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Adult education makes strides

By **Michael B. Gritton**
Special to The Courier-Journal

Louisville is recognized internationally for being a great college basketball town and the home of the Kentucky Derby. But did you know we've also developed a national reputation for some of the most successful adult education programs in the nation?



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Two years ago, Julie Scoskie, the visionary leader of Jefferson County Public Schools Adult Education programs, was selected by her national peers at the Commission on Adult Basic Education (COABE) as the national adult educator of the year. That same year, Mary Doyle of Louisville was selected as the nation's leading adult education teacher by the same group.



Down the road in Bullitt County, another visionary adult educator, Jim Boswell, has created an innovative family literacy curriculum that is being implemented in counties across Kentucky, as well as in areas across the Midwest. Boswell's work builds on the work of the nation's leading authorities on helping entire families improve literacy levels. Amazingly, those national experts in family literacy -- Sharon

Darling and her colleagues at the National Center for Family Literacy -- are headquartered in Louisville.

The tremendous strength of our adult education programs -- combined with the growing strength of our K-12 school systems -- is helping us close the "job skills gap" with competing cities. From 1990-2000, our region raised the percentage of adults with at least a high school degree from 74 percent to 82 percent, and such progress has continued in this decade. Adult education

programs are critical in our effort to raise our educational attainment levels and thereby improve our region's economic competitiveness.

Adult education programs are important because they provide a direct return to the economic bottom line of our community. A report from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation recently said that the average person with a high school degree or GED earns \$9,200 more each year than the average person who lacks that credential. Given that adult education programs in our region are helping more than 1,000 people a year earn their GED, this translates into approximately \$9.2 million in additional income each year that these families will earn -- and approximately \$920,000 in additional yearly state and local taxes generated by these workers.

Sophisticated academic studies prove what our common sense would suggest -- helping a person earn a GED dramatically reduces the possibility he or she will become a recipient of government assistance or wind up in jail. In fact, the Gates Foundation found that "four out of every 10 young adults lacking a high school diploma received some type of government assistance ... and a dropout is more than eight times as likely to be in jail or prison as a person with at least a high school diploma."

Despite our region's progress in the last decade, a significant number of young people continues to drop out of high school. Two regional efforts are achieving impressive results in helping these young people get back into educational programs, find work and get their lives back on productive paths.

Mayor Jerry Abramson, KentuckianaWorks and JCPS Adult Education launched the Youth Opportunities Unlimited (YOU) Center at 200 W. Broadway last August. We were expecting to serve about 200 young people in the first year of operation, but in the past eight months our staff has registered more than 500 young people in the program. More than 100 have already received jobs, 130 have improved their math or reading scores, and 43 have earned their GED. The Jobs for America's Graduates program in Bullitt County is producing impressive results.

At this year's Commission on Adult Basic Education annual conference, Louisville's James Meyer will be honored as the student of the year. His personal story is amazing. He experienced a number of family hardships that led him to drop out of high school and start work while still a teenager. When he realized he needed more education to provide for his family, he enrolled in a JCPS Adult Education class, worked extremely hard and earned the highest score in the state on last year's GED exam. But James did not stop there; he's now working and attending college at Jefferson Community and Technical College.

Behind the roughly 1,000 GEDs that will be earned in our region this year, there are 1,000 stories just like James' -- stories of perseverance and courage in the pursuit of education and a better life. Our economic development efforts increasingly depend on our ability to foster more of these success stories.

Michael B. Gritton is the executive director of KentuckianaWorks, the regional workforce investment board. He is the recipient of COABE's 2006 Partner in Adult Learning Services Award.

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