



Literacy Facts

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About D.C. LEARNs

Our Mission:

To lead an active coalition of Washington, DC literacy programs, learners and supporters, and work with them to strengthen literacy services and present a strong unified voice on the importance of literacy as an investment in the community.

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Adult Literacy Skills in Washington, D.C.

What do the national studies tell us about literacy rates in the District?

The most recent survey of adult literacy in the United States is the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL). It was conducted in 2003 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and its findings were released in December 2005. This data does not provide us with a single national literacy rate; instead it offers an estimate of three different types of literacy: prose, document and quantitative literacy. Moreover, the NCES has not released any form of localized estimates for the District of Columbia based on this data, and it is unclear whether this will be forthcoming.

As a result, the most commonly cited estimates of literacy levels in Washington, DC are derived from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS), conducted by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) for the U.S. Department of Education. Those results were reported in three scales, which were then divided into five levels. In 1997, the National Institute for Literacy commissioned a report to estimate the number of adults who fell within the two lowest of these five levels for every city, county, congressional district, and state in the country, using demographic "proxy" data such as educational attainment, age, and race.

	Literacy Level	
	Level 1	Level 2
% of D.C. Adult Population	37% ¹	24% ¹
% of U.S. Adult Population	21–23% ²	25–28% ²
Literacy Characteristics of Adults at these Levels	Adults typically cannot read well enough to fill out an application, read a food label, or read a simple story to a child. ²	Adults begin to compare, contrast, or integrate pieces of information but generally cannot perform higher-level reading and problem-solving skills. ²

- Adults with literacy skills at Level 1 are, on average, likely to lack the literacy skills that most Americans would view as necessary in order to function effectively in our society. However, it's important to note that a person whose average literacy skills are at Level 1 may possess higher skills at certain tasks that are of particular importance to them. D.C. LEARNs' position is that definitively classifying a certain proportion of D.C. residents as "functionally illiterate" is problematic at best, as the definition of "functional" is at least somewhat subjective.

- On average, GED recipients and high school graduates score a little below the mid-point of NALS' Level 3 proficiency.³ This data suggests that many adults at Level 2 are also likely in need of (and some may receive services from) adult education programs. It also suggests that adults at Level 1 are less likely to have sufficient literacy skills to prepare for the GED.
- While D.C. has a higher estimate percentage of individuals at the lowest literacy levels than any other state in the nation, a fairer comparison is with other major U.S. cities. D.C.'s estimated percentage of individuals at Level 1 and 2 is in fact comparable to that of other large cities.⁴
- The scales/levels provided by these studies are not correlated with grade level.
- The NALS and NAAL estimates were used to evaluate the overall literacy rates of the population, not the population attending adult education programs. Therefore the estimates tell us little about the performance of adult literacy programs.
- In 2006, the State Education Agency (SEA) commissioned a study that produced synthetic estimates for the District at the ward level.⁵ These percentages were published in a report issued by the SEA in March 2007.⁶

Endnotes

- ¹ *National Adult Literacy Survey*, 1992.
- ² National Institute for Literacy, 2005. Available at: <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/faqs.html>
- ³ U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, "Educational and Labor Market Performance of GED Recipients," 1998.
- ⁴ Harrington, Marcia and Diane Knich, "The Literacy Numbers Game," *Knowledge Builder*. D.C. LEARNs. Volume 1, Issue 1, 2005. Available at: <http://www.dclearns.org/knowledgebuilder/Spring2005.pdf>
- ⁵ Karios Management, "Technical Appendix for the State of Literacy in DC Report," 2007. Available at: <http://literacydc.org/documents/techpaper.pdf>
- ⁶ State Education Agency, "The State of Adult Literacy: Investing in Human Capital," 2007. Available at: <http://literacydc.org/documents/report.pdf>