



**Council for Advancement of Adult Literacy**  
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## **BENCHMARK STUDIES & REPORTS IN ADULT LITERACY (rev. 6/06)**

**1. The Adult Performance Level Study:** Final Report, University of Texas (Austin), August 1977--funding by the Office of Education of the former Department of Health, Education, & Welfare.

This study sought to identify the competencies necessary for success in today's society and to develop tools for assessing those competencies in adults. The competencies were determined through a review of the literature, a survey of state and federal agencies, regional conferences, and interviews with "undereducated and underemployed adults." This research resulted in a taxonomy of adult needs categorized into the following "general knowledge" areas: (1) consumer economics, (2) occupational or occupationally related knowledge, (3) community resources, (4) health, and (5) government and the law. The knowledge base was then studied to determine the skills needed to achieve functional competence.

The report delineated the following characteristics of functional competency: it has a specific societal context; involves "the application a set of skills to a set of general knowledge areas"; and correlates with success in the adult life. The relevant skills areas are communications, computation, and problem solving.

The general knowledge areas and skills identified were used to specify competencies and develop performance indicators for those competencies. These in turn were used to develop assessment instruments that were used with 7,500 adults drawn from five independent samples of the population numbering at least 1,500 each. The survey data were used "to develop 'competency profiles' associated with different levels of adult success as measured by income, job status, and education," resulting in three levels of competency for adults, defined in terms of income, education, and employability: least competent, marginally competent, and most competent.

The study found that about one-fifth of adults in the United States were "functionally incompetent" overall. The percentages of functionally incompetent adults by knowledge category were as follows: occupational knowledge, 19.1 percent; consumer economics, 29.4 percent; government and law, 25.8 percent; health, 21.3 percent, and community resources, 22.6 percent. In terms of skills areas, 21.7 percent were functionally

incompetent in reading, 16.4 percent in writing, 32.9 percent in computation, and 28.0 percent in problem solving. The report further analyzed results in terms of demographic characteristics, showing a clear correlation between level of functional competency and education, income, occupation, and race/ethnic groups.

The report also outlined ways in which the formulation and instruments developed as part of the study might be applied at the program, local, state, and national levels for developing objectives, curriculum, diagnostic and assessment instruments, and related resources.

## **2. Adult Illiteracy in the United States: A Report to the Ford Foundation, Carmen St. John Hunter and David Harman, McGraw-Hill, 1979**

*Adult Illiteracy in the United States* reports the findings of a study of adult “illiteracy”, the adult illiterate population, and programs designed to teach them. The study, which involved reviews of existing data and literature and interviews with authorities, finds a lack of standards for defining literacy, measuring the extent of illiteracy, and assessing attempts to overcome it.

The authors found that the concepts of literacy change as society changes and are different for subgroups of the society. With these factors in mind, they came up with two definitions of literacy: (1) *conventional literacy, which relates to a person's ability to read, write, and comprehend texts* and (2) *functional literacy, which is the "possession of skills perceived as necessary by particular persons and groups to fulfill their own self-determined objectives as family and community members, citizens, consumers, job-hunters, and members of social, religious, and other associations of their own choosing."*

No study existing at the time measured literacy by either of these definitions; however, the authors cite statistics from two sources: (1) U.S. Office of Education data from the University of Texas Adult Performance Level Study which found that 57 million Americans lack the skills to perform basic tasks and an additional 34 million are able to function but are not proficient and (2) U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics findings that over 57 million adults over 16 and not in school have less than a high school education. Demographically, these "educationally disadvantaged" adults are primarily poor, are likely to be members of minority groups, and most often live in inner cities.

The authors adopted the Appalachian Adult Education Center categories that divide the educationally disadvantaged into four groups ranging from those who are most fully a part of the dominant culture to the hard-core poor who do not participate in mainstream society. They found existing programs to be least successful at reaching those at the

lower end of this spectrum. These programs, which take for granted the values and goals of the dominant culture, are most appropriate for those whose lives are firmly grounded in mainstream society and serve that portion of the functionally illiterate population well. However, they reach only a tiny fraction of all functionally illiterate Americans.

The authors' overarching recommendation is that emphasis be given to the hard-core poor who are not being well-served by existing programs. To do so, they recommended the establishment of "new, pluralistic, community-based initiatives" in which learning takes place in the context of community goals set in a social context.

Other recommendations entail wide dissemination to policymakers and stakeholders of approaches to literacy and learning by community-based organizations; regional conferences for the purposes of gathering data from the "client" population and creating a climate for implementing community-based approaches; collecting and disseminating research data and developing case studies of successful model programs; funding pilot projects; establishing a "national commission on community-based initiatives" to formulate policy, legislation, and approaches to public funding at the national level (while allowing for independent program development at the community level); encouraging citizen groups to address issues related to social purpose; and creating mechanisms at the national level equivalent to those for economic planning.

### **3. A Nation at Risk: the Imperative for Educational Reform, National Commission on Excellence in Education, April 1983**

Since its publication in 1983, *A Nation at Risk* has become a focal point for reform among policymakers and educators. While the findings and recommendations are limited to schools and colleges, the report had/has a degree of relevance to the adult literacy field. For one thing, the need to improve the skills of American workers in order to regain a competitive edge in the global marketplace was a major impetus for forming the commission. For another, among the results of problems in the school, the report pointed to the millions of American adults and youths who are functionally illiterate and to the fact that deficiencies in workers' basic skills are all the more serious considering the demands of new technology.

While the report does not touch on adult education, it recognizes the goal of lifelong learning. It also recommends skills be taught in the school in a way that applies them to real-life situations.

**4. Turning Illiteracy Around: An Agenda for National Action**, Working Paper No. 1, Donald McCune and Judith Alamprese, and Working Paper No. 2, David Harman, Business Council for Effective Literacy, May 1985

The purpose of *Turning Illiteracy Around* was to examine illiteracy and existing literacy services in order to guide expansion of the adult literacy system to better meet current and future need.

In Working Paper No. 1, based on extensive interviews with local literacy programs and national organizations, Donald McCune and Judith Alamprese examine current activities and resources of basic skills programs and the roles of national organizations that participate in literacy efforts. They suggest ways that organizations not then engaged in literacy efforts can make a contribution, and they recommend various public and private-sector actions for expanding service capacities.

The study found that local programs need greatly increased funding to pay for new staff and resources, expand staff development and training, and develop and implement sound instructional approaches. While unable to give precise figures for the costs of program expansion, the report estimated that even if the capacity of existing systems (and their costs) was tripled, no more than about 15 percent of adult illiterates could be reached. To do more would require the development of new delivery systems and approaches and even more funding.

The study considered the role of different types of national organizations, recognizing that they have different resource needs, and argued that many millions of dollars will be required for them to build their capacities as well.

In Working Paper No. 2, David Harman analyzed what constitutes literacy in the United States (in the 1980s). He estimated that 27 million Americans over 16 years old were functionally illiterate, that 45 million more were only marginally proficient in the use of basic skills, and that the existing framework of adult literacy providers can meet the needs of some 15 million adults annually. He recommended giving priority to the 27 million who are functionally illiterate. Serving this group effectively, he said, would require instructors to use new methods. Serving the marginally proficient would also require developing appropriate curricula for use with adults. He estimated that a comprehensive and quality national adult literacy system would require public and private-sector expenditures in the range of from \$8 billion to \$10 billion annually.

Major recommendations, drawn from both working papers, include expanding funding and amending legislation at the federal and state levels to direct funds more efficiently.

Harman also concluded that the federal government should expand the technical assistance capacity of the U.S. Department of Education, underwrite a short-term tutor training program, and create a national agency with grant-making authority to improve coordination and cooperation throughout the literacy field and a national center to coordinate, access, and guide research and development activities.

On the state level, he said, those states that do not have comprehensive planning bodies should establish them. Organizations in the private sector should provide both funds and in-kind services to literacy programs and give grants to research and development organizations. Funding should also be provided to professional associations with an interest or involvement in adult literacy. And mechanisms should be developed to help assure that the illiteracy issue remains on the public agenda.

**5. Jump Start: The Federal Role in Adult Literacy** by Forrest P. Chisman, Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, January 1989

As of the late 1980s (when *Jump Start* was prepared), Southport's study of the federal government's role in adult literacy found that the vast majority of adults in need of basic skills upgrading were not being reached; the national effort was intellectually weak and institutionally fragmented; and that there was virtually no lobby for literacy.

The report argued that the national literacy goal should be to ensure that by the year 2000 or soon thereafter, every adult should have the skills needed to perform effectively the tasks required by the high-productivity economy and that six steps must be taken immediately to achieve that end: (1) establish national literacy goals and mechanisms to track progress toward them; (2) create stronger intellectual, political, and institutional focal points to strengthen the knowledge base and underpinnings of basic skills effort; (3) focus on the problems of adults [not children and youths still in school]; (4) demand systems that produce large gains in basic skills and hold programs accountable for achieving those gains; (5) make the necessary investments in technology, training, and administration to achieve the first four steps; (6) build on the strengths of the field now in place, including the existing knowledge base.

The report offered many highly detailed, time-specific recommendations regarding executive leadership and legislative initiatives. A few of the more wide-reaching ones were: President Bush should establish early in his term [1989] the enhancement of adult basic skills as a major national priority and workforce literacy as a major priority of his administration. He should establish a high-level task force on adult basic skills with a six-month deadline to evaluate current federal activities, develop a statement of national goals, proposed a process for coordinating federal activities, and suggest new federal

initiatives. Further, the task force should recommend -- and the president should appoint -- a Cabinet Council on Adult Literacy.

*Jump Start* indicated that the federal legislative program should center on a comprehensive Adult Basic Skills Act with 26 specific provisions that together would redirect several billion dollars in existing federal, state, and local spending for adult basic skills and authorize additional funding of about \$550 million annually. Other major provisions were to establish a National Center for Adult Literacy...require the departments of Labor, Education, and Health and Human Services to set aside no less than \$7 million each from existing funds for research, technical assistance, and policy analysis...remove restrictions on the portion of state grants that may be spent for improving the quality and cost-effectiveness of instruction through teacher training or purchasing technology systems; and create matching funds for state and local investments in teacher training and technology.

Other provisions were aimed at strengthening the states' ability to serve as the "primary public institutions for coordinating and upgrading the delivery of adult basic skills services" and implementing "changes in virtually all federal programs that provide support" for adult literacy, including (at the time) the Job Training Partnership Act, the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act, the Adult Education Act, the Family Support Act of 1988, Even Start, and Volunteers in Service to America.

## **6. The National Literacy Act of 1991**

The National Literacy Act provided an infrastructure for coordination, research, and planning; for upgrading the literacy and basic skills training systems; and for investing in programs assisting adults and families with low literacy levels. Its key provisions were:

*Title I: Literacy: Strategic Planning, Research, and Coordination* gave the responsibility for coordinating all literacy programs to the Department of Education and established the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the State Literacy Resource Centers (SLRCs).

-- NIFL was intended to improve and expand the system of literacy service delivery by (1) assisting federal agencies in setting up objectives and strategies and measuring progress; (2) conducting research and demonstrations; (3) helping government agencies develop, implement, and evaluate literacy policy; (4) providing training and assistance to literacy programs nationwide; (5) collecting and disseminating information about promising methods; (6) reviewing and making recommendations on ways to achieve uniformity among reporting requirements, performance measures, and standards for

program effectiveness; and (7) providing a telephone hotline for literacy providers and volunteers.

-- The SLRCs were intended to be a network of state or regional adult literacy centers linking the Institute and local service providers. They were to: (1) improve and promote state-of-the-art teaching and assessment methods; (2) develop approaches to coordinating local, state and federal literacy service; (3) encourage government and industry partnerships; (4) encourage innovation and experimentation; (5) provide training, technical, and policy assistance; and (6) encourage and facilitate the training of professional adult educators.

*Title II: Workforce Literacy* established the National Workforce Literacy Assistance Collaborative in the U.S. Department of Labor, and the National Workforce Literacy Strategies grants program in the U.S. Department of Education. The Literacy Assistance Collaborative was to disseminate information, develop materials, and offer technical assistance to enhance employment opportunities for the marginally employed and unemployed by improving their basic skills. The Workforce Literacy Strategies program was to fund projects that develop, test, and replicate cost-effective successful workforce literacy strategies for the nation.

*Title III: Investments in Literacy* amended the Adult Education Act, primarily to extend and/or modify Even Start and the basic ABE state grant program. It also gave governors responsibility for state advisory councils on adult education and literacy and authorized the secretary of education to contract with the Corporation for Public Broadcasting for the production and dissemination of family literacy materials.

The Act also authorized making grants to increase literacy skills of commercial drivers so that they could meet federal testing requirements; amending the book distribution programs of the Secondary Education Act of 1965 to give priority to persons and programs in most need; and empowering the U.S. Department of Justice to make grants to state corrections agencies for functional literacy programs.

Note: The National Literacy Act defined adult literacy as follows: *An individual's ability to read, write, and speak in English, and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential.*

**7. Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High-Performance**, the final report of the Secretary's Commission for Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), April 1992

The SCANS report recommended a coordinated effort from employers, communities, and schools to ensure that all students become competent to fill high-wage, high-skilled jobs. It identified five essential areas of workplace competency for individuals:

- Ability to locate time, money, materials, space, and staff.
- Ability to work in teams, teach others, serve customers, lead, negotiate, and work well with people from culturally diverse backgrounds.
- Ability to acquire and evaluate data, organize and maintain files, interpret and communicate, and use computers to process information.
- Ability to interpret social, organizational, and technological systems; monitor and correct performance; and design or improve systems.
- Ability to select equipment and tools, apply technology to specific tasks, and maintain and troubleshoot equipment.

The report recommended that employers take responsibility for improving the way work is organized and for developing human resources, not only in their companies but also in the community and the nation. It also recommended that schools pay attention to the roles students will play as workers, parents, and citizens, that teachers relate the curriculum to the outside world, and that administrators apply W. Edwards Deming's 14 points, stressing quality and leadership in the organization.

Recognizing that learning must become a lifelong endeavor, the Commission called on the U.S. Departments of Labor and Education, the business community, trade unions, job training and literacy providers, the military, community-based organizations, and other organizations to form a "national partnership built around employment," and to establish a common language and equitable system of human resource development, assessment, and certification.

According to SCANS, educators need to adjust their methods to teach skills in new contexts and use collaborative learning. They also need to form coalitions with management, labor, and community groups to review pedagogy, curriculum, and school administration. Teacher training and staff development efforts were also seen as essential to provide educators with new pedagogical skills and expose them to the principles of the high-performance workplace so they can help their students make the crossover from school to work.

Indeed, public and employer-sponsored training was/is considered by SCANS to be a priority. Because a system of assessment and certification is essential, vocational and proprietary schools, community colleges, and adult education and work-based programs must offer instruction and certification in the SCANS workplace competencies. In fact, the report recommended that a "cumulative resume" be established for all students that would state courses taken, projects completed, and proficiency levels attained. Students whose accomplishments met an overall standard would be awarded a "certificate of initial mastery," a universally recognized statement of experience and achievements for could use in seeking employment or further education.

**8. Beyond the School Doors: The Literacy Needs of Job Seekers Served by the U.S. Department of Labor**, Educational Testing Service, 1992

*Beyond the School Doors* reports the results of an eight-month study of persons who were being served in 1989 and 1990 by the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) and the Employment Service/Unemployment Insurance (ES/UI) program conducted for the U.S. Department of Labor. The study used the same definition of literacy as the National Adult Literacy Survey (see item 8 below). Like NALS, it assessed prose, document, and quantitative literacy with items based on a wide range of actual print materials and ranked scores with a scaling system that recognized no cutoff point below which the person is illiterate, but rather a continuum along which the degree to which one is (or is not) functionally literate can be determined. This scale was then divided into five proficiency levels, with Level 1 being the least proficient and Level 5 the highest. The study found that both the JTPA and the ES/UI groups, which together constituted a significant portion of America's job seekers, were deficient in literacy skills to an alarming degree: for prose literacy, 37.5 percent of the combined target population performed at levels 1 and 2; for document literacy, 43 percent; for quantitative literacy, 37.4 percent.

**9. Adult Literacy in America: A First Look at the Results of the National Adult Literacy Survey**, Irwin S. Kirsch, Ann Jungeblut, Lynn Jenkins, and Andrew Kolstad, National Center for Education Statistics, September 1993

*Adult Literacy in America*, a report of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) authorized by Congress in 1988, was funded by the U.S. Department of Education, administered by The Educational Testing Service in collaboration with Westat, Inc., and directed by researcher Irwin Kirsch. It gave a comprehensive and detailed picture of literacy skills of adults in the U.S. in the early 1990s. NALS used the following

definition of literacy: "*using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goal, and to develop one's knowledge and potential.*"

NALS broke literacy into three parts: prose literacy (reading and understanding texts); document literacy (locating and using information in such materials as job applications, maps, and graphs); and quantitative literacy (using arithmetic operations). It developed sets of real-world tasks at a range of difficulty levels to measure degrees of proficiency for each of these parts. Then a new scaling was devised to capture and reflect the realities of everyday adult life and work (rather than determining a single, artificial cut off point or ranking adults with grade-level equivalencies). The scale was broken into five levels, with Level 1 the lowest (very limited skills in processing information) and Level 5 the highest (advanced skills in dealing with complex materials).

Some 26,000 adults were interviewed (nearly 13,600 individuals age 16 and older). Supplemental information was gathered from additional surveys, one of 1,000 adults in each of 12 states in order to provide comparable state-level, and another one of some 1,100 prison inmates. In these interviews, participants were asked to complete a series of literacy tasks and respond to questions about their demographic characteristics, educational background, reading practices, and other relevant factors. From the data collected, researchers were not only able to determine the extent of functional illiteracy in the U.S. but also to examine literacy within narrow segments of the population (workers, the elderly, inmates, etc.) and to compare literacy rates according to various factors.

Among NALS major findings were:

- \* 20-23 percent of respondents demonstrated skills at Level 1 on each of the literacy scales; about 25 percent of these respondents were immigrants who may have had limited English proficiency; 62 percent had not completed high school; and from 66-75 percent described themselves as being able to read and write.
- \* 25-28% demonstrated skills proficiency at Level 2 on each of the scales.
- \* Nearly one-third of respondents performed at Level 3.
- \* 15-17% performed at Level 4.
- \* 3-4% performed at Level 5 (the highest level).

- \* Some 75-80% of respondents with eight or fewer years of education placed in Level 1; fewer than 1 percent of these respondents were in Level 4 or Level 5.
- \* Minority respondents were more likely than non-ethnic, white respondents to be in levels 1 and 2; and with the exception of blacks, the members of a given racial or ethnic group who were born in the U.S. outperformed those who were born abroad.
- \* Respondents with higher literacy levels were more likely to be employed and earn higher wages than those with lower skills levels.
- \* Respondents who placed in the higher levels were on the whole much better off economically than those in the lowest levels. For example 17-19% of respondents in the lowest levels reported receiving food stamps, while 4% of respondents in the highest levels did; only from 23-27% of respondents in Level 1 received interests from the savings or bank account, while 70-85% of those in Levels 4 or 5 did; and 41-44% were living in poverty, as opposed to only 4-8% of those in Levels 4 and 5.

*(NOTE: To help local and state policymakers and adult education/literacy professionals understand the relevance of NALS to their own local populations—and especially to understand the extent to which their own populations could perform only at the lowest level of literacy skills (Level One of NALS)—the National Institute for Literacy/U.S. Department of Education subsequently funded a project that led to **The State of Literacy in America: Estimates at the Local, State, and National Levels**. This 1998 report by Stephen Reder of Portland State University used “synthetic estimates” (based on NALS and 1990 U.S. Census databases) to estimate the document, prose, and quantitative skills (tested for in NALS) of adults at the local level. Data are presented in the report, in the form of bar graphs and maps, for each state, county, and city with a population of over 5,000. An appendix contains data for smaller census areas. While synthetic estimates are not as accurate as surveys, the report nevertheless makes it possible for policymakers and literacy professionals to better judge needs in their regions, and to make needed regional comparisons.)*

## **10. Skills for a New Century: A Blueprint for Lifelong Learning, 1999**

*Skills for a New Century* is the report of a Leadership Group on 21st Century Skills convened by Vice President Al Gore to study and to issue recommendations on workforce learning. The group, comprised of leaders from business, organized labor, education, and government, proposed four "workforce learning goals" and recommended action steps to meet each goal. In addition, group members made commitments in the

names of the organizations they represent to undertake specific projects toward reaching the goals. The recommendations:

1. *Deliver education, training, and learning that are tied to high standards, lead to useful credentials, and meet labor market needs.* This recommendation encompasses investments in education by students, employees, employers, and all levels of governments throughout all segments of the education and training infrastructure for children, youths, and lifelong learners. The 10 action steps include incorporating skills needed in a high-performance workplace into workforce development curricula; promoting a skill-based, portable documentation process that records acquired skills and qualifications; and organizing state and local advisory panels of employers to guide the development of curricula for work-related programs.

2. *Improve access to financial resources for lifetime learning for all Americans, including those in low-wage jobs.* This recommendation interprets "access" as including not only the availability of funding but also the knowledge needed to negotiate the process of finding and applying for these resources. The four action steps include encouraging employers to increase employees' continuous learning by communicating the benefits, offering incentives, devoting resources to the most effective education and training programs, and encouraging lending institutions to provide low-interest loans for lifetime learning.

3. *Promote learning at a time and place, and in the manner that meets workers' needs and interests.* Achieving this goal involves broadening thinking about the structure, scheduling, and delivery of education and training. The four action steps focus on promoting employer/employee and business/education partnerships and using the new technologies to deliver instruction.

4. *Increase awareness and motivation to participate in education, training, and learning.* This recommendation recognizes the need for continuous communication about training options. The four action steps include using business-led local coalitions to build awareness and promoting the use of an on-line clearinghouse for information about learning opportunities, available financial aid, and related matters.

Among the many organizations that were represented in the Leadership Group and have made commitments to take on projects related to the action steps are AT&T, National Association of Manufacturers, Cisco systems, U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Miami-Dade Community College, American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, State Farm Insurance Companies, National Institute for Literacy, United Steelworkers of America, U.S. Department of Education, and the California Virtual University Regional Centers.

**11. Equipped for the Future Content Standards: What Adults Need to Know and Be Able to Do in the 21st Century**, Sondra Stein, National Institute for Literacy, January 2000

*Equipped for the Future* (EFF) contains a comprehensive set of content standards for adult and lifelong learning that were formulated as part of an ongoing research and development effort that began in 1994. Over the next few years the work generate benchmarks and levels of performance and tools for assessing performance of the EFF standards. The publication summarizes the goals of EFF, traces the process of development, gives detailed examples of how the framework can be used, and examines how it can be implemented in the context of systemwide reform as well as detailing the standards themselves.

By building on SCANS and other research, EFF's goals are (a) to provide a framework for assessing knowledge and skills in relation to goals and for linking curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation to real-world outcomes; and (b) to create a common language for linking services provided throughout the "human resources investment system," a uniform standard for demonstrating competence applicable to a system of portable credentials for adult learning, and a single definition of significant results as a yardstick for governmental investment.

The framework is presented as a multi-tiered construct:

- \* Three "Role Maps" outline responsibilities and activities of adults as citizen/community member, parent/family member, and worker.
- \* Common Activities identifies areas of activity overlap for the three roles: gather, analyze, and use information; manage resources; work within the big picture; work together; provide leadership; guide and support others; seek guidance and support from others; develop and express sense of self; respect others and value diversity; exercise rights and responsibilities; create and pursue vision and goals; use technology and other tools to accomplish goals; keep pace with change.
- \* Content Standards identify the knowledge and skills adults need to meet their responsibilities.
- \* Four broad categories of Necessary Skills ( communications, decision-making, interpersonal, and lifelong learning) pinpoint specific skills needed to perform activities in the three roles.

\* Four Learning Purposes are laid down – (a) Access -- to gain access to information and resources so that adults can orient themselves in the world"; (b) Voice -- to voice ideas and opinions with the confidence that they will be heard and taken into account"; Action -- to solve problems and make decisions on their own, acting independently, as parents, citizens, and workers -- for the good of their families, their communities, and their nation"; and Bridge to the Future – to define the reasons for using the skills.

EFF intends to help develop a national consensus about the future shape of the adult literacy and lifelong learning system. As such it is considered a step toward systemwide reform. Next steps involve using standards to guide curriculum and assessment design, pedagogic practices, professional development, and policy decisions about resource allocations at all governmental levels.

## **12. From the Margins to the Mainstream: An Action Agenda for Literacy, National Literacy Summit 2000**, September 2000

*From the Margins to the Mainstream* synthesizes recommendations from the National Literacy Summit 2000, which included a major meeting in Washington, D.C. in September, and 25 smaller meetings around the country in which representatives of various adult literacy stakeholder groups participated. The broad goal of the Summit was stated as follows: "By 2010, a system of high-quality adult literacy, language, and lifelong learning services will help adults in every community make measurable gains toward achieving their goals as family members, workers, citizens, and lifelong learners."

In the area of funding, a major recommended target is the achievement by 2010 of \$1 billion in annual federal funding for adult literacy plus 50% in state-level matching funds.

The definition of adult literacy in *From the Margins to the Mainstream* is the same as in the National Literacy Act of 1991: "An individual's ability to read, write, and speak English and compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job and in society, to achieve one's goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential."

The report posits that literacy must be a national priority for four crucial reasons: (1) To enable individuals to participate fully in jobs and the economy; (2) To improve the health and health care for those whose low literacy levels impedes both; (3) to achieve proficiency levels central to access and use effectively resources of the internet; and 4) to

improve the skills of low-literacy parents in order to overcome intergenerational transfer of low skills and learning achievement.

The report identifies three “action priorities” for adult literacy and several essential outcomes for each:

1. Developing resources (including money, time, and services). Outcomes include legislative and policy changes to expand and enhanced services; sufficient funding from the federal and state government; widely available support services; private sector investments in lifelong learning; and public-private partnerships.
2. Access. Outcomes include strong local information and referral systems; stakeholders' knowledge of learning opportunities; a student support systems; and convenient access to instruction.
3. Quality. Outcomes include "program goals that reflect the concerns of all stakeholders"; content and curriculum tied to the knowledge and skills adults need; ongoing quality improvement systems; ongoing professional development; strong, ongoing research and development; and the inclusion of students as primary stakeholders and full partners.

The report also lists dozens of actions that stakeholders from all segments of the literacy community can take to achieve the various outcomes.

In working toward the achievement of each priority, the report also advocates: (1) student involvement in all aspects of the system; (2) better communications to visibility and recognition for the adult literacy field; (3) the need for partnerships and broadly-based collaboration throughout the literacy system; and (4) the use of technology to increase awareness of need for literacy and improved literacy itself.

**13. International Adult Literacy Survey: Benchmarking Adult Literacy in America: An International Comparative Study**, Albert Tuijnman, Institute of International Education, Stockholm University, September 2000

This report (IALS) compares literacy levels in America with levels in other countries, according to 10 indicators: literacy proficiency of youth population, literacy proficiency of recent high school dropouts, literacy proficiency of recent college graduates, inequality in literacy proficiency among youths, literacy proficiency of the adult population, literacy proficiency among adults in the top 25 percent, literacy proficiency among adults in the bottom 25 percent, inequality in literacy proficiency among adults,

percent of poor literacy proficiency among adults aged 45-65, and percent with poor literacy proficiency among second-language, foreign-born population.

It draws upon a survey conducted in 22 countries between 1994 and 1998. The goals of the study were to "create comparable literacy profiles across national, linguistic and cultural boundaries, to study the factors that influence literacy proficiency, and to investigate how literacy is related to various social and economic outcomes." The survey used the NALS assessment instrument (see item 8 above) with representative samples of adults aged between 16 and 65. The average scores for the U.S. placed it in the middle range of the countries studied, with countries ranking higher and lower. However, the data show a wide range in proficiency levels within the U.S., and on the criteria of In "inequality" the U.S. and Canada were found to have the worst record among the countries studied.

The report gives numerous recommendations for overcoming problems of inequality. Of these, the most relevant for adult literacy instructions are promoting the following: cultures of lifelong learning; access to adult education for all citizens; literacy rich environment at work, at home, and in the community, workplace literacy programs; and access to information and communications technologies. A major question raised by the survey, re the variable on "inequality" is how to balance workforce issues with poverty and other social issues. Some analysts called for a revamping of current U.S. federal legislation.

**Research Note from Tom Sticht: Concerns for Inequality and Social Justice On the Rise**

When one looks in the Benchmarking report at the range of scores in each nation, there are clearly differences across nations in terms of the range of literacy scores between the lower scoring and higher scoring adults. There are large international differences in the variation among the adult populations within nations with regard to their literacy scores. The report makes a great deal about these inequalities among nations.

The report creates an index of inequality in literacy for each of 22 nations by dividing the literacy scores of those at the 90th percentile by the scores of those at the 10th percentile. For the United States, the score of 183 (10th percentile) was divided into 355 (90<sup>th</sup> percentile) producing an inequality index of 1.9. For the adult population aged 26-65 years, the U. S. has a larger index of inequality than 14 of the 21 nations, and has less inequality in literacy only than Portugal, Poland, Slovenia, Italy, and Chile. Only Canada and the U.S. are equal in their distributions of literacy and both of these nations have inequality indices that are not statistically different from the average inequality index computed using all 22 nations (1.8). Similar findings hold for the adult population aged 16-25, though in this case the U. S. has more inequality than in 13 other nations, including Canada.

The report goes on to note that "...inequality in the range of literacy scores in North America is also among the highest of the nations surveyed. Especially in the United States, inequality in the distribution of literacy scores on the English test [that is, the NALS] used for the survey is strongly related to economic inequality measured by income differentials between households."

The emphasis of this recent report using IALS data is largely on the inequality of literacy among adults within nations, and the economic consequences of these differences in literacy for adults within a given nation. In many respects, this seems to be a change in perspective from the concern for adult literacy as a factor in international competitiveness that has in large part driven the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, to a return to the concern for issues of poverty and the need for individuals to be economically competitive within our nation that led to the enactment of the adult basic education program as part of the War on Poverty's Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. In a sense, with this new report using IALS data, we seem to have gone back from the concerns with international competitiveness of A Nation at Risk of the 1980s and 1990s to the concerns for People at Risk of the 1960s.

This might be a more fruitful stance for advocating for the full recognition of the Adult Education and Literacy System (AELS) as the third major, mainstream component of our nation's publicly supported educational structure (K-12, AELS, Higher Education,) for promoting the general health, welfare and prosperity of the nation. It might also augur well for placing workforce development in a more appropriate, tertiary position with regard to its importance as an outcome for adult education and for getting the WIA changed to the Adult Education, Literacy and Workforce Investment Act (AELWIA) when it next comes up for reconsideration.

Funded by the U. S. Department of Education, *Benchmarking Adult Literacy in America: An International Comparative Study* is available for downloading at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/ovae/publicat.html> and at [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca) under Full Text Documents.

#### **14. Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL), OECD, May 2003**

ALL measured the literacy and numeracy skills of 16-65 year olds in Bermuda, Canada, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and the U.S. (with literacy defined as "the ability to use information from written formats." ALL shows that low skills among adults "erodes the economic and social return on educational investment and hampers productivity and economic growth." In the U.S., low-skilled adults were found to be more likely to be unemployed, regardless of whether they immigrated or are native-born. The U.S. outperformed Italy in literacy and numeracy, but was significantly outperformed by Bermuda, Canada, Norway, and Switzerland. Further, only in Italy and Switzerland were there measurable differences in literacy by gender. However, in the U.S. men score higher than women on the numeracy scale, while women outperform men in use of text and written materials. Racial and ethnic groups vary between the countries and international comparisons could not be made. Findings for the U.S. alone show that white U.S. adults outscore black and Hispanic and all other adults in both [prose] literacy and numeracy, with blacks and Hispanics performing about the same.

#### **15. A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century**, National Adult Literacy Survey (NAL), American Institutes of Research (funded by U.S. Department of Education), 2006. (The full report is available from the National Center

for Educational Statistics at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2006470>.  
Also see: <http://nces.ed.gov/naal>.)

Following up on the national adult literacy survey of a decade ago (NAAL), this survey (NAL) was conducted in 2003. Preliminary results were reported out in early 2006. At the most generalized level ([in terms of comparing 1992 and 2003 findings], *the survey found that “average prose and document literacy scores have risen for blacks and Asians but have decreased significantly among Hispanics.”*

This broad finding is related significantly to demographic change over the decade. In 2003, there were more than 222,000,000 adults in the population. The percentage of White adults in the population decreased between 1992 and 2003 from 77 to 70 percent, Blacks increased from 11 to 12 percent, and Hispanic adults increased from 8 to 12 percent. The percent of Asian/Pacific Islander adults also increased, from two to four percent. The 2003 survey findings correlate strongly with educational attainment level, poverty, and ethnicity.

**BELOW BASIC** (able to perform no more than the most rudimentary literacy tasks): In general, in 2003, in **PROSE** literacy 15%-12% (men,women) of the adult population made up the level. In **DOCUMENT** and **QUANTITATIVE** literacy, the corresponding percentages were 14%-11% (m,w) and 21%-22% (m,w) respectively.

**By race/ethnicity:** In prose literacy, Whites make up 7 percent of this population group (and 70% of the total population), Blacks make up 24 percent of those Below Basic (but 12% of total population); Hispanics make up 44 percent (but 12% of total population); and Asian/Pacific Islanders make up 14 percent (and 4% of the population). In document literacy, Whites make up 8% of the Below Basic group; Blacks make up 24%, Hispanics 36%, and Asian/Pacific Islanders 11%. In quantitative literacy, Whites make up 13%; Blacks 47%; Hispanics 50%; and Asian/Pacific Islanders 19%.

**By age:** In prose literacy, the percentages of each age group at Below Basic are 16-18 (11%), 19-24 (11%), 25-39 (12%), 40-49 (11%), 50-64 (13%), and 65+ (23%). In document literacy, the percentages of each age group at Below Basic are 16-18 (11%), 19-24 (9%), 25-39 (8%), 40-49 (10%), 50-64 (12%), 65+ (27%). The results for the quantitative scale are available on the NAAL website.

**Language spoken at school entry:** Persons speaking English only before starting school represent 52 percent of the Below Basic Group (and 81% of the total population); persons speaking Spanish before starting school represent 35 percent of Below Basic (but only 8% of the general population). Compared to 1992, the percentage of adults who spoke English before starting school decreased in 2003, while the percentage who spoke Spanish or another non-English language increased. (*Note: some two percent of the NALs population could not be tested because they could not communicate in English or Spanish and another five percent were given an alternative assessment because they were “nonliterate” in English - a total of 11 million adults*).

**Educational attainment:** On average, 55 percent of adults scoring at the Below Basic prose level had less than or some high school (people at this attainment level constituted 15% of the total NALs population); 27 percent of high school graduates and those with GED/high school equivalency made up the Below Basic group (and 31% of the total NALs population). Some 46% of the NALs population had some college, undergraduate degrees, or graduate study (a larger percentage in 2003 compared to 1992), 10 percent of those scoring at Below Basic had some college or better.

**Employment Status:** Over 60 percent of all adults were employed either full or part-time in 2003. Of these, 35 percent scored Below Basic (and 44% and 54% scored at the Basic and Intermediate Levels).

**BASIC** (able to perform simple, basic everyday literacy activities). In general, in prose literacy 29 percent (m,w) of the adult population made up the Basic proficiency level in 2003; the corresponding percentages for document and quantitative literacy were 23%-22% (m,f) percent and 31%-35% (male, female) respectively.

**INTERMEDIATE** (able to perform moderately challenging literacy activities). In general, in prose literacy 42%-46% (m,w) made up the pool. In document and quantitative literacy, the corresponding percentages were 51%-54% (m,w) and 33% and 32% (m,w) respectively.

**BELOW BASIC & BASIC COMBINED** (General Findings): For prose, document, and quantitative literacy, the findings in general are: **PROSE** literacy, 39%-44% (men, women) of adults in households or prisons make up the Basic or Below Basic levels. Some 43%-46% (m,w) perform at the Intermediate level. In **DOCUMENT** literacy,

About 37%-33% (m,w) are at the Basic or Below Basic Levels. Some 51%-54% (m,w) are at Intermediate level. In **QUANTITATIVE** literacy, 52%-57% (m,w) are at the Basic or Below Basic levels. Some 33%-32% (m,w) are at the Intermediate level.