



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adult Literacy in Florida

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in Florida 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 assessment 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 potentially damaging, in that they fail to acknowledge both the complexity of the literacy problem and the range of solutions needed to address it.

The Florida 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 nationwide, and in 11 of the states that participated in the State Adult Literacy Survey, 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 each state and in the nation as a whole. Because the Florida survey could not be administered at this time, it was conducted during the Fall of 1992. In total, 1,807 adults in Florida were surveyed, representing approximately 10.3 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 Florida 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 Florida

- Twenty-one to 23 percent of the adults in Florida demonstrated skills in the lowest level of prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies (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 schedule, 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, 37 percent of the Florida residents who performed in Level 1 on the prose literacy scale were born outside the United States — more than twice proportion of foreign-born adults in the state population (16 percent). Individuals in Level 1 on the quantitative scale were less likely than those statewide to have attended some postsecondary education (12 percent compared with 41 percent). Across the scales, 27 to 34 percent of those in the lowest level were age 65 or older, and 27 to 30 percent have physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities.
- Twenty-seven to 31 percent of the Florida respondents performed in the next higher 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 in which the individual had to set up the problem and then carry out two or more sequential operations.
- Thirty to 33 percent of the survey participants in Florida performed in Level 3 on the literacy scales. 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 Level 3 on the quantitative scale demonstrated an ability to determine the appropriate arithmetic operation based on information contained in the directive, and to identify the quantities needed to perform that operation.
- Fourteen to 17 percent of the respondents in Florida scored in the fourth level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy. Two to 4 percent attained the highest level (Level 5); 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.
- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of adults in Florida were not significantly different from those of adults in the South and nationwide.
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. Across the literacy scales, 56 to 63 percent of the Florida residents age 55 to 64 and 61 to 78 percent of those age 65 or older performed in the two lowest levels. Florida adults age 65 and older were less likely than their same-age counterparts in the region and nation to demonstrate proficiencies in the lowest level on each literacy scale. On the prose scale, for example, just 31 percent of Florida residents in this age group performed in Level 1, compared with 52 percent of Southern adults age 65 or older.

- Florida residents who were born in the United States performed far better in the assessment, on average, than did foreign-born individuals. Across the literacy scales, about half (44 to 51 percent) of the foreign-born adults in the state performed in Level 1 compared with 16 to 19 percent of the native-born adults.
- African American and Latino adults were more likely than White adults to perform in the lowest two literacy levels and less likely to attain the two highest levels. Across the three literacy scales, 12 to 14 percent of White Florida respondents performed in Level 1, compared with 48 to 53 percent of African American respondents and 45 to 48 percent of Latino respondents. Among native-born respondents in Florida, Latino adults had significantly higher average proficiencies than African American adults.
- Nearly half the adults in Florida (48 percent) indicated that they had lived in the state for 16 or more years, while 29 percent had lived in the state for six to 15 years, and 23 percent had resided in the state for five years or less. There were no significant differences in average literacy scores among adults who had lived in the state for various lengths of time.
- Florida residents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults in the population as a whole to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and less likely to reach the highest levels.
- There were no statistically significant differences between the average proficiencies of men and women living in Florida on any of the three literacy scales.

Education and Training

- Literacy skills rise steadily across the entire range of education levels. For example, Florida adults with zero to eight years of education had an average prose score of 178, compared with 235 for those who had finished nine to 12 years of schooling and 274 for those who had earned a high school diploma but went no further. Individuals who had attended a postsecondary institution but not earned a degree had an average prose score of 290, compared with 308 for those with a two-year degree and 313 for those with a four-year degree.
- A large percentage of the adults in Florida reported that they had not attended school in the state (43 percent). On each literacy scale, adults who had attended primary, elementary, or secondary school in Florida performed comparably to those who had not.

- Approximately 10 percent of the survey respondents in the state were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. Individuals who had enrolled in such courses had lower average prose proficiencies than those who had not.
- When Florida respondents were asked what one reason would most likely prevent them from enrolling in a course or training program, slightly more than one-third cited a lack of time or interest.
- Inability to pay, lack of information about available courses or programs, lack of child care, lack of convenient times, and lack of transportation were cited by 3 to 17 percent of the state's respondents as the primary reason for not enrolling in a course or training program.
- Those who cited lack of child care or inability to pay as the main reason for not enrolling tended to have the lowest proficiencies, and those who cited lack of convenient times tended to have the highest.
- Differences in the average number of years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. White Florida residents had completed more schooling, on average (12.7 years), than African American (10.9 years) and Latino residents (10.9 years). Adults who were born in the United States had finished more schooling in this country (12.5 years, on average) than those born abroad (11 years). It is interesting to note that older adults in Florida had completed more years of schooling than their counterparts in the region and nation.
- Twelve percent of the foreign-born adults in Florida said they had not completed any schooling before coming to this country. Nationwide, immigrants who have lived in the United States for 10 years or less were more likely than those who have lived here for more than a decade to have completed some schooling before moving to this country. Among foreign-born adults who have lived in the United States for less than five years, for example, 96 percent reported having completed some schooling before coming to this country.
- On each literacy scale, the average scores of school dropouts in Florida who had studied for a GED or high school equivalency diploma were 47 to 54 points higher than those of dropouts who had not participated in such a program.
- Florida residents who were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey had higher literacy proficiencies, on average, than adults who were not enrolled in an academic program. Nationwide, 38 percent of the enrollees said their goal was a four-year college degree; smaller percentages cited other goals.

- When adults in the state were asked to indicate the best location for taking a course or training program, the sites most often identified were a local community college (46 percent) and an adult education center (24 percent).

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 literacy scales, between 37 and 52 percent of the employed adults in Florida performed in Levels 1 and 2, compared with 57 to 69 percent of residents who were unemployed or out of the labor force.
- Florida residents who reported working in professional, technical, or managerial positions in their current or most recent jobs had higher average literacy scores than those in other types of occupations, including sales or clerical, craft or service, or labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions.
- Adults who performed in the higher levels on each literacy scale had worked more weeks in the past year, on average, than individuals in the lower levels.
- Across the scales, Florida adults with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$188 to \$194, while those in Level 3 earned about \$350 to \$358. For those in Level 5, the financial rewards were even greater; adults who performed in this level on the prose scale, for example, had median weekly earnings of \$573. 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.
- Thirty-one to 34 percent of Florida residents designated as either poor or near poor demonstrated skills in the lowest level on each literacy scale. In contrast, just 11 to 14 percent of the residents classified as not poor scored in this level. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor adults are considerably lower than those of adults who were not poor.
- Nearly half the food stamp recipients in Florida (46 to 48 percent) performed in Level 1 on the prose, document, and quantitative literacy scales.
- Among Florida 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 state or national election in the past five years were significantly higher than those of nonvoters.

Language Use and Literacy Practices

- Most Florida residents (81 percent) reported learning only English before beginning school, and these individuals displayed higher average proficiencies in the assessment than adults who reported having learned a language other than English.
- Almost all survey respondents in Florida said they understand (95 percent) and speak (94 percent) English well or very well; slightly smaller proportions described themselves as reading (91 percent) and writing (88 percent) it well or very well. In each dimension of literacy, the average scores of these individuals were considerably higher (105 to 142 points) than those of state residents who said they do not speak, understand, read, or write English well.
- Florida residents who learned a language other than English before starting school were more likely to say they understand (94 percent) and speak (88 percent) that language well or very well than to say they read (80 percent) or write (72 percent) it well or very well.
- Approximately one-third of the Florida respondents who learned a language other than English before starting school said they had at some time enrolled in a class to learn to read and write English as a second language, and a similar percentage reported having enrolled in a course to learn to speak and understand English as a second language. More than half these enrollees had completed the course, and their average literacy scores were significantly higher than those of adults who had enrolled in a course but had not completed it.
- Twelve percent of the adults in Florida said they had not experienced early home support for literacy and learning, such as having a variety of reading materials at home, being read to, and receiving help with schoolwork. Thirty-nine to 42 percent of these individuals scored in the lowest level on each literacy scale, in contrast to just 15 to 17 percent of those who reported having one or more types of support when growing up.
- Virtually all survey respondents in Florida (96 percent) reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, and government from nonprint media — that is, from television or radio. A smaller percentage (84 percent) said they get much of their information from print media, such as newspapers or magazines; 64 percent said they get some or a lot of information from personal sources, such as friends and family. Adults who get some or a lot of information from print media earned higher average scores in the assessment than those who do not.

- About half of the adults in the state said they read a newspaper every day, and another 36 percent said they do so at least once a week. Eight percent reported never reading a newspaper, and their average prose, document, and quantitative scores were far lower than those of regular newspaper readers.
- Twenty-one percent of the Florida respondents said they do not read any magazines in English on a regular basis. Their average proficiencies were considerably lower than those of respondents who read at least one or two magazines regularly. Approximately 15 percent of the adults in Florida said they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their scores were considerably lower, on average, than those of residents who had read at least one.
- More than one-third of the adults in Florida reported that they never use a library, and another 31 percent said they do so only once or twice a year. On average, individuals who at least occasionally use the library performed better in the assessment than those who never do.
- Virtually all Florida residents (98 percent) said they watch some television every day, although 14 percent reported spending no more than an hour on this activity. Slightly more than one-third of the state's residents said they watch four or more hours of television each day. There were large performance differences between adults who watch the most television and those who watch relatively little.
- There are very large differences in prose proficiency (59 to 106 points) between Florida residents who read and write prose every day, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who never read or write these materials. Similarly, the average document scores of individuals who use documents at least a few times a week are far higher than those of respondents who do not 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 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.

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."¹

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.

It is true that some adults who were unemployed or who earned low wages performed relatively well in the assessment, and that some full-time workers or adults who earned high wages did relatively poorly. Clearly, then, literacy is not the only factor that contributes to how we live our lives or how well we do in the labor market. 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.

¹ A.J. Carnevale and L.J. Gainer. (1989). *The Learning Enterprise*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

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 be able to do little more than sign their names on forms or locate single facts in newspaper articles or tables, 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 past 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.² 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.³ 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.

² 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.

³ 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.

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.⁴ 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 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.

⁴ 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.