

ProLiteracy Policy Update

A publication of ProLiteracy Worldwide

December 15, 2005

NAAL Figures Released

Dear Literacy Advocate:

On December 15, 2005, the U.S. Department of Education released the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). For a detailed comparison of the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) and the 2003 NAAL, please visit http://www.proliteracy.org/downloads/policy_update/ProLiteracy_Policy-Update_7-8-05_updated_8-04-05.pdf.

The report indicated that 14% of adults in the U.S. — 30 million people — are estimated to be in the Below Basic Literacy category for prose, and that 5% are estimated to be Nonliterate in English. An additional 29% are estimated to be in the Basic Literacy category for prose. According to the report, these adults struggle to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential; that is, they may be *functionally illiterate*.

ProLiteracy has prepared the following questions and answers to assist you in answering questions that you may receive from the media, policymakers, and other literacy stakeholders in your community about the implications of the report. While it is not possible to anticipate every question that you may be asked, this guide is intended to help you to formulate answers to those that we anticipate are most likely to be asked. Please feel free to put the answers into your own words. We hope that you find this tool helpful.

The release of the NAAL presents you with an opportunity to raise awareness about adult literacy and your program in your community. You also may find it helpful to refer to the other materials in the Public Policy Update section of the ProLiteracy Web site in your efforts to communicate with the media and policy makers about the report. This is your chance to get *your* message out! Please do not hesitate to contact the public affairs department at ProLiteracy (corpcomm@proliteracy.org) if we can assist you with NAAL questions.

Good luck in your advocacy efforts!

Marsha L. Tait
Senior Vice President

National Assessment of Adult Literacy 2003
ProLiteracy Worldwide Question and Answer Sheet

Question:

How many adults are illiterate in the U.S.?

Answer:

The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) defines adult literacy as the ability to use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve goals, and to develop knowledge and potential.

In the U.S., we generally talk in terms of adults being *functionally literate*, rather than *illiterate*. Illiteracy refers to the inability to read or write in any language.

The NAAL report describes five levels of adult literacy, the lowest of which is Below Basic Literacy. The NAAL estimates that 14%, or 30 million adults in the U.S., are in the Below Basic Literacy category.

The NAAL also estimates that there are 5%, or 11 million adults who are Nonliterate in English. These adults may be illiterate in their native languages, or they may have advanced degrees, but they need to learn to speak, read, and write English in order to participate fully in U.S. society.

UNESCO estimates that there are 771 million illiterate adults in the world.

Question:

How confident are you about the results of this report?

Answer:

This report represents the best available analysis of the scope of this issue today. The National Academy of Sciences recommended the methodology used to produce this report to the Department of Education. Many adult education and literacy experts were involved at various stages in its development.

[If you feel uncomfortable answering questions about the methodology, say so. You do not have to be an expert on statistical methodology to participate in a media interview about the NAAL. You are an expert in adult literacy. These questions can be referred to the public affairs department of ProLiteracy Worldwide for further explanation if necessary.]

Question:

Do you know how the data breaks down by state, city, or voting district?

Answer:

No. The Department of Education has indicated that it will release further analysis of the data like that next year.

However, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, Missouri, New York, and Oklahoma purchased additional sample data from their states and that information is available now.

Question:

How much money does the federal government spend on adult basic education and literacy, and is this money making any difference?

Answer:

The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 authorizes federal appropriations for adult basic education and literacy. Both the House and Senate have passed appropriations bills that would fund state grants for adult basic education and literacy at \$570 million for fiscal 2006. This represents no increase in funding for the last three years, and a slight decrease from previous years. These funds will give approximately three million adult literacy students out of the estimated 30 million in need of instruction the opportunity to participate in federally funded literacy programs at a cost of \$190 per student per year.

In addition, the states that receive federal funds under the Workforce Investment Act are required to match a percentage of their allocation, and some states appropriate significant additional funds.

This money is making a difference for those adults who are able to access instruction, but it is not enough to serve all the adults who seek instruction.

Question:

Isn't that enough money to address the problem?

Answer:

No. Even if you add in all the community-based and employer-sponsored adult literacy programs that don't receive federal and state funding, there are not enough programs to serve all the students who want and need literacy instruction.

Seventy-seven percent of community-based adult literacy programs currently report waiting lists.

Question:

What do you mean by “community-based literacy programs”?

Answer:

A community-based literacy program may be an independent charitable organization with its own 501(c)3, a library or church-based program, or a program operating under the auspices of some other agency. Many of these programs do not currently receive any federal or state funds under the Workforce Investment Act.

Question:

The Administration said earlier in the year that federally funded adult literacy programs are ineffective. Why should the government waste money on programs that don't work?

Answer:

The Administration based this conclusion on an Office of Management and Budget Report that did not take into account the actual outcomes, or learning gains, of the students enrolled in the programs in question. Instead, it analyzed data that pertains to the labor programs that are funded under WIA and not the education programs.

In 1998 Congress set performance indicators for adult education programs, and each year the U.S. Department of Education has negotiated performance levels on these indicators with the states. According to the Department of Education, the majority of the federally funded programs met or exceeded goals established by the states and the Department of Education.

Question:

Why should the federal government be involved in this at all? Isn't it the responsibility of charitable and volunteer organizations to address this problem?

Answer:

Although some people volunteer their time in adult literacy programs, there are costs to train and manage those volunteers so that adults receive quality instruction. Increasingly people do not have the time to make the kind of commitment that

volunteer tutoring requires, and local programs are hiring more staff. Funding from philanthropic sources like community funds and individual donors, corporate and private foundations, and local fund-raising events is not enough to offer quality instruction to all the adults who seek it.

Question:

Adults had their chance to acquire literacy skills in school and failed. Wouldn't the money be better spent on improving the public school system?

Answer:

Adults who were born in the United States may not acquire literacy skills in school because of undiagnosed learning disabilities, visual and physical disabilities, childhood trauma such as illness or domestic violence, sporadic attendance at school, or poverty. Teachers may not be equipped, nor have the resources, to address all these problems in their classrooms.

The population of adults in the U.S. who need literacy instruction also includes the more than 37.5 million foreign-born, who regardless of their native language literacy skills, may or may not have proficiency in English. According to the NAAL, 5% of the adult population is Nonliterate in English.

We support K-12 reform efforts, including No Child Left Behind, but research has demonstrated that efforts to increase children's literacy skills fail unless there is an adult literacy component to the program. The best predictor of a child's academic achievement is the educational attainment of his/her primary caregiver. Children whose parents read and read with them are positioned for success in school and in life. You can not make dramatic improvements in the literacy skills of children unless you ensure that their parents have adequate literacy skills as well.

Question:

Doesn't this report prove that immigration is really the cause of adult illiteracy in the U.S.?

Answer:

The NAAL indicates that 5% of the adult population is Nonliterate in English. According to a study released by the Pew Hispanic Center in 2005, legal immigrants enter the country at varied levels of literacy skill. While it is true that 25% of legal immigrants have less than a high school diploma, it also is true that 25% have a high school diploma, and that 50% have some college education or a bachelor's degree. The percent of legal immigrants that have a bachelor's degree actually exceeds the percent of native-born Americans who have a college degree.

Immigrants must be given the opportunity to acquire English proficiency in order to ensure that American society takes full advantage of the skills of the immigrant population.

Question:

Is it possible for the U.S. to achieve a 100% literate population?

Answer:

Not in the foreseeable future. There are too many factors that contribute to functional illiteracy in the U.S. Efforts to reform the public school system and to control illegal immigration will help, but will not address the current adult population in need of additional literacy instruction.

Also, an unintended consequence of K-12 reform has been increasing numbers of out-of-school youth who do not have either the credentials or adequate enough literacy skills to enter the workforce. These youth have limited educational opportunities and many come to adult literacy programs for instruction.

Question:

What else do you want me to know about the report or this issue?

Answer:

The issue of adult literacy is correlated with every other important economic, humanitarian, and social issue that we face in the U.S. today. Adults with adequate literacy skills are better equipped to be parents, workers, and citizens. They are economically self-sufficient and they vote! It is in the best interests of society at large to invest in adult literacy programs, so that all adults who want to acquire or improve their literacy skills have the opportunity to participate in quality instruction.

[In your community, illustrate the correlations between whatever issue is topical, timely, and in the media to the issue of adult literacy and explain how your program is a part of the solution. Use the ProLiteracy Worldwide fact sheets to make your case.]