

Adult Basic Education and Literacy Programming for TANF Recipients

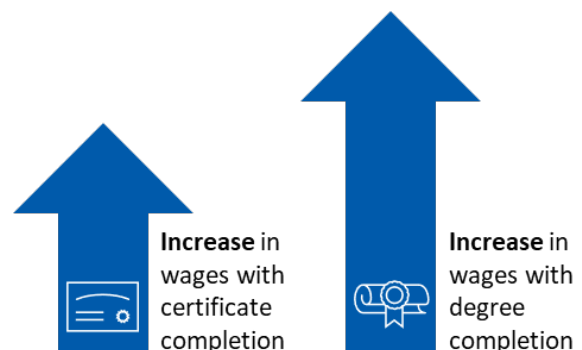
Currently, over half (54%) of U.S. adults are lacking in proficient literacy skills¹. Studies have shown that literacy levels are strongly positively correlated with earnings and socioeconomic status (SES), with high literacy levels associated with higher earnings and SES. The effect is not limited to only adults in the household. Research also shows that children of parents with lower literacy levels tend to also have lower literacy levels as they age.² This impact highlights the importance of TANF programs investing in adult basic education (ABE) to not only improve the earnings and employment outcomes for adults but also improve future outcomes for children in the household.

These investments relate to the second statutory purpose of TANF: *to end the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage*. Up front investments in programming to improve literacy have downstream effects on the entire family and can lead to higher-paying jobs that increase economic independence and reduce benefit churn- where families exit TANF (or other means-tested benefits) only to reapply shortly thereafter. The programs highlighted below have utilized federal or state TANF dollars to provide programming that focuses on increasing literacy levels and skills gain, along with providing supportive services, to lead to better outcomes. For additional information on the TANF program and its legislative framework, please refer to the Office of Family Assistance's TANF Laws and Regulations page.

Washington State's I-BEST Program

Washington's Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) program within their community and technical college system is a nationally recognized model that provides two instructors per classroom- one to teach academic content and the other to teach basic reading, writing, and math skills³. This approach helps students, including TANF participants, move through school faster while getting the skills they need to obtain living-wage jobs.

Students in the program can choose between a technical or academic route, depending on their interests, with the goal of earning a two-year degree or a professional certification to help them find in-demand jobs in their local labor market. Students can complete certificate programs within one to three quarters and can go on to complete a degree or leave the program for employment. In the 2023-2024 academic year, I-BEST students who completed a certificate saw a significant increase in wages and those who completed a degree had even higher gains⁴. By pairing literacy and academic instructors together, students can obtain jobs, and exit TANF, in less time than traditional student models, which promotes economic independence.



¹ <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/10x-adult-literacy>

² [The Relationship between Socioeconomic Status and Literacy: How Literacy is Influenced by and Influences SES](#)

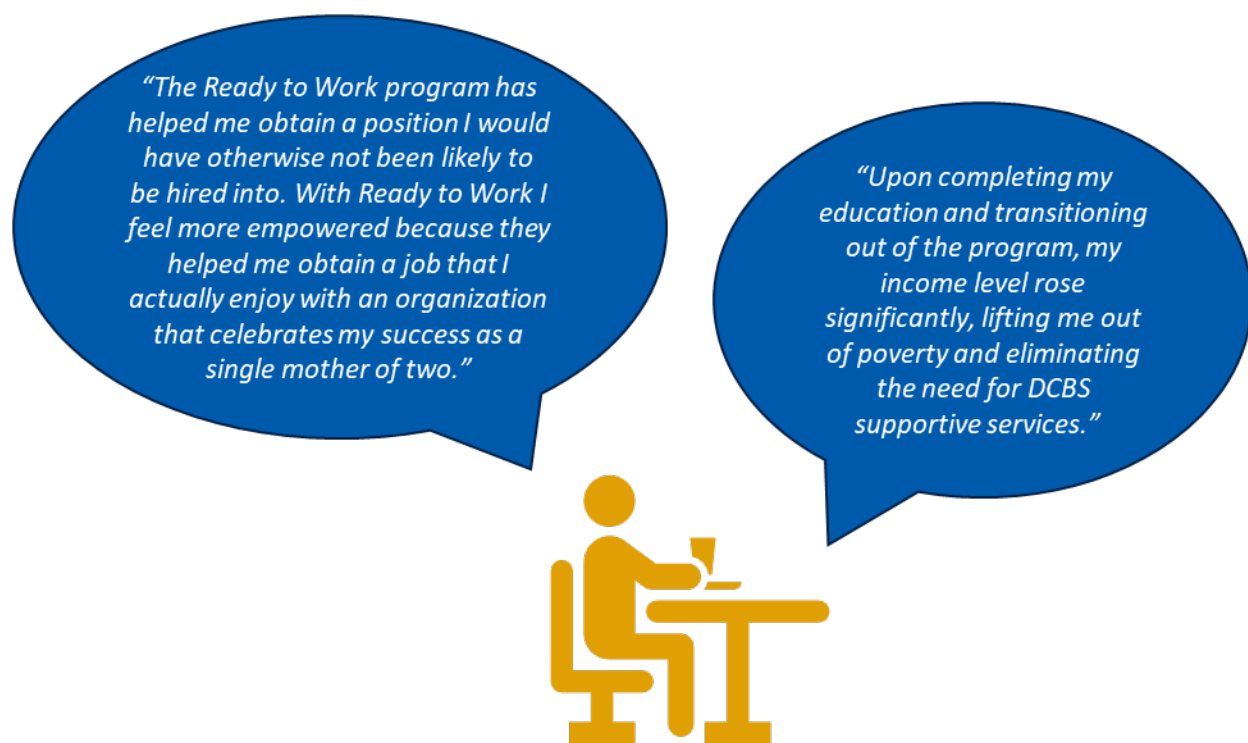
³ <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/i-best/>

⁴ Per Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges staff report

Kentucky's Ready to Work (RTW) Program

The Kentucky Transitional Assistance Program (KTAP) collaborates with the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS) to offer support to adult learners through the Ready to Work (RTW) program. TANF participants seeking education or training opportunities are referred to RTW, where a coordinator evaluates their educational background and administers the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) to determine the appropriate educational placement. They are then connected with an adult education provider in their area. While working toward obtaining their GED or another credential, participants are also placed in TANF-funded work-study positions within both public and private sectors. These placements provide valuable work experience, allowing participants to enhance their skills and education. Importantly, all income earned through work-study is disregarded and does not affect their KTAP benefit amount. This policy encourages participants to remain engaged in RTW, further their education, and ultimately exit the program with improved skills, knowledge, and financial stability. RTW coordinators also offer ongoing case management to ensure participants have access to essential resources, such as childcare, transportation, and work uniforms, to support their success in both education and work-study programs.

RTW Student Testimonials⁵



The success of these programs demonstrates that investing in literacy and adult basic education for TANF participants can significantly improve outcomes—not only for individuals, but for their families as well. Higher wages, increased work experience, and valuable credentials all contribute to greater economic stability. By strengthening support and resources within community and technical college

⁵ Quotes taken from the "Ready To Work Good News Report"

systems, including income disregards for work study experience, TANF programs can help participants build lasting economic independence and thereby reduce the likelihood of future program re-enrollment.

PeerTA. Sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance (OFA), PeerTA provides individual and group technical assistance and other supports to help Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) implement best practices and ensure compliance with TANF statutory purposes. PeerTA is led by MEF Associates and The Adjacent Possible.