

Executive Summary from ADULT LITERACY in Ohio

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 interested	18%	22%
Financial	12%	15%
Family	10%	12%
Other	6%	8%

Table B3.15: Reasons for high school noncompletion by age of arrival in the United States

Reason	Age of Arrival
Not interested	15%
Financial	10%
Family	8%
Other	7%

 Educational Testing Service

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Adult Literacy in Ohio

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

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 the complexity, scope, and context of individual literacy needs and the range of actions needed to address them.

The Ohio 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 Ohio, 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, nearly 1,600 adults in Ohio were surveyed, representing approximately 8.3 million adults statewide.

Each survey participant was asked to spend approximately an hour responding to a series of varied literacy tasks as well as questions about his or her demographic characteristics, educational background, employment, income, reading practices, and other areas related to literacy. Based on their responses to the survey tasks, adults received proficiency scores along three scales, each ranging from 0 to 500. The score points along these scales reflect varying degrees of skill in prose, document, and quantitative literacy. To provide a way to examine the distribution of performance within various subpopulations of interest, five levels of proficiency were defined along each scale: Level 1 (0 to 225), Level 2 (226 to 275), Level 3 (276 to 325), Level 4 (326 to 375), and Level 5 (376 to 500).

The full report offers a comprehensive look at the results of the Ohio survey. It describes the average literacy proficiencies and the levels of proficiency demonstrated by adults surveyed in this state, compared with adults 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 Ohio

- Sixteen to 18 percent of the Ohio survey respondents 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 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.¹
- The composition of the Level 1 population differs in some important respects from the state population as a whole. For example, 4 percent of the Ohio adults who performed in Level 1 on the quantitative literacy scale were foreign-born, twice the proportion of foreign-born adults in the state. Just 36 percent had completed high school or a General Educational Development certificate (GED) or attended a postsecondary institution, compared with 74 percent across the state. More than 40 percent were age 65 or older, although only 17 percent of the state population is in that age group;

¹The composition of the Level 1 population will be further explored in the technical report on the National and State Adult Literacy Surveys.

26 to 28 percent have physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work, school, housework, or other activities, compared with 11 percent of the state population.

- Twenty-seven to 31 percent of the Ohio respondents performed in the next higher level of proficiency (Level 2) on the literacy scales. 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 perform two or more sequential operations.
- Approximately one-third of the survey participants in Ohio 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.
- Seventeen to 19 percent of the respondents in Ohio scored in the fourth level of prose, document, and quantitative literacy, and 2 to 4 percent attained the highest level (Level 5). These adults consistently demonstrated the ability to perform the most challenging tasks in this assessment, many of which involved long and complex documents and text passages.
- The average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies of Ohio respondents were almost identical to those of adults living in the Midwest region and 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. For example, the average proficiencies of Ohio respondents age 65 and older were 63 to 64 points (or more than one literacy level) below those of adults age 35 to 44.
- Virtually all Ohio adults surveyed (98 percent) were born in the United States or a U.S. territory. As a result, the number of foreign-born respondents in the state was too small to compare the proficiencies of those who had lived in the United States for different numbers of years. Nationwide, however, adults born in the United States or one of its territories displayed higher average proficiencies than those born abroad. Foreign-born adults who had lived in this country for more than a decade outperformed more recent immigrants.
- African American respondents in Ohio were more likely than White respondents to perform in the two lowest literacy levels and less likely to attain the two highest levels. There were too few Latino adults in Ohio to provide reliable estimates of their proficiencies. In the national population, Latino adults had lower average scores than African American adults. When one controls for country of birth, however, a different pattern emerges. Latino adults who were born in the United States or one of its territories have higher average proficiencies than African American adults.

- Ohio respondents who reported having physical or mental conditions that keep them from participating fully in work or other activities were more likely than adults without such conditions to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale and less likely to reach the highest levels.
- More than three-quarters of Ohio survey participants reported having lived in the state for more than 20 years, and another 12 percent had been residents for 16 to 20 years. There were no significant differences in performance among adults who had lived in the state for different lengths of time.
- The average prose and document proficiencies of men and women in Ohio did not differ, but men displayed somewhat higher average quantitative proficiencies than women.

Education and Training

- Ohio respondents with relatively few years of education were more likely to display limited literacy skills than those who completed high school or some postsecondary education. In fact, average literacy proficiencies rise steadily across the entire range of education levels.
- Differences in the average years of schooling completed by adults in various subpopulations tend to parallel the observed differences in literacy proficiencies. Older survey participants in Ohio had completed less schooling, on average, than younger participants, for example. The differences in average years of schooling among the racial/ethnic groups are not statistically significant, however.
- On each literacy scale, the average scores of school dropouts in Ohio who had studied for a GED or high school equivalency certificate were 41 to 43 points higher than those of dropouts who had not studied for the certificate. Forty-one percent of the Ohio respondents who had studied for the GED indicated they had received it, and their average scores were 22 to 36 points higher than those of individuals who had studied for but did not receive a GED. The vast majority of GED program participants in Ohio were between the ages of 25 and 54.
- The 10 percent of Ohio survey participants who were enrolled in school or college at the time of the survey had higher literacy proficiencies, on average, than those who were not enrolled in academic programs. Nationwide, the largest percentage of enrollees (38 percent) stated that their goal was a four-year college degree.
- Eighty-nine percent of the Ohio respondents reported having completed at least some of their precollegiate or collegiate education in the state. Overall, their literacy skills were comparable to those of respondents who were educated somewhere else. The average proficiencies of Ohio adults who had been educated in private schools were not significantly different from those of adults who had been educated in public schools.
- Less than 10 percent of the survey respondents in this state said they were currently or previously enrolled in a course to improve their basic skills. Individuals who had enrolled in such a course had lower average proficiencies on the document and quantitative scales than those who had not.

Employment, Economic Status, and Civic Responsibility

- Employed respondents were less likely than those who were unemployed or out of the labor force to perform in the lowest levels on each literacy scale. Across the scales, between 31 and 38 percent of the employed survey participants in Ohio performed in Levels 1 and 2, in contrast to approximately 60 percent of unemployed participants and roughly two-thirds of those who were out of the labor force.
- Ohio respondents 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, including sales or clerical, craft or service, or 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 Ohio respondents, those in the three highest literacy levels reported working an average of 32 to 46 weeks in the past year, compared with only 13 to 15 weeks for those performing in Level 1.
- Across the scales, Ohio survey participants with proficiencies in Level 1 reported median weekly earnings of \$197 to \$205. In contrast, those in Level 3 earned about \$314 to \$332, while those in Level 5 earned between \$560 and \$594. Similarly, the median annual household income reported by survey participants in the highest proficiency levels was far higher than that of participants in the lowest levels.
- Approximately two-thirds of Ohio respondents designated as either poor or near poor demonstrated skills in Levels 1 and 2 on each literacy scale; in contrast, only 34 to 41 percent of the not poor performed in this level. As a result, the average literacy scores of poor and near poor respondents are considerably lower than the scores of adults who were not poor.
- Among Ohio survey participants, voting appears to be related to literacy proficiency. On all three scales, the average literacy proficiencies of respondents who said they had voted in a recent election were higher than those of nonvoters.

Language Use and Literacy Practices

- Almost all Ohio survey respondents (95 percent) reported speaking only English before beginning school. All respondents in the state said they understand (100 percent) and almost all said they speak (99 percent) English well or very well; slightly smaller proportions described themselves as reading (97 percent) and writing (94 percent) English well or very well. On all three literacy scales, Ohio respondents who described themselves as having limited writing skills scored, on average, 50 to 60 points below those who said they write well or very well.
- Virtually all survey respondents in Ohio reported getting some or a lot of information about current events, public affairs, or the 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. Sixty-eight percent said they get some or a lot of this type of information from friends or relatives. Those who get some or a lot of information from print media earned higher average scores in the assessment than those who do not.
- More than half the adults surveyed in the state (57 percent) said they read a newspaper every day, while another 33 percent said they do so at least once a week. Seven percent reported reading a newspaper less than once a week, and their average prose, document, and quantitative proficiencies were far lower than those of more regular newspaper readers.
- Nineteen percent of the Ohio 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 at least one magazine regularly. Seventeen percent of the respondents in Ohio said they had not read any books in English in the past six months, and their scores were considerably lower, on average, than the scores of those who had read at least one book. The types of books read most frequently were reference books, manuals, and fiction.
- Thirty percent of the survey participants in Ohio reported that they never use a library, and another one-third said they do so only once or twice a year. In general, individuals who reported frequent use of the library outperformed less frequent users.
- Virtually all Ohio respondents said they watch some television every day, although 15 percent said they spend no more than an hour on this activity. Thirty-eight percent of the survey respondents in the state reported watching four or more hours of television each day. Individuals who watch the most television had lower average proficiencies than those who watch the least.

- There are large (49 to 79 point) differences in prose proficiency between Ohio respondents 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 respondents who use reference books, catalogs, or lists at least a few times a week are far (66 to 75 points) higher than the scores of those who never use these materials. Finally, in the dimension of quantitative literacy, adults who said they frequently use mathematics outperformed those who rarely or never do so.

Reflections on the Results

In reflecting on the results of this study, many readers will undoubtedly seek an answer to a fundamental question: Are the outcomes satisfactory? That is, are the distributions of prose, document, and quantitative proficiency observed in this survey adequate to ensure individual opportunities for all adults, to increase worker productivity, or to strengthen America's competitiveness around the world?

Because it is impossible to say precisely what literacy skills are essential for individuals to succeed in this or any other society, the results of the State and National Adult Literacy Surveys provide no firm answers to such questions. As the authors examined the survey data and deliberated on the results with members of the advisory committees, however, several observations and concerns emerged.

Perhaps the most salient finding of this study is that such large percentages of adults nationwide 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."²

The data from this survey appear to support such views. On each of the literacy scales, adults who were unemployed or out of the labor force and who earned low wages tended to demonstrate far more limited skills than those who were employed and who earned high wages. Adults who rarely or never read displayed lower average proficiencies than those who were at least occasional readers. Moreover, the average literacy scores of individuals who received food stamps and who were poor or near poor were much lower than those of their more affluent peers.

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 be able to sign their name on a form or locate a single fact in a newspaper or table, then the levels of literacy seen in this survey might not warrant

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

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

³L.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,

⁴U.S. Department of Labor. (1992, April). *Learning a Living: A Blueprint for High Performance*. Washington, DC: The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS). R.L. Venezky, C.F. Kaestle, and A. Sum. (1987, January). *The Subtle Danger: Reflections on the Literacy Abilities of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.

⁵National 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.