

NATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ADULT LITERACY RESULTS AND TALKING POINTS

ASSESSMENT OF NEED

- The focus of the DOE release is on the *Below Basic* category of literacy, which reflects the literacy level of 30 million or 14 percent of the population.
- The needs of those individuals at the basic level, encompassing 63 million adults, or 29 percent of the population, are essentially overlooked in DOE's release.
- The *Below Basic* level includes adults who are unable to read and understand any written information in English to those having great difficulty with reading. They have few basic skills and are able to do no more than the simplest and most concrete literacy skills such as signing a form or totaling a bank deposit entry.
- Adults at the *basic* level have limited skills. They can read, but not read well. They can deal only with materials that is simple and clearly laid out – material in which the tasks involved are not too complex, such as underlining a sentence explaining action stated in a short article. ***This population is still in need of services must be addressed in funding decisions for adult education.***
- Although it appears the ability of adults to read and understand sentences and paragraphs or to understand documents, such as job applications (has not changed in the decade since the last survey), the adult education community is serving a different population of participants. These are not the same adults.
- Mean learning gains increase threefold as students approach 120 or more hours of instruction; therefore, it can take several years for many individuals to achieve the goals they identified when entering the program, including an ability to communicate in the English language, a high school diploma or a GED. In the meantime, thousands of adults are waiting in line to receive services.
- So while millions of adults have achieved their goals over the past decade and have learned to read, obtained their GED or high school diploma, obtained a job, or a promotion, the number of adults in need of services has not changed. Others have taken their place, particularly out of school youth and new Americans.

- Estimates of the target population are based on a lower threshold of performance and may give a false sense of progress. The Response Probability (RP) standard of 67%. This is a moderate level of performance at which someone is judged to be proficient or competent and contrasts with the RP standard (high level of consistency) of 80% used for the 1993 NALS. In order for comparisons to be made between the 1993 and 2003 literacy findings, AIR/NCES has reconfigured the 1993 data to an RP 67% standard. This lowering of the bar for literacy reduces the number of individuals in the two lowest levels of literacy

EMPLOYMENT AND LITERACY

- We cannot afford to leave any adults behind. We need each and every individual to work to their full potential. We cannot lose workers because of their lack of skills or because of technological advances in their chosen field which require additional education.
- Individuals with lower literacy levels are disproportionately represented in the unemployed. 51 percent of adults at the *Below Basic* prose literacy level were not in the labor force in 2003; while 35 percent were employed full time. 38 percent of adults with *basic* prose literacy were not in the labor force and 6 percent were unemployed.
- In 2003, average prose and document literacy was highest among adults employed full time or part time, indicating a correlation between education and employment.
- Businesses need a well-trained workforce; our economy depends on a skilled, educated workforce. We cannot afford to send jobs overseas because of deficits in essential workplace skills.

HELPING NEW IMMIGRANTS AND INDIVIDUALS LACKING ENGLISH LANGUAGE SKILLS

- The language of America's adults changed between 1992 and 2003. The percentage of adults who spoke English before starting school decreased while the percentage who spoke Spanish or Spanish and another non-English language before starting school increased. (Fewer adults who spoke English only or English and a non-Spanish language before starting school had *Below Basic* prose document and quantitative literacy in 2003 than 1992).
- More than 40 percent of new entrants into adult education are seeking English as a Second Language services. Some of these individuals are fluent in their native language; others are not, so they come to the program with varying needs.

- New immigrants strive to assimilate and succeed in the United States. They come to this country seeking opportunity.
- Lack of access to adult education and English-language instruction can limit their ability to succeed. The field stands ready to meet their needs but a lack of funds limits opportunities for all those seeking services to be accommodated.
- Hispanics represented 12 percent of the NAAL population but 39 percent of the adults with *Below Basic* prose literacy.
- The percentage of Hispanics with *Below Basic* prose literacy increased 9 points between 1992 and 2003; the percentage with *Below Basic* document literacy increased 8 percentage points. Hispanics with *Below Basic* quantitative literacy was 50 percent in both 1992 and 2003.
- Scores for adults who spoke Spanish or Spanish and another non-English language before starting school dropped 17 points from 1992-2003 for prose and document literacy but did not change significantly for quantitative literacy.

PERFORMANCE BY EDUCATION

- Adult education has the ability to provide GED students with the same skills as those who complete high school. For many individuals without a high school diploma, adult education is the best alternative to achieve the skills they need to obtain a job or further their education.
- The educational attainment of America's adults increased between 1992 and 2003, with the percentage of adults with less than a high school degree or GED/Equivalency decreasing by six percentage points.
- Prose literacy decreased for all levels of educational attainment between 1992-2003 with the exception of adults who were still in high school or completed a GED.
- Literacy was lowest across all three scales for adults who did not complete high school. These adults made up the largest group with *Below Basic* prose, document and quantitative literacy. For example, over 60 percent of adults without a high school diploma had *Below Basic* quantitative literacy.
- Average prose, document and quantitative literacy for adults who completed a GED was not significantly different from that of adults who stopped their education after graduating high school.

PERFORMANCE BY AGE

- While the average literacy of adults age 65 and older increased between 1992 and 2003, adults in this age group had the lowest average literacy in 2003 and accounted for the largest percentage of adults with *Below Basic* prose, document and quantitative literacy (23 percent Below Basic in prose; 27 percent in document, and 34 percent quantitative).
- Average literacy for adults in the 16-18 and 19-24 age groups was not significantly different between 1992 and 2003 across the literacy scales.

SNAPSHOT OF BELOW BASIC

- Adults without a high school diploma or GED represent 15 percent of the total NAAL population but 55 percent of the adults in the lowest prose literacy level.
- Fifty-two percent of adults in the total NAAL population completed at least some education beyond high school, compared to 14 percent of adults with *Below Basic* prose literacy.
- 14 percent of American adults had *Below Basic* prose literacy in 2003.
- Hispanics, who represented 12 percent of the NAAL population, accounted for 39 percent of adults with *Below Basic* prose literacy;
- 20 percent of adults with *Below Basic* were Black.
- Adults age 65 and older represented 15 percent of the NAAL population, but 26 percent of adults in the lowest prose literacy level.
- While 35 percent of adults with *Below Basic* prose literacy spoke Spanish or Spanish and another non-English language before starting school, these individuals account for 8 percent of the population.
- Forty-six percent of adults with *Below Basic* prose literacy had one or more disabilities compared to 30 percent of adults in the NAAL population. The percentage of adults with multiple disabilities in the *Below Basic* prose level was significantly higher than the percentage of adults with multiple disabilities in the NAAL population (9 percent)