

# Educating for Change in St. Louis

*Acting for a Better Community (ABC) Organizing Team*

## Literacy and Social Change: A Short History

Throughout history, people around the world have organized and struggled for educational rights. Literacy campaigns have taken place in nations such as Cuba, Nicaragua, South Africa, and, most recently, Venezuela. The premise behind these literacy campaigns was to change society through literacy education. A popular education center in the United States called The Highlander Center has played important roles in many major political movements. Highlander's work is rooted in the belief that in a just and democratic society, the policies shaping political and economic life must be informed by equal concern for and participation by the people.

St. Louisans have also fought for education for centuries. One such person is John Berry Meachum. Meachum established Candle Tallow School, which taught black St. Louisans, free and enslaved, to read and write. In 1847, the State of Missouri passed a law that prohibited teaching blacks to read and write. When Candle Tallow was raided by police and its teacher arrested, Meachum looked for a new location for his school. He settled upon the Mississippi river. Hundreds of black students became literate on this steamship in the middle of the Mississippi. This school became known as the Freedom School.

## Literacy and Social Change in St. Louis Today

Following in this rich tradition, adult learners and educators in St. Louis have been meeting and holding conferences and forums to identify how literacy could be improved in our community and used to address various social issues such as employment, healthcare, and housing. In 2004, the Acting for a Better Community (ABC) conference was organized by members of the Literacy Roundtable and LIFT-Missouri, the state's literacy

resource center. In 2005, a core group of 20 adult learners and 10 educators participated in a student leadership program led by VALUE, a national organization whose mission is to strengthen adult literacy efforts in the United States through learner involvement and leadership. After attending the program, the students went back to their sites and started to work on student leadership projects.



*Students and teachers dialogue about their site-based projects at a forum.*

## Noticing a Problem, Making a Plan

At one literacy site, adult learners realized that, after budget cuts, there was not enough money in the school budget to take their children on a field trip. They organized to raise money so they could take their children to the City Museum.

The students decided that they wanted to do a car wash and this resulted in several learning experiences. Students had to devise a budget, supplies list, marketing plan, and volunteer schedule for the carwash to be a success. The classroom teacher, center director, and the students all had to have a level of trust in the process to ensure that the carwash would occur. The planning process and the mutual trust that was generated promoted a sense of group identity. Because the fundraiser resulted in a field trip with their children, there was a built-in celebration of their work and accomplishments.

This group shared their experiences with other adult education teachers and learners at one of the

ABC forums. After listening to the steps in their process, each learning site developed a project that was specific to the needs and concerns of their site.

They started by posing a problem and then developing a collective solution. Through this process, people started to ask critical questions about *why* funding was cut and *why* students are allowed to drop out of school and other issues about social, political, economic, and educational equity. They asked, "Why is there homelessness? Why can't we find decent jobs? Why is there money for war and not for education? Why is the fight for freedom so fierce? Why is there so much injustice when we live in one of the richest countries in the world."

## Literacy Education and Democracy

With this article, we hope to provide just a brief snapshot of the organizing around social change that has been occurring through adult literacy education in St. Louis. ABC participants have gone on to organize transition-to-college events and a

workshop of Freedom Writers. They have participated in the forum planning meetings, spoken to student classes about leadership, and have a strong presence in the COABE '08 conference planning sessions. And they are finding out that what seemed like private problems are in fact shared by many and have roots not in their own personal flaws but in the way society is organized.

In the adult learners' stories we hear their critical analysis of the social, economic, and political conditions of their lives. Literacy education that is aimed at building democracy and changing society demands an educational process that is learner-centered, connected to the real concerns and needs of learners, includes problem posing and problem solving, and provides the opportunity to see connections between private and systemic problems.

*The ABC organizing team includes Mary Ann Kramer, Sarah Beaman-Jones, Maggie Dyer, Carlotta Algee-Stancil, Marcia Hayes, Caroline Mitchell, Rebecca Rogers, Ora Lewis-Clark, and Dwight Johnson. For more information, see <[www.abcsoliteracy.blogspot.com](http://www.abcsoliteracy.blogspot.com)>.*

## STUDENT WORK SHEET

*In order to create positive change, it is helpful to follow a process.*

### 1. CHOOSE

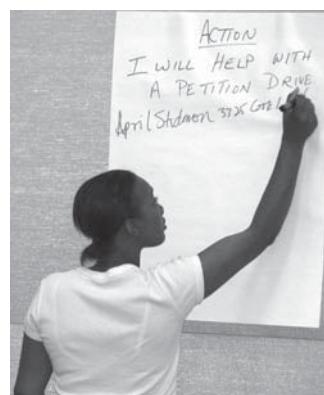
- a. List some things you'd like to see change. Start with things you as a group have some control over.
- b. Pick an issue, situation or problem you want to change. Aim for consensus within your group that this is what you want to work on.
- c. What is the result you want?

### 2. PLAN

- a. What are the steps you must take to realize this result? Create a list of steps.
- b. List people who agree to participate in each step and what they will be responsible for.
- c. When do you want to start and complete each step? Create a timeline.
- d. Who else will need to be involved?

### 3. ACT

- a. Check off action steps as they are completed.
- b. Say "thank you" to those who have assisted you in your action.



*A student participates in an action plan at a forum.*

### 4. EVALUATE

- a. Did you get the result you hoped for? How do you know?
- b. Who became your allies in the process? Can you count on them to help you again?
- c. What did not go smoothly? Why? What could you have done?
- d. How did you feel during the process?
- e. What did you learn in the process that would help you in the future?