

OVERVIEW

It is estimated that one in five American adults demonstrate literacy at the lowest levels and is therefore considered functionally illiterate. (NCFL, 2003) Children of functionally illiterate adults are at a disadvantage from the very beginning. Overwhelmingly, they perform at lower levels in school and have higher drop-out rates than their counterparts with literate parents. Because of the link between a parent's success to his or her child's success, educators, policy makers and service providers are embracing comprehensive family literacy services to help stave off a literacy crisis.

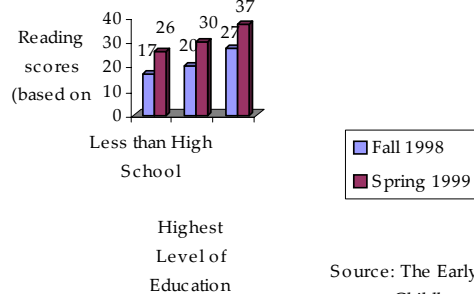
What is literacy?

As defined by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), literacy is the ability to use "printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential." (NAAL, 2003) For children and teenagers, literacy is determined by the abilities demonstrated in national assessment tests conducted from kindergarten through 12th grade (k-12).

The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

The [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study \(ECLS\)](#) began in 1998 by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in collaboration with other federal agencies and organizations. The purpose of the study was to understand what factors affect a child's ability to learn as infants and young children. Overall, the study determined that kindergarten students from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to do

Figure 1: Reading Scores of Kindergarteners



Source: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

almost as well as their cohorts in regards to basic skills like counting and recognizing letters, however fall behind when those skills become more sophisticated. (NIFL) As **Figure 1** demonstrates, the more education a parent has, the higher the achievement of a child.

The study's findings reveal many children are at a disadvantage when entering kindergarten and the gap only becomes wider with age. **Figure 2** shows that Hispanic and Black children demonstrate lower competencies when tested on reading skills, than their Asian and White peers. The percentages shown represent the averaged percentage of a particular ethnic group in five areas of reading skills and comprehension. Despite showing lower

competencies when entering kindergarten, Hispanic and Black children also demonstrate considerably higher rates of improvement over a year's time, suggesting that their initial low performance is environment-related. The study also found that children who were read to at least three times a week consistently outperformed children who were not. These reading and reading comprehension skills included mastering letter-sound relationships at the beginning and the end of words (showing a 12 -14 percent improvement) and sight-word recognition (a seven percent improvement). (NIFL)

Nutrition and literacy

A problem emerging in children from low-income households is not necessarily a scarcity of food, but the kind of food that is being eaten. When families are forced to stretch their money, the goal often becomes to provide enough food instead of a nutritional, balanced diet. Many studies are now examining the effects of growing up in a food insufficient household. Some known effects include heightened susceptibility to illness and inability to ward off infection, stunted physical and mental growth, and economic impediments, as

children are less likely to complete education or do well. (Bread for the World Institute, 1994) Federal programs that attempt to supplement the diets of young people include the *Food Stamp Program*, the *National School Lunch Program*, and/or the *Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children*.

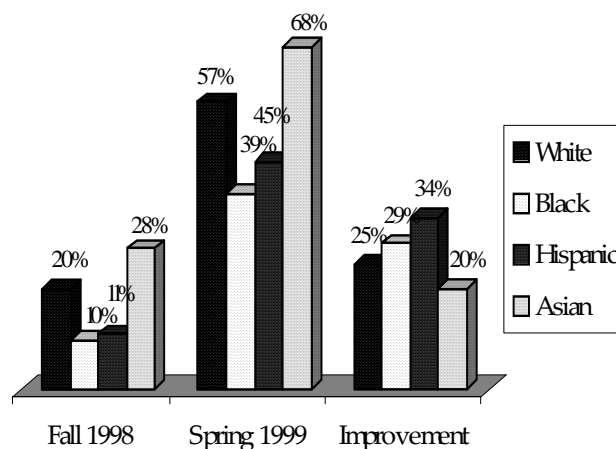
Bridging the education gap with Head Start

In an effort to bridge the learning gap among pre-kindergarten children, the *Head Start Act* was passed in 1965 creating the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. Head Start is administered by the Head Start Bureau, the Administration of Children, Youth and Families, the Administration on Children and Families and the Department of Health and Human Services. Head Start provides comprehensive early development services to low-income children from birth to age five, as well as pregnant women and their families. In FY2002, Massachusetts received \$104 million to support 13,040 children enrolled in Head Start programs. (ACYF, 2003) In an evaluation issued in June 2002, Early Head Start was credited with moving children out of the at-risk range in terms of cognitive development who otherwise many not have. Similarly, Early Head Start children scored higher than the at-risk range for language and socio-emotional development. (CORE, et al, 2002)

K-12 Education in Massachusetts

According to the Massachusetts Department of Education, an estimated two million Massachusetts adults lack the literacy skills required of a high school graduate. This number suggests that nearly 45 percent of Massachusetts residents, 18 or older lack basic educational skills. (MBLC, 2002) Most researchers would agree that level of literacy an individual achieves is directly related to the number of years spent in school. As a result, providing a quality education to all students from all backgrounds is essential to lower the number of functionally illiterate Americans. Based on findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) conducted in 2003, the Massachusetts school system demonstrated great strength in the standards and accountability it requires, but showed considerable weakness in providing resource equity or increased financial aid to property-poor districts. In fact on this issue, Massachusetts ranks as one of the worst states in the country in terms of providing students in property-poor districts with more aid than students in affluent districts. (Ed Week, 2004)

Figure 2: Kindergarten Reading Skills by Ethnic Group



Source: The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study

Despite the relatively high proficiency scores of Massachusetts students, on average the achievement gap between White students and Black and Hispanic students remains wide, and higher than the national average. In both fourth and eighth grade testing of reading skills, Black and Hispanic children were 33 percent less proficient than their White peers. Similarly, mathematics testing revealed that Black and Hispanic students were 13 percent less proficient in fourth grade and 34.5 percent less proficient in eighth grade than their White peers. (Ed Week, 2004)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act

The *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* is the largest education program funded by the federal government. Title I of the *Act* makes substantial provisions for the education of children who find themselves at a disadvantage due to environmental factors for almost all school districts in the United States. (Ed Week, 2001) In the 2001 reauthorization of the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, provisions were made because of the *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), that required all children to meet the same achievement standards. In Massachusetts, 51.9 percent of students are in Title I schools. (Ed Week)

Literate parents, literate children

Parents who have low literacy skills tend to have children with similarly low skills or who perform at lower levels than their peers. In fact, the children of parents who are not high school graduates are five to six times more likely to drop out of school than children with high school educated parents. (MBLC,2002) In addition to improved literary skills, young people with literate parents have fewer health problems, unplanned pregnancies, and experience less unemployment. ProLiteracy Worldwide suggests to end the "legacy of low literacy," the family as a whole must receive basic literacy skills to see a marked improvement of literate children and adults. (Wedgeworth, 2003)

In Massachusetts, 465,000 parents with children under 13 years old require services for themselves and their children because they are undereducated or are limited by not being proficient in English. In addition, 114,000 households have at least one parent who cannot read to their child aloud and 264,000 households have at least one parent who can read aloud but experiences difficulty in helping with homework. (MBLC,2002) Because of these numbers, family literacy has become an important way to combat low literacy in both parents and children.

Family literacy

As more is learned about the significant role a parent's education plays on the education of his or her child, family literacy is becoming the most widely used approach to reducing generations of functionally illiterate families. According to the U.S Department of Education, the single most important factor in predicting a child's literacy skills, is his or her mother's literacy level. (Wedgeworth, 2003) The rationale behind this is that children want to emulate their parents, so if their parents are reading they want to read, when their parents place value on learning, their children do the same. In support of the family literacy movement, the *Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)* was enacted in 1998 as Title II of *The Workforce Investment Act*. The act is important because it recognizes the importance of family literacy and makes specific provisions to "assist adults who are parents to obtain the educational skills necessary to become full partners in the educational development of their children." (NCFL) At the state level, family literacy programs are provided by the Massachusetts Family Network, Adult and Community Learning Services, libraries and private funders.

Other factors that affect youth literacy levels

According to the *State of Adult Literacy 2003*, a report issued by ProLiteracy Worldwide, the number of adults who are functionally illiterate is rising, because the educational services they receive as young people are inadequate. Factors most responsible for this growth, outside of a parent's literacy level, are a jump in immigration rates, the increased frequency with which young people are moved, and school sanctioned drop-outs.

Rise of new immigrants: The 2000 Census reported 31.1 immigrants are currently living in the United States and of that number, nearly 773,000 reside in Massachusetts (12.2 percent of the state population). Furthermore, 1,115,570 residents of Massachusetts (18.7 percent of the population) speak a language other than English at home. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000) This number represents an unprecedented growth among the particular population, making immigrants the largest growing population of young people 18 years old or younger. Immigrants also represent a disproportionately large number of people living in poverty, almost one in four. Education is another issue faced by immigrants, who overall, find themselves again at a disadvantage. Many have a primary language other than English, have a considerable less amount of education (30 percent have not completed high school) and much higher drop-out rates (3.5 times higher than native born Americans do). (ProLiteracy, 2003) For this reason, many community-based literacy programs provide English as a Second Language (ESL) and High School equivalency courses as the cornerstone of the services provided. The city of Boston offers English for New Bostonians (ENB), a private/public community partnership created in 2000 to reduce Boston's ESL waiting list and improve services to residents who are still learning English.

Increased frequency of students relocated: Students who move frequently experience lower grades and higher drop-out rates. Oftentimes, frequent moves are symptomatic of a low-income household that experiences economic hardship. The constant relocation puts these students at a significant disadvantage as they find themselves struggling to catch up. Many adult literary programs are finding that many of their clients moved several times during their youth making it difficult to complete high school.

School-encouraged drop-outs: As drop-out numbers have not changed significantly in the past few years, students leaving high school to seek out Tests of General Educational Development, more frequently know as a G.E.D. Many schools are

happy to discharge these students, because they do not count as drop-outs, however, few are prepared to pass G.E.D standards. As a result, these students are left without a high school or high school equivalent degree and oftentimes the skills they need to become competent professionals. (ProLiteracy, 2003)

The compelling research supporting family literacy makes clear that schools may be tasked with educating young people, but this burden is not theirs alone. Results from the 2003 *National Adult Literacy Survey* will be issued in 2005, but most analysts are already predicting an increase in functionally illiterate American adults since the last survey ten years ago. Although most communities offer some form of family literacy programs nationwide, many are overfilled or have long waiting lists. This suggests that the resources allotted to providing basic family education are not enough to meet the growing need.

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Local & State

Boston Center for Youth and Families
www.cityofboston.gov/bcyf/search.asp
Massachusetts Department of Education
www.doe.mass.edu
New England Literacy Resource Center
www.nelrc.org

National

Center for the Improvement of Early
Reading Achievement
www.ciera.org
Education Week on the Web
www.edweek.org
ProLiteracy Worldwide
www.proliteracy.org
Reading is Fundamental
www.rif.org

Government

Administration for Children and Families
www.acf.hhs.gov
Educational Resources Information Center
(ERIC)
<http://www.eric.ed.gov/>
National Institute for Literacy
www.nifl.gov
United States Department of Education
www.ed.gov

For more information on this and other local issues, we encourage you to utilize the *Boston Indicators Project*, available online www.tbf.org/indicators. Produced and maintained by the **Boston Foundation**, this web site features indicators of change and progress in ten sectors and is regularly updated with new information and reports.



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About Boston Cares

Boston Cares organizes and leads volunteer teams and services in and around Boston that have a positive impact on individuals and communities. Since 1991, thousands of people of all ages have volunteered through Boston Cares at over 240 Greater Boston schools and non-profits.

Boston Cares is a member of the Hands on Network (formerly City Cares,) an alliance of volunteer organizations working to transform individuals and communities through service and civic engagement, with affiliates and partners in 41 US and international locations



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