

Partnership with BC3 helps Lawrence County residents to earn high school equivalency diplomas

July 30, 2020



Jonathan Reed, second from left, earned a high school equivalency diploma July 14 after enrolling in an Adult Literacy Lawrence County program funded primarily through a state Department of Education grant to Butler County Community College. Reed, a former New Castle Senior High School student, is shown with his family in Shenango Township on Monday, July 20, 2020. From left, sons Gavin, 12 and Nolan, 4; daughter Aria, 1; and wife, Sierra.

(New Castle, PA) Thirty-two-year-old unemployed father of three Jonathan Reed opened the driver's-side door of his car parked in the driveway of the family babysitter, glanced at Nolan and Aria in the backseat, and noticed a text-message from his wife, Sierra.

Sierra: *Did you get your results?*

Jonathan responded: *I'm sure I did. I'm just afraid to look at them.*

Sierra: *Stop! You're heading to the babysitter's to get the kids?*

Jonathan: *I don't feel good about the math at all.*

Sierra: *I'm sure you did great, baby. And if you didn't, it's one test. Send me a screenshot when you look.*

For nine years, the Shenango Township resident worked a full-time manufacturing job in New Castle, one that enabled his family to live “paycheck to paycheck, basically.”

He lost that job in March, and found regrets resurfacing, of discontinuing his education as a 17-year-old junior at New Castle Senior High School.

“I have a 12-year-old son, a 4-year-old son, and a daughter who just turned 1,” Reed said. “I can't just be another Joe Shmoe out on the street doing this job, doing that job. I have to find a career that is going to support a family of five.”

“There can be a real sense of hopelessness”

Within a week of becoming unemployed, Reed enrolled in an Adult Literacy Lawrence County program funded primarily through a Pennsylvania Department of Education grant to Butler County Community College.

On July 14, after leaving Nolan and Aria with the family babysitter, he took the final two of four tests that would determine his future, and theirs.

BC3's adult literacy program funds free high school equivalency courses and instruction in Butler, Lawrence and Mercer counties. The program prepares students to take General Education Development examinations that measure proficiency in language arts, which includes reading and writing; and in mathematics, science and social studies.

About 8 percent of Lawrence County residents ages 25 and older did not hold at least a high school diploma between 2014 and 2018, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“I was young, and it was dumb to do,” Reed said of his decision in 2005.

Thirty-four students who had been attending public schools in Lawrence County were among the nearly 14,800 in grades 7-12 who dropped out of Pennsylvania public schools in the 2017-18 academic year, according to the most recent state Department of Education information.

“The difficulty is that they are very limited in terms of employment options,” said Gillian Maule, executive director of Adult Literacy Lawrence County. “And limited at any point to be able to secure a position that has a self-sustaining or family sustaining wage. There can be a real sense of hopelessness.”

“They start seeing possibilities”

Nearly 4,000 students in Pennsylvania earned a commonwealth secondary school diploma between July 1, 2019, and June 30, according to Mary Kay Peters, high school equivalency administrator, Bureau of Postsecondary and Adult Education with the state Department of Education.

A high school equivalency diploma, Maule said, “opens the doors and a lot more opportunities for them. In terms of their view of themselves, it gives them a sense of self-efficacy and of being someone who is competent and capable.”

Full-time workers age 25 and older without a high school diploma in the third quarter of 2019 had median weekly earnings that were \$143 less than those who were high school graduates but had no college credits, according to the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Labor Statistics.

“The amount a person earns increases significantly,” said Barb Gade, grant director of BC3’s adult literacy program. “Throughout their lifetime, they can earn so much more money. Just by getting their high school equivalency diploma, they start to change their viewpoint of themselves, and the family starts to change their viewpoint as well.

“They learn that they can do more than they thought they could. And they start seeing possibilities.”

Twelve Lawrence County students earned high school equivalency diplomas during a BC3 fiscal year that ended June 30.

Social studies, mathematics exams final hurdles

Passing General Education Development social studies and mathematics examinations stood between Reed and his becoming the first Lawrence County student to earn a high school equivalency diploma in BC3’s new fiscal year, of his no longer saying he is a Joe Shmoe, of his being able to find a career that will support Sierra, Gavin, Nolan, Aria and himself.

OK, I’m going to look, Reed texted his wife.

He logged into his account with ged.com.

Congratulations! it read.

“I was shocked,” he said.

He sent to Sierra the screen shot she had requested.

Sierra: *I am so proud of you.*

She added crying faces and happy faces to her text message.

Jonathan: *It is such a relief.*

“To me, it seems such a small step,” Reed said. “But, my wife, my kids, they’re like, ‘You did it. I’m so proud of you.’ I’m like, ‘I should have done this 14, 15 years ago.’”

Adult Literacy Lawrence County instructors, Reed said, “really relate to you. They wanted to help. It felt good knowing there were people out there like that. They walked me through step-by-step with whatever questions I had and offered me all kinds of help.”

Reed now plans to open driver’s-side doors to tractor-trailers after he earns a Class A commercial driver’s license while studying at a nearby technical school.

“Most importantly, I will be happier doing what I want to do versus what I have to do,” Reed said. “They say if you enjoy your job and love what you do, you don’t work a day in your life. That’s where I want to be.”

Adult Literacy Lawrence County’s program has been primarily funded by BC3 for the past two years as part of the three-year Pennsylvania Department of Education grant. Thirty-three students have earned high school equivalency diplomas through Adult Literacy Lawrence County in the past two years.

The United Way of Lawrence County and the Wimodausis Club also fund Adult Literacy Lawrence County, whose next classes will begin in late August.