

# Executive Summary from ADULT LITERACY in Iowa

Results of the  
National Adult Literacy Survey

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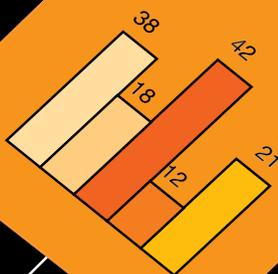


Table B3.14: Reasons for high school noncompletion among states born in the United States and foreignborn

Reason	States Born	Foreignborn
Not enough money	18%	22%
Not enough time	22%	25%
Not enough ability	25%	28%
Not enough interest	28%	31%
Not enough motivation	31%	34%
Not enough information	34%	37%
Not enough support	37%	40%
Not enough encouragement	40%	43%
Not enough help	43%	46%
Not enough resources	46%	49%
Not enough opportunities	49%	52%

Why Do We Need to Literate?

- 1. To be able to read and understand the written word.
- 2. To be able to write and communicate effectively.
- 3. To be able to solve problems and make decisions.
- 4. To be able to participate in society and the economy.
- 5. To be able to improve one's quality of life.



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## *Adult Literacy in Iowa*

This executive summary presents a portrait of adult literacy in Iowa 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.

### **Introduction**

In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted to evaluate programs that serve Iowa's adults, including the adult basic education population, GED graduates, and participants in community college continuing education programs.<sup>1</sup> The Iowa State Adult Literacy Survey adds to this important and growing body of research on adult literacy and education in this state.

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 Iowa 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 Iowa, 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, approximately 1,250 adults in Iowa were surveyed, representing approximately 2.1 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 Iowa 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 Iowa**

- Fourteen to 16 percent of the adults in Iowa 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 form, and

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<sup>1</sup>Iowa Department of Education. (1991, April). *A Study of the Impact of Iowa Community College Continuing Education Programs*. Research on Adult Basic Education. (1990, February). *What Motivates Adults to Participate in the Federal Adult Basic Education Program?* CASAS. (1993, September). *Iowa's Adult Basic Education Program: A Survey of Learner Demographics and Preliminary Skill Levels*. Iowa Department of Education. (1992, March). *What Has Happened to Iowa's GED Graduates? Executive Summary*. Iowa Department of Education. (1993, May). *Performance Indicators of Program Quality for Iowa's Adult Basic Education Programs*.

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, 38 percent of the Iowa residents who performed in Level 1 on the quantitative literacy scale had zero to eight years of education, compared with 7 percent of adults statewide. Respondents who demonstrated skills in Level 1 were much less likely to have completed high school or a General Educational Development (GED) certificate or attended a postsecondary institution (33 percent) than adults in the state population as a whole (77 percent). Half the Iowa respondents in Level 1 were age 65 or older, and almost 40 percent had physical or mental conditions that kept them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities.
- Twenty-two to 27 percent of the Iowa 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-six to 37 percent of the survey participants in Iowa 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 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.
- Twenty-one to 27 percent of the respondents in Iowa scored in the two highest levels of prose, document, and quantitative literacy (Levels 4 and 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. They were more likely than individuals in the state population as a whole to have completed high school or a GED or to have attended a postsecondary institution.
- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of adults in Iowa were comparable to those of adults living in the Midwest region and were significantly (13 to 16 points) higher than those of adults 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).
- Older adults were more likely than middle-aged and younger adults to demonstrate limited literacy skills. On the prose scale, for example, average scores rise from 290 among Iowa's 16- to 18-year-olds to 303 among 35- to 44-year-olds before declining across the older age groups (to 275 among 55- to 64-year-olds).

- The vast majority of Iowa residents were born in the United States or one of its territories. In the national population, native-born adults performed far better in the assessment, on average, than did individuals born outside the United States. Foreign-born adults who had lived in this country for more than a decade outperformed more recent immigrants.
- Ninety-six percent of the Iowa population is White. The numbers of adults in other racial/ethnic groups are too small to provide reliable proficiency estimates. Nationwide, however, 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. The average proficiencies of Latino individuals who were born in this country were higher than those of African American adults.
- Approximately three-quarters of the adults in Iowa reported having lived in the state for more than 20 years. There are no significant differences in literacy skills, on average, among adults who had lived in Iowa for varying lengths of time. Nearly three-quarters of the state's adults said it was unlikely that they would move out of the state in the next five years, while 18 percent reported that it was somewhat likely and 10 percent said it was likely. Again, there are no significant differences in performance between adults who believed they would move out of the state and those who did not.
- Iowa 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.
- In the Iowa population, there were no significant differences in the average literacy scores of men and women. Nationwide, however, men displayed higher average document and quantitative proficiencies than women.

### **Education and Training**

- Iowa residents with relatively few years of education demonstrated lower average literacy proficiencies than those who completed high school or some postsecondary education. In fact, scores rise steadily across the entire range of education levels. The average prose proficiency of those who completed 9 to 12 years of schooling was 242, for example, compared with 283 for those who earned a high school diploma but went no further, and 333 for those who had completed a four-year degree.
- There were no statistically significant differences between the average literacy scores of GED and high school graduates.
- Differences in the average years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. Though not all the differences are statistically significant, average years of schooling tend to increase from the youngest age group to the middle groups and then to decline across the older groups. Further, the more education respondents' parents had completed, the more education they themselves were likely to have completed—and the higher their literacy proficiencies were likely to be.
- Roughly one-third of the school dropouts in Iowa reported having participated in a GED or high school equivalency program. On each literacy scale, the average scores of program participants were approximately 50 points higher than those of dropouts who had not taken part in a GED program. The vast majority of program participants in Iowa were between the ages of 25 and 54.
- Eleven percent of the adults in Iowa were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey, and they had higher literacy proficiencies, on average, than adults who were not enrolled in an academic

program. Thirty-eight percent of those enrolled in a program stated that their goal was a four-year college degree.

- Six percent of the survey respondents in Iowa said they were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. These individuals performed as well as those who had not enrolled in such a course.
- Thirty-eight percent of the Iowa adults said they would not enroll in a basic skills program because they did not think they needed to improve their skills. Their average scores were higher than those of adults who cited other reasons for not enrolling. One-quarter of the Iowa respondents said they would not enroll because they did not have time, and another 12 percent said they lacked information about basic skills programs.
- Three-quarters of Iowa's survey participants agreed with the view that a state's literacy rate affects an out-of-state employer's decision to establish a location there. Their scores were, on average, higher than those of adults who disagreed. Fifty-eight percent of Iowa's adults believed that employers are obligated to provide literacy education to employees who need it. They performed similarly to adults who did not share this view.

### **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 three scales, 25 to 33 percent of the employed adults in Iowa performed in Levels 1 and 2, compared with 45 percent of the unemployed adults and roughly two-thirds of respondents who were out of the labor force. Conversely, employed adults were more likely than unemployed adults and those not in the labor force to attain Levels 4 and 5.
- Iowa 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 occupations. On the prose scale, for example, they had an average proficiency score of 330, compared with scores of 309 for those in sales or clerical positions, 286 for those in craft or service occupations, and 276 for those in labor, assembly, fishing, or farming positions.
- On each literacy scale, adults who performed in the higher levels had worked more weeks in the past year, on average, than individuals in the lower levels. Among Iowa residents, those in the three highest literacy levels reported working an average of 37 to 45 weeks in the past year, compared with only 13 to 14 weeks for individuals performing in Level 1, and 27 to 31 weeks for those in Level 2.
- Across the scales, Iowa adults with proficiencies in Levels 1 and 2 reported median weekly earnings of \$228 to \$261. In contrast, those in Level 4 earned about \$391 to \$419, while those in Level 5 earned between \$504 and \$550 each week. 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.
- Approximately half the Iowa residents who were classified as either poor or near poor demonstrated skills in the two lowest levels on each literacy scale; in contrast, 25 to 31 percent of those designated not poor performed in these levels. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor adults are considerably lower than the scores of adults who were not in poverty.

- Among Iowa residents, voting practices appear to be related to literacy proficiency. On all three scales, the average literacy proficiencies of state residents who said they had voted in a recent election are higher than those of nonvoters.

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

- The vast majority of Iowa residents (96 percent) reported that English was the only language they learned before beginning school. Nationwide, individuals who learned a language other than English as a child, either in addition to or in place of English, displayed lower average proficiencies than adults who reported having learned only English.
- Virtually all survey respondents in Iowa (98 to 99 percent) said they understand, speak, and read English well or very well; a slightly smaller proportion described themselves as writing (96 percent) well or very well. In each dimension of literacy, the average proficiencies of adults who said they do not write English well are approximately 60 points lower than those of individuals who said they write well or very well.
- Ninety-seven percent of the survey respondents in Iowa reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, or government from nonprint media—that is, from television or radio. A smaller percentage (86 percent) said they get much of their information from print media, such as newspapers or magazines. Those who get some or a lot of information from print media earned higher average scores in the assessment than those who do not.
- Slightly more than half (56 percent) of the adults in the state said they read a newspaper every day, while another 35 percent said they do so at least once a week. Four percent reported never reading a newspaper. There are no significant differences in literacy proficiency between newspaper readers and nonreaders in Iowa.
- Fourteen percent of the Iowa 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 a few magazines regularly. Similarly, 17 percent of the adults in Iowa said they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their average scores were considerably lower than those of adults who had read at least one book.
- One-third of the adults in Iowa reported that they never use a library, while 19 percent said they do so monthly and 20 percent said they do so either weekly or daily. In general, individuals who reported frequent use of the library outperformed less frequent users.
- Virtually all (98 percent) of the adults in Iowa reported watching some television every day, although 23 percent said they spend no more than an hour on this activity. Approximately one-third of the state's residents reported watching four or more hours of television each day. Individuals who watch the most television demonstrated lower average proficiencies than individuals who watch relatively little television.
- There are very large differences in prose proficiency between Iowa residents who read and write prose frequently, either for their personal use or for their jobs, and those who do not. Similarly, the average document proficiencies of individuals who use documents at least a few times a week are far higher than the scores of individuals who do not use these materials often. Finally, adults who said they frequently use mathematics tend to display better quantitative skills than 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 nationwide, surprisingly 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. 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>2</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 demonstrated far more limited skills than those who were employed, and those who earned low wages displayed far lower proficiencies than those 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 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 sign their names on forms or locate single facts in newspapers 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 last 200 years, our nation's literacy skills have increased dramatically in response to new requirements and expanded opportunities for social and economic

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<sup>2</sup>AJ Carnevale and L.J. Gainer. (1989). *The Learning Enterprise*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment and Training Administration.

growth. Today we are a better educated and more literate society than at any time in our history.<sup>3</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>4</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>5</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 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.

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<sup>3</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>4</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 Americas Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

<sup>5</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.