



The State of Adult Literacy 2006



PROLITERACY
Worldwide





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About ProLiteracy Worldwide

Sponsoring the educational programs and services that help adults and their families acquire the literacy practices and skills they need to function more effectively in their daily lives, and to participate in the transformation of their societies.

ProLiteracy Worldwide is the largest organization of adult literacy programs in the world. From its headquarters in Syracuse, New York, this international nonprofit organization provides the training, technical assistance, materials, advocacy, and other support that local literacy programs need to provide individual, small group, and classroom literacy and English-as-a-second-language instruction to adults and their families. ProLiteracy serves more than one million adult learners globally each year through its efforts.

ProLiteracy's U.S. Programs division represents 1,200 local literacy program affiliates and more than 3,000 individual members in all 50 United States. Its International Programs division operates in 57 developing countries in collaboration with 114 indigenous partner programs. It also has a national partner in Canada, Laubach Literacy Canada. Proceeds from the sale of materials published by New Readers Press, ProLiteracy's publishing house, support ProLiteracy's work. New learners throughout the world read *News for You*, a New Readers Press weekly newspaper written in plain English.

Robert Wedgeworth has served as president and CEO of ProLiteracy Worldwide since 2000. He has a long and distinguished history with literacy, libraries, and education. Mr. Wedgeworth is most recently retired from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign where he was university librarian and professor of library administration. He is a former dean at Columbia University and former executive director of the American Library Association. Mr. Wedgeworth is an international specialist in the library and book field who served on President Ford's National Commission on Copyright and President Reagan's Advisory Committee on the U.S. Information Agency. Mr. Wedgeworth is a graduate and trustee of Wabash College.

Introduction

The United States is not a literacy superpower. This was made clear by the survey released in December 2005 by the U.S. Commissioner of Education Statistics. The *ProLiteracy President's State of Adult Literacy 2006* report explores these survey results in an international context, assesses the adult-child literacy link, and notes the public policy disconnect over literacy.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) estimates that there are 771 million illiterate adults in the world—one-fifth of the world's adult population does not have “*the ability to read and write, with understanding, a short, simple sentence about one's everyday life.*”¹ Yet literacy is seen as a basic human right, a crucial component in overcoming poverty, improving health, and reducing human rights abuses. In 2000, 164 countries concurred when they signed the Dakar Framework for Action. Among the Framework's six goals is the objective to cut the world's adult illiteracy rate in half by the year 2015, in part by ensuring that young people and adults have “equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.”²

There is no doubt that literacy needs are great! The ability to read, write, and understand one's native language is the basis for all other education. Literacy is the key that opens the door to economic prospects, good health, political awareness and participation, and cultural opportunity. It is a weapon against poverty and gender inequality. But five years after the Framework for Action was signed, UNESCO reports that literacy is “one of the most neglected of the six goals adopted in 2000...”³ That is particularly true in the case of adult literacy, as the emphasis on initiatives since Dakar has been on extending and improving formal elementary education systems instead of adult programs.

UNESCO reports there are many explanations for why this has occurred, including the almost universal but “unfounded” belief by governments that “primary education is more cost effective than youth and adult literacy...”⁴ ProLiteracy's position is that this emphasis is misplaced as there is no consideration given to those adults who will never access the primary education system or who passed through it without gaining the necessary literacy skills. In addition, research and experience show that a child of

¹ UNESCO. (2006). “Literacy: The Core of Education for All,” *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*.

² United Nations General Assembly. September 6, 2001. Resolution A/56/326.

³ UNESCO. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*.

⁴ Ibid.

parents who have low literacy skills is much more likely to become a low-literate adult than a child whose parents have well-developed literacy skills or who are enrolled in a literacy training program. Clearly, a more comprehensive approach to literacy for people of all ages is necessary.

While the majority of the world's illiterate adults live in developing countries, there are significant numbers of older teens and adults living in industrialized nations whose abilities to read, write, and perform basic mathematical computations fall far short of what they need to reach their full potential in today's technologically focused living and work environments.

UNESCO's review of the progress made in the five years since Dakar indicates that, at the current rate, the world will fall far short of the adult literacy goals established in the Framework. We should not be surprised. How can we expect developing countries to make significant progress in the area of adult literacy if a world power such as the United States cannot? The proof that the U.S. has not made progress can be found in the results of two recent surveys. These reports raise these questions: how do the literacy skills of adults in the U.S. today compare to estimates made ten years ago and how do the literacy skills of adults in the U.S. today compare to those of adults in other industrialized countries?

This report addresses these, and two other significant questions: how do the English reading, writing, comprehension, and math skills of adults in the U.S. today impact this country's standing in the global marketplace now and in the future and what can be done about it?

"One adult unable to read is one too many in America."

*Margaret Spellings
U.S. Secretary of Education*

The U.S. and the NAAL

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), released in December 2005, estimates the current level of literacy skills among individuals in the U.S. aged 16 and older. This report is the first update of the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). The NAAL surveyed a nationally representative sample of more than 19,000 adults in residences and correctional facilities, testing their English reading and comprehension abilities in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. The tasks represented reading activities that individuals are likely to encounter during their daily activities: reading and understanding newspaper articles and informational pamphlets, reviewing television program viewing guides and bus sched-

ules, and completing simple mathematics calculations. Based on their scores or their inability to be tested because they could not understand enough English to be assessed, individuals were placed into one of five levels of literacy:

Nonliterate in English — these individuals could not understand enough English to take part in the assessment.

Below Basic — adults in this level range from being nonliterate in English to having the ability to find easily identifiable information in short text or a form and to follow written directions to complete that simple form. For example, when asked to read a 12-paragraph article about the *Se Habla Español* expo, a trade show about how to sell products to Hispanics, adults with below basic skills could not answer the question, “What is the purpose of the *Se Habla Español* expo?”

Basic — adults who have basic literacy skills are able to complete simple, everyday literacy tasks, such as reading and understanding information in short, commonplace texts and simple documents. But when given a chart showing how parents and elementary, junior high, and high school teachers evaluated parental involvement at their school, just four percent of adults with basic skills could read the chart to correctly answer the question, “Seventy-eight percent of what specific group agree that their school does a good job of encouraging parental involvement in educational areas?”

Intermediate — individuals at the intermediate level can complete moderately challenging literacy tasks—consulting reference materials to find foods that contain a specific vitamin or finding a certain location on a map, for example. Given a bill for fuel oil that stated price per gallon, number of gallons delivered, total amount, and the amount of a deduction per gallon given for paying within 10 days, intermediate-skilled adults would have little difficulty computing the amount of the deduction they would receive by paying within the time limit. Just one percent of the adults categorized as “below basic,” however, answered this question correctly.

Proficient — these adults can read long sections of complex and abstract text and then integrate that information and make inferences from it. In a pamphlet about the dangers of high blood pressure that refers to the disease as “the silent killer,” individuals in the proficient level easily answered the question, “According to the brochure, why is it difficult for people to know if they have high blood pressure?”



Maria Moran

Maria Moran didn't speak a word of English in 2002 when she moved from Peru to Tucson, Arizona shortly after she married an American. Her mother-in-law arranged for her to learn English through Literacy Volunteers of Tucson, a ProLiteracy affiliate.

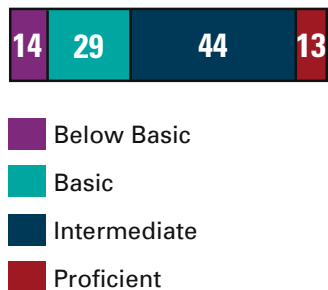
With the help of tutor Yale Joseph, Moran had learned enough English in three years to address 800 adult literacy program directors, instructors, tutors, and students at a ProLiteracy conference.

The most difficult part of instruction, she told the crowd, was learning a language “where there are no rules.

“Just think. My football is your soccer. Your football you don't play with your feet. And it's ‘cool’ to go to a ‘hot’ movie,” she said.

Moran still meets with Joseph five days a week for 90 minutes per day, preparing for the citizenship exam she hopes to take in 2007. She brings her toddler to class with her. “It's good for him to see his mother learning,” she says. About her tutor, her mother-in-law, and Literacy Volunteers of Tucson, Moran says, “I shall be eternally grateful to them for helping me to become an American.”

Percentage of Adults in the U.S. in Each Literacy Level



“My fear is that in the rush to provide help to the ESL and college population, the traditional adult basic education population may be left behind.”

Dale Lipschultz
 President, National Coalition
 for Literacy
 Report on Literacy Programs,
 December 22, 2005

The NAAL results demonstrate that an estimated 11 million adults in the U.S. are “nonliterate in English,” while 30 million—14 percent of the total adult population in the U.S.—are at the “below basic” level. Another 63 million are considered to have “basic” literacy skills (29 percent of the adult population). Ninety-five million adults—44 percent of the U.S. adult population—have literacy skills in the intermediate category, while 28 million, just 13 percent of this country’s adults, have English reading and comprehension skills considered to be “proficient.”⁵

When compared to the results of the 1992 NALS, there is little significant change in the number of adults scoring at each literacy level. The percentages of adults who exhibit literacy skills in the two lowest levels are roughly the same—14 percent at Level 1, 28 percent at Level 2. The literacy skills of women did not change between 1992 and 2003, while the prose skills of men declined marginally. Of particular interest to the local and national news media following the December 2005 release of the NAAL results was the declining performance of adults who hold postsecondary degrees. In 1992, 40 percent of adults who had earned college degrees scored in the proficient level; in 2003, that had dropped to 31 percent.

The NAAL did contain some encouraging news: the prose and document literacy skills of African-American adults improved, showing an increase in 2003 of 6 points and 8 points, respectively, over the 1992 scores. The prose literacy skills of Asian/Pacific Islander adults also rose in the past 11 years by a significant 16 points. There has been an alarming drop in the English literacy skills of Hispanic adults, however; prose literacy skills decreased by 18 points while document literacy skills declined by 14 points over the 1992 NALS scores.⁶

This information came as little surprise to literacy practitioners who provide adult basic education and literacy instruction. It also should not have come as a surprise to anyone who reads today’s headlines. There are waiting lists for services at the majority of local literacy programs. The demand for English-as-a-second-language instruction is at a record high, understandable as the number of immigrants entering the country averages one million each year⁷, many of them Hispanic, more of them less educated in their native countries than previous generations of immigrants. Articles in major news publications such as *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *A First Look at the Literacy of America’s Adults in the 21st Century*. <http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470.PDF>. Retrieved March 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Passel, Jeffrey S. and Suro, Robert. (2005). *Rise, Peak, and Decline: Trends in U.S. Immigration 1992–2004*. Pew Hispanic Center.

decreased the rising dropout rate of U.S. high school students and the decreasing number of U.S. graduates in the science, technology, and engineering fields. Just two weeks before the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released the NAAL results, the National Association of Manufacturers released an updated version of its survey of U.S. manufacturers that states, of the most serious skill deficiencies of current employees, 36 percent of employers surveyed said that their employees have inadequate reading, writing, and communication skills and that this gap impedes their ability to meet customer production and satisfaction demands.⁸

The amount of information the average adult in the U.S. is exposed to daily has increased exponentially in the past 50 years.⁹ We multitask at work and at home; television news screens flash information in “screen crawls” in addition to the information we receive from the news anchor. Adults in the U.S., however, have made little improvement in their literacy skills in the past 11 years. There are still far too many who cannot read and understand a newspaper article written at an eighth grade reading level or complete the type of math problem that is taught in the fourth grade. This should appall us as citizens and humans and spur policy makers to take action as quickly as possible. Yet the news reports about the NAAL generated only lukewarm interest. Can it be any revelation then, that ProLiteracy finds the literacy skills of adults today compared to those in 1992 unacceptable and inexcusable?

The U.S. and the ALL

“It is critically important that basic literacy skills be taught to all, whether child or adult, because their absence puts the U.S. and its citizens at an economic disadvantage in both individual earnings and firm productivity.”

Phyllis Eisen, Vice President, The Manufacturing Institute, and Executive Director, Center for Workforce Success

How do the literacy skills of adults in the U.S. compare to those of adults in other industrialized countries? Conducted in 2003 by the Organization

“We have no choice as Americans but to pay greater attention to the international literacy results. Increasingly, we live in a global economy and we no longer are a dominant player, but one of several important players in that economy.”

Dr. Willard R. Daggett, President, International Center for Leadership in Education

⁸ Deloitte Consulting, National Association of Manufacturers. (2005). *2005 Skills Gap Report: A Survey of the American Manufacturing Workforce*.

⁹ Wikipedia. *Information Overload*. Retrieved May 25, 2006 from http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_overload.

“In today’s technical world, document and quantitative literacy carry an additional importance and we are falling further behind in those two areas than we are in prose. In the 21st century, that will have a profound impact on our ability to compete as a nation and our ability to use cutting edge technology.”

Dr. Willard R. Daggett

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey (ALL) is the direct successor to the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) that was conducted in three phases during 1994, 1996, and 1998. The 2003 ALL measured the literacy and numeracy skills of representative samples of 16- to 65-year-olds in Bermuda, Canada, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. More than 3,400 individuals in the U.S. took part in the assessment that was administered between January and June 2003.¹⁰

There are many similarities between the NAAL and the ALL. Like the NAAL, the ALL defined literacy as “*the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from text and other written formats.*” Participants completed NAAL-like tasks: reading a pamphlet describing a job interview process and then answering questions related to the text, for example, or determining the number of soda bottles in two cases when one case is partially hidden.

The ALL report examined literacy and numeracy skills relative to:

- an individual’s education
- participation in organized adult education and training and informal learning
- employment and participation in the labor force
- earnings and economic outcomes
- use of technology
- immigrants
- family socio-economic background and daily literacy practices

Literacy and numeracy scores were measured on a scale of 0-500 to create several levels of literacy proficiency:

- **Level 4/5**—the highest level of ability with scores ranging between 326 and 500. Adults at these levels can integrate and fuse information from long, complex passages, sort through irrelevant information in graphs to find the data needed to answer questions, combine multiple types of mathematical information, and draw inferences.
- **Level 3**—scores range from 276 to 325. People in this range can integrate multiple pieces of information from one or more documents and demonstrate understanding of mathematical information represented in numbers, symbols, maps, graphs, and drawings.

¹⁰ National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Highlights from the 2003 International Adult Literacy and Lifeskills Survey*. Issue Brief.

- **Level 2**—scores of 226 to 275. Adults in this level can compare and contrast information if it is easily identifiable and complete one- or two-step math processes involving whole numbers, benchmark percents, and fractions.

- **Level 1**—scores from 0 to 225. Individuals scoring in Level 1 can do little more than read a short text to find one piece of information, locate a piece of information based on a literal match, and complete one-step math tasks such as counting or sorting dates.¹¹

The ALL showed that all six participant countries have “significant”¹² numbers of adults with low literacy skills. It also confirmed many of the findings of the NAAL, including the fact that connections can be made between educational attainment and literacy skill level, skill level and employment and earning levels, and skill level and the use of technology. For example:

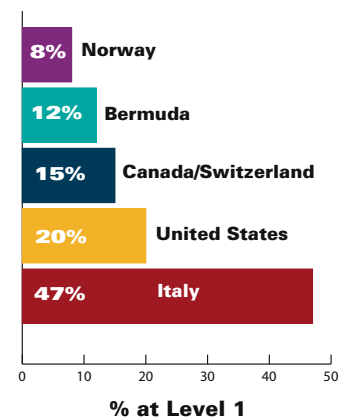
- The more education an individual has, the more likely he or she scored in a higher level of literacy.
- The lower the literacy skills, the more likely the individual is to be unemployed or earning less than someone who has higher quality reading, writing, and math skills.
- Adults with low literacy skills are less likely to use computers to write or edit text, complete accounting tasks, create presentations, or keep a calendar or schedule.

Generally, the U.S. outperformed only Italy in literacy and numeracy, falling behind Norway, Bermuda, Switzerland, and Canada in both skill areas. With regard to the percentage of adults scoring at the lowest literacy level, the U.S. again ranks fifth out of the six countries:

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| ▪ Norway | 8% at Level 1 |
| ▪ Bermuda | 12% at Level 1 |
| ▪ Canada/Switzerland | 15% at Level 1 |
| ▪ U.S. | 20% at Level 1 |
| ▪ Italy | 47% at Level 1 |

Unlike the NAAL report, ALL researchers established a threshold for literacy competence: they determined that Level 3 is the “minimum for persons to understand and use information contained in the increasingly difficult texts and tasks that characterize the emerging knowledge society and information economy.”¹³ Yet less than one-half the adults in the United

Lowest Literacy Level Rankings by Country



¹¹ Statistics Canada. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2005). *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

States scored in this desirable level, on a par with Switzerland and ahead of Italy, but still far behind Norway, Bermuda, and Canada.

The U.S. also recorded a significant difference between the scores of its high and low performers, far more of a difference than Norway, Switzerland, Bermuda, and Canada. ALL researchers consider this difference to be an important indicator of a country's "distribution of social, economic, health, and educational outcomes."

The U.S. leads the world in the amount of money spent to educate an individual through college; our primary school teachers are among the hardest working, and foreign students find our graduate school programs more attractive than that of any other nation.¹⁴ Our country has the largest pool of highly skilled adults in the world,¹⁵ our workforce is the most productive, and our level of living, until recently, has been among the most envied. The leadership position of the U.S. in these areas since World War II has been unchallenged. But the implications of the NAAL report and our standing in the ALL do not bode well for the future.

"Individual and organizational productivity are dependent upon the literacy skills of workers, and we need to make sure that all adults who wish to improve their skills have the access and educational pathways they need to help them succeed."

Phyllis Eisen

What Does This Mean for the U.S.?

It is not just for patriotic reasons that the U.S. should be concerned about the high number of adults in this country whose literacy skills prevent them from reaching their potential; adult low literacy threatens America's ability to hold its ground against rising economic competitors. Jobs that require only minimal skills in the U.S. are the first to be lost to individuals overseas who are willing to work for lower wages. India is a prime example. Call center positions, considered to be low wage and low skill in the U.S., are high status in India; call centers in India now employ some 245,000 individuals.¹⁶

High skill, high wage jobs are not far behind in the exodus overseas. Willard Daggett, president of the International Center for Leadership in Education, and Jerry Pedinotti, the Center's director of education research, report that technology leaders such as Motorola, Hewlett-Packard, and Cisco Systems rely on staff in India to design software for next generation systems, that U.S. doctors send CT scans to India for reading, and that even the U.S. government outsources federal income tax return

¹⁴ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2003). *Education at a Glance*.

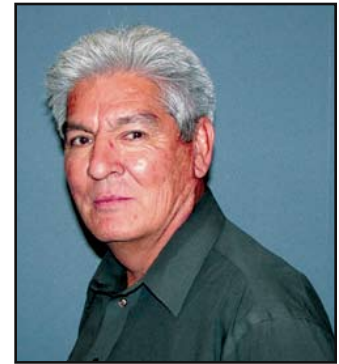
¹⁵ Statistics Canada. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2005). *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*.

¹⁶ Daggett, Willard and Pedinotti, Jerry. (2005). *Globalization—Tipping the Scale of Economic Supremacy*. International Center for Leadership in Education.

processing work to India in increasing numbers. China is positioning itself “to become a world leader in biotechnology and computer manufacturing.”¹⁷ The key, they say, is that “developing nations in Asia and Eastern Europe place a premium on educating students to excel in industries that will drive the future global marketplace.”¹⁸ In his book on globalization, *The World is Flat*, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman points out the growing number of immigrant scientists and engineers coming to the United States “to do the scientific work that its citizens no longer want to do or even know how to do.”¹⁹

In the United States, however, the annual high school dropout rate hovers at 34 percent,²⁰ with a disproportionate number of minorities and children of low-income parents among those leaving school before earning a degree. Many of those young people who do complete high school leave without having mastered the basic reading and math skills needed to do college level work. Their math literacy skills fall below the average of teens in other industrialized nations who will compete against them for future jobs.²¹ Our workforce is becoming younger and more diverse; the largest increase in the population aged 16 to 24 in the next 15 years is expected to be Hispanic²²—the same group that showed a significant decline in literacy skills in the 2003 NAAL.

This is of considerable concern to Thomas Donohue, president and CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. In laying out the Chamber’s national agenda for 2006, Donohue wrote of the looming worker shortage that will result as some 77 million baby boomers retire, and the fact that many of today’s jobs require more technical skill than current U.S. workers possess. In his 2006 report on the state of American business, Donohue wrote: “China graduates more than eight times as many engineers as the United States—India five times as many...”²³



Gilbert Zamora

Gilbert Zamora recalls the day his teenage daughter discovered that he couldn’t read as one of the worst days of his life. But that incident prompted him to contact LVA Otero County Literacy Council, Inc. and begin working with a tutor. Being part of the “reading world,” as he puts it, turned his life inside out.

“I was afraid to fly because I couldn’t read the signs in the airport,” he said. “Today, I read my way from New Mexico to Chicago and Chicago to Syracuse. Tomorrow I’ll read my way back home. That’s what it means to be part of the reading world.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Zakaria, Fareed. (2005). Book Review: *The World is Flat: The Wealth of Yet More Nations*. www.nytimes.com/2005/05/01/books/review/01ZAKARIA.html?ex=1272600000&en=1b84e47e745ea7ca&ei=5088&partner=rssnyt&emc=rss. Retrieved June 2006.

²⁰ Hall, Daria. (2005). *Getting Honest About Grad Rates: How States Play the Numbers and Students Lose*. The Education Trust.

²¹ Lemke, Mariann, Sen, Anindita, Pahkle, Erin, Partelow, Lisette, Miller, David, Williams, Trevor, Kastberg, David, and Jocelyn, Leslie. (2004). *International Outcomes of Learning in Mathematics Literacy and Problem Solving: Pisa 2003 Results from the U.S. Perspective*. National Center for Education Statistics. U.S. Department of Education.

²² Ibid.

²³ Donohue, Thomas J. (2006). *The State of American Business*. U.S. Chamber of Commerce report.

We as adult literacy stakeholders need to be concerned about youth because there is a strong connection between dropping out of high school and being an adult with low literacy skills—low reading scores are one of the most reliable predictors of whether a student will drop out of high school.²⁴ The largest group in the below basic category in the NAAL is adults who did not receive a high school diploma.²⁵ High school dropout rates also should concern us as citizens who want economically strong and safe communities. Research shows that 67 percent of prison inmates are high school dropouts²⁶ and 70 percent of the more than one million inmates in state and federal prisons are functionally illiterate or read below the eighth grade level.²⁷ Individuals with poor reading skills are more likely than strong readers to be unemployed and require public assistance. They have higher health care costs and are less likely to have health insurance. These are costs that impact everyone in every community in this country.

“...It is unlikely that we will be able to make a major difference in the child unless we place equal priority on education and remediation for the parent.”

Toward a More Perfect Union: Basic Skills, Poor Families, and Our Economic Future

The Adult-child Literacy Link

Funding for adult basic education in the U.S. has not kept pace with need. Support that was promised in 1992 when the release of the NALS and the Secretary of Education’s statement that millions of Americans were “illiterate” grabbed the attention and concern of the news media and national policy makers has not materialized. While laudable, the current policy emphasis on K-12 education reform does not address the needs of those adults who have left the system or who, as immigrants, haven’t been exposed to it. Nor does it break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy that research has shown exists.

Studies conducted 40 years ago examined the connection between a parent’s reading ability and attitudes toward literacy and the child’s success as a reader. In an effort to understand how children learn to read—and, in turn, what contributes to reading problems—researchers looked into the impact on reading ability of growing up in a literacy-rich environment, of a parent’s vocabulary, and whether parents read aloud to their children.

But learning to read is a complex, complicated process involving many elements. First there is the code, or the alphabet, the “signals that represent

²⁴ Alliance for Excellent Education. (2006). *The Crisis in America’s High Schools*, www.all4ed.org/whats_at_stake/crisis.html. Retrieved May 2006.

²⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *A First Look at the Literacy of America’s Adults in the 21st Century*. <http://nces.ed.gov/NAAL/PDF/2006470.PDF>. Retrieved March 2006.

²⁶ Thornburgh, Nathan. (2006, April 17). Dropout Nation. *Time*, Vol. 167, No. 16.

²⁷ Literacy Behind Prison Walls. (1994). *Profiles of the Prison Population* from the National Adult Literacy Survey.

assigned meanings.”²⁸ Beginning readers must understand that there is a link between letters and sounds (known as mapping); this is key to sounding out unknown words. Other elements include phonics and phonemic awareness—the knowledge that words are made up of letters and that letters have sounds in spoken words. Vocabulary, syntax, story elements, and world knowledge also are important in learning to read.

This complex process can be impacted by many factors. A child who has not been read to may not understand that printed material carries messages; a child who is hungry, exhausted, or distracted by problems at home may miss the cues that link letters to words and the sound of a word to a written word. An adult learner who worked with one ProLiteracy affiliate said he left school at age 16 without ever having broken the code. “I knew that ‘c,’ ‘a,’ and ‘t’ were letters, but I didn’t know that ‘c-a-t’ made the word ‘cat,’” he said. His is a story of intergenerational low literacy—his mother could not read and only one family member had completed high school.

Less-than-qualified teachers and a school’s location (well-funded suburban district vs. poor inner-city school) also impact a child’s ability to acquire decoding skills. Elementary education teachers rarely are required to have specific training in reading instruction; reading as a specific part of curriculum rarely exists past the first few years of schooling.

If today’s children are to become the adult readers of tomorrow, we must treat the acquisition of literacy skills as a never-ending process. The public education system must emphasize reading instruction throughout the K-12 curriculum. We must give teachers the proper training to effectively teach reading, and we must give parents the opportunity to acquire the literacy skills they need in order to give their children the foundation required for becoming a successful reader because “...school today does not solve the problem of achieving literacy for all...”²⁹

The Public Policy Disconnect

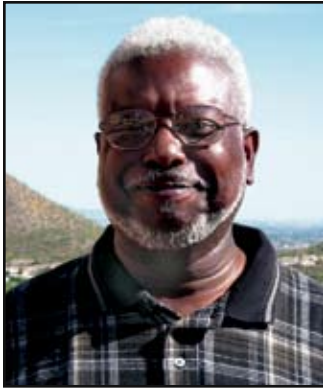
In Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, adults continue to learn throughout their lifetimes because policy makers in those countries have created an

“Education is no longer a responsibility that we take as a nation just until age 18. Education has got to become a lifelong commitment that we make to all citizens.”

Dr. Willard R. Daggett

²⁸ Beck, Isabel L. and Juel, Connie. (1992). The Role of Decoding in Learning to Read. What Research Has to Say about Reading Instruction. International Reading Association.

²⁹ UNESCO. *Education for All Global Monitoring Report*.



Johnny Gilchrist

As a child, Johnny Gilchrist never developed the skills that would help him break the reading code. Instead, he developed skills that helped him avoid dealing with the written word.

"In a restaurant, I would look around and see if someone was eating something I would like and then I would ask the waiter to bring me that item," he says. To do his job in a Long Island grocery warehouse meant memorizing the colors and symbols on thousands of labels.

After he retired at age 60, Gilchrist, on a trip to the library with his grandchildren, asked about an adult literacy program. ProLiteracy affiliate Literacy Nassau matched him with a tutor. Now Gilchrist feels comfortable traveling. He reads books to his grandchildren, pays his bills online, reads e-mail from his daughter, and makes his choices at a restaurant from the menu.

environment where organized adult education—any class, course, program, seminar, or workshop related to employment, postsecondary learning, and acquiring basic literacy skills—is the norm rather than the exception. When you review who in each ALL country actually takes part in these adult education programs, the ALL shows "...that differences in adult learning policy do matter."

In the U.S., for example, "Americans at document literacy Level 4/5 are about six times more likely to participate (in adult education) than those at Level 1"³⁰ and "two-thirds of company training programs are directed at managers who have high levels of educational attainment."³¹ Researchers for the Educational Testing Service reported that the unequal distribution of skills and training opportunities is "deeply rooted" in America's workplaces, that ours is a nation that "concentrates on producing and rewarding first-class skills," accepting, in fact, "a basic skills underclass."³² In Norway, high-level learners are only two times more likely to be involved in adult education than low-level learners. This may be due, in part, to the Scandinavian countries' long-standing policies supporting adult education.

Towns and villages throughout Scandinavia have supported folk high schools for decades. Held in community centers, these folk high schools offer a range of classes, from arts and crafts and book club discussions to more structured foreign language classes or geography and history courses and often serve as sites for the basic literacy classes that nongovernment organizations conduct for adults. Folk high schools create an environment where adult education is the norm rather than the exception and they promote the mindset that learning is not finite but is a continuing process not limited by a formal course of study in a public or private educational institution.

In the United States, however, education is the business of the young; learning to read is the activity of children in kindergarten through third grade. The educational career of the average individual in the U.S. ends with either a high school diploma or a post-secondary degree; adults in their 30s or 40s and older who return to school for a new or additional degree are referred to as "non-traditional" students. Adults who did

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Council on Competitiveness. (2001). "U.S. Competitiveness 2001: Strengths, Vulnerabilities and Long-term Priorities."

³² Sum, Andrew, Kirsch, Irwin, and Taggart, Robert. (2002). "The Twin Challenges of Mediocrity and Inequality: Literacy in the U.S. from an International Perspective." Educational Testing Service. Statistics and Research Division, Center for Global Assessment.

not acquire literacy skills as children often avoid or delay entry into an adult basic education program because they are embarrassed or ashamed to do so.

There are a number of useful examples of effective adult education policy in other industrialized countries. Norway adopted specific legislation establishing the rights of all adults to education in 1976, becoming the first country ever to take such action.³³ The regulations give municipalities responsibility for educating adults at the primary and lower secondary education levels (comparable to preschool through grade 10 in the U.S.) and for providing adult immigrants with Norwegian language and civic life instruction. County authorities are responsible for providing adults with the upper secondary education that is designed to qualify them for an occupation or college. In addition to folk high schools, adult basic instruction occurs in the Norwegian public educational system, adult education associations, distance education institutions, and the workplace.³⁴

In 1999, the Norwegian Parliament adopted Competence Reform “to provide individuals, enterprises and society with the competence needed in the new knowledge society.”³⁵ It gave adult students certain statutory rights and established a national system for using vocational tests to validate what they had learned in the workplace. In an address marking Norway’s hosting of International Adult Learners Week 2005, the Norwegian Minister of Education and Reform pledged extensive efforts to reach those adults most in need of basic skills, to research financing adult education activities for working adults, and to encourage closer collaboration with nongovernment organizations and social partners who also provide adults with basic instruction.

Public policy in Sweden establishes adult education as a second chance, and the government is responsible for providing it.³⁶ Certified teachers paid by the government give adult basic education (ABE) instruction and adult students are eligible for study grants and loans. They also have the right to

“As a society, we have come to accept that nearly half of America’s adults lack the skills needed to be competitive in a new world economy . . . As citizens and taxpayers, apparently we want those who lack basic skills to do something about it on their own.”

David J. Rosen, Ed.D., adult education consultant

³³ Norway, the official site in the United States. www.norway.org. Retrieved April 2006.

³⁴ Odin Archives. <http://odin.dep.no/kd/english/toics/educatin/adult/dok-bu.html>. Retrieved April 2006.

³⁵ Minister of Education and Research, Norway. (2005). Education for All in an Era of Increasing Mobility: The Implications for Adult Learning. <http://odin.dep.no/kd/norsk/aktuelt/taler/minister/045071-090057/dok-bn.html>. Retrieved April 2006.

³⁶ Veeman, Nayda, Walker, Keith, and Ward, Angela. (2005). Impact of policy on adult literacy in Sweden and Canada, Literacy Across the Curriculum Focus. The Centre for Literacy, Montreal, Quebec. Volume 18, Number 1.



David Clemons

David Clemons stayed in school until he was 16, even though he couldn't read. His inability to connect letters to the sounds they represent made him feel that he was mentally retarded. When injuries prevented him from keeping the job he'd had for 28 years, Clemons couldn't fill out applications for new positions. He followed a job counselor's advice to find an adult literacy program, even though he didn't think it would help.

His tutor used phonics to teach Clemons the sounds associated with the alphabet along with letter combinations. He still remembers the first time his tutor asked him to put sounds together and to sound out words in a sentence. "I walked out...knowing that I could learn to read and write," he recalls. "That was the first time in my life I felt that I could."

an education leave from their jobs. Adults with the lowest skills have priority and immigrants have immediate access to Swedish language classes. The United Kingdom began its "Skills for Life" initiative in 2001 to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of some 2.25 million adults by the year 2010. By July 2004, the U.K. Department of Education and Skills reported that 750,000 adults achieved qualifications. Over half of them were 16- to 18-year-olds "who had not managed to get the qualifications at school."³⁷

The European Union (EU) adopted a resolution in 2001 that called for EU members to invest time and money in adult learning, to promote learning in the workplace, and to focus on the acquisition or promotion of basic skills since lifelong learning and adult education are integral to Europe's prosperity and "social cohesion."³⁸ The initiative includes a goal to promote adult learning "to improve citizenship, personal fulfillment, social inclusion, and employability."³⁹

In December 2005, Kosovo held its first-ever lifelong learning festival, which was guided by the motto, "Education is not preparation for life, education is life itself." Earlier this year, Brussels sponsored a four-day seminar on adult literacy and basic skills practices, and countries throughout the EU celebrated May 20–26, 2006 as "Adult Learners Week."

This is not to say that the U.S. can, or should, do all that these countries have done. The countries vary greatly in many ways—size, population, and number of immigrants, to name a few. But Europe's obvious commitment to the belief in "lifelong learning"—adult education and the right of all adults to receive the instruction they need to participate fully in the workforce and their communities—is a concept the United States should embrace.

Conclusion

Ninety-three million adults out of a total population of approximately 221 million in the U.S. struggle to read a bus schedule so they can travel across town, have difficulty using an ATM machine, or find it hard to fill out an average job application. If these adults are to reach their full potential, the U.S. must provide them with adequate adult basic education and English-

³⁷ House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts. (2005). Skills for Life: Improving adult literacy and numeracy. http://www.nao.org.uk/publications/nao_reports/04-05/040520.pdf. Retrieved March 2006.

³⁸ EurActiv.com.,(2004). Lifelong learning is being given a high priority on EU agenda, http://www.euractiv.com/en/education/lifelong-learning/article-117516?_print. Retrieved April 2006.

³⁹ Ibid.

as-a-second-language (ESL) instruction. To do so, we need to engage leadership from business and industry, health care, law enforcement, community development, policy makers at all levels, and educators in a grand alliance to address our nation's literacy crisis. The conversation about adult education must include language like "shared responsibility," "collaboration," "adequate funding," and "lifelong learning." We need to stop thinking about literacy as a technical skill that is acquired before adulthood and then must suffice. We need to stop treating adult low literacy as the problem of individuals who didn't pay attention when they were in school, and English acquisition as the problem of immigrants only. Our conversations about solutions must extend beyond the boundaries of No Child Left Behind and high school reform. We need to stop talking about literacy as just an educational issue and speak of it in a broader, more comprehensive context—as an economic issue, a community development issue, a health issue, a global competitiveness issue, a financial issue, a criminal justice issue, in short, as an issue of concern to all. These several aspects of the literacy challenge demonstrate that literacy is a key indicator of quality of life.

In October 2005, ProLiteracy released its U.S. 10 Point Advocacy Plan. We pledged to increase our focus on federal and state legislative initiatives to increase attention to, and our public investment in, adult literacy education and lifelong learning. We committed to work toward the creation of a comprehensive, fully coordinated adult literacy and basic education system. We are working on these and other points of the plan, but we cannot address the issue alone. So, we are reaching out to and beyond our colleagues in adult literacy. For the past year ProLiteracy representatives have spoken about the NAAL results and their implications to the national news media and to business and community leaders in California, Indiana, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. We will continue to take our literacy message to as many sectors of the population in as many communities as possible. We are working with the Home Safety Council, are forging a relationship with the National Association of Manufacturers, and will continue to reach out to other national associations and organizations that share our literacy agenda. We also will continue to cultivate literacy "champions" on Capitol Hill.

ProLiteracy is changing the conversation about adult literacy and turning words into actions to address the issue. We encourage other literacy stakeholders to do the same. Carry this conversation into your communities and state capitals. It is only by changing the conversation that the U.S. can hope to persuade its leaders to make decisions that will significantly decrease the number of adults who will score in the below basic literacy category of the next national and international literacy assessments.

"For the first time in our history, education attainment levels in the U.S. are declining... We must act now to ensure that all our citizens, youths and adults, have the literacy skills required for the high-skill jobs of the present and future."

Phyllis Eisen

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