

# OIC literacy agency makes GED attainment a family affair: M. Diane McCormick



Alex Otero, right, tells his mother, Isabel Otero of Susquehanna Twp., the colors of the cars he's playing with at the OIC child care center. Otero is studying for her GED at OIC, the Harrisburg-based literacy and job training center. (M. Diane McCormick)

[PrintEmail](#)



By **M. Diane McCormick** | [Special to PennLive](#)

on April 22, 2015 at 9:15 AM

0

Reddit

Tomica Snowden and I share a dilemma. We'll ace any test in English or social studies, but when the subject is math or science, things get ugly. For instance, Snowden would prefer going through life without having to balance equations.

"I know how to multiply," she said. "That's no problem. But when it comes down to knowing the steps and going from right to left, that's hard."

Still, on a practice test for the math part of her GED, she got a 144, very near the 150 needed to pass. "I'll get it," she insisted. "I'm there."

No doubt. I've blotted from my mind this thing called "balancing equations," so Snowden's one up on me.

I met Snowden, of Upper Allen Twp., and Isabel Otero, of Susquehanna Twp., at OIC in Harrisburg. Both are studying for their GEDs – seems they preferred spending time with the rebellious crowds back in their high school days – and this is the place to be. The nonprofit OIC builds literacy and job skills among people who, like Snowden and Otero, are seeking better things for themselves and their children.

I met OIC Executive Director Jeffrey Woodyard and Family Literacy Coordinator Priscilla Ferguson on a visit to this bright, happily cluttered space. In an age of transition and mobility, these two are a kind of natural wonder. Both have been with OIC since it was founded in 1977. Fortunately, I didn't have to do the math. Ferguson told me. They've devoted 38 years to instilling literacy and job skills in the community.

"You just don't know how you're going to touch someone's life," Woodyard said by way of explanation.

With a staff of 25 people, devoted volunteers, and a long list of community partners, OIC can reach into its bag of supports, Wizard of Oz-like, and help adult students overcome barriers in order to earn their GEDs, learn English, improve their reading skills, or learn a vocation.

"Whatever it is that they're coming in for, the ultimate goal is to help them achieve that dream," said Woodyard.

Today's GED aligns with the same academic standards expected of high school students, Woodyard said. He often hears, "Is this where I get my GED?"

"It's not a drive-thru window," he said. "You have to work for it. It is challenging. It's comparable to a high school diploma. It is a state-sanctioned credential."

Even though the students here are grown-ups, OIC is very much a family place. Parents can bring their young ones to the child care center while they're in class, but they're required to have reading time with their kids. It's a tough climb for some parents who might dread reading aloud, but before long, families cherish those moments, Ferguson assured me.

Snowden and Otero credit their children with inspiring their quests for high school diplomas. Both have worked steadily since leaving school, but now in their 30s, they want better. Snowden will study occupational therapy. Otero sees a future in medical management.

Snowden admitted that she gave up on school when she was a teen, but she convinced her daughter not to. "Now she's on the honor roll," she said with pride.

Otero is excited about her graduation ceremony, when she'll wear a cap and gown with her OIC classmates. Her daughter hopes they can go to college together.

"It's one of my big goals in life, to be able to be proud to say that I did graduate," she said.