

Monday, September 8, 2008
A10

In metro Atlanta, many still functionally illiterate

By EMILY ELLISON

In the past few decades, metro Atlanta has seen unprecedented growth and incredible prosperity. And since the 1996 Olympics, the city has become a brand name around the world.

So I can understand why people are surprised when I tell them that right here in metro Atlanta, more than 800,000 adults are functionally illiterate.

That's a sobering number — and one that needs to be talked about — as we mark international literacy day today and September as literacy month. It also needs to be included in any conversation we have regarding educational reform in this city.

What, exactly, does "functional illiteracy" mean?

It means the inability to read, write and compute in everyday life situations. It means not being able to fill out a job application, read a newspaper, understand a bus schedule or read to one's children.

In short, it means wasted potential, dreams cut short and families weakened by a cycle of despair.

What does this have to do with me, you ask?

It matters to you and me because on top of the human tragedy, illiteracy has a tangible, bottom-line cost. Illiteracy costs Georgia businesses and industry more than \$2 billion a year in lost productivity, studies show. And as we compete in a global economy, having an educated work force is not a luxury, but a requirement for continued prosperity.

Here's another reason we



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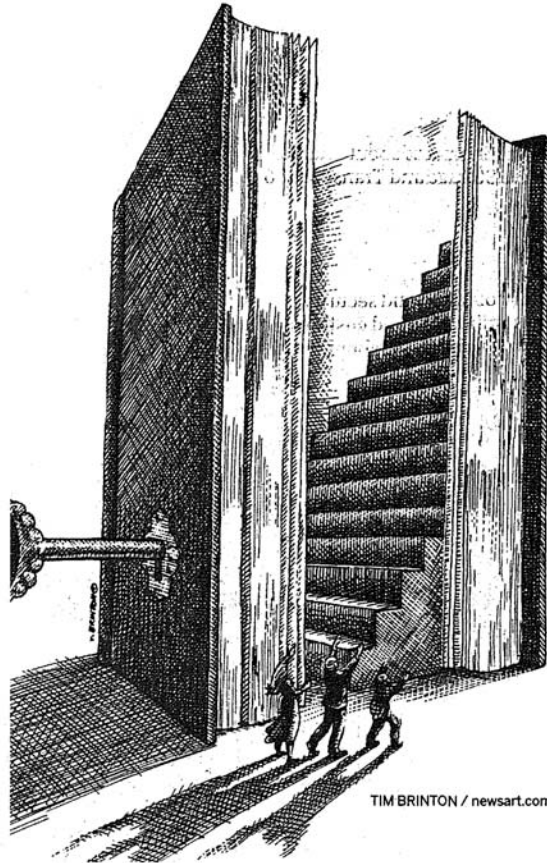
should care about adult literacy:

Studies show that the greatest predictor of children's academic success is their mother's literacy level. We know that if a child comes from a home where the adults cannot read and write, that child will start school two years behind his or her peers and remain two years behind. That child has an 80 percent greater chance of dropping out of school than classmates who come from literate homes.

Literacy Action Inc. and other adult literacy agencies across the state are working every day to try to mitigate both the human and economic toll caused by low literacy.

We are helping adults such as Lorraine Sargent, a 42-year-old Atlantan and mother of six who dropped out of high school in the 11th grade to deliver her first child. Today she is enrolled full time in classes at Literacy Action. Her experience of caring for her dying father for seven years led her to dream of earning a GED and working in the field of elderly care.

But Lorraine's biggest dream is that when she walks across the stage to accept her diploma at our graduation ceremony next year, her 19-year-old son will be walking right beside her.



TIM BRINTON / newsart.com

Gary Sargent also dropped out of school after the eighth grade, and he also takes full-time classes at Literacy Action. His goal is to start a career in the information technology business after earning his GED and create a life of greater opportunity for himself and his beautiful 9-month-old daughter.

Lorraine and Gary show how literacy affects whole families and how the entire community can benefit from their success.

Franklin Roosevelt

said that liberty "requires the opportunity to make a living, a living decent according to the standard of the time, a living which gives man not only enough to live by, but something to live for."

Today, as we celebrate the power of the written word, and in this election year as we celebrate our liberty as Americans, I ask you to remember the hundreds of thousands of adults in Atlanta who are desperate to get the education they need to be truly free.