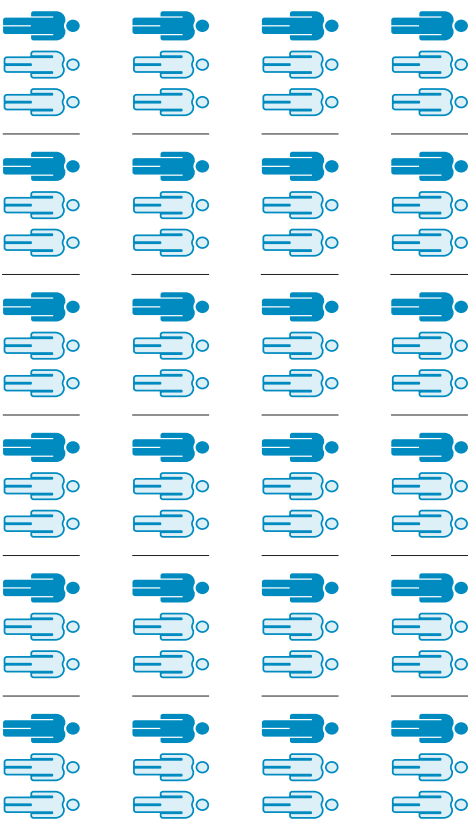
“The American Dream is about giving everyone who works hard an equal opportunity to succeed. If we don't give everyone the ability to simply read and write, then we aren't giving everyone an equal chance to succeed.”

-BARBARA BUSH

## Executive Summary

1 in every 3 adults in Harris County is functionally illiterate.<sup>1</sup>

This means that more than 1 million adults in Harris County lack the necessary skills to participate and engage fully in the workplace and society.<sup>2</sup>





# Houston's Adult Literacy Challenge

A potent form of systemic injustice is evident in Harris County, and it affects 1 in every 3 adults. According to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), **32% of Harris County adults are functionally illiterate**, meaning they do not yet have the literacy skills they need to successfully perform their role on the job, in their family, or in society.<sup>2</sup> These adults also often face societal stigma related to their low literacy, despite the systemic factors or circumstances that have influenced or contributed to it.

This data is alarming, as literacy rates have become a global metric for determining the overall health and vibrancy of communities and have far-reaching implications for low-literate adults, their families, the economy, the well-being of individuals and the community, and for the future success of Houston.<sup>4</sup>

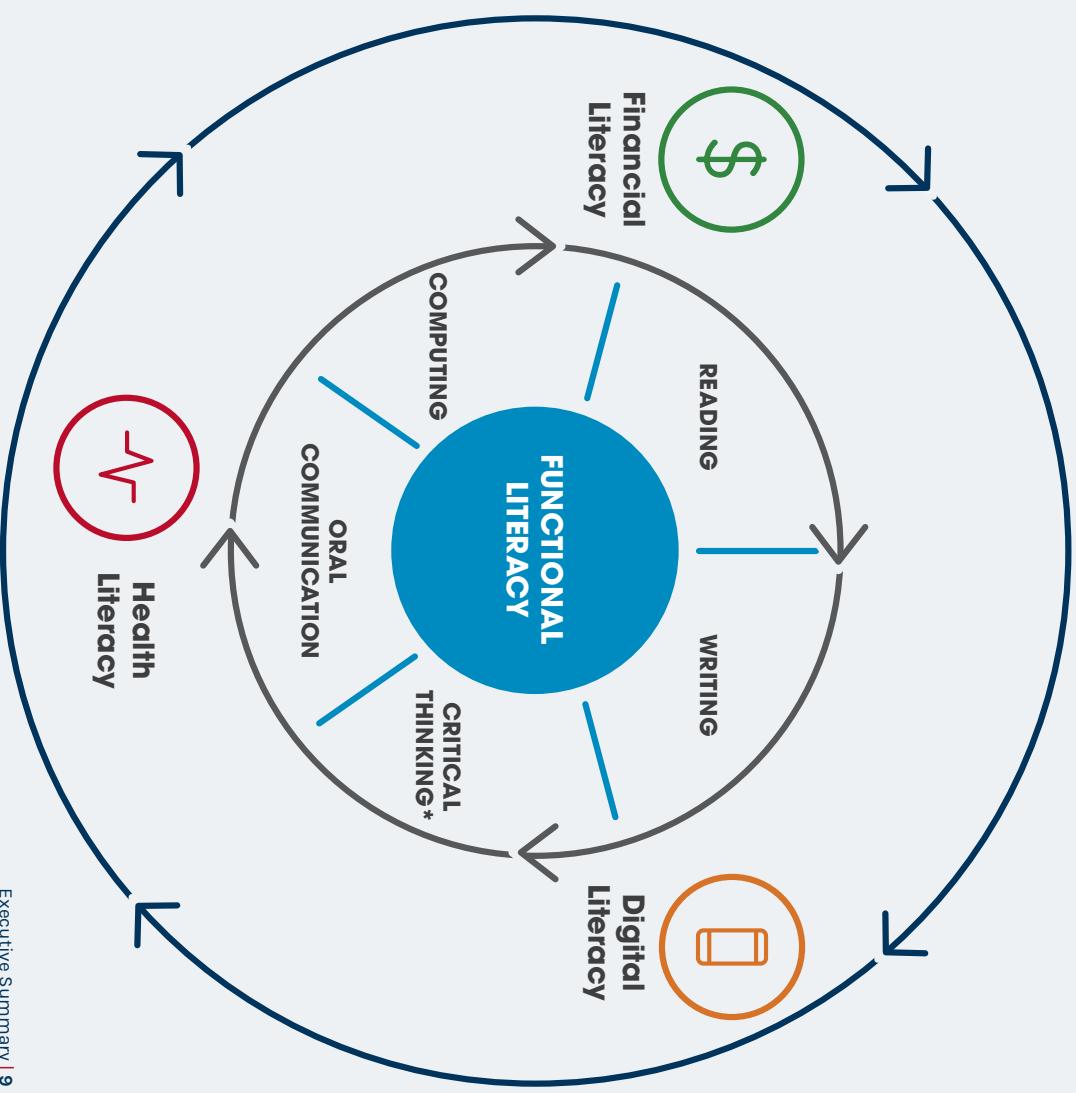
To be functionally literate, adults need more complex and varying skills beyond the traditional ability to read and write. First, adults need the foundations of functional literacy— which include **skills beyond the fundamental, requisite skills of reading and writing**. Due to the complex and changing expectations of everyday life, adults also need more contextualized specific skills to navigate decisions, support their families, and adapt to changing circumstances. These skills fall within the domains of **financial literacy, digital literacy, and health literacy**, which are integral to the success of adults in Houston (See Figure 1). Without skills in these domains, everyday tasks, such as balancing a budget, accessing information from a website, reading a prescription, supporting a child with homework, or completing a job application, become hurdles to everyday life and long-term prosperity.

## What is Functional Literacy?

Functional literacy includes reading, writing, computing, critical thinking, and oral communication skills at levels of proficiency to function on the job, in the family, and across society.

<sup>\*</sup>Refers to the ability to make decisions, synthesize information, and solve problems

FIGURE 1: WHAT IS FUNCTIONAL LITERACY?



Social Inequity

Low adult literacy levels are related to, and in some instances, are a root cause of existing and historical inequities in our society. **Low literacy reinforces and perpetuates multigenerational cycles of poverty, poor health, and low educational attainment, and impacts already marginalized groups at higher rates than others.**

In the United States, low levels of functional literacy disproportionately affect people of color. In the U.S., Black and Hispanic populations have higher rates of low literacy and numeracy skills as compared to White populations (See Figures 2 and 3). Additionally, in Houston we see similar trends and ethnic disparities in education and economic vulnerability.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, literacy and education inequities are related to disparities in economic and unemployment outcomes. Specifically, compared to adults with some college education, **adults without a high school diploma are almost two times more likely to be unemployed and three times more likely to live in poverty.<sup>6</sup>**

**Compared to adults with just some college, adults without a high school diploma are almost: 2 times more likely to be unemployed and 3 times more likely to live in poverty**

FIGURE 2: % OF U.S. POPULATION WITH LOW LITERACY SKILLS

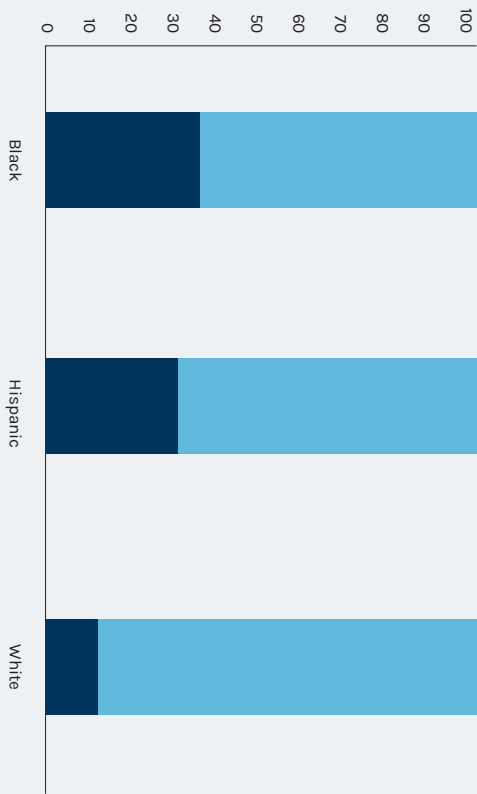


FIGURE 3: % OF U.S. POPULATION WITH LOW NUMERACY SKILLS

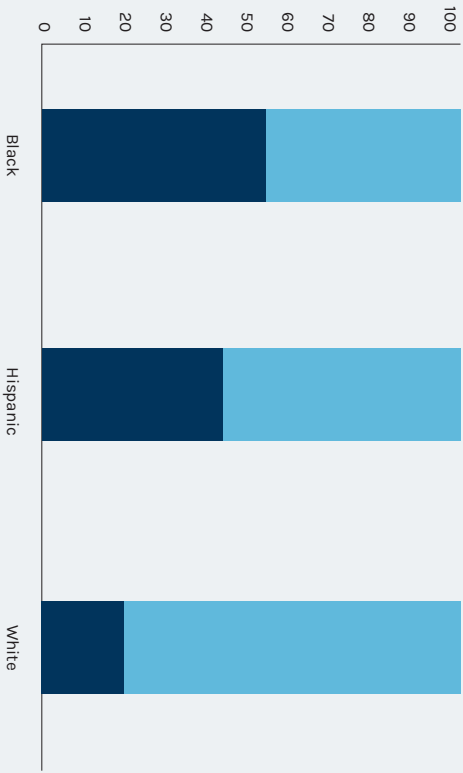







FIGURE 4: IMPACTS OF LOW ON SOCIETY

KEY SOCIETAL OUTCOMES	RELATIONSHIP TO ADULT LITERACY
 CRIME	29% of inmates have low levels of literacy compared to 19% for the general U.S. population. <sup>8</sup>
 HEALTH	Adults with low literacy skills are four times more likely to report “fair” or “poor” health compared to those with strong skills. <sup>9</sup>
 CIVIC PARTICIPATION	60% of individuals with low academic skills feel they have no influence on public decisions and the political process. <sup>10</sup>

Literacy levels also underpin the overall well-being, vibrancy, and success of communities. Basic aspects of successful communities such as safe and healthy neighborhoods, sustainable infrastructure, and equal access to opportunities are not possible without capable and literate populations.<sup>7</sup> Figure 4 depicts key facts that represent the relationship between adult literacy and key societal outcomes.

Such inequities and societal impacts weigh heavy on and marginalize groups affected by them. Empowering adults by boosting their literacy skills provides a pivotal strategy to bridge the gaps among populations, while at the same time, removes barriers to success, restores dignity and self-efficacy, and reduces extra life stressors that arise from societal inequalities. Indeed, literacy is liberating and transformative.

According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), literacy is “fully essential to social and human development in its ability to transform lives. For individuals, families, and societies alike, it is an instrument of empowerment to improve one’s health, one’s income, and one’s relationship with the world.”<sup>11</sup> This is no different for Houston. For many Houstonians, literacy provides a way out of systemic cycles of poverty and racial inequity.



“  
Literacy is a fundamental  
human right and the foundation  
for lifelong learning.”<sup>12</sup>  
-UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC,  
AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION, 1988



## The Digital Divide

Social and economic inequalities are compounded as business and society become more and more digital. In today's world, it is incredibly difficult to function and advance in society without access to a variety of digital devices, including smart phones, basic computer hardware and internet connection, as well as the requisite digital skills to use them. Yet, even in the 21st Century, access is not universal.

Although it has long existed since the advent of personal computer devices and the internet, the digital divide was further exacerbated amid the COVID-19 pandemic as families struggled to stay connected to schools, employers, and public services. In Houston, about 142,650 households do not have a computer at home and almost twice that amount, about 267,250 households, do not have broadband internet access.<sup>12</sup> In addition, national numbers show that 32% of those without a high school diploma are dependent on their smartphone for internet access, limiting their ability to access and utilize the internet for key tasks.<sup>13</sup>

Even with access to technology devices and internet connectivity, adults that lack foundational literacy skills may also struggle with essential digital literacy skills. This digital divide—a divide of both resources and skills—impacts adults' ability to participate fully in an increasingly digital workforce.

Adults who are low in digital literacy have a lower rate of labor force participation and are more likely to work in low-skilled jobs for low wages, contributing to the cycles of poverty and low literacy.<sup>14</sup> These adults are, also, on average, less educated, older, and more likely to be Black, Hispanic, or foreign-born, compared to digitally literate adults.<sup>15</sup>

For their part, providers of adult basic education and workforce development programs have also been heavily impacted by the pandemic and the necessity of rapidly transitioning to the digital space in order to educate and support adult learners. Providers have struggled with implementation of remote learning due to lack of experience with completely digital curricula and the challenges of engaging adult learners virtually. Yet, in a nationwide survey by ProLiteracy, 70% of the adult literacy instructors who had not previously taught remotely had moved all of their instruction online.<sup>16</sup>

Enrollment and retention of adult learners has also been an issue for many educators as instruction has shifted to a digital format. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many adult learners have dealt with the stress of unemployment, lost income, increased parenting responsibilities, sickness and death, and other threats, leaving little room for the time and resources necessary to navigate a newly digital format for adult education.<sup>17</sup>

**In Houston, about 142,650 households do not have a computer at home and almost twice that amount, about 267,250 households, do not have broadband internet access.<sup>13</sup>**





# It will be impossible to break the cycle of poverty without first breaking the cycle of low literacy.

## Impact on Children & Families

Low literacy has life-long impacts on individuals as well as those around them. Forty-three percent of adults with the lowest levels of literacy skills live in poverty, compared to only 4% of those with the highest levels of literacy skills.<sup>18</sup> Studies have also shown that adults with low literacy have poorer health, limited job opportunities, and struggle to support themselves and their children.<sup>19</sup>

Perhaps more troubling is the generational impact of low levels of literacy. Specifically, research shows that a mother's education level is the leading determinant of a child's reading success,<sup>20</sup> and because low literacy rates are correlated to living in poverty, a child's chances of breaking the cycle of poverty are greatly improved if their caregivers are functionally literate.

Successful educational attainment begins at home, even before a child enters school. According to the Urban Child Institute, a child's brain develops at a rapid rate during their early life. By age 3, the brain has reached 80% of its adult size.

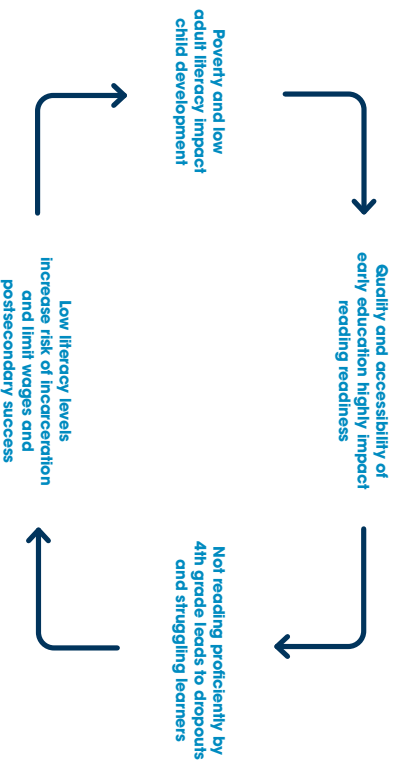
Reading and problem solving at home and building relationships with books among parents and children encourages learning at a critical time in a child's development.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, reading and solving problems in the home is fundamental to preparing a child to enter kindergarten with vital reading skills. In Houston, studies show that each year, 60% of children who enter kindergarten lack these requisite reading skills.<sup>22</sup>

Reading, telling stories, solving problems, and thinking critically with adult caregivers should start at an early age and be encouraged across all families. When parents teach children how to read, ask questions, solve problems, and ultimately navigate the world, they are developing the building blocks for academic and life success.<sup>23</sup>

**A mother's education level is the leading determinant of a child's reading success.<sup>21</sup>**

Today's low literacy levels among Houston's adults are strongly influencing the literacy achievement of the next generation of Houstonians. However, by improving the literacy skills of adults in our city, we can interrupt the cycle of low literacy and its impacts on children, families, and communities.

Figure 5 depicts the importance of adult literacy in the cycle of low literacy, its implications, and the complexity involved in breaking the cycle.

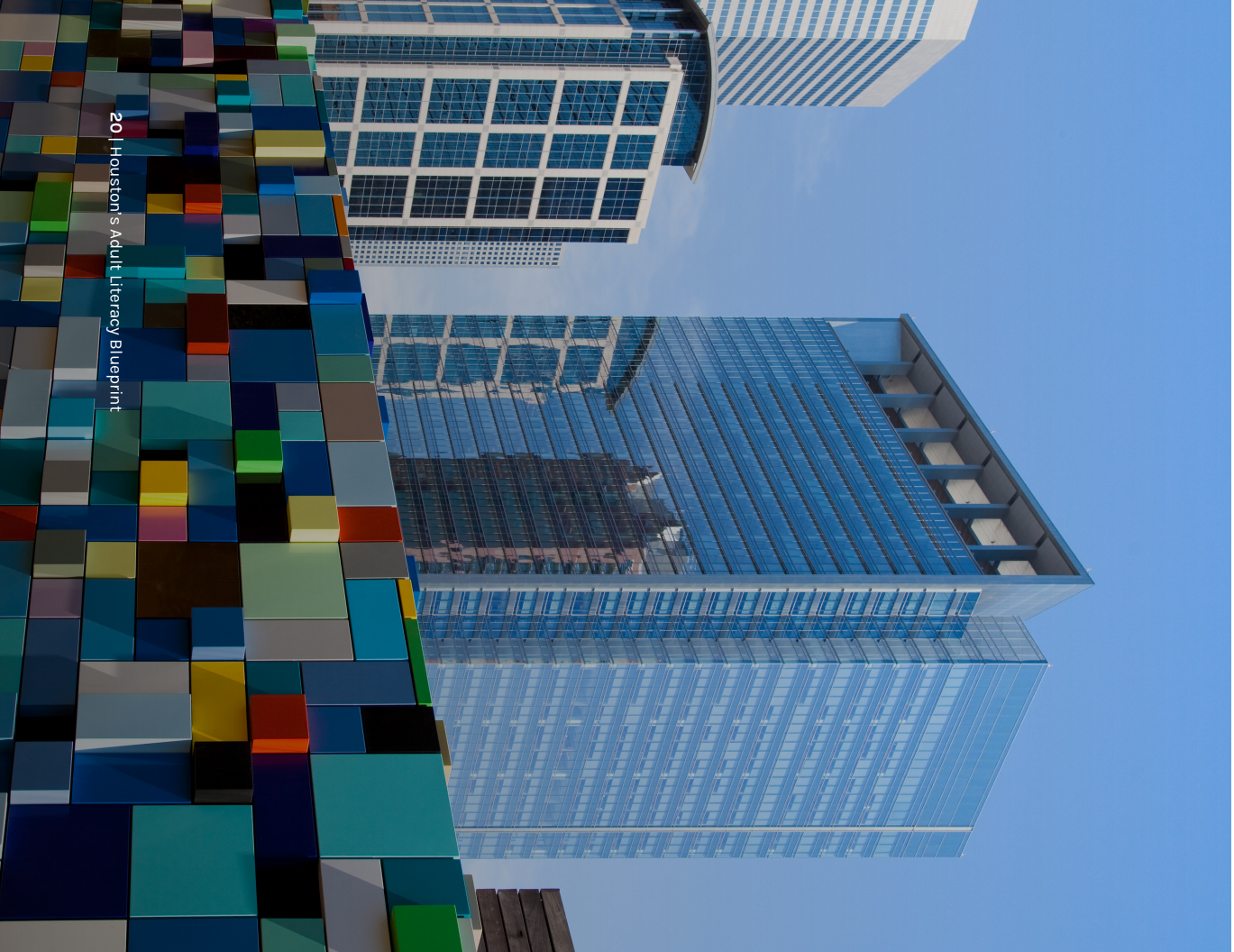


**FIGURE 5: CYCLE OF LOW LITERACY\***

\*This cycle holds true for native speakers as well as for second language learners.

**Forty-three percent of adults with the lowest levels of literacy skills live in poverty.<sup>18</sup>**





## The Cost to Businesses & Our Economy

Having a literate community has significant implications for Houston's economic and financial success, as it is correlated with personal income, employment levels, and overall economic growth. For individuals, literacy levels directly correlate to annual income. **The average annual income of adults who are at the minimum proficiency level for functional literacy is \$63,000, nearly double the average income of those at low levels of literacy.**<sup>24</sup>

At the county level, the cost of low levels of literacy becomes even more staggering. Recent research by Gallup shows the extent of economic growth possible if Houstonians with literacy skills at or below a PLACC proficiency level of 1—who are able to, at best, understand short texts and complete simple forms—increased their literacy skills to a Level 2, meaning they could read and integrate

more complex information in both print and digital formats. If this increase of skills occurred, Harris County's economy could grow by \$13 billion, or a 3.3% increase in its current GDP.<sup>25</sup>

These economic costs will continue, and likely increase, if Houston's pervasive issue of low adult literacy levels remains under-resourced and systemically unaddressed. Future workforce trends show that jobs that require some post-secondary education and/or on-the-job training for technical skills will dominate the local Gulf Coast/Houston economy. **In fact, by 2024, 58.8% of all jobs in the Gulf Coast/Houston region will require education or training beyond the high school level.**<sup>26</sup> However, as of 2019, 24% of Harris County adult residents possess only a high-school diploma and an additional 18% do not have a high-school diploma at all.<sup>27</sup>

Boosting the literacy skills of adults in our city is an imperative if we seek to ensure our city thrives socially and economically, and the people who call Houston 'home' have an equal opportunity to engage fully in all that the city has to offer.

**Harris County's economy could grow by \$13 billion if adults with low literacy could increase their literacy skills by even one level.**<sup>25</sup>

# Houston's Blueprint for City-Wide Action

Literacy is the key to breaking the cycles of systemic inequity that exist today.

By improving rates of adult literacy in Houston, we can disrupt and even curtail cycles of generational poverty, improve health outcomes, strengthen communities and civic participation, and ensure all are able to take part in a thriving economy.

Houston's systemic literacy crisis will require sustained action and engagement from everyone.

It's time for Houston to act. Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint offers a crucial path forward.

## Goals

- 1. **AWARENESS & ACTION**  
Raise awareness of and galvanize communities to address and solve the systemic crisis of adult literacy.
- 2. **A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM**  
Create a data-informed, comprehensive, cross-sector system of adult literacy programming, services, and resources.
- 3. **MULTI-GENERATIONAL LEARNING**  
Expand access to and improve positive outcomes for participation in basic education, family literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy learning opportunities across generations.
- 4. **WORKFORCE SKILLS & OPPORTUNITIES**  
Improve employability skills and increase access to career and entrepreneurship opportunities for adult learners.
- 5. **DIGITAL RESOURCES & SKILLS**  
Reduce the gap in access to technology and digital resources and increase the number of adults completing digital skills training.
- 6. **A COMMON DATA SYSTEM & PRACTICES**  
Design, develop, and implement a common data and learning management system for adult literacy.
- 7. **SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES FOR PROGRESS**  
Establish sustainable resources to support and build capacity for Blueprint initiatives and progress.

<b>GOAL 1</b> AWARENESS & ACTION	<b>GOAL 2</b> A COMPREHENSIVE SYSTEM
<b>GOAL 3</b> MULTI-GENERATIONAL LEARNING	<b>GOAL 4</b> WORKFORCE SKILLS & OPPORTUNITIES
<b>GOAL 5</b> DIGITAL RESOURCES & SKILLS	<b>GOAL 6</b> A COMMON DATA SYSTEM & PRACTICES
<b>GOAL 7</b> SUSTAINABLE RESOURCES FOR PROGRESS	

The full report, *Houston's Adult Literacy Blueprint*, which will include an extensive review of the challenge of low rates of adult literacy in Houston and the complete plan of action, will be available in June 2021.



# Contributing Organizations

Adult Education Center	ASTOUNDZ	AT&T	Intel	Interfaith Ministries	ION
Baker Ripley	Bank on Houston	Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy	Kinder Foundation	Legacy Community Health	Literacy Now
CenterPoint Energy	Cheniere Energy	CITGO Petroleum Corporation	Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC)	Lone Star College	LyondellBasell
City of Houston	Coalition on Adult Basic Education (COABE)	Collaborative for Children	Marathon Oil	Memorial Assistance Ministries (MAM)	Mexican Institute of Greater Houston (MIGH)
Comcast	Consulate of Qatar in Houston	Deloitte Consulting, LLP	Neuhaus Education Center	PNC Bank	Dress for Success Houston
EastSide University	Elite Mixed Martial Arts	Entercom	Prestige Institute	Proliteracy	Reliant
EOG Resources, Inc	Fort Bend Literacy Council	Greater Houston Partnership	Rice University	SheSpace	StalwartMC
Greater Houston Restaurant Association	Harris County Department of Education	Harris County Judge's Office	System for Education Empowerment and Success	Texas Capital Bank	Texas Workforce Commission
Harris County Public Library	Harris County Sheriff's Department	H-E-B	The Alliance	Twin Oaks ESL Program	Tyson Foods
Hess Corporation	Houston Astros Foundation	Houston Community College	United Way THRIVE	University of Houston-Downtown	Volunteer Houston
Houston Food Bank	Houston Hispanic Chamber of Commerce	Houston Independent School District	Wesley Community Center	Workforce Solutions	
Houston Public Library	Houston Urban League	Independent Contractor			

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**MAYOR'S OFFICE**  
FOR ADULT LITERACY

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