

## Adolescent Literacy

Millions of middle and high school students lack the literacy skills—including reading, writing, and critical thinking—that they need to succeed in college and the workplace. According to *The Nation's Report Card* fewer than one third of eighth graders read at a proficient level.<sup>1</sup>

Policymakers have directed considerable resources toward improving the skills of the nation's youngest schoolchildren, and higher scores for fourth graders indicate that these investments are paying off. However, similar investments have not been made to support the literacy needs of students in the later grades; thus, academic gains are not being sustained through secondary schooling when students need instruction in advanced literacy skills necessary to succeed with more complex content.<sup>2</sup> As a result, while fourth-grade proficiency rates on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) increased from 1998 through 2007, the percentage of eighth graders who scored at or above “proficient” declined.<sup>3</sup>

A wealth of evidence shows that intensive, high-quality instruction can help struggling readers catch up to grade level. Additionally, all students need support building their literacy skills across the content areas to succeed in high school and beyond. However, unless the nation makes a consistent investment towards delivering comprehensive reading and writing instruction throughout the pre-K–12 grade span, millions of students will continue to leave school unprepared for college, work, and the many demands of adulthood.

- Only 29 percent of America's eighth-grade public school students meet the NAEP standard of reading proficiency for their grade level.<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately eight million of the 32.5 million students in fourth through twelfth grade read below NAEP's minimum or “basic” standards for their grade level.<sup>5</sup>
- A mere 2 percent of all eighth graders read at an advanced level.<sup>6</sup>
- Between 1971 and 2004, the NAEP scores of seventeen-year-olds showed no improvement. Further, the 2005 scores of twelfth graders were generally lower than their counterparts in 1992.<sup>7</sup>
- State-administered reading tests for grades 3–12 are mainly designed to measure basic and intermediate skills, not to assess advanced, discipline specific literacy skills.<sup>8</sup>
- For many adolescent students, ongoing difficulties with reading and writing figure prominently into the decision to drop out of school.<sup>9</sup>
- About two thirds of prison inmates are high school dropouts, and one third of all juvenile offenders read below the fourth-grade level.<sup>10</sup>

- Among low-income eighth graders, just 15 percent read at or above a proficient level. Proficiency rates of economically disadvantaged students range from 11 to 33 percentage points lower than those of more affluent eighth graders.<sup>11</sup>
- About half of the incoming ninth graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level.<sup>12</sup>
- On average, minority and low-income students trail their peers by 22–28 percentage points on the reading and writing portion of NAEP. Further, nearly half of African American and Hispanic eighth graders score below basic on the NAEP reading assessment.<sup>13</sup>
- On average, African American and Hispanic twelfth-grade students read at the same level as white eighth-grade students.<sup>14</sup>
- Only 36 percent of Asian and Pacific Islander American students, 26 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students, 20 percent of Hispanic students, and 16 percent of African American twelfth graders scored at or above proficient on the National Assessment of Educational Progress in reading, compared to 43 percent of white students.<sup>15</sup>
- Adolescent ELLs are challenged with “double the work” of native English speakers; they are learning the language at the same time they are studying core content areas in English.<sup>16</sup>
- Advanced literacy across content areas is the best available predictor of students’ ability to succeed in introductory college courses.<sup>17</sup>
- High school students’ ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses.<sup>18</sup>
- Roughly one third of high school graduates are not ready to succeed in an introductory-level college writing course.<sup>19</sup>
- At the nation’s four-year colleges, nearly 8 percent of all entering students are required to take at least one remedial reading course. Only about one third of them are likely to graduate within eight years.<sup>20</sup>
- About 40 percent of high school graduates lack the literacy skills employers seek.<sup>21</sup>
- Employers feel that more than half of recent high school graduates are weak in such skills as oral and written communications, problem solving, and critical thinking.<sup>22</sup>
- The twenty-five fastest-growing professions have far greater than average literacy demands, while the fastest-declining professions have lower-than-average literacy demands.<sup>23</sup>



## Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007* (NCES 2007-496) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> J. Snipes and A. Horwitz, "Advancing Adolescent Literacy in Urban Schools," (Washington, DC: The Council of the Great City Schools, 2008).
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007*.
- <sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007; The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005* (NCES 2007-468) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Carnegie Corporation of New York, "Why Adolescent Literacy Matters," <http://www.carnegie.org/literacy/why.html> (accessed January 29, 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007*.
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *NAEP 2004 Trends in Academic Progress: Three Decades of Student Performance in Reading and Mathematics* (NCES 2005-464) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005); *The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade Reading and Mathematics 2005*.
- <sup>8</sup> R. Heller and C. Greenleaf, *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).
- <sup>9</sup> B. Ehren, K. Lenz, and D. Deshler, "Enhancing Literacy Proficiency With Adolescents and Young Adults," in *Handbook of Language and Literacy*, eds. C. Stone, et al. (New York: Guilford Press, 2004).
- <sup>10</sup> M. Haynes, "From State Policy to Classroom Practice: Improving Literacy Instruction for All Students," (Alexandria, VA: National Association of State Boards of Education, 2007).
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: Reading 2007*; J. McCombs, S. Kirby, H. Barney, H. Darilek, and S. Magee, *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, A Long Uphill Road*, a report to the Carnegie Corporation of New York (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Education, 2005).
- <sup>12</sup> R. Balfanz, J. M. McPartland, and A. Shaw, "Re-Conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era" (Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2002).
- <sup>13</sup> McCombs et al., *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals*; Haynes, "From State Policy to Classroom Practice."
- <sup>14</sup> The Education Trust, *NAEP Long Term Trends 2004* (Washington, DC: Author, 2004).
- <sup>15</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation's Report Card: 12th-Grade*.
- <sup>16</sup> D. J. Short and S. Fitzsimmons, *Double the Work: Challenges and Solutions to Acquiring Language and Academic Literacy for Adolescent English Language Learners*, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).
- <sup>17</sup> Heller and Greenleaf, *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas*.
- <sup>18</sup> ACT, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2006).
- <sup>19</sup> ACT, *Crisis at the Core: Preparing All Students for College and Work* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2005).
- <sup>20</sup> C. Adelman, *The Toolbox Revisited: Paths to Degree Completion from High School through College* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2006); *Principal Indicators of Student Academic Histories in Postsecondary Education, 1972–2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2004).
- <sup>21</sup> Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (Washington, DC: Author, 2005).
- <sup>22</sup> Council on Competitiveness, *Competitiveness Index: Where America Stands* (Washington, DC: Author, 2007).
- <sup>23</sup> P. E. Barton, *What Jobs Require: Literacy, Education, and Training, 1940–2006*. (Washington, DC: Educational Testing Service, 2000).

