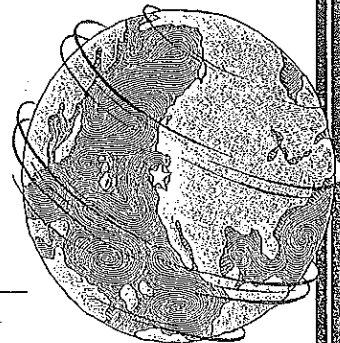


Critical Key to the Future

Literacy measures a community's economic health and vitality.



BY DIANE CORDERO DE NORIEGA

Why should we be worried about literacy? This is Monterey County. Surely this is not a problem for us. The data tell a different story. Among kindergartners, 46 percent begin school without the necessary pre-academic skills. By the 11th grade, only 55 percent score at the basic level or higher in English language arts, and only 60 percent in math. Stated another way, between 40 and 45 percent of our students are below the basic level in English language arts and math. Fifty-four percent of our high school graduates entering college require remediation in writing. Thirty-six percent of students at Hartnell College and Monterey Peninsula College must complete basic skills before continuing with college level work. Eleven percent of adults in Monterey County are not literate in any language. Twenty-five percent of adults read below the 4th grade level, and only 68 percent have completed high school. It appears that Monterey County, indeed, needs to be concerned about literacy levels.

Literacy is a measure of a community's economic health and vitality. It allows young people to see all the options and opportunities available to them. The leadership of the Community Safety Alliance cited literacy as the top issue in reducing gang violence in our community. Research shows that children who cannot read by the 4th-grade are among the first to drop out of school. Children from homes with high literacy skills have greater success in school and at work. Lack of English-language and literacy skills is a barrier to entry and advancement in many types of employment.

A recent survey of the hospitality industry in Monterey County underlined many of the issues we know to be true about entry-level skills of our local employees. According to the 2005 Monterey

County Business and Workforce Study, the most in-demand worker characteristics are a high school diploma/GED and basic computer skills. The study's key findings reveal that our local workforce lacks appropriate basic skills and readiness for the workplace. Workplace literacy programs offer a way to improve skill levels.

A study by the National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education in Washington, D.C., states that many new workplace

TWENTY-FIVE PERCENT OF LOCAL ADULTS READ BELOW THE 4TH-GRADE LEVEL.

literacy programs have begun as a result of the need for a competitive workforce. Companies are providing training in literacy and numeracy and problem-solving skills on the job. The study concluded, "Workers who would not attend a night class in another location have their education brought to them. Education can be tailored to the needs and interests of the workers and discussion of specific literacy needs can provide a starting place for addressing literacy needs beyond the workplace as well."

Last year, the Literacy Campaign, coordinated by the Community Foundation for Monterey County, funded a workplace literacy class. One participant was Dole Fresh Vegetables in Soledad. Lourdes Uranday, Dole's human resources manager said, "We [Dole] are interested in this program because employees need additional skills." Reflecting on the completion of the 12-week class, Uranday said, "We had great feedback from managers and the employees in the class. The literacy class boosted our employee morale."

Recognizing the need for communication and customer service skills, Chapala's Restaurant in

Salinas decided to support employees in continuing their education. Owner Lucy Pizarro referred them to the Salinas Adult School. Pizarro compensated her employees for the time spent improving their language and literacy skills. "One of my employees worked with a tutor, another took classes at the Adult School and is now at Hartnell," Pizarro said.

The Literacy Campaign for Monterey County, launched in 2006, is a multi-year, multimillion-dollar effort to identify and direct grants to community-based programs offering literacy services. The target audience of this five-year, concerted program is adults ages 18 to 35, with a focus on parents with young children. The intent is to break the cycle of low literacy levels, improve employability and promotability, and raise awareness of literacy and its importance in our community.

The Community Foundation for Monterey County, dedicated to raising, managing and distributing charitable funds to qualified organizations, coordinates the campaign, in response to the alarming local statistics. The foundation, in partnership with other community leaders and funders (such as the Monterey Peninsula Foundation, the First 5 Commission, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, the Dunspaugh-Dalton Foundation, and the S.D. Bechtel Foundation), is committed to profound change in our community. By helping others gain the literacy skills needed for fuller lives, greater job opportunities and successful families, the campaign will improve our quality of life. To learn more, check the website at literacycampaignmc.org. ☒

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