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To Read or Not to Read: The Enduring Question of Low Adult Literacy in America

Daniel A. Wagner

University of Pennsylvania, wagner@literacy.upenn.edu

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Abstract

In 1990, America's governors reached a historic consensus on a set of national educational goals as targets for the year 2000. Among these national goals was that "... every adult American shall be literate." While this goal was widely applauded by those in the literacy community, much more national attention (and nearly 15 times the budgetary resources) has been devoted to the other goals that focus almost exclusively on improving the formal K-12 school system. Now, with the new Adult Education Act, welfare-reform legislation pending in Congress, and renewed debate over the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the troubling (and enduring) question of low-literate Americans is back in the news.

Disciplines

Adult and Continuing Education | Education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Educational Methods | Language and Literacy Education

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COMMENTARY

To Read or Not To Read

The Enduring Question Of Low Adult Literacy In America

By Daniel A. Wagner

October 25, 1995

In 1990, America's governors reached a historic consensus on a set of national educational goals as targets for the year 2000. Among these national goals was that " ... every adult American shall be literate." While this goal was widely applauded by those in the literacy community, much more national attention (and nearly 15 times the budgetary resources) has been devoted to the other goals that focus almost exclusively on improving the formal K-12 school system. Now, with the new Adult Education Act, welfare-reform legislation pending in Congress, and renewed debate over the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, the troubling (and enduring) question of low-literate Americans is back in the news. [← Back to Story](#)

The relative lack of attention to adult-literacy needs is even more shocking when we consider that the estimated population of adults in need of retraining, up-skilling, or developing even the most basic literacy skills is estimated to be about the same as that of the entire national school-age population, about 40 million to 50 million people. This striking contrast between resources allocated and population needs is one of the best-kept secrets in American education today.

In the 1960s, the United States was widely considered to be one of the most literate countries in the world, with a United Nations-listed "literacy rate" of nearly 99 percent--this in contrast to many developing countries with rates of 50 percent or lower. Yet in 1993, the first report from the federally funded National Adult Literacy Survey, the most comprehensive study of its kind, painted a different picture. The so-called good news was that nearly 95 percent of adult Americans could read at a 4th-grade level or better, showing that illiteracy in its most basic form was relatively low. The bad news was that nearly half of all adult Americans scored in the lowest two levels of literacy, levels that the National Education Goals Panel has stated are well below what American workers need to be competitive in the global economy.

Although the literacy-survey findings made headlines, research shows that we are making relatively little progress in achieving a fully literate society. The survey indicated that nearly 25 percent of America's adults with an average of 10 years of formal schooling had 4th-grade literacy skills (or lower). Among urban minority groups, fewer than 50 percent of the children complete 10th grade. Low achievement in schools and early dropping out, along with the increased flow of poorly educated immigrants, fill the rolls of low-literate American adults at least as fast as adult-education programs try to empty them through remediation and retraining. In other words, low literacy must now be seen as a chronic feature of the American educational landscape, with all the well-known statistical relationships with increased school failure, lower worker productivity, crime, and dependence on welfare.

As in the other educational sectors, adult-literacy educators feel underfunded, undersupported, and often misunderstood by government agencies. At the same time, such agencies and the public wring their

hands at this "problem" which will simply not go away. Yet, the last several years have yielded new approaches to this once-intractable problem.

Let me give a few brief examples of change and innovation in this once-moribund field. Research has now conclusively demonstrated that the income of American adults goes up substantially for each level of literacy attained; and furthermore that income differences between ethnic and racial groups tend to disappear when literacy and education factors are held constant. We now know that well-designed and targeted adult-literacy programs can help participants achieve higher rates of employment, wages, and earnings and decrease their reliance on public assistance.

We also know that effective literacy teaching requires matching appropriate instructional techniques with the different learning styles and needs of adult students, and, where possible, that basic-skills instruction should be oriented toward workplace literacy needs. Thus, state and federal resources should be shifted to incorporate more extensive diagnostic testing (including tests for eyesight, hearing, and learning disabilities) in literacy and basic-skills programs, and learners should be identified according to instructionally relevant variables, rather than the still-common "one size fits all" approach. Furthermore, recent studies have shown that employer incentives, such as increased pay for developing literacy skills, can lead to greater participation in literacy-education programs, increased skills and earnings, and even improved company productivity.

No discussion of today's literacy problems can ignore the approximately 12 million to 14 million adults who have limited proficiency in English. Each year federal, state, and local agencies serve approximately 1.8 million English-as-a-second-language adults, about half the total participation in adult-literacy education in the United States. Yet, esl instructional programs are often poorly tailored to learner profiles and culture-specific interests. Family-literacy programs can be more attractive than regular adult-basic-education programs for many low-income families, in part because they provide services such as child care; nonetheless, more specialized training is required for family-literacy instructors who will be involved with teaching both young children and adults. Of course, one major obstacle to change in adult-literacy instruction is that the large majority of the teaching staff (87 percent in 1993) is part-time (often volunteers with high turnover); we need to invert this proportion and provide enhanced professional-development opportunities.

Finally, technology holds enormous promise for the future because it reduces the isolation that many teachers and students experience, increases access to high-quality materials and emerging research, and helps deliver innovative instructional and staff-development approaches. The 1993 report from the Congressional Office of Technology Assessment, "Adult Literacy and New Technologies," found that technology already exists in businesses, homes, schools, colleges, and libraries that could easily be shared or used in partnership with adult-literacy programs, but it rarely is. The National Center on Adult Literacy's own national survey and research suggest that federal and state funding should be targeted specifically for technology purchase and accompanying staff development, and that such expenses would result in large cost efficiencies in the near future.

Policymakers are increasingly faced with difficult choices on how to spend "social dollars." Awareness of adult literacy as a social issue has risen since 1980, and enrollment in programs has increased as well, but efforts to improve adult literacy have not brought the dramatic gains hoped for by policymakers, the literacy community, or the public.

America's literacy problems and needs are growing, not declining. While government investments in adult education climbed in the last decade, current federal legislative proposals are scheduled to cut back on adult-literacy education just when the field is beginning to reinvigorate itself through innovation.

Given its economic and social importance and its impact in terms of the effect parents' education has on children's learning in schools the time has come to help more adults to read, and to be readers.

Daniel A. Wagner is the director of the National Center on Adult Literacy and a professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. The research on which this essay is based is from an NCAL report titled "Adult Literacy: The Next Generation." The NCAL is supported principally by funding from the U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this paper go not necessarily reflect the views or policies of any public or private agency.

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