

# Adolescent Literacy: Bridging the College- and Career-Readiness Gap



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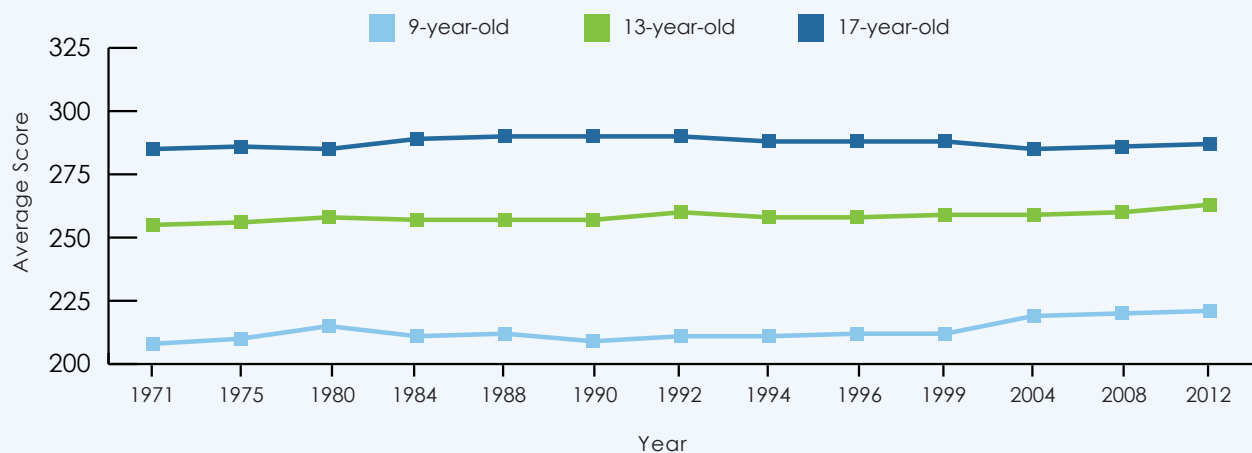
## Many of the more than 700,000 students who leave U.S. high schools each year without a diploma have low literacy skills.<sup>1</sup>

More than 60 percent of eighth graders and 60 percent of twelfth graders scored below the “proficient” level in reading achievement according to the most recent administrations of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), known as the Nation’s Report Card.<sup>2</sup> Even more disturbing, NAEP results reveal that almost half of students of color and students from low-income families enter fifth grade with skills below the basic level on NAEP.<sup>3</sup> These outcomes mean that millions of young people lack the rudimentary reading skills to locate relevant

information or make simple inferences. Without essential literacy skills, students are more likely to be retained in school, drop out of high school, become teen parents, or enter the juvenile justice system.<sup>4</sup> The consequences for the individuals and the costs to the nation are staggering in terms of the billions of dollars in wages and earnings lost over a lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, between 1973 and 2015, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy requiring postsecondary education increased from 28 percent to 61 percent.<sup>6</sup> Without advanced literacy skills, young Americans are at risk for being locked out of the middle class and working in predominantly low-wage jobs. Unfortunately, over the past four decades, the literacy performance of seventeen-year-olds on NAEP has remained flat as figure 1 shows.<sup>7</sup>

**FIGURE 1: Trend in NAEP Reading Average Scores for 9-, 13-, and 17-Year-Olds**



Source: U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012* (NCES 2013-456) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).

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There is good news in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). Under the new law, states now can receive federal support for comprehensive literacy programs from early education through grade twelve for students most in need.<sup>8</sup> ESSA incorporates language from the Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act, creating a discretionary grant program designed to connect policy and practice more directly and powerfully by investing in the knowledge and skills of educators. “[E]nough is already known about adolescent literacy—both the nature of the problems of struggling readers and the types of interventions and approaches to address these needs—in order to act immediately on a broad scale,” write Gina Biancarosa, assistant professor of educational methodology, policy, and leadership at the University of Oregon, and Catherine Snow, the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.<sup>9</sup>

States and districts must confront the enormity of the college- and career-readiness gap by improving literacy education for all students. The facts below make the case for aggressive action to improve the reading and writing skills of adolescent learners across the nation.

- On the 2015 NAEP reading assessment, the most recent for twelfth graders, only 27 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students, 24 percent of Latino students, and 16 percent of African American students scored at or above proficient, compared to 44 percent of white students and 48 percent of Asian students.<sup>10</sup>
- Meanwhile, 29 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>11</sup>
- Among twelfth-grade students of color, 38 percent of Latino students and 49 percent of African American students scored below the basic level, compared to 22 percent of white students and 20 percent of Asian/Pacific Islander students.<sup>12</sup>
- Similarly, among eighth-grade students, only 15 percent of African Americans, 20 percent of Latinos, and 22 percent of American Indian and Alaska Natives scored at or above the proficient level on the 2015 NAEP reading assessment, the most recent for this grade.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, 22 percent of eighth-grade students scored below the basic level.<sup>14</sup>

- Only 20 percent of eighth-grade students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch reached the proficient level in reading, compared with 47 percent of their more affluent peers.<sup>15</sup>
  - Only 3 percent of eighth-grade English language learners scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment; 72 percent scored below basic.<sup>16</sup>
  - Underdeveloped literacy skills are a key reason why many students fail to graduate from high school. Only 76 percent of Latino students, 72 percent of African American students, and 70 percent of American Indian and Alaska Native students graduated from high school in 2014, compared to 87 percent of white students and 89 percent of Asian students.<sup>17</sup>
  - Furthermore, states vary widely in how well they address students' language and literacy needs. For example, in 2014, just 18 percent of English language learners graduated on time in Arizona, compared with 84 percent of English language learners in Arkansas.<sup>18</sup>
  - Only 46 percent of high school graduates tested on the 2015 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>19</sup>
  - High school students' ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses. In 2015, just 28 percent of ACT-tested high school graduates met or exceeded the college-readiness benchmarks in all four academic areas—English, reading, mathematics, and science.<sup>20</sup>
  - Only about 27 percent of middle school and high school students met the standards of writing proficiency defined for their grade on the most recent NAEP writing assessment.<sup>21</sup> In addition, roughly one-third of high school graduates are not ready to succeed in an introductory-level college writing course.<sup>22</sup> Remedial education at the postsecondary level costs the nation an estimated \$3.6 billion annually.<sup>23</sup>
  - About 61 percent of employers request or require high school graduates to get additional education or training to make up for gaps in their ability to read and write.<sup>24</sup> Private industry spends an estimated \$3.1 billion annually to bolster the literacy skills of entry-level workers.<sup>25</sup>
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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), *Common Core of Data*, Table 1: Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR), by Race/Ethnicity and Selected Demographics for the United States, the 50 States, and the District of Columbia: School Year 2013–14, [http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR\\_RE\\_and\\_characteristics\\_2013-14.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp) (accessed December 21, 2015).
- <sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, NAEP, 2015 Reading Assessment; [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_2015/#?grade=8](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_2015/#?grade=8) (accessed December 21, 2015); U.S. Department of Education, NCES, NAEP, 2015 Mathematics and Reading: Grade 12 Assessments; [http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_g12\\_2015/#reading](http://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2015/#reading) (accessed May 11, 2016).
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, NAEP, 2015 Reading Assessment.
- <sup>4</sup> C. Connor et al., *Improving Reading Outcomes for Students with or at Risk for Reading Disabilities: A Synthesis of the Contributions from the Institute of Education Sciences Research Centers* (NCSE 2014-3000) (Washington, DC: National Center for Special Education Research, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, 2014). <http://ies.ed.gov/ncser/pubs/20143000/pdf/20143000.pdf> (accessed December 22, 2015).
- <sup>5</sup> Alliance for Excellent Education, America's Promise Alliance, Civic Enterprises, and the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, *Progress Is No Accident: Why ESEA Can't Backtrack on High School Graduation Rates* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, November 2015) <http://all4ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/NoAccident.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- <sup>6</sup> A. Carnevale, N. Smith, and J. Strohl, *Recovery: Projections of Jobs and Education Requirements Through 2020* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University, June 2013), [https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR\\_Web\\_.pdf](https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Recovery2020.FR_Web_.pdf) (accessed December 23, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Trends in Academic Progress 2012* (NCES 2013–456) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2013).
- <sup>8</sup> Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, Public Law 114-95, 114 Congress, 1st sess., <https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1177> (accessed December 23, 2015).
- <sup>9</sup> G. Biancarosa and C. Snow, *Reading Next—A Vision for Action and Research and High School Literacy*, a report to Carnegie Corporation of New York (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004, second edition 2006), <http://all4ed.org/reports-factsheets/reading-next-a-vision-for-action-and-research-in-middle-and-high-school-literacy/> (accessed December 22, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, NAEP, 2015 Mathematics and Reading: Grade 12 Assessments.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, NAEP, 2015 Reading Assessment.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *Common Core of Data*, Table 1: Public High School 4-Year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup> ACT, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2015), <https://www.act.org/research/policymakers/cccr15/pdf/CCCR15-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf> (accessed December 21, 2015).
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid.; ACT, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2006).
- <sup>21</sup> U.S. Department of Education, NCES, *The Nation's Report Card: Writing 2011* (NCES 2012–470) (Washington, DC: Author, 2012), <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pdf/main2011/2012470.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016).
- <sup>22</sup> S. Graham and M. Hebert, *Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010).
- <sup>23</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>24</sup> Achieve, Inc., *Rising to the Challenge: Views on High School Graduates' Preparedness for College and Careers, Part Two: Employers and College Faculty* (Washington, DC: Achieve, April 2015), <http://www.achieve.org/files/AchieveSurveyIIPowerPoint.pdf> (accessed January 5, 2016).
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