



# International Literacy Network

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## **United Nations Celebrates International Literacy Successes, Considers Challenges that Persist**

### *New York City's Literacy Community Shares Local Insights With International Literacy Network, UNESCO, and Verizon Communications*

New York – Under a banner proclaiming, “Literacy for Diversity: Voices of Resilience,” a coalition of local, national, and international education organizations celebrated International Literacy Day 2002 by spotlighting successful literacy programs and contemplating solutions to both the city-wide and global needs that remain.

As part of a day-long program of roundtable discussions and policy presentations organized by the International Literacy Network, adult learners from the U.S. and abroad shared stories of their struggles and offered insight for solutions with senior representatives from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the New York City Mayor’s Office, and the U.S. Department of Education.

High illiteracy rates continue to plague developing and highly developed nations alike. Here in the U.S., 40 million adults have trouble reading to their children or helping them with homework. Globally, over 880 million adults are illiterate, more than 120 million children lack access to education, and two-thirds of the world’s illiterate population are women.

“On International Literacy Day, we also celebrate the dedicated efforts of those who work so hard to bring learning opportunities to others,” said Koïchiro Matsuura, UNESCO Director-General. “They are a reminder to UNESCO and its partners at international and national levels that our role must be to strengthen local capacity and to support community initiatives. Indeed, it is vital that learners themselves, in their own contexts and guided by their own aspirations and hopes, shape the literacy agenda. Only this will result in societies that sustain their own use of written communication and their own learning.”

“Literacy is essential to the development and health of individuals, communities, and countries,” declared U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a statement released today. “It is a condition for people’s effective participation in the democratic process.

Achieving universal literacy is everybody's concern. Therefore, it must engage the wider international community, the United Nations family, civil society, the private sector, local groups, and individuals."

UNESCO and the International Literacy Network partnered with Verizon Communications, a major sponsor of today's session, to convene literacy policymakers, educators, and learners. The telecommunications company has supported literacy efforts domestically and abroad since it was formed in 2000. Verizon-funded literacy initiatives include Verizon Literacy Champions, Check into Literacy, Literacy Partners, and the Literacy Network.

### ***Eritrean Ministry of Education Recognized***

Participants focused much of today's discussion on strategies various nations have employed to respond to the literacy crisis.

Despite years of civil war and high poverty rates, the Adult Education Division of the Eritrean Ministry of Education has made strides to reduce an adult illiteracy rate that was once estimated to be 70 percent. For their efforts, the Ministry will receive the annual International Reading Association Literacy Day Prize, first established in 1979, along with a check for \$15,000. Ministry representatives were recognized for this honor at today's celebration.

"Supporting this award reflects our international mission of improving literacy worldwide," said Lesley Morrow, President-elect of the International Reading Association and a participant in today's session. "Our recognition of the Eritrean Ministry of Education brings international attention to the importance of global literacy efforts."

Amongst other accomplishments, Morrow cited the Ministry's efforts to improve women's literacy levels. Through partnerships with national unions of Eritrean women, youth, and students, the Eritrean government provided adult literacy programs including vocational training, HIV/AIDS, and life skills training. In addition, the Ministry expanded reading rooms and opened radio listening centers in markets around the country.

### ***Local Literacy Learners Featured***

Closer to home, literacy is an issue with which many local adults still struggle. According to the most recent National Adult Literacy Survey, over one million adults in New York City cannot read at the 5th grade level.

These challenges became even more difficult to overcome in the wake of the September 11 attacks, when adult learners lost their homes, their jobs, and in many cases the lives of their family's primary wage-earners.

During today's luncheon session, 11 adults shared their reflections on September 11<sup>th</sup>. The learners are part of an initiative organized by the Literacy Assistance Center, headquartered just four blocks south of Ground Zero.

"I worked in an observation deck gift shop on WTC No. 2 before last September 11," read Xi Chen, a Chinese immigrant who arrived in the U.S. three years ago. Xi Chen recounted how she was in the elevator on her way to work when the first plane struck. After a "very strong shock, the elevator stopped, then went down by itself." She was able to escape the building, but, "it was too fearful to be forgotten for me."

### ***Collaboration of Policymakers and Learners***

Earlier in the day, policy experts from UNESCO, the U.S. Department of Education, International Reading Association, the Mayor's Office, and the World Bank shared a variety of perspectives on the role of literacy in aiding communities affected by poverty, conflict, social marginalization, and other threats to communities' livelihoods.

Joining them was Calvin Miles, an adult learner from New York who has become an advocate for adult education, and who spoke on behalf of other adults in the audience who face literacy challenges.

"I am honored to be working on this important issue with such accomplished individuals," Mr. Miles said to a crowd of several hundred in the auditorium. "Of course I'm referring to the ambassadors, federal policymakers, and mayoral aides with whom I share this stage. Equally accomplished, however, are the adult learners who have joined us today, particularly those who are brave enough to read aloud their reflections on 9-11. They understand as well as anyone the challenges we're discussing, and we would be wise to seriously consider the solutions they offer."

### ***Part of Long-Term Efforts***

The United Nations served as host for the day's proceedings, a symbolic reminder that literacy problems are local, national, and international in scope.

As a specialized agency of the United Nations, UNESCO has historically taken a leadership role in mainstreaming global efforts to address this issue. Twelve years ago, UNESCO mobilized the efforts of other major UN agencies and governments towards the organization of the World Conference on Education for All (EFA) in Jomtien, Thailand. Conference participants pledged to provide primary education for all children and significantly reduce adult illiteracy.

In April, 2000, more than 1,100 delegates from 164 countries reaffirmed their commitment to EFA at the World Education Forum in Dakar, Senegal. They adopted the Dakar Framework for Action which established as one of its six goals increasing adult literacy by 50 percent by 2015 as well as ensuring that children have access to complete primary education that is free, compulsory, and of good quality.

Later this year, the U.N. also will officially announce the International Literacy Decade, to begin in January, 2003. This declaration will re-focus U.N. member nations' energy and resources on the goals set by the EFA movement. And as nations contemplate strategies to manage international relations in the post-September 11 climate, the International Literacy Decade will also demonstrate how literacy can foster democratic participation and citizenship, tolerance and respect for others, social development, and peace and stability within and among countries.

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