

New York protest against Bush's cuts in adult literacy funding

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Over a thousand people demonstrated in Union Square in New York City April 22 to protest the Bush administration's proposed 2006 federal budget cut for adult education and family literacy programs funded through the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). This 64 percent budget cut would slash funding from \$569 million to \$207 million nationwide.

The Center for Law and Social Policy estimates that at least 470,000 people would be denied literacy, Adult Basic Education, GED (General Educational Development high school equivalency diploma), and English as a Second Language services. More than 51 million American out-of-school youth and adults lack a high school diploma or GED, and 29 million are in need of English language services. However, only 2.8 million individuals can be served by current public adult education and English language efforts. The Journal of the American Medical Association reported in 1999 that 46 percent of American adults are functionally illiterate in dealing with the health care system.

In New York City, one-quarter of adults over 25 do not have a high school diploma, 30 percent of high school students are dropping out, and one in four adults is not proficient in English. The proposed cuts, along with others threatened at city, state, and federal levels, could eliminate classes for tens of thousands of students in the city. According to the Literacy Assistance Center, every year 50,000 adults in New York City take classes in GED preparation, English for speakers of other languages, reading, writing, and math. The majority of students are low-wage workers and immigrants. In these classes, adults learn the skills needed to gain higher-paying jobs, support their families, and enroll in college.

The demonstrators consisted of teachers, students,

and family members from 58 community-based organizations, 13 campuses of The City University of New York (CUNY) and the public library system. Although a couple of local elected officials spoke, there was little evidence of official support, let alone physical presence, by unions or the New York City Department of Education. The demonstrators, however, were enthusiastic. People could be heard in speaking in English, Spanish, Chinese and other languages.

Three young adults from the Adult Education Center of LaGuardia Community College GED classes spoke to a reporter from the WWSWS. Maritza Perez explained, "I had to drop out of school when I was 14 to work. A lot of students have to work and have family issues. I am here to protest because there will be no more free GED classes." Manuel Escobar said he thinks funds are being cut because "the money went to support the war. Already \$300 billion is spent for the war. The war is garbage. Bush needs to concentrate on his people."

"Bush claims he is for No Child Left Behind," stated Jennifer Sughrue, who just achieved her GED, "but look what he does. And it is going to be harder to get a job. There has been a little cuts every year recently and we have done letter-writing but this year has been the worst cuts, so we are here protesting."

Betsy Gross, an Adult Literacy teacher from Brooklyn was also at the demonstration. "It's wrong, and we need to reinstate the funding. Most of the students are poor or immigrants. They are lucky to have a few hours to take classes. The government trend is anti-immigrant policies. It is hard to organize people to take action. We have the strength to unite. But there is a fear of deportation or detainment. It is not only anti-immigrant. There are cutbacks in all services—education to the poor, health care. It is mostly against people who are not powerful in voting."



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