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"Adult Education Saved My Life": An Argument in Favor of Preserving Adult Education Programs in Los Angeles

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When I met Juliana just before the winter holidays, I was impressed. The first in her family to apply to college, Juliana hopes to attend a University of California campus next year. I met Juliana while volunteering at a college outreach program in her neighborhood. She was telling the younger students to make up failed and missing classes through Los Angeles Adult Education.

"Adult education saved my life," she said to a rapt audience of 9th and 10th graders, adding, "If you had known me two years ago, you would not have recognized me. I was mad at the world." Little did she and I know that the Los Angeles Unified School Superintendent has placed the entire Los Angeles Adult Education's budget on the district's cutting block for next school year.

Throughout 9th and 10th grade, Juliana went to high school in the Los Angeles Unified High School District (LAUSD) and rarely went to school and when she did she caused trouble. She got Ds and Fs in most of her classes. She got a couple of Bs in a few classes where the material interested her and where teachers let her hand in make-up packets. "I wasn't dumb. I just didn't care," explains Juliana.

Juliana was on the road to becoming one of the 20-40 percent of students (depending on who you talk to) to drop out of high school in Los Angeles. Yet at the beginning of the summer between 10th and 11th grade, Juliana says she had a revelation. She realized that she didn't want to wind up like her older sister, a high school drop out with two children under the age of four and who worked the night shift in a sewing factory alongside her parents. Moreover, Juliana decided she wanted to be a lawyer.

So she began 11th grade with the desire to graduate and to go to college. Yet she had the credits of a 9th grader. So she began to search for ways to make up classes.

Limited Options to Make Up Classes

There was no way for her to make up her classes during summer school because LAUSD has eliminated summer school except for juniors who need to make up a few classes. There are a limited number of spaces for these precious slots, and Juliana was only an entering junior at the time. And she couldn't take enough classes to make up what she was missing anyway.

She couldn't go to community colleges, because they too are suffering from the tough economy and most have basically eliminated spots for concurrent high school enrollment. Besides the fact, she would not have qualified for most of the classes

they offer.

There are some online programs that LAUSD uses, but school counselors with their huge caseloads rarely know about them and/or can only recommend a limited number of kids, and Juliana wasn't one of those kids. Also there are only a few classes that are covered with these online classes, and they were not all college approved.

She didn't have enough time in her day to take several 9th and 10th grade classes, and she wanted to finish in two years.

That Left Adult School

LAUSD's 30 adult schools serve more than [88,200](#) high school students each year. These students are attempting to take credit recovery classes and graduate from high school. In addition, last year more than [1,500 students](#) who dropped out of LAUSD schools were able to graduate by enrolling in adult school.

Junior year, Juliana began taking classes at her local adult school in the afternoons and evenings after her regular school day. Other kids can complete classes through adult school packets. She could take one to two semester classes at a time and could finish each within two months. In addition, she was able to retake one 9th grade class each semester during the school year. So by the end of junior year, she had one semester of 10th grade and all of 12th grade to finish. She had straight A's in her adult school and a 3.8 in her junior year. She had also passed the CAHSEE, the high school exit exam, and was on the road to graduate high school.

Setting Her Sights on College

But now Juliana had her sights on college. And this year the University of California (UC) campuses made a change. Anyone applying has to have completed 11 out of the 15 mandatory college prep (A-G) courses by the beginning of senior year. Juliana was a few short, so between summer school in LAUSD, because she now qualified to take two classes at summer school and could continue taking classes at adult school, she started 12th grade as a 12th grader with enough classes and the GPA to qualify for a UC.

"Without adult school, I wouldn't be here," says Juliana. "Adult school isn't for everyone. You have to be able to learn on your own and be focused. But I was ready. That shows my determination because I had to keep up with regular school and adult school."

Juliana and Others Are Now Ready

By Thanksgiving of senior year, Juliana had applied to college, and she has the grades and qualifications to attend a competitive four year college. She is lucky the UCs and other state colleges let kids replace failed grades with the higher grades

they receive in re-taken classes.

A Short-Sighted Decision

More and more of the urban freshmen I teach have relied on adult school to help them graduate from high school and matriculate to college. Moreover, as I go out and work with high school juniors and seniors who need to make up courses to graduate from high school and to qualify for college, I have increasingly relied on referring them to LAUSD's adult schools because of all the budget cuts affecting students back in their home schools. The classes are fast paced, and students can make up several classes in a school year.

I am losing more and more of my triage options and worrying that fewer of these students will graduate high school let alone make it to college.

Adult school is the second chance so many kids need. And yet the district's superintendent has placed its entire budget on the chopping block. That makes no sense -- fiscally or educationally. President Obama in his State of the Union Address says our goal should be to raise our high school graduation rate to 90 percent. He wants to prevent kids from dropping out until they are 18, and yet in LA, the city with the second highest dropout rate in the nation, the leadership wants to end a program that has helped so many kids get the classes and credits to graduate. The cuts will increase the already high dropout rate for many kids who need the encouragement and support to re-make themselves in high school or just take a couple of needed class for graduation.

A Huge Contribution to Our Economy

We need to stop thinking in just short-sighted ways. LA Adult Education doesn't just help high school students with credit recovery. It also provides G.E.D classes, adult education for real adults wanting to continue their education, E.S.L classes for immigrants, and vocational classes for people wanting to learn a trade. During these tough economic times, LA Adult Education is making a huge difference in helping retrain and educate people to contribute to our economy.

More importantly, kids like Juliana will be less likely to have the chance to graduate from high school and go to college.

So on February 14, when the LAUSD School Board meets to decide on the budget cuts, we need to share as many voices as we can about the lives that will be damaged by the flawed decision to cut LAUSD's Adult Education program.

"I would not be going to college. I would not be able to graduate high school and would become a statistic," says Juliana. Let's help people like Juliana make their college and life dreams come true.

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