

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE LITERACY SKILLS OF AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS?

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While the increased focus on adolescent literacy is a natural extension of efforts to improve literacy skills for students in grades K-3, the National Adolescent Literacy Coalition (NALC) maintains that this focus has a lot to do with Americans' increasing sense of anxiety about the economic and civic health of the nation (2007). Graham and Perrin (2007) point out that reading comprehension and writing skills are predictors of academic success and a basic requirement for participation in civic life and in the global economy. The statistics about the lack of literacy skills among American middle and high school students and adults are alarming. For example:

- Data from the 2007 National Assessment of Progress (NAEP) in reading show that 69 percent of eighth grade students fall below proficient level in their ability to comprehend the meaning of text at their grade level; 26 percent read below the basic level (Lee, Griggs & Donahue, 2007).
- As measured by the NAEP, roughly two-thirds of twelfth-graders read and write below a proficient level, and half of those students lack even the most basic literacy skills needed to succeed in school. Those figures did not change between 1974 and 2005 (NALC, 2007).
- The 2002 NAEP writing report noted that only 22 percent to 26 percent of fourth, eighth and twelfth graders scored at the proficient level, and alarmingly high proportions of students were found to be at or below the basic level (Graham & Perrin, 2007).
- Achievement gaps in upper grades have not narrowed. In 2005, only 12 percent of black and 15 percent of Hispanic eighth graders read at or above a proficient level, compared to 39 percent of white eighth graders. In a typical high-poverty urban school, approximately half of incoming ninth-grade students read at a sixth- or seventh-grade level or below (Perie, Grigg, & Donahue, 2005; Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).
- Among the 30 OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) free-market countries, the U.S. is the only nation where young adults are less educated than the previous generation. The U.S. is also losing ground in international comparisons in terms of high school diplomas and college degrees awarded. Further, while we score as one of the highest countries in numbers of well-educated people we also score near the top in the largest number of people at the lowest education levels – about 55 percent of adults at the lowest literacy levels did not graduate from high school and have no GED or high school equivalency diploma (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2008).
- Every year, one in three young adults drop out of high school (Center for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2008), and one of the most commonly cited reasons for this is that students simply do not have the literacy skills to keep up with the high school curriculum, which has become increasingly complex (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006; Kamil, 2003).
- Almost 40 percent of high school graduates lack the reading and writing skills that employers seek, and almost a third of high school graduates who enroll in college require remediation (National Governors' Association, 2005).
- Deficits in basic skills cost the nation's businesses, universities, and under-prepared high school graduates as much as \$16 billion annually in lost productivity and remedial costs (Greene, 2000).
- On average, college graduates earn 70 percent more than their high school graduate counterparts, while high school dropouts are four times more likely than college graduates to be unemployed (Sum, Taggart & McLaughlin, 2001). Regardless of educational attainment, higher levels of literacy translate into higher earnings (National Governors' Association, 2005).
- The twenty-five fastest-growing professions have far greater than average literacy demands, while the fastest-declining professions have lower-than-average literacy demands (Barton, 2000).
- One in every 100 U.S. adults 16 and older is in prison or jail. About 43 percent do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, and 56 percent have very low literacy skills. Ninety-five percent of incarcerated people return to our communities where it is hard to find jobs because of a prison record, but even harder without the necessary literacy skills (Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy, 2008).

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