

## Adolescent Literacy

The majority of students are leaving high school without the reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college and a career. Many of the more than 700,000 students who leave U.S. high schools each year without a diploma have low literacy skills.<sup>1</sup> In America today, one in five students fails to graduate from high school on time. The consequences for the individuals and the costs to the nation are staggering in terms of lost wages and earnings over a lifetime, estimated at about \$335 billion per year.<sup>2</sup> For those students who earn a diploma, an increasing number must take remedial coursework upon entering college, without promising results: students who enroll in a remedial reading course are less likely to eventually earn a degree or certificate.<sup>3</sup>

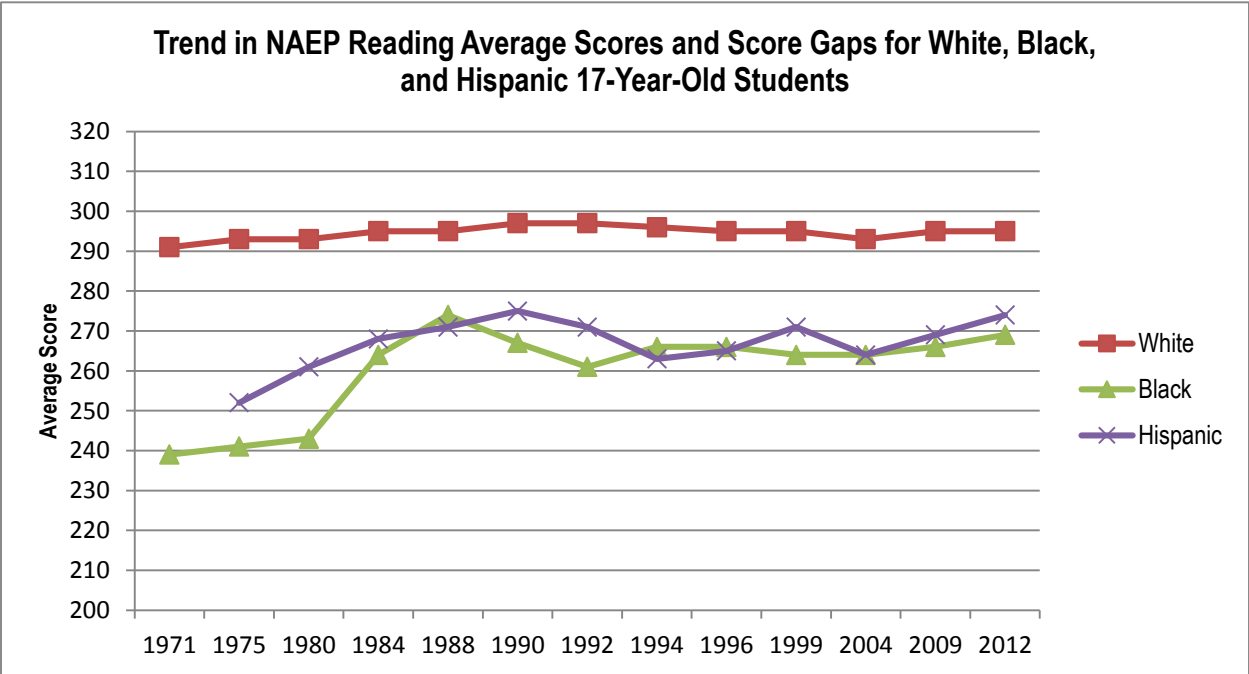
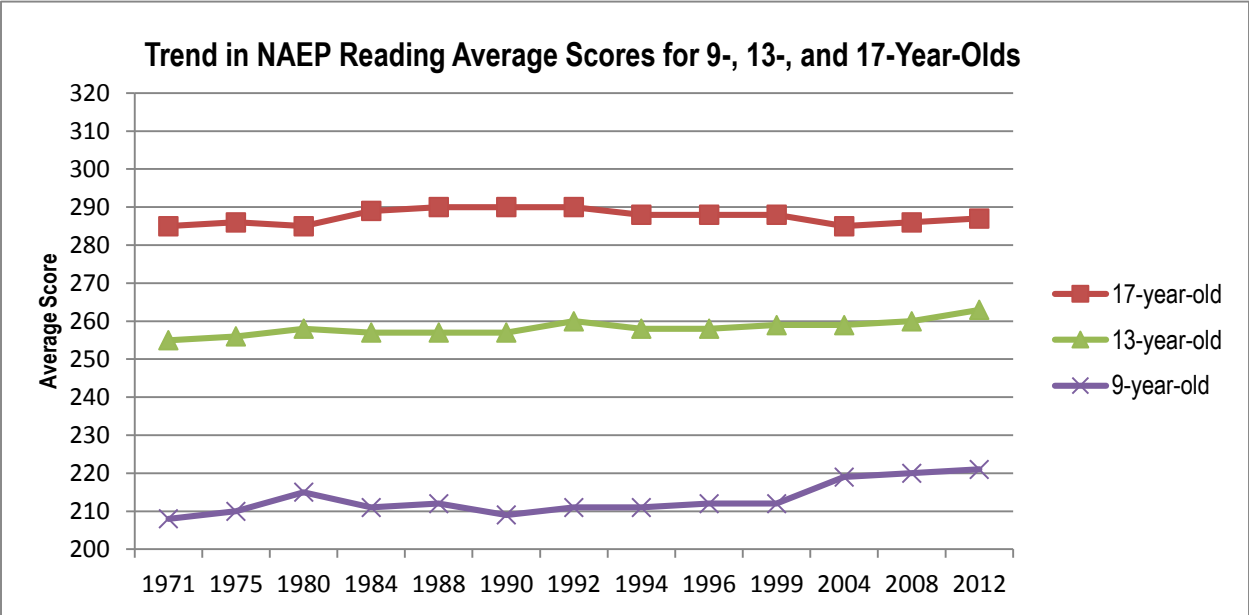
Between 1973 and 2008, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy requiring postsecondary education increased from 28 percent to 59 percent.<sup>4</sup> More than ever, students need advanced literacy skills to succeed in a fast-paced global economy. Yet over the past four decades, the literacy performance of seventeen-year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has remained flat.<sup>5</sup> International measures of reading place American fifteen-year-olds seventeenth among developed nations in reading, lagging behind countries such as Estonia, Liechtenstein, and Poland.<sup>6</sup>

In the face of this literacy crisis, the majority of states have agreed to improve reading and writing instruction dramatically across all grade levels by adopting the English language arts Common Core State Standards. Students must show a steady increase in their ability to read complex texts and write reasoned arguments based on evidence. The development of strong literacy skills requires explicit instruction and extensive practice in reading, writing, and thinking across the curriculum. Ensuring that all young people graduate from high school with advanced literacy skills is essential to their success in postsecondary education and a career.

The facts below make a case for comprehensive federal and state initiatives and investments to improve reading and writing skills of adolescent learners across the nation.

- According to the NAEP, more than 60 percent of middle and high school students scored below the “proficient” level in reading achievement.<sup>7</sup> These results reveal that millions of young people cannot understand or evaluate text, provide relevant details, or support inferences about the written documents they read.
- Only 26 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native, 23 percent of Hispanic, and 16 percent of African American twelfth graders scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment, compared to 47 percent of white and Asian students.<sup>8</sup>

- Twenty-three percent of eighth-grade students and 25 percent of twelfth-grade students scored below the basic level in reading, which means that they do not have even partial mastery of the appropriate grade-level knowledge and skills.<sup>9</sup>
- Among twelfth-grade students of color, 36 percent of Hispanic students and 44 percent of black students scored below the basic level, compared to 17 percent of white students and 20 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students.<sup>10</sup>
- Only 20 percent of eighth-grade students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch reached the proficient level in reading, compared with 48 percent of their more affluent peers.<sup>11</sup>



- Only 16 percent of African American, 21 percent of Hispanic, and 19 percent of Native American eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level in reading.<sup>12</sup>
- Only 3 percent of eighth-grade English language learners scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment; 70 percent scored below basic.<sup>13</sup>
- Half of incoming ninth graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level.<sup>14</sup>
- Underdeveloped literacy skills are a key reason why many students fail to graduate from high school. Only 73 percent of Hispanics, 69 percent of African Americans, and 67 percent of Native Americans graduate from high school, compared to more than 86 percent of white and Asian students.<sup>15</sup>
- The possession of advanced literacy skills across content areas is the best available predictor of students' ability to succeed in introductory college courses.<sup>16</sup> Yet since the 1960s, there has been a steady decline in the difficulty and sophistication of the content of the texts students have been asked to read.<sup>17</sup>
- Only 44 percent of high school graduates tested on the 2013 ACT met the reading-readiness benchmark, which represents the knowledge and skills a student needs to succeed in credit-bearing, first-year college courses.<sup>18</sup>
- High school students' ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses. Just over one in four of ACT-tested high school graduates met or exceeded the college-readiness benchmarks in all four academic areas—English, reading, mathematics, and science.<sup>19</sup>
- Roughly one-third of high school graduates are not ready to succeed in an introductory-level college writing course.<sup>20</sup> Remedial education at the postsecondary level costs the nation an estimated \$3.6 billion annually.<sup>21</sup>
- About 40 percent of employers indicated that they were dissatisfied with high school graduates' ability to read and understand complicated materials, think analytically, and solve real-world problems.<sup>22</sup> For those who enter the workplace, the private industry spends an estimated \$3.1 billion annually to bolster the literacy skills of entry-level workers.<sup>23</sup>

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## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> M. Stetser and R. Stillwell, *Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates: School Years 2010–11 and 2011–12, First Look* (NCES 2014-391) (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014).
- <sup>2</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, “The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools” (Washington, DC: Author, August 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, “Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation” (Washington, DC: Author, August 2006).
- <sup>4</sup> A. Carnevale, N. Smith, and J. Strohl, *Help Wanted: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2018* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), <https://georgetown.app.box.com/s/ursjbxaym2np1v8mgrv7> (accessed November 21, 2013).
- <sup>5</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012* (NCES 2013-456) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).
- <sup>6</sup> Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *2012 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*, <http://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/PISA-2012-results-US.pdf> and <http://www.oecd.org/pisa/keyfindings/PISA-2012-results-snapshot-Volume-I-ENG.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2013).
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: A First Look: 2013 Mathematics and Reading* (NCES 2014-451) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: A First Look: Reading 2013* (NCES 2014-451) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: A First Look: Reading 2013*.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>14</sup> R. Balfanz, J. M. McPartland, and A. Shaw, *Re-conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era* (Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2002).
- <sup>15</sup> Stetser and Stillwell, *Public High School Four-Year On-Time Graduation Rates and Event Dropout Rates*.
- <sup>16</sup> R. Heller and C. L. Greenleaf, *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, June 2007).
- <sup>17</sup> National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Glossary of Key Terms* (Washington, DC: Author, 2010).
- <sup>18</sup> ACT, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2013), <http://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr13/pdf/CCCR13-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2014).
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.; ACT, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2006).
- <sup>20</sup> S. Graham and M. Hebert, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
- <sup>21</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, “Saving Now and Saving Later: How High School Reform Can Reduce the Nation’s Wasted Remediation Dollars” (Washington, DC: Author, 2011).
- <sup>22</sup> Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2005); Council on Competitiveness, *Competitiveness Index: Where America Stands* (Washington, DC: Author, 2007).
- <sup>23</sup> National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket to Work ... Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders* (New York, NY: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004).

