

Executive Summary from

# ADULT LITERACY in Washington

Results of the  
National Adult Literacy Survey

Lynn B. Jenkins and Irwin S. Kirsch



Table B3.14: Reasons for high school noncompletion among those born in the United States and foreignborn

Reason	Percent	Number	Percent	Number
Did not graduate	24	104	22	104
Did not attend	12	52	12	52
Did not finish	12	52	12	52
Did not enroll	12	52	12	52
Did not attend	12	52	12	52
Did not finish	12	52	12	52
Did not enroll	12	52	12	52
Did not attend	12	52	12	52
Did not finish	12	52	12	52
Did not enroll	12	52	12	52

Why Do We Need to Literate?

The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) is a national survey of the literacy skills of the adult population in the United States. The survey was conducted in 1992 and 1993. The results of the survey are presented in this report.

The survey found that the majority of the adult population in the United States is literate. However, there are significant differences in literacy skills across different groups. For example, the literacy skills of the foreign-born population are generally lower than those of the native-born population. The literacy skills of the low-income population are also generally lower than those of the high-income population.

The survey also found that literacy skills are important for many aspects of life. For example, literacy skills are important for finding a job, understanding a contract, and understanding a prescription. Literacy skills are also important for participating in civic life and for understanding the news.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### *Adult Literacy in Washington*

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in Washington based on the results of the State Adult Literacy Survey, an important research project in which 12 states assessed the literacy skills of their adult populations. The project, conducted in 1992, is a component of the National Adult Literacy Survey, a large-scale study funded by the U.S. Department of Education and administered by Educational Testing Service.

Many past studies of adult literacy have tried to count the number of “illiterates” in this nation, thereby treating literacy as a condition that individuals either do or do not have. We believe that such efforts are inherently arbitrary and misleading. They are also damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.

The Washington State Adult Literacy Survey, like the National Adult Literacy Survey of which it is a part, is based on a different definition of literacy and therefore follows a different approach to measuring it. The aim of this survey is to characterize adults’ literacy skills in English based on their performance on diverse tasks that reflect the types of materials and demands they encounter in their daily lives.

To gather information on the literacy skills of adults in Washington, trained staff interviewed selected individuals age 16 and older during the first eight months of 1992. These participants were randomly chosen to represent the adult population in the state as a whole. In total, more than 1,200 adults in Washington were surveyed, representing approximately 3.7 million adults statewide.

Each survey participant was asked to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of varied literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, employment, income, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy. Based on their responses to the survey tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three scales, each ranging from 0 to 500. The score points along these scales reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. To provide a way to examine the distribution of performance within various subpopulations of interest, five levels of proficiency were defined along each scale: Level 1 (0 to 225), Level 2 (226 to 275), Level 3 (276 to 325), Level 4 (326 to 375), and Level 5 (376 to 500).

The full report offers a comprehensive look at the results of the Washington survey. It describes the average literacy proficiencies and the levels of proficiency demonstrated by adults in this state, compared with individuals in the region and nation, and explores connections between literacy and an array of variables. Some of the major findings are highlighted in the pages that follow.

#### **Profiles of Adult Literacy in Washington**

- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of adults in Washington were higher than those of adults in the West and nationwide. In all three populations—the state, region, and nation—average scores were either in the high end of the Level 2 range (226 to 275) or the low end of the Level 3 range (276 to 325).
- Ten to 11 percent of the adults in Washington demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiency (Level 1). Though all adults in this level displayed limited skills, their characteristics are diverse. Many adults in this level were successful in performing simple, routine tasks involving brief and uncomplicated texts and documents. For example, they were able to total the entries on a deposit slip, locate the time or place of a meeting on a form, and identify a piece of specific information in a brief news article. Others did not perform these types of tasks successfully, however, and some had such limited skills that they were unable to respond to much of the survey.
- The composition of the Level 1 population differs in some important respects from the state population as a whole. For example, 51 percent of the Washington residents who performed in Level 1 on the prose literacy scale were born outside the United States—more than four times the

proportion of foreign-born adults in the state as a whole. Just 51 percent had completed high school or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or attended a postsecondary institution, compared with 84 percent of the adults statewide. Twenty-nine to 31 percent of those in Level 1 reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities, compared with 9 percent of adults statewide.

- Twenty-one to 25 percent of the Washington respondents performed in the second lowest level of proficiency (Level 2) on each literacy scale. While their skills were more varied than those of individuals in Level 1, their repertoires were still quite limited. They were generally able to locate information in text, to make low-level inferences using printed materials, and to integrate easily identifiable pieces of information. Further, they demonstrated the ability to perform quantitative tasks that involve a single operation where the numbers are either stated or can be easily found in text. For example, adults in this level were able to calculate the total cost of a purchase or determine the difference in price between two items. They could also locate a particular intersection on a street map and enter background information on a simple form.
- Individuals in Levels 1 and 2 were sometimes, but not consistently, able to respond correctly to the more challenging literacy tasks in the assessment—those requiring higher level reading and problem-solving skills. In particular, they appeared to have considerable difficulty with tasks that required them to integrate or synthesize information from complex or lengthy texts or to perform quantitative tasks that involved two or more sequential operations and in which the individual had to set up the problem.
- Thirty-eight to 41 percent of the survey participants in Washington performed in Level 3 on each literacy scale. Respondents with skills in this level on the prose and document scales integrated information from relatively long or dense text or from documents. Those in the third level on the quantitative scale demonstrated an ability to use information in the directive to determine the appropriate arithmetic operation to be performed and to identify the quantities needed to perform that operation.
- Twenty-two to 23 percent of the respondents in Washington scored in the fourth level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy, and 4 to 6 percent attained the highest level. These adults consistently demonstrated the ability to perform the most challenging tasks in this assessment, many of which involved long and complex documents and text passages.
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. On all three scales, individuals 55 to 64 years of age and those age 65 and older had lower average scores than younger adults.
- Eighty-nine percent of the adults in Washington were born in the United States or one of its territories, and these individuals tended to display higher proficiencies in English than adults who were born abroad. Among Washington residents, the gap in average prose scores between native-born and foreign-born adults is 87 points. In the national population, foreign-born adults who had lived in this country for more than a decade outperformed more recent immigrants by roughly 20 points on each scale.
- The numbers of African American and Latino adults in Washington are too small to permit reliable proficiency estimates. In the region and nation, White adults tended to outperform African American individuals, who tended to outperform Latino individuals. White adults also outperformed Asian/Pacific Islander adults. When one controls for country of birth, the gaps in average proficiency between White and Latino adults and between White and Asian/Pacific Islander adults diminish on all three literacy scales, from 31 to 90 points in the adult population overall to between 9 and 49 points among native-born adults.

- More than half the Washington adults (52 percent) reported having lived in the state for more than 20 years, and another 14 percent had been residents for 16 to 20 years. Adults who had lived in the state for different lengths of time tended to perform similarly on the assessment.
- Washington residents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults without such conditions to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and less likely to reach the highest levels.
- The performance results for men and women in Washington did not differ on any of the literacy scales. In the region, men had higher average quantitative scores than women, and in the nation, men had higher document as well as quantitative scores than women.

### **Education and Training**

- Washington residents with relatively few years of education were more likely to perform in the lower literacy levels than those who completed high school or some postsecondary education. In fact, average literacy proficiencies rise steadily across the entire range of education levels.
- Adults in Washington had completed more years of schooling, on average, than adults in the West and the nation. Men had completed more years of schooling than women, though these groups performed comparably in the assessment. Older adults in Washington tended to have completed fewer years of schooling than younger adults. White adults had completed more schooling, on average (13 years), than African American adults (12 years).
- Washington adults who had not received a high school diploma were most likely to report that their primary reason for leaving school was a loss of interest or behavior problems, going to work or into the military, or personal or family problems.
- Half the school dropouts in Washington said they had studied for a GED or high school equivalency certificate, and 63 percent of them indicated that they had received it.
- Eleven percent of Washington residents were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey, and as a group they had significantly higher average prose and document proficiencies than adults who were not enrolled in an academic program.
- Seventy-three percent of the adults in Washington reported having completed at least some of their precollegiate or collegiate education in the state, and their average proficiencies were similar to those of adults who were educated elsewhere.
- Twelve percent of the survey respondents in the state said they were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. Individuals who had enrolled in such a course had average proficiencies in the Level 2 range.
- More than half the employed adults in Washington (53 percent) reported needing training in the use of computers in order to be more productive in their jobs. Smaller percentages reported needing training in problem solving, listening, working in teams, arithmetic, and reading. In each dimension of literacy assessed, employees who said they needed training in reading or arithmetic had lower scores, on average, than those who needed training in other areas. It should be noted, however, that employed adults had higher average proficiencies than the population as a whole. Thus, they do not represent the training needs of all those who seek to be in the workforce.

### **Employment, Economic Status, and Civic Responsibility**

- Employed adults were less likely than adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and more likely to attain the highest levels. Across

the scales, between 22 and 30 percent of the employed adults performed in Levels 1 and 2, in contrast to 43 to 59 percent of adults who were employed or out of the labor force.

- Washington residents who reported being in professional, technical, or managerial positions in their current or most recent jobs had higher average literacy scores than those in other types of jobs. On the quantitative scale, for example, their average score was 331, compared with 305 for those in sales or clerical jobs, 289 for those in craft or service jobs, and 277 for adults in labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions.
- Washington residents were asked if they had ever been passed over for a job or promotion because of limited literacy skills. Ninety-three percent of the respondents said they had not been denied a job or promotion for such reasons. Their average proficiencies were significantly higher than those of adults who said they had been denied a job or promotion because of limited literacy skills.
- On each literacy scale, adults who performed in the higher levels tended to have worked more weeks in the past year than individuals in the lower levels. In fact, the average number of weeks worked climbs steadily across the literacy levels.
- Across the scales, Washington adults with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$220 to \$262. In contrast, respondents in Level 3 earned \$373 to \$388, while those in Level 5 earned between \$580 and \$657. Similarly, the median annual household income reported by adults in the highest proficiency levels was far higher than that of adults in the lowest levels.
- From 18 to 21 percent of Washington residents designated as either poor or near poor demonstrated skills in Level 1 on each literacy scale. In contrast, only 6 to 8 percent of those designated not poor performed in this level. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor adults were considerably lower than the scores of adults who were not poor.
- Among Washington residents, voting appears to be related to literacy proficiency. On all three scales, the average literacy scores of state residents who said they had voted in a recent state or national election were significantly higher than those of nonvoters.

### **Language Use and Literacy Practices**

- Most adults in Washington (88 percent) reported having learned only English before beginning school. The vast majority said they understand (97 percent) and speak (96 percent) English well or very well; slightly smaller proportions described themselves as reading (94 percent) and writing (91 percent) English well or very well. Washington residents who described themselves as not writing English well (or at all) had literacy scores that were, on average, 96 to 117 points lower than those of adults who said they write English well or very well.
- Almost all survey respondents in Washington (94 percent) reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, or the government from nonprint media—that is, from television or radio. A smaller percentage (83 percent) said they get much of their information from print media, such as newspapers or magazines. Sixty-four percent said they get some or a lot of their information from friends or relatives. Those who get some or a lot of information from nonprint media earned higher average scores on all three scales than those who do not. Additionally, those who get some or a lot of information from print media had higher average proficiencies than those who get little or no information from these sources.
- Half the adults in the state said they read a newspaper every day, while another 23 percent said they do so at least once a week. Eight percent reported reading a newspaper less than once a week, and 5 percent said they never read a newspaper.
- Fifteen percent of the Washington respondents said they do not read any magazines in English on a regular basis. Their average literacy scores were considerably lower than the scores of those who

read at least one magazine regularly. Approximately 10 percent of the adults in Washington said they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their scores were considerably lower, on average, than the scores of adults who had read at least one. Those who reported having read at least one book were most likely to say they had read reference books, manuals, or fiction.

- Twenty-six percent of the adults in Washington reported that they never use a library, and another 34 percent said they do so only once or twice a year. In general, individuals who reported frequent use of the library outperformed less frequent users.
- Virtually all Washington residents (96 percent) said they watch some television every day, although 23 percent said they spend no more than an hour on this activity. Twenty-four percent of the state's residents reported watching four or more hours of television each day. Individuals who watch the least television outperformed those who watch the most.
- There are large differences in prose proficiency (54 to 144 points) between Washington residents who read and write prose materials every day, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who never engage in these activities. Similarly, the average document proficiencies of individuals who use reference books, catalogs, or lists every day or a few times a week are far higher (107 to 109 points) than the scores of individuals who never use these materials. Finally, in the dimension of quantitative literacy, adults who frequently use mathematics outperformed those who rarely or never do so.

## Reflections on the Results

In reflecting on the results of this study, many readers will undoubtedly seek an answer to a fundamental question: Are the outcomes satisfactory? That is, are the distributions of prose, document, and quantitative proficiency observed in this survey adequate to ensure individual opportunities for all adults, to increase worker productivity, or to strengthen America's competitiveness around the world?

Because it is impossible to say precisely what literacy skills are essential for individuals to succeed in this or any other society, the results of the State and National Adult Literacy Surveys provide no firm answers to such questions. As the authors examined the survey data and deliberated on the results with members of the advisory committees, however, several observations and concerns emerged.

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is that such large percentages of adults nationwide performed in the lowest levels (Levels 1 and 2) of prose, document, and quantitative literacy. In and of itself, this may not indicate a serious problem. After all, the majority of adults who demonstrated limited skills described themselves as reading or writing English well, and relatively few said they get a lot of assistance from others in performing everyday literacy tasks. Perhaps these individuals are able to meet most of the literacy demands they encounter currently at work, at home, and in their communities.

Yet, some argue that lower literacy skills mean a lower quality of life and more limited employment opportunities. As noted in a recent report from the American Society for Training and Development, "The association between skills and opportunity for individual Americans is powerful and growing.... Individuals with poor skills do not have much to bargain with; they are condemned to low earnings and limited choices."<sup>1</sup>

The data from this survey appear to support such views. On each of the literacy scales, adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force and who earned low wages tended to demonstrate far more limited skills than those who were employed and who earned high wages. Adults who rarely or never read displayed lower average proficiencies than those who were at least occasional readers. Moreover, the average literacy scores of individuals who received food stamps and who were poor or near poor were much lower than those of their more affluent peers.

Literacy is not the only factor that contributes to how we live our lives, however. Some adults who were out of work or who earned low wages performed relatively well in the assessment, while some

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<sup>1</sup>A.J. Carnevale and L.J. Gainer. (1989). *The Learning Enterprise*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

full-time workers or adults who earned high wages did relatively poorly. Thus, having advanced literacy skills is not necessarily associated with individual opportunities.

Still, literacy can be thought of as a currency in this society. Just as adults with little money have difficulty meeting their basic needs, those with limited literacy skills are likely to find it more challenging to pursue their goals—whether these involve job advancement, consumer decision making, citizenship, or other aspects of their lives. Even if adults who performed in the lowest literacy levels are not experiencing difficulties at present, they may be at risk as the nation’s economy and social fabric continue to change.

Beyond these personal consequences, what implications are there for society when so many individuals display limited skills? The answer to this question is elusive. Still, it seems apparent that a nation in which large numbers of citizens display limited literacy skills has fewer resources with which to meet its goals and objectives, whether these are social, political, civic, or economic.

If large percentages of adults had to do little more than be able to sign their name on a form or locate a single fact in a newspaper or table, then the levels of literacy seen in this survey might not warrant concern. We live in a nation, however, where both the volume and variety of written information are growing and where increasing numbers of citizens are expected to be able to read, understand, and use these materials.

Historians remind us that during the last 200 years, our nation’s literacy skills have increased dramatically in response to new requirements and expanded opportunities for social and economic growth. Today we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there have also been periods of imbalance—times when demands seemed to surpass levels of attainment.

In recent years, our society has grown more technologically advanced and the roles of formal institutions have expanded. As this has occurred, many have argued that there is a greater need for all individuals to become more literate and for a larger proportion to develop advanced skills.<sup>3</sup> Growing numbers of individuals are expected to be able to attend to multiple features of information in lengthy and sometimes complex displays, to compare and contrast information, to integrate information from various parts of a text or document, to generate ideas and information based on what they read, and to apply arithmetic operations sequentially to solve a problem.

The results from this and other surveys, however, indicate that many adults do not demonstrate these levels of proficiency. Further, the continuing process of demographic, social, and economic change within this country could lead to a more divided society along both racial and socioeconomic lines. Already there is evidence of a widening division. According to the report *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!*, over the past 15 years the gap in earnings between professionals and clerical workers has grown from 47 to 86 percent while the gap between white collar workers and skilled tradespeople has risen from 2 to 37 percent. At the same time, earnings for college educated males 24 to 34 years of age have increased by 10 percent while earnings for those with high school diplomas have declined by 9 percent. Moreover, the poverty rate for African American families is nearly three times that for White families.<sup>4</sup> One child in five is born into poverty, and for minority populations, this rate approaches one in two.

In 1990, President Bush and the nation’s governors, including Governor Clinton, adopted the goal that *all* of America’s adults be literate by the year 2000. The responsibility for meeting this objective must, in the end, be shared among individuals, groups, and organizations throughout our society. Programs that serve adult learners cannot be expected to solve the literacy problem alone, and neither can the schools. Other institutions—ranging from the largest and most complex government agency, to large and small businesses, to the family—all have a role to play in ensuring that adults who need or wish to improve their literacy skills have the opportunity to do so. It is also important that individuals themselves

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<sup>2</sup>L.C. Stedman and C.F. Kaestle. (1991). “Literacy and Reading Performance in the United States from 1880 to the Present,” in C.F. Kaestle et al., *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press. T Snyder (ed.). (1993). *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Department of Labor. (1992, April), *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance*. Washington, DC: The Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). R.L. Venezky, C.F. Kaestle, and A. Sum. (1987, January). *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America’s Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

<sup>4</sup>National Center on Education and the Economy. (1990, June). *America’s Choice: High Skills or Low Wages! The Report of The Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce*. p. 20.

come to realize the value of literacy in their lives and to recognize the benefits associated with having better skills. Only then will more adults in this nation develop the literacy resources they need to function in society, to achieve their goals, and to develop their knowledge and potential.