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Barbra Ivery dropped out of high school in the 9th grade and when she had to leave her job of 30 years, she wasn't strong in the subjects of reading and writing.

And that affected her ability to fill out tedious applications for jobs.

"I got thrown back into the work field with hands-on knowledge, but I had to get my GED so I could pass the test to get back into the work field," she says.

Twenty percent of adults in Greenville are at or below a fifth grade reading level and according to the National Institute for Literacy, 75 percent of unemployed adults have reading and writing difficulties.

These statistics make it more difficult for those who may have recently been displaced and are looking for a job and for businesses trying to find qualified employees.

"It makes a difference for those who were in the manufacturing industry and are now back in the high-tech world," says Jane Thomas, director of the Greenville Literacy Association. "With any job, communication is the key whether it is e-mails or memos."

Ivery worked as a machine operator for Kemet Electronics Corp., but when the company began sending its work overseas, she had to find another job.

Ivery is in the pre-GED program at the GLA office and attending classes in math, reading and writing and is excited about being more prepared for a work environment.

She now works at a nursing home and hopes her GED will help her move up the pay scale.

The NIL says workers who lack a high school diploma earn a mean monthly income of \$452, compared to \$1,829 for those with a bachelor's degree.

The GLA offers free classes and resources with a \$10 assessment fee and the Greenville County Workforce System often refers workers to its association.

"A lot of our students are in their 40s and 50s and coming out of the manufacturing field," says Thomas. "They have to choose another career field and upgrade somehow if they are going to apply to companies such as Michelin or BMW which require more skills."

American businesses are estimated to lose more than \$60 billion in productivity each year due to employee's lack of basic skills, says the NIL.

Having a solid education is important to employability, says Teresa Brewer, director of the Laurens County Literacy Council.

"A lot of people don't think about the connection between reading and writing with reading manuals and newspapers," she says.

Most of the people needing help in the Laurens area are between the ages of 30 and 45, Brewer says. "A fair number of them are already working, but they can't move up because they don't have the transferable skills needed. The more abilities and flexibility someone has, the more attractive they are."

Adults are currently seeking help are at the lower levels one and two. "In the current market you need a level three," Brewer says. "If there is an extensive written test as part of the application process, they don't even get to the interview."

The Anderson One-Stop workforce center is seeing a lot more people who are at the fifth grade level and below, says Jennifer Kelly, program coordinator.

"Our office is getting busier," she says, adding that the plant layoffs in recent years are contributing to the traffic. "Many of them need help to get their GED."

The South Carolina Department of Education's adult education program helps to prepare those without a high school diploma for the work force. It awards GEDs to more than 6,000 adults per year, says David Stout program director.

His program helps prepare adults to take the WorkKeys assessment. The test measures real-world skills that employers see as critical and provides an individual with a National Career Readiness Certificate. That certificate shows a student's readiness for certain job skills, such as business writing, applied math and reading for information.

"There is a statewide initiative to get employers to accept people that have the certificate," says Stout.

"We're trying to give people the best opportunity to get a good job," he says. "A GED is not the end. It's just the next step up the ladder."

Ivery is ready to do what it takes to earn her GED and be successful in the job market.

"It's kind of fun," she says, with a smile. "I'm learning things I should have learned 36 years ago."

The Greenville Literacy Association is hosting The Really Good, Really Big, Really Cheap Book Sale Aug. 16 from 8:30 to 4 p.m. at McAlister Square on S. Pleasantburg Drive. The event is the association's largest annual fundraiser.