

23 MCAEL
Coalition for a
Connected
Community
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Annual Report ✨



ANNUAL REPORT 2023 - 2024: CENTERING LEARNER VOICES

To help strengthen the many programs in our network, MCAEL has spent the past year leaning into learner-centered instruction, an approach that prioritizes the unique needs of learners in the design and delivery of instruction.

We launched our new initiative — *Centering Learner Voices* — with a learner survey, a series of focus groups, and the establishment of our first ever learner advisory group. We're excited by all that we have already accomplished and look forward to further integrating learner perspectives into our work in the years to come.



BY THE NUMBERS

JULY 2023 - JUNE 2024



17,000
LEARNERS



1,300
STAFF &
INSTRUCTORS

60
PROGRAMS



\$1,465,853
GRANTS AWARDED
TO 29 PROGRAMS



Centering Learner Voices:

**A Discussion with Rudi Jeung,
MCAEL Director of Programs**



**What is MCAEL's
Centering Learner
Voices initiative
all about?**



Our focus on this began when MCAEL was developing its Racial Equity Strategic Plan back in 2020. We were discussing the various important constituencies of MCAEL, and how learners were the ultimate beneficiaries of English language programs in the coalition. At that time, we did not have a means or process for soliciting learner input around MCAEL programming. We realized that to create a more equitable ESOL system in our county — and a more equitable MCAEL — learners needed a bigger say. Centering Learner Voices is about empowering learners to drive their own learning and giving them the opportunity to take on leadership roles in their education and advocacy efforts.

Why is this so important?

MCAEL is the “system builder” for adult ESOL in the county, so we have a responsibility to observe larger trends and identify gaps in the current system to make it stronger. Adult education, including adult ESOL, exists to help adults be successful in meeting their living, education, and career goals. It’s important for the community to understand the critical role that adult ESOL instruction plays in the well-being of many of our county residents. To be most effective, ESOL programs need the input and feedback of the adult learners they are seeking to help.



What are MCAEL's objectives for this initiative?

We aim to: 1) capture learner feedback directly and systematically to improve MCAEL and coalition partner programs; 2) help our community understand more about learner experiences to underscore the importance of continued support for adult English instruction; and 3) provide learners with some tools and opportunities to advocate for themselves and their families.

What is MCAEL doing to reach its objectives?

To take the pulse of the adult English learner community, last (fiscal) year we conducted a learner survey and three focus groups to learn more about learners' experience in the classroom and what barriers impact their ability to persist in class. This helped to lay the foundation for launching the Learner Leadership Group (LLG) in May. In this pilot year, we will work with LLG members to establish the group's role and activities, and determine how it relates to the MCAEL Advisory Group (composed of instructors and program administrators). We are excited about this new group and look forward to seeing how it develops and influences our work at MCAEL.

CENTERING LEARNER VOICES: Learner-Centered Instruction in Action CASA

At the end of the last school year, CASA staff collected feedback from both learners and instructors about the curriculum being used in its adult ESOL programs. There were a lot of requests for more materials supporting digital literacy across all levels, as well as for new exercises to practice reading comprehension and conversational skills. In response, a team of veteran CASA instructors incorporated this feedback into an update of their curriculum. After introducing the new, learner-centered curriculum, 82% of Life Skills ESOL students demonstrated learning gains through post-tests.

LEARNER CENTERED INSTRUCTION: MCAEL'S PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Learner-centered instruction is an approach to education that prioritizes the needs and abilities of individual learners. It is centered on the idea that learners are active participants in their own education, and that their unique backgrounds, experiences, and goals should inform the design and delivery of instruction. This approach often involves using techniques such as collaborative learning and self-directed learning and can result in a more engaging and effective learning experience for students. (Definition developed by the MCAEL Advisory Group.)



MCAEL's professional development workshops offer skills and techniques for program instructors and administrators to take a learner-centered approach, which emphasizes the unique needs, skill levels, and interests of learners. This approach is a core part of MCAEL's equity work, and one of the tenets of our Strategic Plan.



Instructor and learner feedback confirms that there is a strong desire to engage learners on their own terms, tapping into their lives outside of the educational setting. Our year-round professional development offerings are created with the input of the program administrators and instructors who are part of the MCAEL Advisory Group (MAG), as well as that of learners, to address the needs of those in the classroom.



MCAEL Professional Development Conference

On March 15, 2024, over 100 adult educators from throughout Montgomery County gathered for MCAEL's biennial professional development conference. The conference itself was designed to be learner-centered and interactive. In addition to workshops on various aspects of ESOL instruction and administration, participants had the opportunity to discuss three key areas of feedback from our learner survey and focus groups: learner satisfaction, everyday communication needs, and the inclusion of learner voices in decision making.

“

For me, the reason to take English is because I work in the country where everybody speaks English. I need to talk with everybody. I need to speak with the doctor, I need to speak at the grocery store. I also need to get a job, but if you don't speak English, it's very difficult.”

- Learner Focus Group participant

LEARNER FOCUS GROUPS: SEEKING LEARNER PERSPECTIVES

Over the past year, MCAEL launched a series of focus groups to systematically gather feedback from learners. The goal of the focus groups is to have a greater understanding of learners' experiences with ESOL classes and to incorporate their perspectives into MCAEL's programming. By disseminating our findings to the coalition and the larger community, we hope to raise awareness of learners' experience and underscore the importance of continued support for English instruction.

Focus group participants were asked about their reasons for studying English, their individual learning experiences, any challenges they faced, awareness about MCAEL, and thoughts on learner leadership. These first focus groups were critical to establishing our pilot Learner Leadership Group. MCAEL intends to conduct two to three learner focus groups each year.



December 2023:

Spanish speakers, conducted in Spanish.



January 2024:

Diverse languages, conducted in English.



June 2024:

Amharic speakers, conducted in Amharic.

CENTERING LEARNER VOICES: Learner-Centered Instruction in Action

Seneca Creek Community Church

In response to learner input, Seneca Creek Community Church has established new processes for individualized support for learners. As a result, they've seen increased engagement and higher retention rates. They have incorporated learner feedback into the classroom, resulting in more diversified teaching methods and interactive learning experiences. To keep the momentum going, an advisory board was established in the past year which includes a learner representative.

LEARNER LEADERSHIP GROUP: ELEVATING LEARNER VOICES

The Learner Leadership Group (LLG) is a new MCAEL advisory group designed to elevate learner voices in MCAEL's decision-making, programming, and advocacy.

Leading up to the establishment of the LLG, we conducted a survey asking learners about class satisfaction, barriers to participation, and suggestions for improvement. Of the over 350 responses we received, half expressed interest in participating in leadership activities. The subsequent focus group discussions also informed our ideas for the LLG, which had its first meeting on May 29, 2024.

In this pilot year, the LLG is a smaller group made up of six people representing four languages (Spanish, French, Amharic, and Chinese). In future years, the group will be expanded to 8 - 10 participants. In addition to serving in an advisory capacity throughout the year, LLG members receive training in leadership skills, including effective communication and public speaking.

CENTERING LEARNER VOICES: Learner-Centered Instruction in Action

Vietnamese American Services (VAS)

The VAS instructor and volunteer instructors work closely with learners both to provide instruction and to collect learner feedback in real time. Based on this feedback, they've introduced a collection of new offerings: an interactive online learning platform to supplement in-person classes and accommodate varying schedules; personalized learning paths for individuals; and online tutoring to help learners keep pace with their classmates.



COMMUNITY LEARNING GROUPS

MCAEL's Community Learning Groups (CLGs) were launched in 2021 to address an increasing need for classes in areas with both a scarcity of English language programs and rapidly growing non-English speaking populations. These 8 to 9-week classes are designed to be entry points for learners who would not otherwise have access to English learning. The CLG initiative also recruits and trains much-needed new instructors from the communities they serve. **CLGs have now reached 555 new learners and trained 21 new instructors.**

By partnering with schools, community centers, religious institutions, and businesses, CLGs bring English language learning directly to communities. Learners in CLG classes offered this past year include workers at Ruppert Landscaping Company and multigenerational family members at Greencastle Elementary School. In addition, MCAEL was able to meet the specific needs of recently arrived Haitian immigrants by offering them a shorter-term drop-in conversation class in partnership with Église de Dieu in Silver Spring. This was followed by a standard 9-week class in collaboration with the Haitian Resettlement Working Group, which also included newcomers from Senegal.

IN THE PAST YEAR...



LEARNERS FROM: BENIN, CAMEROON, CHINA, EL SALVADOR, ETHIOPIA, GUATEMALA, HAITI, HONDURAS, MEXICO, SENEGAL, AND VENEZUELA



4 NEW PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

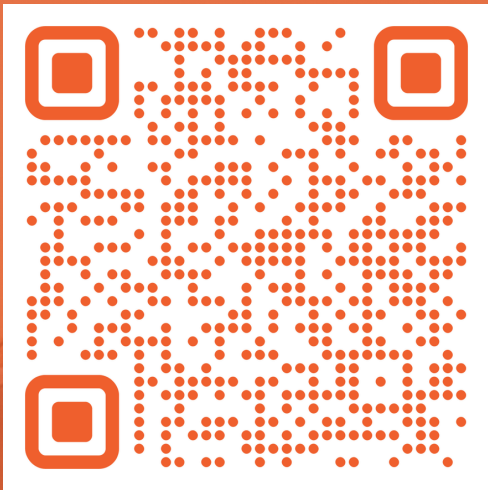


11 IN-PERSON CLASSES OFFERED



When we immigrate here, the first step is learning English. If you want to enroll to the mainstream American culture, that is very, very important. Otherwise, you cannot speak, you cannot make friends, you cannot work, nobody can understand you. So, your first step is very important, you must learn English. This tool. This living tool."

- LEARNERS FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT



MCAEL's Centering Learner Voices philosophy and our equity work is encapsulated in our most recent Strategic Plan.

MCAEL STRATEGIC PLAN

COUNTY COUNCIL BREAKFAST

In September 2023, MCAEL convened County Councilmembers and members of the English language learning community for pastries, coffee, good conversation, and inspirational stories.



MCAEL'S PEOPLE, POWER, & POTENTIAL AWARD WINNERS

At the 2024 Spelling Bee, we honored four inspiring individuals who have made a lasting impact in Montgomery County's ESOL community. This year's winners of the People, Power, & Potential Award were:



HERMELA KEBEDE
ETHIOPIAN COMMUNITY CENTER

Hermela has dedicated decades of her life to supporting and uplifting Ethiopian immigrants in the DMV area in her role as Executive Director of the Ethiopian Community Center and beyond.



LISA YOST
TENLEYTOWN LAWN & LANDSCAPE

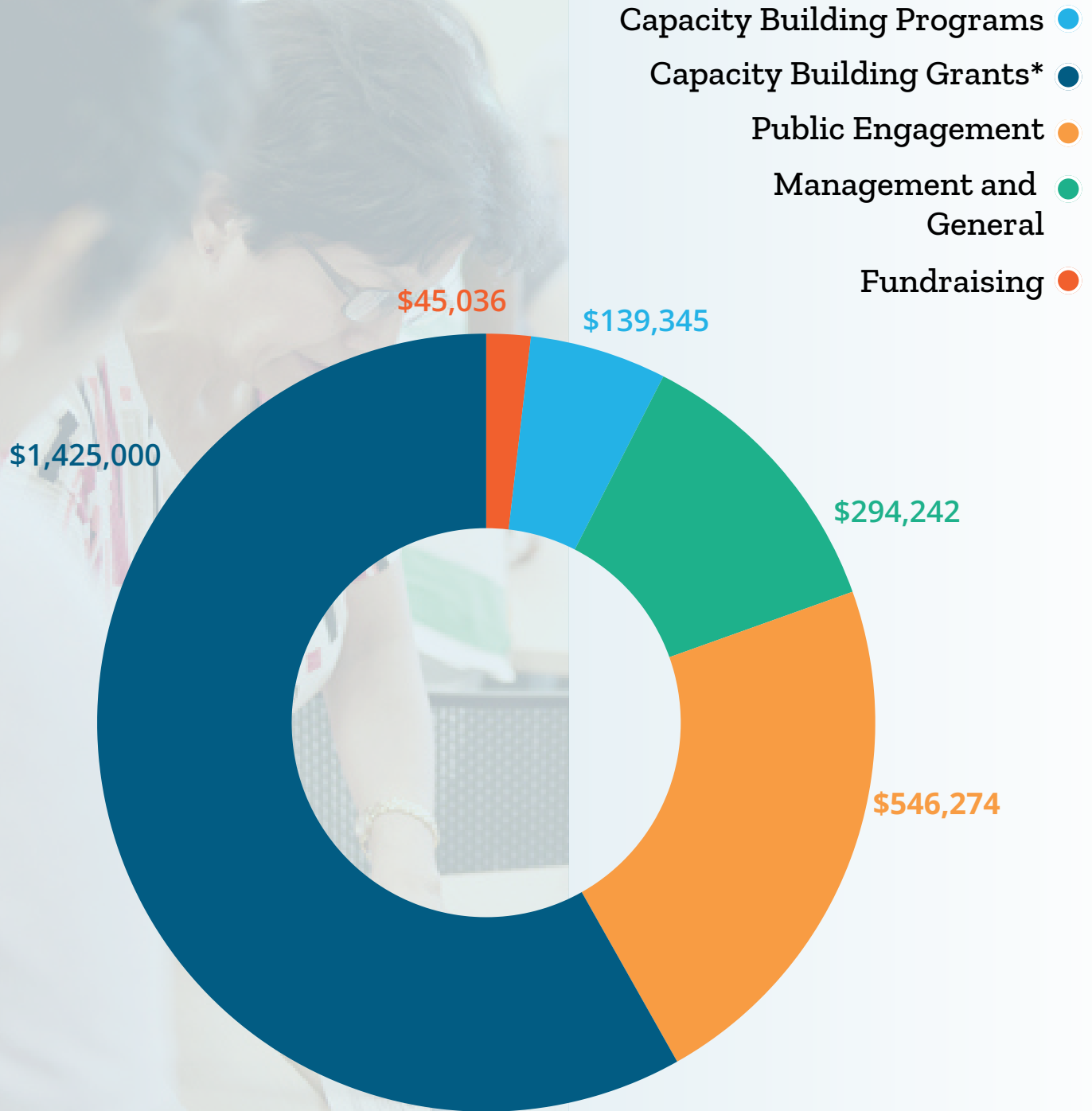
After her husband passed away, Lisa took over his business, and established weekly English classes for her employees as part of their workday, increasing their confidence, income potential, and quality of life.



ANDY & CHRIS LAWRENCE
LIFELONG ESOL INSTRUCTORS

ESOL instructors Andy & Chris have touched the lives of countless English learners over the years, making deep connections to help families and individuals establish their lives in the United States.

MCAEL EXPENSES



Thank you to *Montgomery County Government* for supporting both our operating funds and capacity building grant funds.

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- Joan Schaffer
- Amy Selco
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Thank you, Kathy, for 12 amazing years!

When Kathy Stevens began as MCAEL's Executive Director in 2012, the organization was only five years old, and she was one of three employees. At the time, the operating budget was \$250,000 and the organization awarded \$500,000 in grants. Today, MCAEL's staff has tripled in size, the operating budget is \$1.2 million, and grant awards exceeded \$1.4 million.

Under Kathy's leadership, MCAEL has helped to grow provider capacity and improve quality of instruction, increasing impact in the community. MCAEL now serves about 17,000 learners and 1,300 instructors each year as the coordinating entity of approximately 60 programs. MCAEL's growing staff in programming, training, and communications further helps to enhance coalition support and introduce new ideas to bolster programs.






With Kathy at the helm, MCAEL has established itself as the go-to support, resource, provider, and advocate for Montgomery County's English language learning community.

Kathy is a generous, inspiring leader to her staff and to all who have had the pleasure of knowing or working with her. We will miss her greatly and wish her all the best in her new position as President & CEO of the Healthcare Initiative Foundation.





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