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Alarming Literacy Rates in One of America's Largest Cities: What Can Be Done in the City of Detroit?

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Abstract. Regarded as a major cultural and industrial center, Detroit is known for its contributions to art, architecture, design, and music, which led to its “Motown” nickname, in addition to its ties to the birth of the auto industry, which brought it the nickname of “Motor City”. Despite hosting several higher learning institutions and a national research university, Detroit has been facing a continued decline of its adult literacy rates that amount to 47.00%, meaning that half of the City’s population are functionally illiterate. Low literacy skills can profoundly affect adults’ ability to fully participate in daily activities and contribute to the world around them. Based on statistical data corroborated with historical events and socio-economic factors, the paper discusses the root causes that have led to Detroit’s having one of the lowest literacy rates in the United States. Various efforts aimed to remedy this situation are highlighted along with the entities involved in this on-going endeavor.

Keywords: Illiteracy, literacy rates, reading rates, literacy education, Detroit, Detroit Public Schools Community District.

1 Introduction

If most papers in conference settings present success stories, I propose to share with the ECIL participants the strive to turn a continuing alarming situation into a positive experience. The setting is one of America’s largest urban areas, the City of Detroit, where the literacy rate is one of the lowest in the United States, amounting to only 47.00% (Dwyer, 2011; “Detroit’s Shocking 47,” 2015), meaning that one out of every two adults or half of the population in Motor City is functionally illiterate. Based on the corroboration of census data and the examination of historical events and socio-economic factors, this paper seeks to determine the root causes that have led to the decline of literacy rates in Detroit and to highlight various entities’ sustained efforts aimed to remedy this situation.

2 Detroit: Nicknamed Motor City and Motown

Detroit is the birthplace of two major industries: The automotive industry and blues music.

The automotive industry, with a group of world-famous car manufacturers including Ford, General Motors, Dodge, and Chrysler, has contributed to the City's prosperity and has represented the major employer in the area since 1908 when the Model T car was produced by the Ford Motor Company. Thus, Detroit became known as the Motor City with the first freeway system in the world.

The legendary Motown Records, also known as "Hitsville USA," [1] is a record label that became a nickname for Detroit where the label was originally headquartered. The recording studio helped famous performers like Michael Jackson and Smokey Robinson launch their musical careers. In addition, named after the record company, Motown or the Motown sound has become a music style, a rhythm and blues music that in the 1960s and early 1970s turned the record company into the largest black American-owned enterprise in the country [2].

Midtown Detroit hosts the 6th largest museum in the United States, the Detroit Institute of Arts, that harbors a collection of over 65,000 works [3]. Also located in midtown Detroit is Wayne State University, a national research higher education institution established in 1868, with thirteen schools and colleges, including business, medical, and law [4].

Due to the booming auto industry, Detroit became the fourth-largest city in the nation in 1920, following New York City, Chicago, and Philadelphia [5]. Detroit's large immigrant population consisted of Jews, Southern and Eastern Europeans as well as African Americans who fled the south of the United States, all attracted by job opportunities in the auto industry. These new groups added to the native-born white population, contributing to the City's urban expansion.

As hundreds of thousands of new workers migrated to the industrial City, Detroit, like many places in the United States, developed inequities, tensions, and racial conflicts between the police and inner-city black youth who wanted change. The confrontations culminated in the riots of 1967 [6] that resulted in many deaths, injuries, arrests, and more than 2,000 buildings destroyed by fires. Thousands of small businesses closed permanently or relocated to safer neighborhoods [7]. The white population who fled to the suburbs in 1967 doubled to over 40,000 and doubled again the next year [8]. The riots were a turning point for the City, marking the beginning of its decay.

In 2007-2008 Detroit and its auto industry were hit by one of the worst financial crises. The City's population plummeted to 700,000 with the highest unemployment rate (more than 16%) in the country [9]. The decline in overall economic activity led to a great recession throughout the United States and the entire world. The Detroit economic downturn coupled with public corruption led to the largest municipal bankruptcy filing in U.S. history with debt, estimated at 18-20 billion USD [10]. Detroit became the largest city in the U.S. history to file for bankruptcy in 2012. Detroit's bankruptcy filing followed a declaration of financial emergency in March 2013 that resulted in an "emergency financial manager" of

the City being appointed by the Michigan Governor [11]. As of October 1, 2013, Detroit had spent almost \$23 million in fees to lawyers, consultants, and financial advisers to address its bankruptcy status [12].

In the years following the bankruptcy filing in 2013, there has been major private investment and development in Detroit with many projects receiving government subsidies and tax breaks from the City [13]. While development has improved, Detroit has continued to face financial difficulties. Provision of basic city services continue to be an issue due to old infrastructure, low tax revenue, and a smaller population spread across the city area [14]. It has been less than a decade since Detroit emerged from bankruptcy on paper and the aftermath has been a continuing struggle. An article published in 2018 noted that "Detroit has yet to witness the full economic impact of its resurgence," predicting an additional five to ten years of rebuilding [15].

Further challenges also emerged during post-bankruptcy. During the COVID-19 pandemic, loss of city revenue and unemployment created another budget deficit. In addition to layoffs of City employees and reductions in hours and wages, the City Mayor cut funding for services to prevent the deficit from growing and to avoid another state intervention in the City's finances [16]. Federal COVID-19 relief aid allowed Detroit City to balance budgets, and address stringent issues, among them to improve school buildings and expand academic programs. But those funds will run out soon and Detroit Public Services, including Detroit Public Schools Community District, face some difficult decisions about which programs and employees they can afford to keep once federal support dries up [17]. As of 2023, five of the Detroit Public Library system's twenty-one branches in different neighborhoods remain closed, including four that have not reopened since the pandemic lockdown [18].

3 Declining Population and Alarming Statistics

Detroit's population has been dramatically declining over the past seventy years. Loss of jobs in the auto industry and rapid population migration to the suburbs found the City in an irreversible state of urban decay. The City has suffered a substantial population drop by 65.50%, from 1.85 million inhabitants in 1950 [19] to 639,111 inhabitants counted in the 2020 U.S. Census [20]. Still, Detroit has remained the largest city in the midwestern state of Michigan. Detroit fell to the 27th largest city in the United States. The median household income in the City of Detroit is \$34,762 as opposed to almost double in the State of Michigan, or \$63,202 [20]. Approximately 40.00% of the households are below the poverty level (compared to 16.00% nationwide). Close to half of Detroit's children are born to single mothers and the child poverty rate is close to 60%. The current racial makeup of Detroit is 77.17% blacks, 9.51% whites, 8.02% Hispanics, 3.00% multiracial, 1.58 Asian, and 0.72% other. Detroit's demographics and its low-income levels associated with a long

history of disinvestment in public services and corruption have all played a major role in the City's decline [9], affecting all social strata.

Despite hosting several higher learning institutions, the City's continued population exodus led to the closing of many public schools. The Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), established in 1842 as Detroit Public Schools (DPS) [21], operated schools serving Detroit's significant immigrant population and its black community. "The rise and fall of Detroit's schools mirror the city itself, which once had one of the biggest school districts in the country, hitting peak enrollment in 1966 at 299,962 students. The decline of Detroit's automobile industry brought a dramatic, decades-long population slide for the city and its schools, with white residents, especially, leaving the city for the suburbs" stated Josh Sanburn in 2016 [22]. Zernike [23] indicates that as of 2016 many K-12 students in Detroit frequently changed schools, with some children enrolling in seven schools before their high school graduation.

Over the years, DPSCD has experienced extensive financial difficulties. In 2008, the Michigan State Superintendent of Public Instruction determined the District's inability to manage its finances and declared a financial emergency. The next year, the Governor appointed an emergency financial manager to oversee the public school system [24]. He estimated the District's deficit to be greater than 150 million USD, caused by accounting irregularities and corruption. Since the state takeover took effect in 2009, there has been a recovery effort with the District's projection to run a 27.5 million USD deficit in 2025 if enrollment is around 47,000 students [25].

Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer promised the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) \$94.4 million to settle a 2016 lawsuit alleging that the state denied the City's schoolchildren a basic education by failing to teach them to read. "The "Right to Read" settlement terms, negotiated in 2020, stipulated that the money would go toward increasing reading instruction and support for students to address longstanding challenges with literacy. DPSCD is required to spend the money by 30 September 2027 and plans to use the money to hire academic "interventionists" to provide one-on-one support to students struggling with reading" [25].

During 2008-2009, "the Michigan cohort graduation rate was 80.10%, while DPSCD's cohort graduation rate was 67.39%, 16.00% lower than the state average. With 48,615 students enrolled, the graduation rate for Detroit's 107 public schools was 76.00%, with reading proficiency of only 18.00% for the 2020/21 academic year" [26]. "DPSCD showed a strong improvement in high school graduation rates for the 2021-2022 school year, which increased by 6.50% from 64.50% to 71.10%, still remaining almost 10.00% below Michigan's graduation rate of 81.01%. In addition, DPSCD's dropout rate declined from 14.50% to 13.80%, while the state's dropout rate increased from 7.70% to 8.20%," notes Sandra Powers, from CBS News Detroit [27]. One can only hope that the "Right to Read" settlement money will be wisely invested to address the low reading rates among Detroit's school children population.

4 Low Reading Scores

Despite progress in graduation rates, reading proficiency continues to remain a concern. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or “The Nation’s Report Card,” assesses each state’s reading and math performance at critical time points. Districts are tested at the 4th and 8th grade level. As measured by the 2017 NAEP, “69% of Michigan students are not proficient in 4th grade literacy, compared to 64% at the national level” [28]. The General Education Leadership Network report of 2017 places Michigan’s literacy on high alert: “Michigan is facing a literacy crisis. For the past 14 years, while nearly all other states across the country made gains in their literacy performance for 4th graders, Michigan remained one of the lowest performing states, with minimal growth in literacy achievement. While there was a slight improvement over our 2015 NAEP scores (3% more students are at or above proficiency in 2017 as compared to 2015), Michigan still falls in the bottom 12 states in the nation. With only 32% of students at or above proficiency, we have a long way to go” mentions a report from the General Education Leadership Network [28].

A 2022 review of NAEP scores for Michigan and its largest urban district indicates that only one out of 20 students (5.00%) in DPSCD scored at a “proficient” level on the 8th grade NAEP reading test, states Molly Macek, director of education policy at the Mackinac Center [29]. This means that just 5.00% of Detroit’s students met the minimum score needed to be prepared for higher-level coursework. “And the district’s performance was not significantly different than it was in 2019 or 2009. Things have not changed for the better over time,” continues Macek in her assessment [29], “Detroit also performs poorly when compared with similar urban districts in the United States. The DPSCD scored significantly lower than 25 comparable districts on the 8th grade reading test in 2022. Even worse, Detroit has consistently scored the lowest among urban districts in every test of reading and math since 2009” [29].

“Detroit teachers, administrators, and schools are all richly funded. The district has received more money per student compared to the state and national average since 1994. The district’s revenue in 2021-2022 totaled just under 1 billion USD. Detroit charter schools consistently receive less funding per student than public schools in the Detroit district, and they perform better. More funding does not appear to be the solution,” concludes Molly Macek [29].

The education outlook for the entire State of Michigan is not much better as evidenced by a 2022 suggestively titled Report, “Still Stalled” [30]. Forty states performed better than Michigan on the 4th grade reading test in 2022. Fewer than 30.00% of students scored “at or above proficient” level. Only three states scored “significantly lower than Michigan.” And Michigan’s average reading score fell by 6.50% from 2002-2022, compared to the national public’s average score, which fell by only half a point (0.50%) [30].

Although it is clear that education reform is much needed in the State of Michigan, lawmakers have recently introduced bills that reduce school accountability. The repeal of the Third Grade Reading Law, which required failing students to be held back, removed provisions that help ensure a student's literacy development before advancing to 4th grade. The repeal of the A-F School Grading Law, which ranked schools based on performance, eliminated a transparent system for monitoring school progress. Macek continues: "But a reduction in school accountability at such a critical time is not the solution to our state's education crisis. Instead, targeting the long-term trend of failing schools in Detroit would be a step in the right direction. Rejecting accountability measures does not seem likely to create improvement. Standardized testing is an essential tool for understanding the dire state of education in Michigan. Lawmakers would do well to apply data from these tests to solutions that target the state's – and nation's – most underperforming urban district" [29].

5 Literacy in the United States

In 2003, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) conducted the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) – a nationally representative assessment of adult literacy levels, where adults are defined as people 16 years of age and older living in households or prisons in the United States [31].

"NAAL measured adults' ability to perform everyday literacy tasks, including:

- Prose Literacy—the knowledge and skills to search, comprehend, and use continuous texts (e.g., editorials, news stories, brochures, and instructional materials).
- Document Literacy—the knowledge and skills to search, comprehend, and use non-continuous texts in various formats (e.g., job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables, and drug or food labels).
- Quantitative Literacy—The knowledge and skills to identify and perform computations using numbers embedded in printed materials (e.g., balancing a checkbook calculating a tip, etc.).

NAAL survey found that 90 million American adults read at the two lowest literacy levels, basic or below basic. These low literate adults lack the literacy skills necessary to read and comprehend the information in complex documents. A closer look revealed that:

- 14% of adults (30 million) function at a below basic prose literacy level and 29% (62 million) function at a basic prose literacy level
- 12% of adults (25 million) function at a below basic document literacy level and 22% (47 million) function at a basic document literacy level
- 22% of adults (47 million) function at a below basic quantitative literacy level and 33% (71 million) function at a basic quantitative literacy level

In addition, 11 million adults are illiterate in English. These adults fall into two groups:

- 7 million who could not answer simple test questions
- 4 million who could not take the test because of language barriers” [31].

Based on the NAAL dramatic findings, the American Library Association became involved to address the issue by developing the “Literacy for All: Adult Literacy @ Your Library,” a nation-wide program where participating public libraries supported all types of initiatives aimed at improving adult literacy in the country [31].

The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) conducted an international assessment of adult skills from 2012 to 2017. The US Department of Education combined individual PIAAC data to create and publish, in 2020, literacy levels for every county in the United States. The study determined that “about 130 million (54.00%) adults in the U.S. have low literacy skills. This means more than half of Americans between the ages of 16 and 74 read below the equivalent of a sixth-grade level. The U.S. ranks 16th among the 33 member nations” of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) included in the study [32].

The PIAAC study defines 5 levels of literacy proficiency, with Level 1 as the lowest and Level 5 as the highest. Over 1 in 5 (20%) adults in the U.S. have a literacy proficiency at or below Level 1. Adults in this range have difficulty using or understanding print materials. “Those on the higher end of this category can perform simple tasks based on the information they read and adults below Level 1 may only understand very basic vocabulary or be functionally illiterate. In contrast, 46% of adults in the U.S. have a literacy proficiency at or above Level 3. Adults at Levels 3, 4, and 5 have varying degrees of proficiency in understanding, interpreting, and synthesizing information from multiple, more complex texts to infer meaning and draw conclusions” [33].

The findings of the PIAAC study determined that income levels are strongly related to literacy levels. “The average annual income of adults who reach the minimum level for proficiency in literacy (Level 3) is nearly \$63,000, significantly higher than the average of almost \$48,000 earned by adults who score just below proficiency (Level 2), and much higher than those at low levels of literacy (Levels 0 and 1), whose annual average earnings are just over \$34,000” [33]. As mentioned, the median household income in the City of Detroit is \$34,762, thus placing Detroit at the very bottom of the income scale nationwide.

6 Illiteracy in Detroit

Illiteracy refers to the inability to read or write, but it more accurately encompasses the comprehension, evaluation, and utilization of information, which is why people describe many different types of information literacy, such as health, financial, and legal. “Illiteracy is typically measured according to the inability to comprehend a short simple statement on

everyday life” states a UNESCO definition [34]. Basic literacy represents the foundation of information literacy. Functional literacy is defined as the ability to read and comprehend relatively short texts or understand basic vocabulary. “Low literacy skills can profoundly affect adults’ ability to fully participate in day-to-day activities and contribute to the world around them,” state Hardelie and Clark [35]. Dwyer determined that “The functional illiteracy rate in Michigan is 18% while 47% of metro Detroiters are reportedly functional illiterate, not being able to perform basic tasks, like fill out a job application or other forms, read newspaper articles, or understand instructions on a medicine bottle” [36].

A report, *Addressing Detroit's Basic Skills Crisis*, from the Detroit Regional Workforce Fund [37] had some pretty shocking statistics about literacy in the Motor City. Addressing the literacy problem is particularly critical because of the City's steep unemployment rate. In recent years, Detroit's unemployment has been as high as 50.00%, and 33.00% of adults aged 20-24 are unemployed. Even if a job recovery does happen, if the City's residents do not have the basic skills, like being able to read, their career options will not improve much [36]. The report states: “The Detroit Regional Workforce Fund's efforts to connect low- and moderate-income persons to emerging and growing career pathways have highlighted a number of challenges in our education and employment infrastructure. We have identified that one of the most pressing of these challenges is the constrained capacity of Southeast Michigan's underfunded and fragmented public workforce development system to meet the tremendous needs of a worker population that is terrifically challenged by limited basic skills. This skills gap threatens to substantially limit the success of the Fund's education and training efforts, and ultimately participants' success in connecting to careers” [37]. The Detroit Regional Workforce Fund has identified several opportunities to impact this issue as part of its efforts to support partnerships among employers and workforce development partners (workforce partnerships), effect change in the region's strategic workforce vision, and align public and private resources in new ways around workforce development. As of May 2023, Detroit's unemployment rate has dropped to 6.40% from 7.80% in 2022, and from a long-term average of 13.53% [38].

As of 2021, the education level of Detroit's population age over 25 consisted of 82.60% being high school graduates (compared to a national average of 88.00%) and 16.20% holding a bachelor's degree/four-year college degree (compared to more than 30.00% nationwide) [39]. Access to the internet is an important factor in today's digital age, as it enables individuals to access information and communicate. “Only 87.6% of households in Detroit have a computer, as compared to 92.4% in Michigan, and only 76% of households have a subscription to broadband internet, as compared to the State of Michigan where internet access is 10% higher, at 86.4%” [40]. There are several reasons why internet access is limited in Detroit. One reason is that many low-income households cannot afford the cost of internet service. Additionally, many older buildings in Detroit, especially in neighborhoods with a high poverty rate, lack the infrastructure to support high-speed internet. Several organizations and programs such as the Detroit Internet Initiative and the

Detroit Connected Communities have been established to expand internet access and to offer free computer literacy classes along with the Detroit Public Library system.

7 Addressing the Situation: Setting the Stage for Change

Literacy programs in the United States are federally funded through the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) [41], Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 1998 [42]. The Office of Career, Technical, and Adult Education's (OCTAE) Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) administers AEFLA. "The purpose of AEFLA's basic state grant program is to:

1. assist adults to become literate and obtain the knowledge and skills necessary for employment and economic self-sufficiency;
2. assist adults who are parents or family members to obtain the education and skills that
 - a. are necessary to becoming full partners in the educational development of their children; and
 - b. lead to sustainable improvements in the economic opportunities for their family;
3. assist adults in attaining a secondary school diploma and in the transition to postsecondary education and training, including through career pathways; and
4. assist immigrants and other individuals who are English language learners in
 - a. improving their
 - i. reading, writing, speaking, and comprehension skills in English; and
 - ii. mathematics skills; and
 - b. acquiring an understanding of the American system of Government, individual freedom, and the responsibilities of citizenship" [41].

"The statute requires states to allocate no less than 82.5% of their allotments to local agencies, through a competitive grant or contract process. Federal funding is directed toward communities based on the percentage of people without a high school diploma" [41]. The funding is broken down into basic funding for adult education and literacy services and the Integrated English Literacy and Civics Education (IELCE) program that supports English language learners. However, this funding is not sufficient to make a concrete impact. The crisis of low adult literacy is a phenomenon with a negative effect on the American society in its entirety.

The State of Michigan is on high alert regarding the literacy crisis its population has been experiencing. While nearly all other states across the country have made gains in their literacy performance for 4th graders, Michigan remained one of the lowest performing states, with minimal growth in literacy achievement. Established in 2015, the General Education Leadership Network [43] is a committee affiliated with the Michigan Association of

Intermediate School Administrators, an organization of educational leaders committed to improving student outcomes by providing expanded educational opportunities [44].

GELN drew attention to Michigan's governor, legislators, business leaders, and educators to recognize that literacy incompetence is one of the most pressing issues facing the state: "With over 270,000 students ill-equipped in literacy, our state faces significant hurdles. Our young people are unprepared for the workforce, unprepared for college or career training, and unprepared to be productive citizens.... While Michigan has made progress in creating infrastructure for research-based instructional practices in literacy and a culture of coaching around these practices, we need continued focus and funding for professional learning in literacy for all educators, an increased number of coaches to support high-quality instruction, and bold leadership efforts to change our trajectory and positively impact more children" [45]. Among other action steps taken, the Governor's pre K-12 Literacy Commission was charged to work with the legislature to secure funding to be allocated for early-literacy assessment reimbursement, professional development, coaching, and extended instructional time support.

To this effect, Michigan's standards for educator preparation were adopted. They required pre-service educators to learn how to introduce and support their students in engaging in disciplinary thinking and practices in the content areas. To support this goal, in 2017, the Michigan Department of Education issued the *Essential Practices for Disciplinary Literacy: A Tool to Support Educator Preparation Programs* [46]. It includes instructional guidelines that provide a framework to support the integration of literacy instruction for all grade levels in all of the content areas. The *Essential Practices* document can be used to proactively develop and/or redesign literacy courses to reflect the changes in educator preparation standards while also meeting the existing general requirements.

Regarding literacy programs targeting young adults, in the Metro Detroit area there are several organizations that focus on improving literacy among this population segment.

The **Skillman Foundation** is a philanthropic organization that works to improve the lives of children and teenagers in Detroit. They support programs that focus on improving literacy and educational outcomes for young people.

The **Literacy Center** is a non-profit organization that provides literacy instruction and supports young adults as it enables them to access information, communicate, and complete tasks.

YouthVille Detroit is a non-profit organization that offers after-school and summer programs for young people, including literacy programs.

Detroit Youth Violence Prevention Initiative is a City-wide program aiming at reducing youth violence and improving educational outcomes through literacy programs, mentoring, and other support services for young adults.

The **Greening of Detroit** is a non-profit organization that focuses on environmental education and job training for young adults through programs that focus on building literacy and job skills.

Regarding the adult population, the *Addressing Detroit's Basic Skills Crisis* report highlights service limitations in the City in addition to other deficiencies. Fewer than 10.00% of those in need receive any services whatsoever; only 27.00% of the programs surveyed provide services for learners at the lowest literacy levels; only 18.00% of the programs surveyed serve English language learners; the vast majority of program content is not related to future success in employment or continued training; programs lack capacity to provide adequate supportive services for low-income learners as they participate in education and training; and programs are not designed to address learning disabilities that are prevalent among low-skilled learners [37].

Detroit Public Schools is involved with some of the solutions, like the public-private partnership that is building a network of ten neighborhood-based **Detroit Learning Labs** that link adults who need to refresh or strengthen their basic literacy to allow them to develop new skills and embrace new careers. With such low literacy rates in the City, it is hard not to see the numbers as a pretty harsh indictment of the literacy status in Detroit.

The **Michigan Early Literacy Task Force** convenes monthly to address the State's most pressing literacy issues. The task force views Michigan's literacy crisis as a public health crisis that affects every aspect of an individual's life [47]. They have agreed upon ten essential instructional practices that serve as a "minimum standard of care" when it comes to fostering literate students and literate citizens. These instructional practices are designed to be used in every classroom for every child every day. As part of this initiative, **Michigan Virtual** has created a series of free online training modules for Michigan educators on the essential instructional practices for early literacy [48].

The **Detroit Literacy Project Coalition** (DLPC) was born out of a desire to create a hub for all kinds of resources that aid reading learners of all ages and backgrounds. DLPC is a constantly evolving and growing network of organizations with the same mission: to improve literacy and foster love of reading for all Detroiters.

ModEL Detroit is a project aimed at sharing tools and resources to support teachers in implementing English Language education. Additionally, the project seeks to prepare students enrolled in the Detroit Public School system to be successful in their studies, career, and life.

Starting from the premise that 60.00% of the unemployed lack the necessary skills to train for high-tech jobs, **Pro-Literacy Detroit** offers programs that address the severity of this issue. This non-profit organization aims to assist adults 16 and over to become independent readers, writers, and speakers of English, with the ultimate goal to solve adult illiteracy in Detroit.

The **Detroit Future Media** (DFM) program is an intensive digital literacy training program to support the revitalization of Detroit communities through the use of media and technology as pathways to interconnect the City's communities. The *Detroit Future Media Guide to Digital Literacy* is an open-source handbook to be used by community members to enhance their media literacy skills alongside entrepreneurship and community organizing competencies.

The **Siena Literacy Center** is a non-profit organization with a mission to improve the lives of families in metropolitan Detroit by providing reading, math, English language, and digital literacy programming for adult learners.

SouthWest Solutions is an adult learning lab that assists Detroiters with improving their reading, math, and computer skills so that they can be better qualified when seeking employment.

Both Detroit Public Library and the Wayne State Library System are engaged in outreach initiatives that make a positive impact on Detroit residents' educational enhancement where the main focus is to improve the adult literacy learning experience in the City. Rescue efforts from several types of organizations and agencies along with policymakers' engagement to address the endemic issue of illiteracy in Detroit and to provide solutions for better access to information literacy programs through classes, library services, and even financial incentives aimed at attracting disadvantaged groups are to be noted. Still, visible progress is yet to be seen.

There are several remedies that have been proposed to address illiteracy in Detroit. Action plans include:

1. Improving access to education. This involves increasing funding for schools, providing more resources and support for teachers, and implementing programs that help students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed [49].
2. Adult literacy programs. Programs that focus on teaching adult learners how to read and write, as well as providing job training and other support services, may help raise the literacy rate among the City's adult population.
3. Community outreach and engagement. Organizations and community groups can work together to raise awareness about the importance of literacy and to promote literacy-related activities such as reading clubs and subject-specific workshops.
4. Technology and digital literacy. Providing access to technology, digital tools, and high-speed internet services can help improve computer literacy rates and skills, as well as support lifelong learning and personal and professional development [50].
5. Income and poverty reduction. Addressing poverty and increasing income can have a positive impact on literacy rates as well, as it can lead to improved access to education and resources and promote personal growth [51].

These are just a few examples of the many different strategies that can be used to address illiteracy in Detroit and other urban areas. With private and government support from local and national entities, programs like those mentioned above aim to address the disparities and the challenges of illiteracy in Detroit and to bring the City to par with other American cities that serve as targets for betterment. The efforts of diverse agencies engaged in improving literacy *per se* to be followed by developing basic information literacy skills in Detroit could serve as a model for other parts of the United States and the world facing

similar challenges. The most effective approach will likely involve a combination of different strategies tailored to the specific characteristics and needs of each community.

8 Benefits of Eradicating Illiteracy

At the individual level, it is well-established that literacy is linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as higher education, income, health, and civic engagement [52]. Varying levels of literacy lead to varying income levels. Likewise, macroeconomic research has shown that higher levels of human capital, measured by educational attainment, cognitive ability and literacy, are associated with higher economic growth at the national level [53].

At the societal level, a Gallup study commissioned by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy found that about 130 million adults in the U.S. have low literacy skills. "Getting all U.S. adults to at least a Level 3 of literacy proficiency would generate an additional \$2.2 trillion in annual income for the country. That is 10% of the gross domestic product" estimates J. Rothwell [54] in his analysis of the data. An increase in literacy would reduce income inequality, would likely boost entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation, and ultimately represent ways that would benefit the national economy. The nation's largest metropolitan areas, including New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Dallas would all gain some 10.00% of their GDP by eradicating illiteracy [54].

At the political level, gains from eradicating illiteracy would foster skills, knowledge, and civic engagement within the framework of an ever-growing informed citizenry [55]. Eradicating illiteracy would also translate into a well-informed citizenry empowered with civic values, integrity, and political tolerance, engaged in upholding moral virtues and democratic norms. Promoting the development of basic information skills enables an informed voting process for better democratic involvement.

At the economic level, the eradication of illiteracy could add significant monetary amounts to the United States' economy. Commenting on the findings and importance of the Gallup study commissioned by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy, Michael Nietzel, a former university president, estimated that if all U.S. adults were able to improve their literacy proficiency, it would generate some \$2.2 trillion in annual income gains for the country [56].

In sum, the goal of this paper is to share a worrisome situation that has been occurring in a large American city regarding extremely low literacy rates that affects the quality of life of almost half of its population. Incendiary newspaper articles titles, like "Detroit's Shocking 47 Percent Illiteracy Rate," [57] attempted to raise nation-wide awareness about concrete facts happening in the City. Despite sustained efforts of multiple entities to remedy the situation, it continues to persist. Furthermore, despite limited positive outcomes, the alarming literacy rates in Detroit remain on the agenda of different agencies who spare no effort to address them through a variety of programs. The low literacy rates in Detroit are not only statistics on paper, they are not an abandoned cause. They remain on the working

agenda of many institutions that continue to seek funding to design recovery programs to target different segments of the City's population. Investing in adult literacy is critical to the strength and well-being of any city, small or large, in the nation. The historic 94.4 million dollar Detroit literacy lawsuit settlement represents a significant attempt to remedy the illiteracy phenomenon in Detroit. Will this community money be enough to bring about radical changes and to ensure visible progress in reducing illiteracy in Detroit? One can only hope!

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