



Advocate for Adult Literacy and Celebrate Books in September

by [Deborah Kennedy](#)

Literacy is a key lever of change and a practical tool of empowerment on each of the three main pillars of sustainable development: economic development, social development and environmental protection....As the foundation of learning throughout life, literacy is at the heart of sustainable development.

Kofi Annan, then Secretary-General of the United Nations, included those words in his 2005 [Message for International Literacy Day](#) (United Nations), and they still ring true in 2021.

September is an important month for adult literacy advocacy because it features both International Literacy Day (ILD) and National Adult Education and Family Literacy (AEFL) Week.

International Literacy Day

International Literacy Day is observed on 8 September each year as a way of raising and maintaining support for the foundational skills that underlie full participation in community life. The theme for ILD 2021 is “Literacy for a human-centered recovery: Narrowing the digital divide.” In choosing this theme, the [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization](#) (UNESCO) writes:

The COVID-19 crisis has disrupted the learning of children, young people and adults at an unprecedented scale. It has also magnified the pre-existing inequalities in access to meaningful literacy learning opportunities, disproportionately affecting 773 million non-literate young people and adults. Youth and adult literacy were absent in many initial national response plans, while numerous literacy programs have been forced to halt their usual modes of operation.

Even in the times of global crisis, efforts have been made to find alternative ways to ensure the continuity of learning, including distance learning, often in combination with in-person learning. Access to literacy learning opportunities, however, has not been evenly distributed. The rapid shift to distance learning also highlighted the persistent digital divide in terms of connectivity, infrastructure, and the ability to engage with technology, as well as disparities in other services such as access to electricity, which has limited learning options.

The pandemic, however, was a reminder of the critical importance of literacy. Beyond its intrinsic importance as part of the right to education, literacy empowers individuals and improves their lives by expanding their capabilities to choose a kind of life they can value. It is also a driver for sustainable development. Literacy is an integral part of education and lifelong learning premised on humanism as defined by the Sustainable Development Goal 4. Literacy, therefore, is central to a human-centered recovery from the COVID-19 crisis.

ILD 2021 will explore how literacy can contribute to building a solid foundation for a human-centered recovery, with a special focus on the interplay of literacy and digital skills required by non-literate youth and adults. It will also explore what makes technology-enabled literacy learning inclusive and meaningful to leave no one behind. By doing so, ILD2021 will be an opportunity to reimagine future literacy teaching and learning, within and beyond the context of the pandemic.

Adult Education and Family Literacy Week

In the United States, the major event centered on adult literacy advocacy is National Adult Education and Family Literacy Week, observed this year from 19–25 September. [The National Coalition for Literacy](#) (NCL) and its member organizations encourage students, teachers, and administrators in adult basic education and English language programs nationwide to contact decision makers at local, state, and national levels during AEFL Week to raise awareness of the transformational power of adult education and to advocate for policies that support it.

AEFL Week originated in 2009 when the NCL worked with then-Congressman Jared Polis (D-CO), then-Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) to create a Congressionally-recognized designation that would draw attention to the importance of adult education and family literacy. Since then, NCL has sponsored National AEFL Week in September each year on behalf of its members and the adult education field as a whole, and has worked with members of Congress to have the week recognized through resolutions in the Senate and the House of Representatives.

Ways to Observe and Participate

Both ILD and AEFL Week provide great opportunities for learner-centered activities and projects. Here are some ideas:

- **Illustrate the importance of literacy.** Have learners read or listen to level-appropriate materials about the importance of literacy and reading. Then have them work individually or in small groups to develop posters and presentations illustrating ways that literacy has been important in their own lives. Use [Padlet](#) or [Lino](#) for generating and sharing ideas or [Piktochart](#) for creating posters, or develop a class page on [Instagram](#).
- **Explore literacy data.** Use the [U.S. Skills Map](#) to explore literacy and numeracy data on your state or county with your learners.

- **Teach advocacy.** Plan a visit to a local or state decision maker’s office to generate support for your adult education program. This could be the office of an area business as well as the mayor, city council, or state representative. Give adult learners plenty of support in developing their ideas, and allow time in class for practice, including strategies for what to do if you forget what you were going to say or don’t know the answer to a question. As an alternative, invite decision makers to visit your program and talk with your learners. Adult learners can be powerful advocates because of the personal perspectives on the value of adult education that they provide.

Use the resources in the [TESOL Advocacy Action Center](#) to learn about the [Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act](#) (WIOA) and download the WIOA Resource Kit.

You can find more information and resources for ILD on the [UNESCO website](#) and on the [World Literacy Foundation website](#).

You can find information on AEFL Week, including literacy quotes, links to maps and information about adult literacy in the United States, and links to resources from NCL member organizations on the [NCL website](#).

National Book Festival

While you and your adult learners are engaged in advocacy in September, you can also celebrate books and reading with the Library of Congress [National Book Festival](#), taking place on 17–26 September. The festival will be fully virtual and will feature a PBS special hosted by LeVar Burton and discussions with many of the nation’s best authors, poets, and illustrators. Visit the [festival information site](#) to learn how to participate in the festival experience.

As the Library of Congress says, “Open a book, open the world!”

Reference

United Nations. (2005). *‘Literacy is at the heart of sustainable development’, secretary-general says in Literacy Day message*. Press release.
<https://www.un.org/press/en/2005/sgsm10065.doc.htm>

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