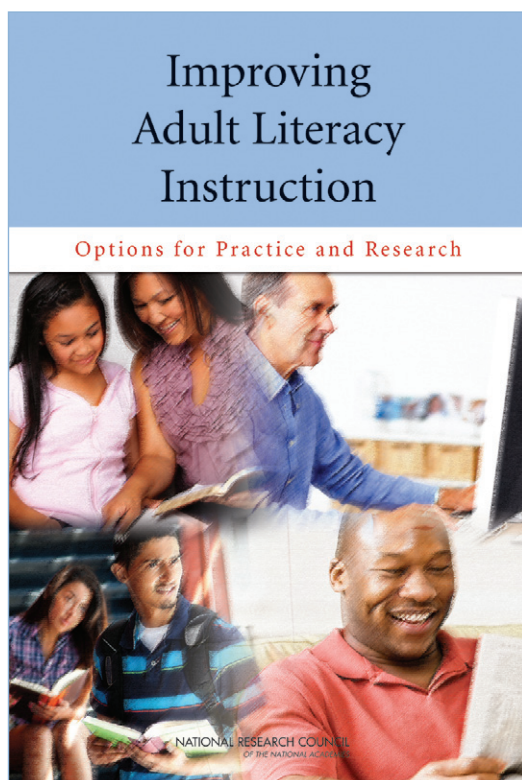


IMPROVING ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION: OPTIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

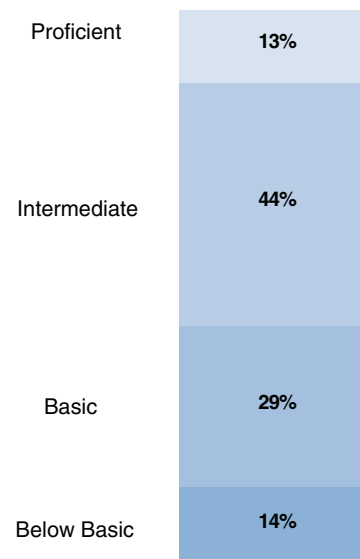


A high level of literacy in both print and digital media is needed to negotiate most aspects of 21st century life, such as succeeding in a competitive job market, supporting a family, navigating health information, and participating in civic activities. But according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 43 percent of U.S. adults have only “basic” or “below basic” ability to read and understand prose texts such as news stories, brochures, and instructional materials. And only 13 percent are “proficient” in being able to read and use such documents.

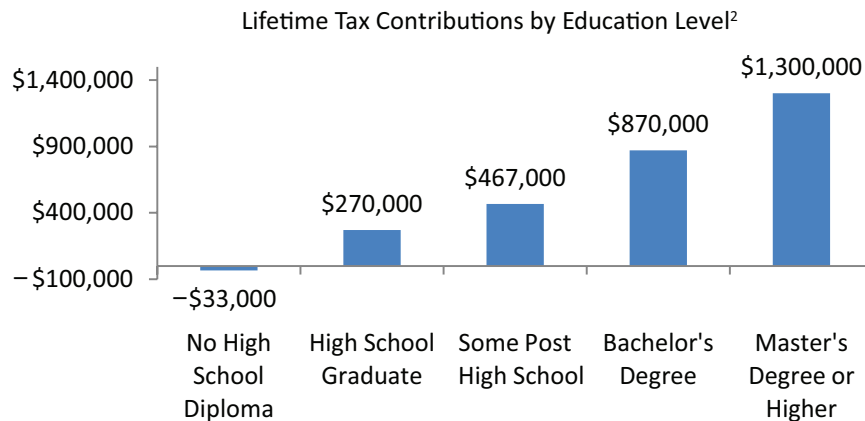
Adults with low literacy skills face daily and serious consequences: they have less ability to access and use health information and are less likely to read to their children. They also have lower rates of participation in the labor force and lower earnings when they do have jobs. As the figure on the next page shows, lifetime net tax contributions increase as education level increases. Gains in literacy can enable increases in educational attainment, which is linked to higher lifetime incomes and contributions to national revenue.

At the request of the U.S.

Department of Education, the National Research Council convened a committee of experts from many disciplines to synthesize the available research on literacy and learning in order to improve literacy instruction for adults in the U.S. The committee’s report, *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction*, recommends a program of research and innovation to better understand adult literacy learners, improve instruction, and create the supports adults need for learning. Success will depend upon strong partnerships among the federal government, states, and settings where adults receive instruction. Sustained cooperation between researchers and practitioners is also important.



This chart shows the percentage of Americans at each level of prose literacy in the most recent national survey, conducted in 2003.¹



APPLYING WHAT WE KNOW

Despite the large population of U.S. adults who need to develop their literacy, there is a severe shortage of research on effective instructional approaches for these learners. The study committee concluded that it is reasonable to apply literacy research with other populations, such as younger students, when developing instruction for adult learners, as long as the instruction meets the motivations and learning needs of adults.

For example, the research shows that instruction should combine teaching and extensive practice with a variety of texts, tools, and tasks that are matched to the learner's skills and background. It should also develop learners' literacy skills so that they are automatic and transferrable to tasks valued by society and the learner.

As these and other principles and research findings are implemented, they should be evaluated to determine how well they work with adult learners. Key to any approach is that it should create a positive climate for adults that draws on their knowledge and life experiences, uses materials and activities that develop valued knowledge and skills, and supports adults in managing their own learning.

CHALLENGES TO IMPLEMENTATION

Efforts to improve literacy instruction for adults face a number of challenges:

- Instruction currently is offered in a mix of programs that lack sufficient coordination and coherence in their objectives and instructional approaches.

- The preparation of literacy instructors varies widely, and professional development for them is limited.
- Attrition rates in adult literacy programs and remedial college courses are high; achieving literacy requires thousands of hours of practice, and many adults drop out of their classes before making sufficient progress toward their goals.

NEXT STEPS FOR IMPROVING ADULT LITERACY INSTRUCTION

The committee recommends four steps to improve adult literacy instruction in the United States:

- **Federal and state policymakers should expand the infrastructure of adult literacy education to support instructional approaches, curricula, materials, tools, and assessments that are consistent with the available research.**

Although little evidence is available on literacy instruction specifically for adults, some practices should be applied immediately, based on evidence from other populations and general principles of instruction and learning. As these approaches are implemented, they should be rigorously evaluated for effectiveness.

- **Federal and state policymakers should ensure that professional development and technical assistance for instructors are widely available, ongoing, and consistent with the available research.**

For U.S. society to continue to function and sustain its standard of living, higher literacy levels are required of the U.S. population in the 21st century.

WHO ARE ADULT LITERACY LEARNERS?

The diverse groups of people who need stronger literacy skills in the U.S. include:

- recent immigrants who have little education in their native languages
- middle-aged and older U.S.-born high school graduates who can no longer keep up with the reading, writing, and technology demands of their jobs
- adolescents and adults who dropped out of school
- adults who had disabilities that were not fully accommodated in school
- highly educated immigrants who are literate in their native language but need to learn to read and write in English
- underprepared students in colleges

Adults receive literacy instruction in many settings, which include schools, community organizations, community colleges, prisons, and workplaces.

The wide variation in the way literacy instructors are prepared presents a clear obstacle to ensuring that instruction is effective on a broad scale, as well as to conducting needed research. It is critical that instructors possess knowledge and skills consistent with the most reliable research.

- **Policymakers, providers of literacy programs, and researchers should collaborate to find ways to help adults persist in their literacy studies.**

Supporting learners' persistence is one of the most challenging aspects of designing effective adult literacy programs, given the complexity and responsibilities of adults' lives and the amount of practice needed to develop literacy skills. Ways to encourage persistence may include particular instructional methods, technologies, social service support, and incentives. All approaches must be evaluated rigorously for effectiveness.

- **To inform local, state, and federal decisions aimed at optimizing the progress of adult learners, strategic and sustained investments are needed in a coordinated approach to improving programs, evaluating them, and conducting research about adult literacy learners.**

Needed research includes:

- developing instructional approaches and materials that apply principles of learning and that can develop the literacy skills adults need for education, work, and civic participation;

- identifying practices, program components, and policies to help adults persist in their learning;
- identifying technologies that could aid learning, free busy adults from needing to be in a specific learning location, and motivate and support them as they practice;
- identifying the specific literacy skills needed in today's society, such as literacy skills related to collaborative problem-solving and the use of new communications media;
- understanding the learning capabilities, needs, and characteristics of adult learners and to identify subgroups who might benefit from particular instructional approaches;
- supporting adults learning English as a Second Language by identifying effective practices for different groups of these learners, who vary in first-language skills, education levels, and reasons for learning English; and
- developing assessments of learners, the quality of instruction they receive, and the supports they are given for learning and persistence.

UNDERSTANDING WHETHER U.S. LITERACY IS IMPROVING

Policymakers need better information to improve adult literacy in the U.S. and to know which investments are resulting in a more literate society – information not provided by the accountability tools currently used at the federal level. Approaches to measurement should be

modified to better track learners' progress in the components of reading and writing and their ability to perform the literacy tasks required and valued in work, education, and community life.

Information should also be gathered on current instructional practices and materials in order to better track existing practices, plan appropriate professional development for instructors, and match instruction to the literacy skills adults need for work, education, health, and functioning in society. It is also important to collect data on how well adults are meeting their personal literacy goals. Data in these areas should be gathered and analyzed on a continuing, long-term basis.

LEADERSHIP AND PARTNERSHIP

Implementing these recommendations will require strong leadership from the U.S. Department of Education, the U.S. Department of Labor, and other spon-

soring research agencies. The nature of the work to be done will require partnerships among researchers, practitioners, curriculum developers, and administrators to systematically build the needed knowledge and tools, and to identify and overcome barriers to implementing them. Enlisting business leaders and community groups is also important.

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² Based on data from Khatiwada, I., McLaughlin, J.K., Sum, A., and Palma, S. (2007, December). *The fiscal consequences of adult educational attainment*. Prepared for the National Commission on Adult Literacy. Boston: Northeast University, Center for Labor Market Studies.

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