



National Coalition for Literacy

OVERVIEW

More than 36 million adults in America struggle to read. Low adult literacy in reading, writing, and numeracy costs billions of dollars in lost revenue and increases costs for health care, corrections, welfare, and other major social issues. According to the PIAAC (Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies) study¹ released in 2013, the United States ranked in the bottom third of 24 surveyed countries for adult skills in literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments.

Why literacy? Why not focus on health, workforce development, or poverty relief? The answer is simple—adult literacy intersects with all of these. We won't solve these socioeconomic problems unless we build a more literate adult population. Adult basic education programs bring a powerful return on investment, impacting the lives of Americans, their families, and communities. Adult basic education helps adults break cycles of intergenerational poverty and illiteracy by providing adults the skills they need to succeed as workers, parents, and citizens. Research shows that better-educated parents raise better-educated, more successful children who are less likely to end up in poverty or prison².

Adult education has a critical need for services. A decline in federal and state funding in the last 10 years has resulted in programs serving only a fraction of the adults in need. Currently, two-thirds of programs are struggling with long student waiting lists. At the present levels of public funding, less than 10 percent of adults in need are receiving services.

THE ISSUE: K-12 EDUCATION

There is a lot of focus on how early childhood education and the Common Core State Standards in K-12 are meant to better prepare students for success in college, career, and life. But research shows that focusing on educating kids without adequately addressing adults will not solve the skills gap. Children whose parents have low literacy levels have a 72 percent chance of being at the lowest reading levels themselves³. These children are more likely to get poor grades, display behavioral problems, have high absentee rates, repeat school years, or drop out. Low-literate parents who improve their own skills are more likely to have a positive impact on their children's educational achievements.

The Issue: Health Literacy

An excess of \$230 billion a year in health care costs is linked to low adult literacy skills⁴. Nearly half of American adults have difficulty understanding and using health information. Lack of understanding impedes adults' abilities to make appropriate health decisions and increases the likelihood that they'll incur higher health costs. When one accounts for the future costs of low health literacy to taxpayers, the real present-day cost of low health literacy is in the range of \$1.6 trillion to \$3.6 trillion².

THE ISSUE: JOBS

There has been much discussion lately about the "skills gap," or disconnect between available jobs and qualified workers. We cannot have a conversation about improving our country's workforce without first talking about the long-term economic impact of low literacy. Individuals at the lowest literacy and numeracy levels have a higher rate of unemployment and lower wages than the national average. Low literacy costs the U.S. \$225 billion or more each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment.

THE ISSUE: HIGH SCHOOL EQUIVALENCY/CAREER AND COLLEGE READINESS

High school dropout rates are staggering. Every year, one in three young adults—more than 1.2 million—drop out of high school. Recent data shows that nearly 30 percent of adults with household incomes at or below the federal poverty line do not have a high school credential⁵. The key to financial success is a viable career path and adequate education to seek meaningful, family-supporting wages. The value to our economy in additional wages and the reduction in costs for various support programs is estimated at more than \$200 billion a year.

THE ISSUE: IMMIGRANTS

About 2 million immigrants come to the U.S. each year seeking better jobs and better lives. About 50 percent of them lack high school education and proficient English language skills, severely limiting their access to jobs and job training, college, and citizenship. This increases their vulnerability to unemployment and living in poverty. Not only are the adults at risk, but so are their children. Poverty in immigrant populations adds to the strain on the U.S. society, which is already dealing with a significant percentage of impoverished citizens.

THE ISSUE: CORRECTIONAL EDUCATION

One in every 100 U.S. adults 16 and older is in prison or jail (about 2.2 million in 2014⁶). Seventy-five percent of state prison inmates and 59 percent of federal prison inmates did not complete high school or can be classified as low literate. Ninety-five percent of those incarcerated are reintegrated into our communities. It is hard for them to find jobs when already burdened with a prison record, but it is nearly impossible when they lack basic literacy and technology skills. Research shows that inmates who are educated are 43 percent less likely to return to prison⁷. Further, the employment rate for those released was 13 percent higher for those who received education⁷.

THE ISSUE: TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LITERACY

To be successful in today's digital world, literacy goes beyond being able to read and write. Digital literacy includes the ability to use technology such as computers, smartphones, and the Internet—and low-literate Americans are disproportionately finding themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide. We are now not only looking at equity of access to technology, but also at how people are able to use that access. As a result we now are referring to the digital use divide, emphasizing how important it is for adults to know how to use digital access to find information, apply for jobs or driver's licenses, bank online, access social networks, and protect their personal information. While national efforts to address affordable access to information technology and broadband are being achieved, efforts to improve e-skills are struggling to keep pace with demand. Learning basic skills is essential for all adults.

SUMMARY

This information is meant to stimulate thought and increase your awareness of the critical issue of low adult basic skills in the United States. We encourage you to respond to our questions, and urge you to address low adult basic skills, including English language acquisition, in the United States. Please [click here](#) to take a few moments to answer our brief survey with your responses and comments.

Sources:

¹ OECD.org - PIAAC Survey of Adult Skills

² National Council for Adult Learning

³ National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER)

⁴ American Journal of Public Health

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics

⁶ U.S. Department of Justice

⁷ Rand Report: *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education*