




# Community-Based Literacy Needs Assessment for Immigrant and Refugee Populations in Sioux Falls, SD

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## Executive Summary

### Research Overview

The research conducted for REACH Literacy seeks to provide actionable insights to enhance the organization's programs and outreach efforts. REACH Literacy, as a non-profit organization, is dedicated to fostering literacy development among individuals and to ensuring access to educational resources and opportunities for personal growth.

### Research Objectives

#### 1. Literacy Needs and Impact Assessment

- Identify specific literacy gaps and challenges faced by immigrants, refugees, and underserved groups in Sioux Falls.
- Assess the effectiveness of current literacy programs in addressing these gaps and improving literacy outcomes.
- Use surveys, focus groups, and data analysis to evaluate impact and identify opportunities for targeted intervention.

#### 2. Tailored Program and Delivery Model Development

- Identify best practices and learner preferences regarding instructional formats (in-person, online, or hybrid).
- Inform the design and implementation of culturally inclusive and flexible ESL, vocational, and digital literacy programs.

#### 3. Strategic Space Utilization

- Provide insights to inform a flexible space usage plan for REACH's new facility, including group classes, tutoring, and tech access.

### Research Methods

Surveys and statistical models were employed to measure the population growth among the immigrant community in Sioux Falls and South Dakota in general.

1. **Qualitative Research:** Site visits and interviews provided rich, contextual feedback on user experiences.
2. **Comparative studies:** The research also benchmarked REACH Literacy's programs against similar organizations in the city, the state of South Dakota, and the United States to identify strengths and areas for improvement.

## Key Findings

The data collected from the site visits and interviews with religious leaders in immigrant communities paint a vivid picture of the linguistic diversity within these communities. There is no single common language, not even among people from the same country of origin. Instead, they speak multiple regional languages, which reflects the rich cultural diversity of their backgrounds.

Beyond linguistic diversity, literacy varies widely. Some individuals can read but struggle to write, while others face the opposite challenge. Many rely heavily on family members, spouses, children, or extended relatives, rather than formal education, to navigate daily communication.

The daily realities make learning even more difficult. Many work long hours, often juggling multiple jobs just to make ends meet. Attending in-person language classes is simply not an option when time, transportation, and energy are in short supply. Even digital learning, which might seem like a solution, presents its own hurdles. Many individuals have limited experience with technology, making online education inaccessible.


These challenges highlight the need for language learning solutions that are flexible, community-driven, and designed to meet people where they are – whether that means employing family networks, offering multilingual resources, or creating accessible learning opportunities that fit within their demanding lives.

## Recommendations

To truly make a difference in community literacy, REACH Literacy needs to go beyond the traditional classroom models and meet people where they are both physically and in their daily lives. Many in the classroom juggle multiple jobs, care for their families, and face challenges like a lack of transportation or digital skills. This makes it nearly impossible to attend structured, in-person classes. Instead of expecting people to come to the program site in person, REACH should bring learning opportunities into places learners already trust and frequent. These sites include religious centers, workplaces, grocery stores, and community hubs. Partnering with faith leaders, employers, and cultural organizations can help create a safe and welcoming learning environment.

Language barriers also make learning difficult, especially when there isn't a single shared language among participants. Providing bilingual materials and training community members as peer educators can create a sense of support and belonging. Family-based learning, where parents and children learn together, can make the process more natural and encourage literacy across generations.

Technology could be a powerful tool, but only if people know how to use it. Many struggle with digital literacy, so REACH should offer hands-on, step-by-step training with simple apps and voice-to-text tools. At the same time, paper-based materials should still be available for those who are more comfortable with traditional learning. Classes should be flexible in the form of short, drop-in sessions, or weekend or evening classes. Even workplace-based programs can facilitate the participation of people without disrupting their already full and busy lives.



Most importantly, REACH should keep listening, engaging with the community, asking what they need, and adjusting programs based on real feedback. This approach will make a difference between a good idea and a truly impactful program. Literacy isn't just about reading or writing. It is about giving people the tools to navigate their world with confidence. Creating learning opportunities that fit into people's realities rather than asking them to change their lives to fit into a program is how REACH can open doors for individuals and strengthen the entire community.

## Conclusions

The findings of this research highlight a critical reality that many individuals facing literacy challenges, particularly immigrants and refugees, are unlikely to access REACH's support at its physical location due to barriers such as demanding work schedules, lack of transportation, and digital literacy challenges. While REACH initially envisioned serving these communities through on-site programs, the data suggest a need for a more decentralized, community-based approach. By embedding literacy support into trusted spaces like religious centers, workplaces, and community hubs, REACH can better reach those in need while building meaningful partnerships that enhance program accessibility.

At the same time, to make the best use of its physical space, REACH may need to expand its focus beyond immigrant and refugee populations. Exploring literacy needs among other underserved groups, such as low-income adults, seniors, or individuals with learning differences, could help maximize the impact of REACH's resources while staying true to its mission of fostering literacy.

# Introduction

## Background

REACH Literacy is dedicated to fostering a community where individuals, regardless of their background, can gain the skills necessary to understand, interpret, and utilize a wide range of information. As literacy is foundational to personal and professional success, REACH Literacy focuses on bridging gaps among underserved populations, particularly immigrants and refugees in the Sioux Falls community. These groups often face significant barriers to accessing literacy education due to language, cultural differences, or lack of resources.

Previously reliant on off-site locations, REACH Literacy's new 300 sq. ft. facility offers an opportunity to expand and enhance its services. This dedicated space enables the organization to host onsite classes, workshops, and events tailored to meet the unique needs of its target population.

In partnership with the Beacom Research Fellowship Program at the Augustana Research Institute (ARI), REACH Literacy seeks to utilize current data and innovative research methodologies to understand the literacy needs of immigrants, refugees, and other underserved groups in Sioux Falls. This collaboration aims to inform strategic decisions on space utilization and program development, ensuring the organization's new classroom facility maximizes its impact on the community.

## Objectives

### **1. Needs assessment for immigrants and refugees:**

- a. Identify the specific literacy gaps and challenges faced by immigrants, refugees, and underserved groups in Sioux Falls.
- b. Use surveys, focus groups, and data analysis to gain insights into barriers to literacy and opportunities for targeted intervention.

### **2. Tailored program development:**

- a. Identify community needs and best practices to inform the design and implementation of literacy programs addressing the unique needs of diverse populations, including English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, vocational literacy training, and digital literacy workshops.
- b. Develop culturally sensitive research materials and methodologies to ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

### **3. Space utilization optimization:**

- a. Provide information to facilitate the creation of a flexible space usage plan to accommodate literacy classes, one-on-one tutoring, technology access, and community-building activities.

## Literature Review

As Sioux Falls, South Dakota, continues to diversify, understanding the unique literacy needs of its immigrant and refugee communities becomes crucial. Literacy, both functional and digital, is essential for economic participation, civic engagement, and overall integration. Organizations like REACH Literacy play a critical role in bridging this gap, but program design must be informed by a solid understanding of both community needs and best practices. This literature review synthesizes existing research on immigrant and refugee literacy barriers, effective program strategies, and implications for community-based literacy initiatives.


Immigrants and refugees often face significant obstacles in acquiring literacy skills in their host countries. One of the most commonly cited barriers is limited English proficiency. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) notes that 34% of foreign-born adults in the U.S. have low English literacy skills, with many never having attended school in their country of origin. Moreover, literacy is multidimensional, encompassing not only the ability to read and write in English, but also digital literacy, health literacy, and financial literacy (Horrigan, 2016).

Beyond language, structural barriers such as transportation, childcare, and work schedules hinder participation in adult education programs (McBrien, 2005). Many immigrants prioritize employment and family responsibilities over formal education, making flexible and community-based programs essential. Refugees, in particular, may experience trauma and instability that affect their learning capacity (Shapiro & MacDonald, 2017).

In the specific context of Sioux Falls, recent reports show a growing immigrant population, with over 8% of residents born outside the United States (U.S. Census Bureau S0501, 2020). This includes immigrants and refugees from countries such as Myanmar, Ethiopia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guatemala, Nepal, India, etc.—groups that often arrive with interrupted or limited formal education.

Effective literacy programs for immigrant and refugee communities are typically community-based, culturally responsive, and adaptable to varying skill levels. According to Wrigley et al. (2003), adult ESL programs are most successful when they incorporate practical content related to employment, healthcare, and civic responsibilities. Contextualized learning—tying literacy instruction to real-life scenarios—helps learners see immediate value and application.

Digital literacy is increasingly important, particularly in accessing government services, employment platforms, and healthcare systems. Warschauer and Matuchniak (2010) emphasize the role of technology training in bridging the digital divide. Programs



must provide access to devices and internet connectivity alongside instruction, particularly for low-income learners.

Community partnerships also amplify program impact. Libraries, schools, nonprofits, and local employers can collaborate to provide space, funding, and participant referrals. These partnerships help reduce stigma and increase trust, especially when programs are hosted in familiar, accessible locations

Literacy is a cornerstone of successful integration for immigrants and refugees, yet barriers remain significant. Community organizations like REACH Literacy have a vital role to play, but their efforts must be rooted in evidence-based practices. Tailoring literacy services to the cultural, linguistic, and logistical realities of Sioux Falls' diverse populations will ensure more equitable and impactful outcomes.

## Research Methodology

To provide REACH Literacy with actionable insights and recommendations for the expansion of its programs and optimal use of its new classroom space, a multi-phase research methodology was employed. This methodology integrates both secondary and primary research approaches, which ensures a comprehensive understanding of literacy needs among immigrants, refugees, and underserved populations in the Sioux Falls community.

### A. Secondary Research

#### 1. Analysis of American Community Survey (ACS) data:

- a. Utilized the ACS data to identify demographic trends, literacy levels, and socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants and refugees in Sioux Falls.
- b. Focused on key indicators such as language proficiency, educational attainment, and employment rates.

#### 2. Review of existing literature:

- a. Examined academic and industry publications on literacy programs, challenges faced by underserved populations, and best practices for addressing these gaps.
- b. Synthesized findings to identify proven strategies for improving literacy outcomes in similar contexts.

#### 3. Assessment of comparable programs

- a. Mapped and analyzed existing literacy programs in the area to identify potential overlaps and gaps in services.
- b. Evaluated the strengths, weaknesses, and unique features of competing programs to determine REACH Literacy's competitive edge.
- c. Studied literacy initiatives targeting immigrants and refugees across the U.S. to identify innovative practices and scalable solutions.
- d. Benchmarked REACH Literacy's goals against successful programs in other states to draw actionable lessons.

## B. Primary Research

### 1. Surveys:

- a. Designed and distributed surveys of leaders of diverse institutions.
- b. Collected data on literacy needs of their institutions, the perceived barriers to accessing literacy services, and suggestions for tailored programming.

### 2. Interviews:

- a. Conducted in-depth interviews with community leaders, including pastors, imams, and other representatives of religious and cultural organizations.
- b. Gained qualitative insights into the day-to-day interactions and challenges faced by immigrants and refugees.
- c. Explored opportunities to collaborate with these institutions to increase program reach and accessibility.

## C. Data Synthesis and Analysis

1. Combined findings from secondary and primary research to build a detailed profile of the literacy needs of Sioux Falls' immigrant and refugee communities.
2. Identified actionable insights to guide space utilization, program development, and strategic partnerships for REACH Literacy.
3. Used comparative data to ensure recommendations are innovative, culturally appropriate, and capable of filling existing service gaps.


## Comparative Landscape

A nationwide comparative analysis of literacy programs reveals critical insights relevant to REACH Literacy's current and future operations. An extensive study of fourteen adult literacy programs across diverse regions of the United States provides a comprehensive look at how similar organizations structure their services, engage communities, and sustain their operations. The analysis reveals that while the core offerings of many of these programs remain rooted in traditional literacy services such as ESL and basic reading and writing, there is a growing trend toward diversification. Several programs have strategically expanded their curriculum to include non-traditional offerings such as citizenship preparation classes, CNA and GED preparation, digital literacy, and professional workforce development courses. These tailored programs not only address the immediate literacy needs of immigrant and refugee communities but also prepare them for broader socio-economic participation, enhancing both the reach and relevance of these organizations.

Furthermore, the operational models of these programs reflect a deliberate adaptation to post-pandemic realities. Many organizations have embraced online and hybrid models of service delivery, capitalizing on the flexibility and accessibility that virtual platforms provide. This shift has had a profound impact on enrollment numbers, as illustrated by the Nashville Adult Literacy Council, which experienced a significant increase in participant engagement following its transition to online-only services during the pandemic. The data suggests that the incorporation of virtual learning options has not only mitigated barriers related to transportation and scheduling but has also opened new pathways for community members who were previously unable to access in-person services.

Online instructional models present an opportunity for REACH Literacy to explore expanding its digital literacy offerings and online instructional capacity, particularly given Sioux Falls' known transportation challenges. However, online learning may not be accessible to all. In that case, REACH may seek other means to overcome transportation challenges. Interestingly, organizations situated in cities facing similar transportation barriers, such as Lincoln Literacy in Nebraska, have proactively addressed these challenges by providing free transportation services to program participants, demonstrating a best practice that REACH could emulate to enhance service accessibility.

Organizational structure and community engagement strategies also emerged as critical factors distinguishing more robust programs. Many of the examined organizations operate within formalized structures that include established boards of directors, paid teaching staff, and strategic partnerships with local universities, corporations, and umbrella organizations such as ProLiteracy. These collaborations not only lend credibility but also diversify funding streams and reduce operational costs through volunteer and internship pipelines. In contrast, programs that rely solely on donations or grants without



supplementary fundraising efforts or institutional partnerships face sustainability challenges. Several programs have successfully supplemented their revenue by hosting fundraising events, engaging in book sales, or charging fees for specialized courses, such as CNA preparation or workforce readiness classes. This multipronged approach to income generation has enabled them to maintain or even expand their services despite funding uncertainties, a strategy that REACH Literacy might find beneficial in securing financial resilience.

Additionally, these programs demonstrate a strong emphasis on community presence beyond classroom instruction. By fostering volunteer opportunities, internships, and outreach initiatives, they have embedded themselves into the social and civic fabric of their communities, enhancing both visibility and impact. Notably, organizations such as the Literacy Center of Pennsylvania and the Literacy Services of Wisconsin have leveraged partnerships with high-profile donors and institutions, creating an ecosystem of support that extends beyond the confines of their literacy programming. For REACH Literacy, these insights point toward the importance of cultivating such partnerships and seeking affiliations with both local and national networks to expand its community footprint and bolster its organizational capacity. The comparison also underscores the necessity for REACH to assess its current service delivery models, community engagement approaches, and funding structures in light of these national patterns, recognizing that adaptability, diversification, and strategic collaboration are central to sustaining and scaling literacy services in the evolving educational and economic landscape.

## Population Estimate and Needs Assessment

### Demographic Analysis

Sioux Falls, South Dakota, has experienced significant demographic shifts over the past two decades, driven largely by an increase in immigration and refugee resettlement. According to the American Community Survey (ACS) data from 2023, approximately 8.47% of the city's population is foreign-born, up from 6.13% in the early 2010s. These figures represent over 17,000 individuals in the city (U.S. Census Bureau S0501, 2023).

Language proficiency remains a central issue for these populations. Approximately 36.8% of the foreign-born population in Sioux Falls reports speaking English "less than very well," which poses challenges for their integration into the workforce, accessing healthcare, and participating in civic life (U.S. Census Bureau S0503, 2023).

Age distribution among immigrant and refugee populations in Sioux Falls skews younger, with the majority between the ages of 18 to 44 (U.S. Census Bureau S0503, 2023). This working age demographic underscores the importance of providing flexible and accessible literacy programs that can accommodate employment schedules and family responsibilities. Additionally, household income data reveals that many immigrants are employed in low-wage sectors such as manufacturing, hospitality, and healthcare support, making cost a potential barrier to participation in literacy programs (U.S. Census Bureau S0503, 2023).

Projected trends suggest continued growth in these communities fueled by both refugee resettlement programs and secondary migration patterns. South Dakota's favourable employment landscape, combined with lower living costs compared to other states, has made Sioux Falls an attractive destination for immigrant families seeking economic opportunities. These trends highlight a sustained and growing need for literacy services tailored to diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

### Competitive Landscape

A focused analysis of the competitive landscape reveals two primary organizations providing literacy and support services to immigrants and refugee populations in Sioux Falls. These are Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of South Dakota and South Dakota Voices for Peace (SDVP). Understanding the strengths, limitations, and areas of overlap between these organizations and REACH Literacy is essential for identifying opportunities for differentiation and strategic positioning.

## Lutheran Social Services (LSS) of South Dakota

LSS South Dakota is the largest and most established service provider for refugees and immigrants in the state. Their offerings include refugee resettlement, English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, financial literacy programs, cultural orientation, job placement assistance, and case management services. LSS operates with significant state and federal funding, which enables them to provide comprehensive wraparound services to newly arrived refugees and certain categories of immigrants.

### Strengths of LSS:

- 1. Established infrastructure:** LSS has a well-developed administrative and programmatic structure, which allows them to manage large-scale resettlement and support services efficiently.
- 2. Comprehensive services:** Their programming extends beyond literacy to include housing, employment, mental health services, and legal assistance, which offers a one-stop-shop approach.
- 3. Government partnerships:** LSS benefits from strong relationships with federal and state agencies, which allow them to secure reliable funding streams and policy influence.

### Limitations of LSS:

- 1. Focus on new arrivals:** LSS primarily serves recently resettled refugees. Long-term immigrants and secondary migrants often fall outside the scope of their services.
- 2. Rigid program structures:** ESL and other educational programs tend to follow standardized schedules and curricula, limiting flexibility for individuals with non-traditional work hours.
- 3. Limited community outreach:** LSS programs are typically held at centralized sites that require clients to travel to their locations, which may not be accessible to everyone.

## South Dakota Voices for Peace (SDVP)

SDVP is an advocacy organization focused on immigrant rights, policy reform, and community empowerment. Their mission includes legal support, civic engagement, and educational workshops aimed at fostering inclusion and equity for immigrants, refugees, and marginalized communities.

### Strengths of SDVP:

1. **Policy advocacy:** SDVP (and its affiliated lobbying and advocacy organization, South Dakota Voices for Justice) has a strong presence in legislative and policy advocacy and works to address systemic barriers faced by immigrant communities.
2. **Community trust:** Their focus on advocacy and rights-based approaches has earned them credibility and trust among immigrant populations, particularly those concerned with legal and civil rights.
3. **Educational workshops:** SDVP provides workshops on topics such as legal rights, civic participation, and cultural competence. They help to enhance community knowledge and engagement on critical community matters.

### Limitations of SDVP:

1. **Limited focus on literacy:** SDVP's educational offerings are primarily centered around civic and legal education with minimal emphasis on language or vocational literacy.
2. **Event-based programming:** Their workshops and seminars are often short-term and issue-specific, lacking the continuous structure of ongoing literacy programs.
3. **Resource constraints:** As an advocacy-focused organization, SDVP's funding and resources may be more variable, which might limit their capacity for long-term educational program development.

## Strategic Positioning for REACH Literacy

REACH Literacy is uniquely positioned to fill these gaps by offering:

1. **Hybrid and decentralized learning models:** Implement flexible class formats, including evening and weekend sessions, mobile classrooms, and partnerships with religious centers and workplaces.
2. **Bilingual peer educator programs:** Train community members to act as peer educators and enhance trust and cultural relevance.
3. **Integrated digital literacy:** Include foundational digital skills training within literacy programs to bridge technological gaps.
4. **Collaborative partnerships:** Act as a coordinating hub to foster partnerships with existing organizations and reduce duplication.

## Community Surveys, Site Visits, and Interviews

Primary data collection, including surveys, site visits, and interviews, occurred in three distinct phases. Each phase illuminated constraints and barriers in reaching the immigrant and refugee populations REACH Literacy seeks to serve. Ultimately, the research design was adapted to overcome these constraints and gather useful input from immigrant and refugee communities via site visits and interviews with religious leaders. Each of the three phases and relevant findings are described in this section.

### Phase I:

Phase I of the research was the first attempt made to collect data to assess the needs pertaining to literacy programs in Sioux Falls that REACH Literacy could potentially address. This phase relied on the findings from comparison programs in South Dakota and nationwide and the creation of a survey translated in major languages dominant in Sioux Falls (English, Amharic, Nepali, Hindi, and Spanish) in order to collect data from individual participants.


To identify these survey participants and receive responses, we relied on the community organizations that either currently serve or have a history of serving the immigrant and refugee population in Sioux Falls. A list of 20 organizations was prepared, which included non-profits, language interpreting services, immigration and refugee support organizations, etc. Organizations were also contacted to see if leaders or staff would be willing to participate in an interview to share their experiences of serving the immigrant population and provide suggestions as to what types of literacy programs would better serve their constituents.

### Outcome of Phase I:

Phase I of the survey was carried out from July through August 2024 (2 months). No responses were gathered by the end of the survey period. Only two of the twenty organizations contacted responded to the request. The rest of the organizations were unresponsive to our request, even after some follow-ups. Two of the organizations that eventually responded expressed hesitancy in participation and unwillingness to share data, citing legal and privacy concerns. This phase did not produce the data we hoped to collect; however, it provided us with valuable insights and explanations of the context in Sioux Falls.

### Observations and Reflections from Phase I:

There may have been a sense of competition or territoriality among the organizations. These groups might have viewed REACH Literacy's initiative as an



encroachment on their own services, leading them to perceive our outreach as potentially “proprietary,” with concerns over client retention or service overlap. Even though we assured organizations that all IRB protocols were followed and confidentiality would be maintained, some may have felt that participating posed legal risks. Concerns over data sharing, client confidentiality, or compliance with privacy laws may have deterred their involvement. This is particularly likely given that some populations served by these organizations, such as immigrants and refugees, may already face heightened sensitivity regarding personal information. It’s possible that our outreach approach didn’t clearly communicate the benefits or relevance of the survey to their organizational goals. If organizations did not fully understand how this partnership would align with their mission or benefit their clients, they may have lacked the motivation to participate. Some organizations may have been wary of unfamiliar partnerships due to past experiences or general caution. They may require a more established relationship or a more gradual trust-building process before engaging in initiatives involving client data or shared responsibilities.

## Phase II:

Following the limited engagement from community organizations in Phase I, we shifted to a direct outreach strategy in Phase II. Our objective was to connect directly with immigrant and refugee communities in Sioux Falls by removing intermediaries and enhancing accessibility. To address language barriers, we translated recruitment fliers as well as surveys into commonly spoken languages in the area, including Nepali, Hindi, Amharic, and Spanish, with English versions available as well.

To reach these communities, we posted the translated fliers in approximately 20 strategic locations, such as restaurants, supermarkets, and community centers, including some organizations initially contacted in Phase I. Despite declining to participate in Phase I, these community organizations agreed to display the fliers on their bulletin boards, which provided additional visibility.

The fliers included a QR code and URL link for easy access to the online survey. Despite these efforts and the diversity of locations chosen, we again received no responses over the two-month period in October and November 2024 during which the survey remained active.

## Outcome of Phase II

Just like in Phase I, Phase II did not produce any response from the individual participants. Even though this phase lasted for almost two months from early September to late October 2024, no responses were gathered.

## Observations in Phase II

Although community organizations permitted us to display fliers, it's possible they still perceived REACH Literacy as a competitor or were cautious about our objectives. There is a possibility that some fliers were removed shortly after posting, potentially by staff members or patrons who felt these surveys conflicted with their organizations' own initiatives. In some immigrant and refugee communities, the concept of surveys may be less familiar, and there could be limited understanding of why data collection is important or how it might benefit their communities. Additionally, a general mistrust toward surveys or concerns about data privacy could have contributed to reluctance to participate.


The survey itself may have been perceived as too lengthy or complex, contributing to "survey fatigue." This could be particularly true if participants were uncertain of the relevance or purpose of each question. Survey anxiety might also be heightened if they were unfamiliar with the survey format or process, potentially deterring them from engaging fully.

The survey required online access, which may have created a barrier. While fliers included a QR code and URL link, not everyone has a smartphone or may be comfortable with online forms, particularly within some immigrant or refugee communities where smartphone use or internet access is limited.

## Phase III

Phase III of this research employed more proactive measures than passive survey strategies. In this phase, we shifted towards a more personalized, interactive approach by establishing focus groups and conducting one-on-one interviews at religious sites with religious leaders, pastors, imams, visitors, and volunteers. In this phase, we were actually able to gather responses from some of the respondents, which informed us about the needs of the community in terms of literacy.

Phase III was conducted from mid-January to late February 2025, through visits to religious sites where immigrants generally congregate. In total, we conducted five interviews in three different sites of different religions. The interviews were thorough and



detailed enough to provide rich information about the state of literacy and access in the community.

## Observations and Findings from Phase III

The findings gathered through interviews at religious and community institutions across Sioux Falls offer profound insights into the complex and multifaceted literacy challenges faced by immigrant and refugee populations. By closely analyzing these responses, several consistent themes emerge, revealing the deeply rooted socio-cultural, linguistic, and structural barriers that hinder literacy development and full participation in community life. This section synthesizes these findings, providing a nuanced interpretation to inform REACH Literacy's programmatic and strategic direction.

### **1. Religious and Community Institutions as Gateways to Immigrant Populations**


One of the most significant observations is the central role that religious institutions play in the lives of immigrant and refugee communities in Sioux Falls. All four participating sites reported that a substantial majority—ranging from 70% to 90%—of their congregants are immigrants or refugees. These communities, drawn primarily from South Asia (India, Nepal, Bhutan, Sri Lanka) and Latin America (Mexico and Central America), rely on these religious spaces not just for spiritual nourishment but also as cultural sanctuaries, support networks, and entry points into broader societal structures.

This centrality positions these institutions as pivotal access points for literacy interventions. Unlike formal educational settings, which may feel intimidating or inaccessible, religious institutions offer a familiar, trusted, and culturally affirming environment. This finding suggests that any literacy initiative aiming for high engagement and trust-building should be deeply embedded within these community hubs, leveraging the established rapport and leadership networks that already exist.

### **2. Linguistic Diversity as Both an Asset and a Barrier**

The linguistic landscape reflected in the interview data is one of rich diversity but also significant complexity. Religious sites serving South Asian populations highlighted visitors speaking languages such as Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Nepali, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, and Punjabi, while Iglesia Christiana Nueva Jerusalem Pentecostal emphasized Spanish as the primary language, with additional representation of indigenous languages like Mixtec and Zapotec.

While this multilingual environment adds to the cultural vibrancy of Sioux Falls, it presents a formidable challenge for literacy programming. There is no single common language shared across or even within communities. Many respondents reported visitors



with only basic English skills or entirely lacking English proficiency. Further, the data from Iglesia Christiana Nueva Jerusalem Pentecostal pointed to an additional layer of complexity—some visitors face literacy limitations not only in English but even in their native Spanish or indigenous languages, particularly those from rural backgrounds with limited access to formal education.

This linguistic mosaic underscores the need for highly flexible, multilingual, and culturally responsive literacy programming. The “one-size-fits-all” model is unlikely to be effective. Rather, materials and instruction must account for both varied native-language proficiencies and the need to bridge to functional English literacy.

### **3. Literacy Challenges as Daily Obstacles to Integration**

The findings vividly illustrate how limited literacy creates tangible, day-to-day hardships for immigrant and refugee individuals. Respondents consistently reported difficulties their visitors encounter in:


- a. Reading and understanding lease agreements, employment contracts, school communications, and healthcare instructions.
- b. Completing essential forms for housing, social services, healthcare, driver’s licenses, or school enrollment.
- c. Communicating effectively in settings such as schools, government offices, and workplaces.

One striking pattern is how deeply these literacy challenges intersect with other systemic vulnerabilities. For example, visitors often need assistance registering children for school, interpreting prescription labels, or understanding their rights in the workplace. Such limitations reduce their autonomy and increase dependence on family members, especially children, or informal volunteers within their religious communities. This dependence perpetuates feelings of inadequacy, isolation, and disempowerment.

Notably, the survey data also indicates that these challenges disproportionately affect older adults, women (especially homemakers), and recent arrivals. Older visitors, in particular, express discouragement about their ability to learn new skills, reflecting both self-doubt and lack of access to patient, beginner-friendly instruction.

### **4. Literacy Barriers Undermine Social Participation and Confidence**

Beyond functional obstacles, the findings highlight the social consequences of low literacy. Visitors with limited English proficiency often avoid participating in larger community events, discussions, or programs where English predominates. Respondents noted feelings of embarrassment, hesitation, and alienation in such settings. This is



especially true in religious settings where, despite being safe spaces, the use of English in announcements, activities, or larger gatherings inadvertently excludes many.

Consequently, literacy barriers are not only practical impediments but also social and emotional obstacles that diminish community cohesion, mental well-being, and an individual's sense of belonging. Addressing literacy, therefore, becomes not merely an educational intervention, but a broader tool for social integration and community empowerment.

## **5. Informal Support Systems: Well-Meaning but Inadequate**

All three sites reported the presence of informal support mechanisms—volunteers assisting with translation, document filing, or basic guidance. However, these systems are ad-hoc, dependent on volunteer availability, and inconsistent in quality and reach. While they reflect the compassion and solidarity within these communities, they are insufficient to meet the scale and depth of need identified.

The leaders at each site expressed a clear willingness to formalize these efforts, welcoming partnerships with external nonprofits like REACH Literacy. Importantly, there is strong interest in sustainable, structured programs that would offer professional instruction, resource stability, and training for existing volunteers.

## **6. In-Person, Community-Based Delivery as the Preferred Format**


When it comes to preferred learning environments, all respondents emphasized in-person classes, particularly those delivered at their own religious sites. Several factors drive this preference:

- a. Trust and familiarity with the space and community leaders.
- b. Accessibility, as visitors already gather at these locations for regular worship or events.
- c. Comfort, as learners feel less judged and more at ease in culturally affirming settings.

That said, some openness to hybrid or online models was noted—primarily among younger, digitally literate visitors. However, digital literacy barriers, lack of internet access, and transportation challenges suggest that online-only or formal institutional models would likely exclude the most vulnerable populations.

## **7. Structural Barriers: Transportation, Work Schedules, and Childcare**

Three persistent structural barriers emerged across all interviews:

- 
- a. Long, inflexible work hours: Many community members work multiple jobs or shifts, leaving little time for traditional classes held during weekday hours.
  - b. Transportation issues: Particularly for visitors living on Sioux Falls' outskirts or low-income households, reliable transportation is not always available.
  - c. Childcare responsibilities: The lack of childcare options, especially for women and mothers, significantly limits participation in educational programs.

Programs designed without consideration for these barriers—offered during standard business hours, at distant locations, or without family support—will continue to face low engagement.

## **8. Pressing Literacy Needs: Practical, Real-World Focus**

A critical takeaway from the data is that community members are not seeking academic or test-oriented instruction. Instead, they require practical literacy skills that immediately enhance their quality of life. Priority areas include:

- a. Conversational English for day-to-day interactions.
- b. Reading and filling out forms (school, healthcare, legal, employment).
- c. Navigating public services, workplaces, and bureaucratic systems.
- d. Basic literacy in their native language where needed (particularly in cases noted at Iglesia Christiana Nueva Jerusalem Pentecostal).

Respondents stressed that programs must be highly practical, scenario-based, and patient, especially for those who are older or have minimal prior education.

## **9. Openness to Partnerships**

Perhaps one of the most encouraging insights is the unanimous openness to partnerships expressed by all three institutions. Leaders articulated a willingness to collaborate with nonprofits, government agencies, and educational entities. They identified specific support areas where they felt they could add value to collaborative efforts:

- a. Assistance in hiring bilingual interpreters.
- b. Development of culturally appropriate, multilingual teaching materials.
- c. Training for existing community volunteers.
- d. Childcare support services during program sessions.

Furthermore, respondents emphasized that building trust is essential. Programs that prioritize cultural understanding, use familiar faces, and engage community leaders as facilitators will not only be better received but also more impactful.



## Summary of Findings

The interpretation of these findings reveals a layered and intersectional understanding of literacy challenges within Sioux Falls' immigrant and refugee communities. Literacy is not merely an educational deficiency, it is a social determinant influencing access to essential services, economic opportunity, and community engagement. Successful interventions must account for linguistic diversity, cultural contexts, and structural barriers such as work schedules, childcare, and transportation.

By embedding programs within trusted community institutions, offering practical, real-world literacy support, and co-developing solutions alongside religious and cultural leaders, REACH Literacy is uniquely positioned to transform these challenges into opportunities. Addressing literacy in this context is not only about reading and writing; it is about empowering individuals, strengthening families, and fostering a more inclusive, resilient Sioux Falls.

## Recommendations for the Future

Drawing from the comprehensive research findings, including both primary data gathered through community interviews and secondary literature analysis, this section presents actionable recommendations to guide REACH Literacy's future efforts. These recommendations are intended to help REACH build sustainable, community-focused, and scalable literacy programs that address identified gaps, leverage existing community networks, and foster long-term impact.

### Strategic Recommendations

#### 1. Adopt a Community-Centered Delivery Model

Given the consistent feedback from community leaders, REACH Literacy should prioritize bringing services directly into trusted community hubs, such as religious centers, cultural organizations, and workplaces. These institutions already serve as central gathering points and enjoy the trust of immigrant and refugee populations. By embedding literacy programs within these spaces, REACH can minimize transportation and trust barriers while maximizing participation.

##### Action Steps:

- a. Formalize partnerships with religious institutions (temples, churches, mosques) and community centers.
- b. Establish satellite learning hubs hosted at these locations on evenings/weekends.
- c. Engage community leaders as cultural liaisons to facilitate recruitment and participation.

#### 2. Focus on Practical, Functional Literacy

The findings strongly indicate that learners seek immediate, real-world literacy skills—such as filling out forms, communicating with schools, understanding healthcare documents, and basic conversational English. REACH should design a curriculum that is practical, scenario-based, and easily applicable to daily life.

**Action Steps:**

- a. Develop modules on common life tasks (e.g., reading prescriptions, job applications, school forms).
- b. Incorporate role-playing, visual aids, and bilingual materials to accommodate varying literacy levels.
- c. Include culturally relevant examples tailored to immigrant communities in Sioux Falls.

**3. Offer Flexible Program Schedules and Support Services**

Structural barriers like work hours, transportation, and childcare consistently limit participation. Therefore, programs must be designed with flexibility and wraparound support.

**Action Steps:**

- a. Schedule classes on weekends and weekday evenings.
- b. Provide on-site childcare during classes, potentially partnering with local childcare providers or volunteers from host sites.
- c. Explore transportation solutions, including travel vouchers, carpools, or community transport partnerships.

**4. Strengthen Volunteer Infrastructure**

While informal volunteer support already exists, formalizing and training this network can enhance program consistency and quality.

**Action Steps:**

- a. Create a Volunteer Literacy Facilitator Training Program to equip bilingual volunteers with basic teaching, cultural competency, and trauma-informed practices.
- b. Recognize and incentivize volunteers with certificates, stipends, or professional development opportunities.
- c. Encourage volunteers from within the target communities to serve as peer educators, ensuring cultural and linguistic alignment.



## Program Development

### 1. Multilingual Literacy Program Series

Given the linguistic diversity across immigrant communities in Sioux Falls, REACH should develop a multilingual literacy series with materials available in English, Spanish, Nepali, Hindi, Amharic, and other languages as needed.

#### Features:

- a. Bilingual instruction (English + native language).
- b. Beginner, intermediate, and advanced tracks based on assessed literacy levels.
- c. Visual aids and interactive tools, especially for learners with low literacy in their native language.

### 2. Digital Literacy Integration

Although digital formats pose challenges, there remains a growing need for basic digital literacy, particularly among younger community members and for essential tasks like job applications or telehealth access.

#### Program Components:

- a. Introduction to smartphone use, basic apps, and internet navigation.
- b. Hands-on workshops on completing online forms or using translation tools.
- c. Hybrid models combining in-person instruction with optional online components for tech-savvy learners.

### 3. Family-Based Learning Models

Several respondents highlighted the role of family members, particularly children, as informal translators. To leverage this dynamic, REACH should consider family-based literacy programs, where parents and children learn together.

#### Program Components:

- a. Joint workshops focused on household literacy tasks (school notices, healthcare forms).
- b. Bilingual reading activities to encourage literacy development across generations.
- c. Child-focused play and learning spaces running concurrently with adult classes.

## Policy Suggestions

To ensure sustainable, systemic impact, REACH Literacy should complement its programmatic efforts with advocacy and policy engagement at the city and state levels. Drawing from successful models across the U.S., the following policy-oriented recommendations are proposed:

### 1. Public-Private Partnerships for Workforce Literacy

REACH should advocate for city-supported public-private partnerships that fund workplace-based literacy programs, particularly targeting industries employing large numbers of immigrants (e.g., manufacturing, hospitality, construction).

#### Action Steps:

- a. Collaborate with employers to offer on-site or subsidized literacy classes.
- b. Seek state workforce development grants or tax incentives for employers who invest in employee literacy.

### 2. Digital Inclusion and Technology Access Grants

Digital literacy is critical for full participation in modern society. Building off federal and state initiatives for digital equity, REACH should expand technology access for immigrant communities.

#### Action steps:

- a. Partner with local libraries, schools, and tech firms or nonprofits to expand access to affordable devices and the internet.
- b. Advocate for city funding for digital literacy training targeted at immigrant communities, ensuring alignment with REACH's program offerings.

### 3. Transportation and Childcare Support Policies

Transportation and childcare remain major barriers preventing adult learners from accessing literacy services. Addressing these barriers can significantly improve participation rates.

**Action Steps:**

Given the widespread barriers of transportation and childcare, REACH should push for:

- a. City-funded transportation vouchers or ride-sharing programs to support adult learners attending classes.
- b. Inclusion of childcare support in local adult education grant programs, ensuring learners—especially women—can participate fully.

#### **4. Formal Recognition of Community-Based Literacy Programs**

Community and faith-based organizations often provide informal literacy programs. Formal recognition can enhance funding opportunities and program legitimacy.

**Action Steps:**

- a. Encourage the City of Sioux Falls or South Dakota Department of Education to establish certification programs recognizing literacy services delivered by non-traditional providers, including religious sites and community hubs.
- b. Advocate for funding streams that support these certified community-based programs to expand reach and sustainability.

#### **5. Multilingual Access Policy Initiatives**

To reduce the literacy burden placed on individuals and complement direct literacy efforts, REACH can advocate for increased multilingual access in public services.

- a. Promote local policies mandating multilingual translations for city services, forms, and public documents to ensure equitable access for all residents.
- b. Collaborate with city departments to identify priority areas for multilingual expansion based on community demographics and needs assessments.



## Conclusion of Recommendations

The findings of this research point to a clear path forward: REACH Literacy's greatest opportunity lies in meeting immigrant and refugee communities where they are—both physically and culturally. Through strategic partnerships, flexible and practical programming, volunteer development, and systemic advocacy, REACH can transform its service model into one that is both sustainable and deeply impactful. By embedding literacy efforts into the trusted, everyday spaces of Sioux Falls' immigrant communities, REACH has the potential to dismantle long-standing barriers and promote a more literate, empowered, and connected city.

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