

STATE OF ADULT LITERACY 2005

ROBERT WEDGEWORTH, PRESIDENT

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INTRODUCTION

This fall, the U.S. Department of Education is scheduled to release its first report in more than 10 years on the state of literacy skills among adults in this country. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) will be based on data gathered in 2003, and literacy advocates hope that it will reopen the debate about adult literacy and what is to be done about it.

The release of the last estimate of the literacy skills of adults in the U.S. was in 1993: the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS). Occurring when interest in the issue was at a high point, when First Lady Barbara Bush championed the cause and President George H. W. Bush signed the National Literacy Act of 1991 into law, the 1992 NALS caused considerable controversy and, as a result, the issue received considerable media coverage. Shifting federal policy priorities, however, have reduced the urgency surrounding the issue since then.

The goals of literacy advocates as reflected in the legislation were ambitious. The National Literacy Act, which created federal funding for adult basic education and literacy state grants, called for an investment in job skills training and adult basic education of \$1 billion over several years. Actual federal appropriations in support of adult basic education and literacy efforts have fallen far short of that target. The current administration has sought to decrease appropriations even further — by a whopping 63 percent — perhaps in anticipation of eliminating federal funding in support of adult basic education and literacy services altogether. Reauthorization of the Workforce Investment Act, the legislation authorizing these appropriations, has languished in Congress since the current Act expired in 2003.

The existing political climate has its educational emphasis on prevention — solving the problem of adult literacy by improving the education of children through the No Child Left Behind Act. Improving the public elementary and secondary education system in the U.S. is commendable, but not quite enough. This approach ignores research that

demonstrates efforts to improve the literacy skills of children cannot be successful without efforts to improve the literacy skills of parents as well. Supporting parents in the development of their literacy skills is required to ensure that no child *will* be left behind.¹ In addition, public school reform will not address the literacy needs of the millions of adult immigrants living in the U.S. who do not read, speak, or write in English and who never had the opportunity to attend this country's schools in the first place.

Current public policy has not addressed effectively the fact that one-third of all teens who enter high school do not graduate with a diploma four years later.² It ignores the literacy needs of adults who raise families, hold jobs, and pay taxes, even though their limited literacy skills prevent them from reaching their full economic and social potential. It ignores basic American principles of democratic citizenship, as the undereducated "lack the tools to represent their own interests in the political arena."³

If we as a country are not willing to provide adequate adult basic education because research tells us it is the right thing to do, because basic human morals tell us it is the right thing to do, and because our democratic principles demand it of us, then perhaps we will support adult learners because basic economics says it is the right thing to do. There is a startling societal price tag attached to having millions of adults who cannot adequately read, write, solve math problems, and integrate information effectively in order to fulfill their human potential.

THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LOW LITERACY IN ADULTS

The economic impact of adult functional illiteracy in the United States reverberates throughout the country's economy. Public assistance in the form of welfare, food stamps, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), and Medicaid make up the majority of the budgets for most local governments. In Onondaga County, for example, where ProLiteracy Worldwide is headquartered, these mandated programs account for 48 percent of the county's expenses. These costs directly impact the property tax rate charged to homeowners. Research conducted after the release of the 1992 NALS indicated that two-thirds to three-quarters of adults receiving public assistance, food stamps, or TANF performed at the

¹ National Center for Family Literacy

² *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Gary Orfield, 2005

³ Forrest P. Chisman, *Adult Literacy and the American Dream*, Council of Advancement for Literacy, February 2002

NALS' two lowest levels of literacy.⁴ One quarter of all high school dropouts report having received public assistance as compared to 10 percent of high school graduates.⁵ Those high school dropouts with jobs earn an average annual salary of \$19,000 — \$7,000 less than their classmates who successfully complete their high school education.⁶

The cost of health care goods and services, which is rising faster than almost any other sector of the economy, is a continued concern for the American family.⁷ The health care industry estimates \$73 billion per year of unnecessary health care expenses attributable to poor literacy. While the average American spent \$5,440 for health care in 2002, the average health care cost for adults with low literacy skills was four times that amount, or \$21,760. This may be due to the higher rate of hospitalization and the increased number of medication and treatment errors that they experience.⁸

The United States' prison population has tripled since 1980 — there are now more than one million individuals housed in state and federal prisons — more adults than in any other developed nation. Seventy percent of those inmates are either functionally illiterate or read below the eighth grade level.⁹ In 2004, the cost to keep an inmate incarcerated for just one year averaged \$22,650; for the same period, it cost the state of Indiana just \$583 to enroll an adult in an adult education program. As a society, Americans are more willing to spend resources incarcerating adults than educating them.

Much time and ink has been spent in the past five years on studies and reports regarding the skills that employees in the United States will need if this country is to retain or improve its standing as a competitor in the global marketplace. From the National Association of Manufacturers and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce to the U.S. Department of Labor the message is the same: "In the 21st century, American competitiveness and worker prosperity will be tied tightly to the education and skill attainment of the workforce."¹⁰ Although there may not be universal agreement about what literacy skills adults need to be successful in the workplace, the skills most often called for by employers include the ability to "read and

⁴ Bartonk, Paul, E. and Lynn Jenkins, *Literacy and Dependency: The Literacy Skills of Welfare Recipients in the United States*, Educational Testing Services, Princeton, N.J., 1995

⁵ Cain, Alice (2003). "Is the GED Valuable to Those Who Pass It?" *Focus on Policy*, Vol. 1, Issue 1

⁶ *U.S. Census Bureau*

⁷ America's Health Insurance Plans, *Rising Health Care Costs*, 2004, <http://www.ahip.org/content/default.aspx?bc=3913411327>

⁸ Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Statistics, 2004; Center for Health Care Strategies, Inc. *Health Literacy and Understanding Medical Information Fact Sheet*, 1997 http://www.chcs.org/usr_doc/FS4.pdf

⁹ *Literacy Behind Prison Walls*, Profiles of the Prison Population from the National Adult Literacy Survey, 1994

¹⁰ Stuart, Lisa and Emily Dahm, *21st Century Skills for 21st Century Jobs*, U.S. Department of Commerce, 1999

understand complex material, think analytically, and use technology efficiently.”¹¹ The jobs that will pay a living wage in the future require more than a high school diploma; six of the 10 fastest growing occupations listed by the U.S. Department of Labor in its employment projections through 2012 require an associate’s or bachelor’s degree.¹²

The United States is a nation of immigrants. It has been built by and has prospered from immigrant ideas and labor. Recent immigrants are not as well educated as those of previous generations, however.¹³ Immigrants who entered the United States and joined the workforce between 1990 and 2000 were younger and less well educated than immigrants during all preceding decades between 1890 and 1990; one-third lacked the equivalent of a U.S. high school diploma.¹⁴

Even the most basic jobs in the United States today require workers to speak in English so others can understand them, to use basic math skills to solve problems, to be able to use a computer and other electronic equipment, and to have the ability to follow basic work procedures. These requirements often pose a barrier to employment for adults with limited literacy skills. The low literacy skills of American workers were reported to be a factor in Toyota’s selection process for the site of its newest North American manufacturing plant. The factory, and its 1,300 jobs, will be located in Ontario, Canada, even though several U.S. states offered the Japanese carmaker more than double the Canadian incentives. In announcing the decision in July, the president of Canada’s Automotive Parts Manufacturers’ Association reportedly stated that Toyota hoped to avoid the expensive training problems encountered by Nissan and Honda, who had to resort to employing pictorials when training workers to use the high tech equipment in their Alabama plants.¹⁵

Inattention to adult literacy costs U.S. taxpayers more than the dollars needed to subsidize public assistance, keep individuals incarcerated, cover the rising cost of health care, and train employees so that they can be competitive in a global economy; there are also direct costs to commercial and retail industries in lost sales. Any business that sells goods to the general public must be concerned about the reading and math skills of today’s

¹¹ U.S. 21st Century Workforce Commission, *A Nation of Opportunity: Building America’s 21st Century Workforce*, 2000

¹² U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, *2002–2012 Employment Projections*, February 2004

¹³ *Dropouts in America: Confronting the Graduation Rate Crisis*, Gary Orfield, 2005

¹⁴ Sum, Andrew and others, *Immigrant Workers and the Great American Job Machine: The Contributions of New Foreign Immigration to National and Regional Labor Force Growth in the 1990s*, Center for Labor Market Studies, Northeastern University, August 2002

¹⁵ Erwin, Steve, *Toyota to build 100,000 vehicles per year in Woodstock, Ont., starting 2008*, CBC News, <http://www.cbc.ca/cp/business/050630/b0630102.html>. The president later denied having made this statement.

consumers. The U.S. retail industry depends on individuals who serve themselves from displays of goods. Shoppers are required to read labels in order to make selections; they must determine value through unit pricing, calculate discounts, and read signs in malls and stores to locate needed items.

In 2004, companies in the United States spent more than \$500 billion on marketing and advertising to promote new products and improved versions of old products, or to maintain market share.¹⁶ They offered coupons, percentage off sales, and servicing agreements as purchasing incentives. A recent study by faculty members at the College of Business, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; the Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University; and Saint Norbert College indicates that consumers with limited literacy skills and those who are learning English as a second language (ESL) do not use coupons, sign service agreements, or take advantage of percentage or fraction off promotions because they cannot interpret the written information or complete the calculations to determine the item's final cost.¹⁷ This is important to note because, while many adults with literacy problems live in poverty, not all do — the study indicates the ESL and low literate population represents \$380 million in annual discretionary spending power.

The study also shows that low literate or ESL shoppers make selections based on *concrete reasoning* — the larger size is more expensive, the smaller size is cheaper, a short bottle holds less than a tall bottle, even if both contain 16 ounces. These consumers seek out familiar colors, type styles, or pictures on packaging when selecting brands. The research indicates this consumer group often ignores new products, even if they are upgraded versions of existing brands, because they look different from those to which they are accustomed.

Companies that take appropriate steps to market and sell goods to low literate and ESL individuals may be rewarded with brand loyalty. Such adjustments do not always require a significant financial investment on the part of the goods or service provider. It is sufficient to be aware that printing “with added bleach for more whitening power” means less to this population than a “before” photo showing a white shirt and an “after” photo showing an even whiter shirt. There also are implications for customer service. To reduce

¹⁶ Auletta, Ken, *The New Pitch*, The New Yorker, March 28, 2005

¹⁷ Viswanathan, Madhubalan and others, *Decision Making and Coping of Functionally Illiterate Consumers and Some Implications for Marketing Management*, Journal of Marketing, January 2005

their level of stress or embarrassment caused by low literacy skills or inability to make appropriate change when shopping, these consumers often develop relationships with supportive store personnel that contribute to store loyalty. Adequately trained sales staff can reap significant financial rewards for the proactive retail outlet.

It is also common practice in the United States to attempt to avoid product liability lawsuits by employing product warning labels and detailed instructions for use. A small print warning that reads “do not mix with chlorine bleach” means little to an individual who has difficulty processing written information. Goods and product providers would do well when developing warning labels and directions to factor in the low literate shopper’s use of concrete reasoning and pictographic thinking. In designing consumer loyalty programs, marketing managers should consider including information regarding the shopping habits of low literate consumers into employee training programs.

THE IMPACT OF ADULT LITERACY PROGRAMS

The lack of a uniform definition of “adult literacy” and consistent standards for demonstrating the outcomes of participation in adult literacy programs makes it difficult to provide specific data regarding the effectiveness of such programs, however, the studies that have been conducted and the anecdotal information collected indicate that adults and their families gain significant benefits when adults participate in literacy programs. In one study, adult students reported an increase in their self-esteem following their participation in adult literacy classes. This results from what they saw as a meaningful improvement in their reading, math, and writing skills, and in having achieved their personal literacy goals. Adults enrolled in literacy classes also reported becoming more involved in their children’s education, an important factor if the intergenerational cycle of functional illiteracy is to be broken.¹⁸

Studies related to employer-sponsored workplace literacy programs reveal that participating employees gain skills that are classified as “soft” but highly regarded by employers, including, but not limited to: a better ability to build and work in teams, heightened understanding and willingness to work with the company’s culture, and a more positive attitude toward change.

¹⁸ Beder, Hal, *The Outcomes and Impacts of Adult Literacy Education in the United States*, NCSALL Reports #6, January 1999

Employees also said they gained a greater willingness to learn for life, had a stronger understanding of prose, and could better use numbers by themselves and in charts or tables.¹⁹

In addition to the soft skills employees gained, workplace education programs increased company profit margins. Reduced error rates, improved health and safety records, and increased products and services output were among the organizational benefits that were attributed to workplace education programs. One company reported that employees trained in such programs were able to use technology more effectively, which reduced per-unit costs and increased capacity, resulting in a 15 percent rise in profits. Another saw reduced overhead costs and a five percent sales increase.²⁰

U.S. business and industry leaders estimate spending an average of \$600 million per year on remedial reading, writing, and math skills training for employees.²¹ General Motors alone spent more than \$25 million in one year on remedial education; the U.S. military spends on average \$70 million for basic skills remediation for new recruits. But who should have the responsibility for providing basic literacy and ESL instruction? Does the general public view adult literacy as a job-training issue, a charitable endeavor, or an educational concern worthy of public support?

IN THE EYES OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC

There can be no doubt that the issue of adult literacy is a significant problem in the eyes of literacy advocates — thousands are engaged in working with adult learners on both professional and volunteer bases. Individuals, corporations, and foundations support that work with donations of hundreds of thousands of philanthropic dollars. In communities across the country, businesses and chambers of commerce create task forces to address the “workforce skills gap,” medical communities discuss health care literacy, and educators do their best to engage parents and caregivers in the education of children.

It is questionable whether the American public in general is concerned with adult literacy as either an education or human service issue. In an effort to collect more specific data regarding the public’s understanding of the issue, opinions about the causes of functional illiteracy

¹⁹ The Conference Board, *Turning Skills into Profit: Economic Benefits of Workplace Education Programs*, 1999

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ National Institute for Literacy, *Literacy Skills for 21st Century America: A blueprint for creating a more literate nation*, 2000, Washington, D.C.

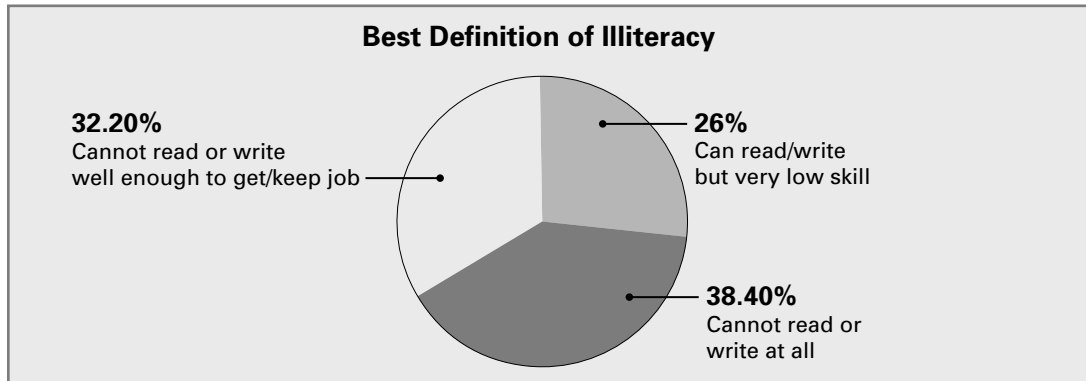
among adults, and interest in applying resources to the problem, ProLiteracy Worldwide engaged the services of the international polling and research firm, Zogby International, Inc.

THE SURVEY

Zogby International conducted a national telephone survey of 1,207 adults whose telephone numbers were drawn randomly from a nationally listed sample. Zogby International surveys employ sampling strategies in which selection probabilities are proportional to population size within area codes and exchanges. Weighting by geographic region, political party affiliation, age, race, religion, and gender are used to adjust for non-response.²²

Individuals were asked the following questions and the responses are summarized below:

1. Which of the following is the best definition for illiteracy?
 - Cannot read and/or write at all
 - Cannot read and/or write enough to get and keep a job
 - Can read and/or write, but very low skill levels
 - Other
 - Not sure

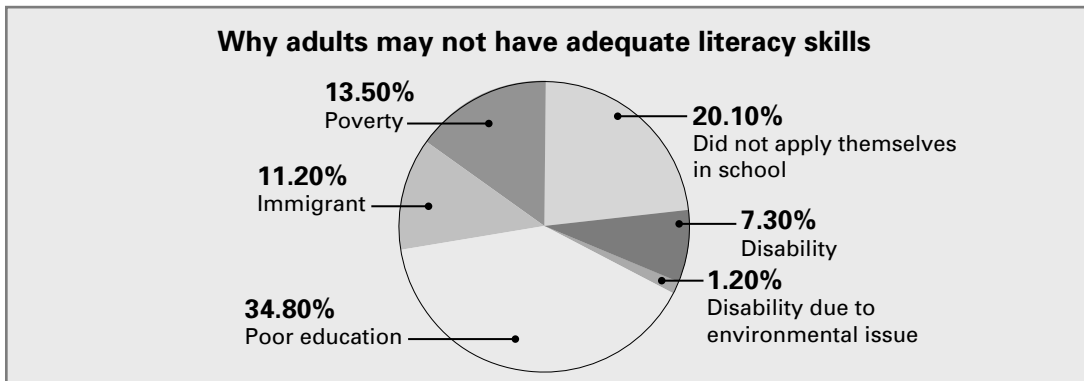


2. On a scale of one to five, with one being no problem at all and five being a very great problem, how would you rate the problem of literacy among adults in America?
 - No problem
 - 2
 - 3
 - 4
 - Great problem

²² The survey's margin of error is +/- 2.9 percentage points.

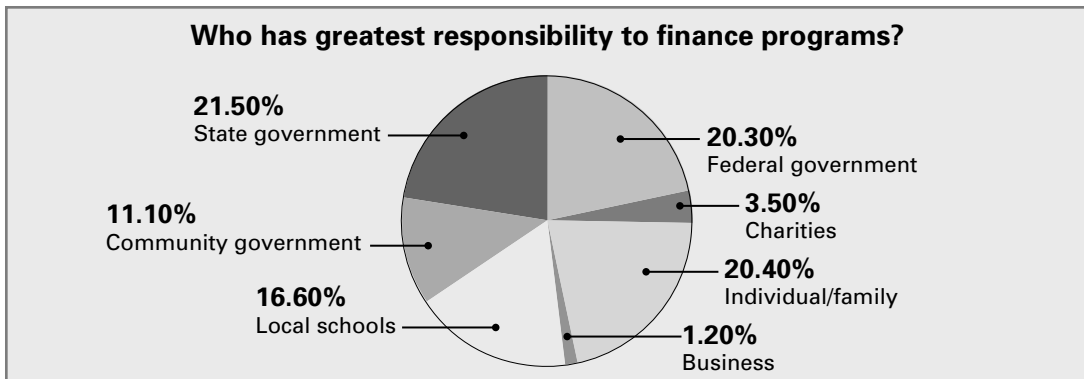
3. Which of the following do you think best explains why an adult (defined as 16 years and older) might not have adequate literacy skills?

- They had a poor education
- They did not apply themselves in school
- They live in poverty
- They are an immigrant and speak/write another language
- They have a disability
- They have a disability due to environmental poisoning, such as lead in paint and pipes
- Other
- Not sure



4. Which of the following do you think has the greatest responsibility for financing adult literacy education or programs?

- State government
- Federal government
- The individual/family
- The local schools
- Community government
- Charities
- Business
- Not sure



5. How important is it for the U.S. to come as close to a 100 percent literacy rate as possible?
- Very important
 - Somewhat important
 - Not important
 - Not sure
6. How likely would you be to donate to a charity that promotes literacy and literacy programs for adults — very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?
- Very likely
 - Somewhat likely
 - Not very likely
 - Not at all likely
 - Not sure
7. How likely would you be to support an increase in taxes to pay for government programs to increase literacy among adults — very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?
- Very likely
 - Somewhat likely
 - Not very likely
 - Not at all likely
 - Not sure
8. A parent is a child's first teacher. Which of the following is the best way to support parents whose lack of literacy skills makes it difficult for them to adequately fill that role?
- Establish community-based literacy programs for adults who are determined to be functionally illiterate
 - Provide grant money for adults who want to improve their literacy skills
 - Increase funding for adult basic education programs that are sponsored by schools
 - Don't do anything — it is not that great a problem
 - Other
 - Not sure

THE FINDINGS

To determine the American public's understanding of literacy beyond the most traditional concept of an individual's ability to read, ProLiteracy asked survey respondents to define illiteracy. The survey indicated that people's understanding of the complexity of illiteracy becomes broader with the more education they have; i.e., the more education they have,

the less likely they are to say that illiteracy is simply “the inability to read or write at all.” Thirty-two percent of those individuals responding to the survey define illiteracy as the inability to read and/or write well enough to obtain employment and keep a job. Almost one in four individuals considers illiteracy to be reading and writing at very low skill levels, what many professionals in the adult literacy and adult basic education field refer to as “functional illiteracy.” Just over one-third of Americans see illiteracy as the total lack of reading and writing ability.

Americans view low literacy in adults as neither a particularly large nor a particularly small problem for the country. According to the survey, 35 percent of the population considers adult low literacy to be a large problem, while 18 percent perceive it to be a small problem. The majority, represented by 42 percent, rated the problem of adult literacy as a three on a scale of one to five. Residents of western states, individuals over the age of 50, and African Americans are slightly more likely to see low literacy as a greater problem than members of other demographic sub-groups. This suggests that, while most Americans perceive low literacy in adults to be a problem, they do not have a sense of urgency about it despite the fact that an overwhelming 77 percent believe it is very important for the United States to come as close to a 100 percent literacy rate as possible. Just one percent said that a 100 percent literacy rate is not important at all.

While 35 percent of respondents cited poor education as the cause of adult low literacy, one out of every five respondents believes that adults have poor literacy skills because they did not apply themselves as students while in school. Another one in seven associates poor literacy skills with living in poverty and 11 percent attribute it to immigrants who speak and or write in a language other than English. Respondents in the 18- to 29-year age group, the fastest growing demographic entering adult literacy programs, are more likely to lay the blame for low literacy skills at the door of the education system than on the individual.

Respondents cite poor quality education and indifferent students as the primary contributors to the problem of low literacy, and see state and federal governments as the top two contributors to solving the problem. Forty-two percent believe either the state or federal government has the responsibility to finance adult education or literacy programs. One in five, however, believes those individuals who use the programs, i.e., the

adult learners, should finance the acquisition of their basic reading, writing, comprehension, and math skills individually. Residents in the east, south, and central regions of the country are most inclined to express this opinion, as are individuals with less than a high school education.

While many respondents said that the federal and state governments have the responsibility to fund adult education and literacy programs, Americans also are willing to contribute through both charitable donations and tax dollars. More than half — 55 percent — indicated a willingness to support a tax increase as a means of funding government programs to increase literacy among adults. And more than seven in ten individuals described themselves as likely to donate to a charity that promotes literacy and literacy programs for adults.

One in four respondents believes increased funding to formalized adult basic education programs, such as those sponsored by schools, will aid in the delivery of literacy services. With regard to assisting parents in achieving the literacy skills they need to assist their children in becoming good readers, almost half the respondents — 45 percent — perceive that community-based organizations are best suited to this purpose. Nearly one quarter believe adults who wish to improve their literacy skills should be awarded direct grants to attend the delivery program of their choice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LITERACY PRACTITIONERS

Based on this survey, more than three-quarters of all Americans believe it is very important for the U.S. to achieve as close to a 100 percent literacy rate as possible. They believe the financial responsibility for adult education lies with states or the federal government, and they express willingness to support adult literacy with tax dollars and personal donations to charities supporting such programs.

With apparent support from a public that is concerned about the issue of adult literacy and willing to invest in it, it is time for the U. S. to make a commitment to lifelong learning opportunities for its citizens. In anticipation of the release of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy, ProLiteracy Worldwide has developed a national advocacy plan that is intended to draw more attention to the issue of adult literacy in the United

States and its correlation to other issues of pressing national concern, and to increase the resources that can be brought to bear on the problem.

First, ProLiteracy will work with other adult literacy institutions and agencies to raise awareness among policy makers and persons of influence about the issue of adult literacy and its implications in the United States. It will advocate for an independent in-depth study of the issue of adult literacy in order to address how adult literacy should be defined, how progress should be assessed, and how outcomes of adult literacy programs are measured and interpreted. To that end, ProLiteracy will advocate for regularly recurring national data collection and analysis efforts, like the much-anticipated NAAL report, that will provide timely and relevant information about the diverse literacy skills and needs of adults in the country.

ProLiteracy will advocate for an organized, coordinated adult basic education and literacy system that affords any adult who wishes to acquire or improve his or her literacy skills the opportunity to access quality instructional services. This system must be multifaceted and consist of a variety of fully integrated service providers in order to meet the needs of a diverse student population.

Last but not least, ProLiteracy will advocate for legislative initiatives that both broaden and deepen the public and private resources available to adult literacy programs. These initiatives are intended to increase the regulatory flexibility of existing funding streams intended to serve the potential population of adult literacy students, and to increase incentives to bring new sources of funding into the system.

As of this writing, ProLiteracy is actively engaged in assessing the damage to its affiliates and other literacy stakeholders as a result of Hurricane Katrina. Short-term assistance will be provided to rebuild the literacy infrastructure of the region. However, we also need to recognize the long-term implications of what we witnessed in the storm's aftermath.

The media coverage of the human suffering in New Orleans exposed a large segment of American society that is affected by multiple social problems including poverty, ill health, and low literacy skills. And while we are first of all sympathetic to the loss of life and livelihood there, the need to address the underlying issues that caused so much

irreparable harm to this vulnerable population must become a priority for all Americans. The number of families living below the poverty level, the number of elderly needing health care and assistance accessing benefits, and the number of people incarcerated in the U.S. has grown significantly in recent years.

Every state and every locality will be affected. National, regional, and local literacy programs must find ways to meet the needs of their existing constituencies as well as of those individuals forced by Katrina to relocate to new communities.

It will be ProLiteracy's primary agenda to be an advocate for marginalized populations, especially those with low literacy skills, no matter where they reside.

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1320 Jamesville Avenue
Syracuse, NY 13210
(315) 422-9121
www.proliteracy.org