

Ending Illiteracy in America Illiteracy

As I mentioned in the previous section, I knew what illiteracy was, but I had never known anyone who was illiterate. Anthony and Sam made me much more aware of illiteracy as a problem for children. What the ten-year study had shown early on was that with no exception, every single child learned. The Anthonys and Sams had learned to read just like everybody else. In that entire group of 308,700 students, there were no illiterate children.

My original goal for the Reading Program had been to eliminate the need for Special Education classes. In the process of achieving that goal, we had ended illiteracy for the study's more than 300,000 children. One way to demonstrate that our Program had ended the need for Special Education classes for students who were struggling with learning to read was to emphasize the Program's ability to end illiteracy. If illiteracy could be ended for all children in a regular classroom setting, then there would be no need to have separate classes for supposedly educationally handicapped children.

Apart from Anthony and Sam, I had little experience with illiteracy. I had not even been aware that it was a real problem for so many people. Because focusing on the Program's ability to end illiteracy seemed to be the best way to show that Special Education classes were no longer needed, I began learning as much as I could about illiteracy in America. And what I learned made me go WOW!!! I had no idea that ending illiteracy in America would have an effect, not just on Anthony and Sam, but on every one of us.

Illiteracy in America

According to a study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 15% of adults in the United States cannot read. A survey conducted by the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), "the nation's report card," showed that not even half (43%) of fourth graders in the U.S. scored at or above a proficient level in reading. And for marginalized students, the numbers were much worse: just 17% of Black students, 21% of Latino students, 11% of students with disabilities, and 10% of multilingual learners can read proficiently by fourth grade.

Illiteracy has many negative impacts on individuals and society. Overall, low-literate adults participate less in the labor force, earn less, and are less likely to read to their children, which may stunt their children's literacy development. As illiteracy passes from parent to child, subsequent generations also suffer from unemployment and poverty.

Other adverse consequences of illiteracy include crime, poor health, low academic performance, and slow economic growth. Estimates show that these adverse social and economic outcomes cost the United States \$360 billion annually. Compared to other developed nations, the U.S. has lower literacy rates. Countries with higher literacy rates have more national productivity, better health, and greater equality than nations with lower literacy rates.

According to the Department of Justice, the link between academic failure and delinquency, violence, and crime is welded to reading failure. Nearly 85% of the juveniles who face trial in the juvenile court system are functionally illiterate.

The shame associated with learning disabilities and low literacy sometimes prevents individuals from seeking the help they need to become literate, perpetuating the issue throughout an individual's lifetime. Many low-literate individuals hide their illiteracy from their employers, associates, children, and even spouses. Studies show that 53% of low-literate adults have never told their children about their reading inability. Feelings of shame and inadequacy lead to low self-esteem and poor mental health. These feelings create an emotional barrier, inhibiting illiterate adults from seeking help in learning to read.

Literacy Rate Statistics

Taken from data compiled in 2022. Posted on www.brightfuturesny.com

- 1 Only 1 in 3 children who enter kindergarten with below-average literacy skills will read proficiently by third grade.
- 2 1 in 3 low-income children do not have any books at home.
- 3 1 in 6 children who are not reading proficiently in third-grade will not graduate from high school on time, a rate four times greater than that for proficient readers.
- 4 33% of fourth-graders cannot read at a basic level.
- 5 67% of students who cannot read proficiently by the end of the 4th grade will end up in jail or on welfare.
- 6 85% of juvenile offenders have low literacy skills.
- 7 19% of high school graduates cannot read.
- 8 14% of adults cannot read.
- 10 21% of adults read below a fifth-grade level.
- 11 50% of adults cannot read a book at an eighth-grade level.
- 12 43% of adults with low literacy live in poverty.
- 13 50% of adults with low literacy do not have a job.
- 14 75% of state prison inmates did not graduate high school.

Additional Statistics on U.S. Literacy

46% of American adults cannot understand basic financial documents like balance sheets and income statements.

75% of Americans receiving food stamps perform at the lowest two literacy levels.

90% of U.S. employers have difficulty filling positions due to a lack of qualified candidates with the necessary skills, including literacy.

Seventy-seven million Americans lack the basic literacy skills required for most jobs in the U.S.