

Columbia is lone public school district in Jackson area that offers adult education program

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As Jimmy Minnick Jr., 39, worked on his math, instructor Roger Downey talked about the arithmetic of state funding for the Columbia Adult Education program.

The state's math never quite seems to add up.

That's concerning to officials from local programs who worry that a greater number of adults seeking to complete their education in a rough job market are falling through the cracks because of a lack of available programs. Columbia, the only remaining adult education program offered by public schools in Jackson County, gets \$2,850 per student in state money.



Katie Rausch | Jackson Citizen Patriot

Linda La Fontaine, 54, of Brooklyn discusses her course work with instructor Roger Downey Thursday at the Columbia Adult Education program.

But its per-student state funding is capped at 18 full-time students. Last school year the equivalent of 27 full-time students enrolled — with the actual head count at 45. This year's full-time equivalency is 20, with more students expected to sign up before the school year is done. "We're pretty much piecing things together as best as we can with tape and baling wire and using the monies that we get as best as we can to provide for our students, because there is that need there," Downey said. "We haven't turned anybody away yet." That's not the case for the Community Action Agency of Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties. That agency offers adult basic education programs for adults who read at less than a ninth-grade level. All 80 seats in the Jackson program are full, said Nancy Norris, adult literacy program manager.

"We do not have another seat for another student," Norris said. "I have a waiting list right now of 20." She gets three or four calls a day from prospective students who often give up when they hear there is a waiting list, Norris said, and she expects that the Community Action Agency will be unable to reach 15 of the 20 people on the waiting list when spots become available. "These types of students, if they can't get service immediately, it's no longer important to them," Norris said. "It's just another thing that failed them in life. "They really have to be tapped into when their interest is piqued, or we lose them."

The Columbia program has a \$50,000 annual budget to provide high school completion and GED preparation programs — theoretically for students from around the county, although students from outside Jackson County take classes there just as some county students enroll in programs elsewhere. Columbia Adult Education became the last school-based program standing in the county in 2008 when the Western School District shut down adult education because of declining state dollars. That came a year after Jackson Public Schools ended its adult education.

Before large state funding cutbacks in the mid-1990s, many local school districts offered their own adult education programs. About 12 percent of Jackson County residents ages 25 and older did not have a high school diploma or a

General Educational Development — better known as a GED — according to 2008-10 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. Increased demand in the last few years is a result of both fewer programs and more unemployed workers who want to complete high school, Norris said.

Minnick, of Brooklyn, enrolled in the Columbia program after being laid off from a factory job in June. "I never want to work in a factory again," Minnick said. He plans to seek a two- or four-year college degree after getting his diploma. That could happen in May. Minnick dropped out of Columbia High School as a senior. "I was just one of those kids living for then and there," Minnick said. He thought he could get a factory job paying \$20 per hour, but "I found it doesn't happen like that," he said.

Enrollment in the Columbia program peaked at 62 students and the equivalent of 43 full-time students in 2009-10. The head count typically was about 30 and the full-time equivalency was in the teens in the 1990s before other adult education programs disappeared, Downey said. A consortium of adult education officials from Jackson, Hillsdale and Lenawee counties has talked about trying to land grants to increase program funding, Downey said, but they fear the state will reduce its funding if that happens.

Opportunities for Adults

Adult education and GED preparation and testing programs in Jackson County:

Columbia Adult Education: Free classes for adults seeking a high school diploma or GED; 4460 N. Lake Road, Clark Lake; 529-9400.

Community Action Agency: Free adult basic education classes for adults below ninth-grade reading level and GED preparation classes; 1214 Greenwood Ave.; 784-4800

T.A. Wilson Academy: GED tests administered weekly at cost of \$25 per test; 310 W. Morrell St.; 841-2800

South Central Michigan Works: Free computer-assisted general remediation programs for adult students (also provides assistance to the Columbia and Community Action Agency programs); 209 E. Washington Ave.; 841-5627