

NAAL Results Demonstrate Need for Adult Basic Education

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The National Center for Education Statistics released the findings of the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) on December 15, 2003. At that time, the news for adult literacy educators about the conditions of adult literacy in the United States was mixed. The percentage of adults who scored at the Below Basic level for Prose literacy (i.e., the knowledge and skills required to search, comprehend, and use information from continuous texts such as news articles and instructional materials) was unchanged—at 14 percent—from the National Adult Literacy Survey, which was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics in 1992. The percentage of adults that scored at the Below Basic level for Document literacy (i.e., the knowledge and skills need to search, comprehend, and use document materials such as job applications, bus schedules, maps, and food labels), however, decreased from 14 to 12 percent. Those who scored at the same level for Quantitative literacy (i.e., the knowledge and skills needed to identify and perform computations, either alone or sequentially, using numbers embedded in printed materials, such as a checkbook or an order form; see Sidebar) decreased from 26 to 22 percent. It is not clear if these changes were due to demographic changes in the adult basic education (ABE) population over the past decade of the 1990s, or to ABE programs' success in improving the literacy skills of adults. The results of the NAAL – the most recent and comprehensive assessment of adults literacy skills -- made it clear, that millions of American adults yet need to improve their literacy skills.

The NAAL measured the English literacy skills of American adults ages 16 and older who were living in households and prisons. A nationally representative sample of 19,714 adults participated in this study. Literacy is defined as “using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one’s goals, and to develop one’s knowledge and potential.” The tasks used to assess literacy were designed to be similar to those that adults encounter in their daily lives—everything from completing job applications to determining the appropriate amount to tip a restaurant waiter.

Adults without a high school degree or GED represent 15 percent of the NAAL population, but a little more than half (55 percent) of the adults in the lowest prose literacy level (Below Basic). In sheer number, this is a population of 30 million adults. Nearly half of the adults in this category (46%) report having one or more disabilities (e.g., vision or hearing problem, learning disability). million adults comprised the population most likely to be served by ABE programs.



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Five percent of U.S. adults, about 11 million people, were termed "nonliterate" in English, meaning that the NAAL interviewers could not communicate with them or that the respondents were unable to answer a minimum number of interview questions. Approximately seven million of these individuals were literate in Spanish or another language. The remaining four

Hispanic adults are dramatically over-represented in the group of adults having Below Basic proficiency for prose literacy. While Hispanic adults comprise only 12 percent of the U.S. adult population, they represent 39 percent of those having Below Basic prose literacy proficiency. And while those adults who report having spoken Spanish prior to entering school represent only eight percent of the population, more than four times as many--35 percent--are Below Basic proficiency for prose literacy.

Another Below-Basic proficiency group that is over-represented consists of those adults who either have not attended, or have not completed, high school. While such adults make up only 15 percent of the population, they represent more than half--55 percent--of those having Below Basic prose literacy proficiency.

The NAAL results demanded a renewed effort to invigorate and support ABE programs throughout the nation. Unfortunately, however, the federal government has ignored this call, devoting both attention and education dollars to K-12 education. There is little evidence that the Obama administration is concerned with the literacy skills of adults, despite the President's support for continuing education through the American Graduation Initiative (www.whitehouse.gov, 2009). One result of this lack of appropriate and focus attention to adult basic education is that millions of adults whose literacy skills are insufficient risk being left behind in a rapidly-expanding global economy. Today's workplace demands that adults upgrade their literacy skills repeatedly and efficiently to remain employed and productive. Despite limited resources, ABE programs are effective in helping adults learn to read. Adults who have earned a GED, for example, have similar literacy skills to those who have completed high school. Successfully completing an ABE program gives hope to millions of adult learners that they will be able to provide for their families, can assist their children with homework, and can participate as informed citizens within their communities.

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