

## The Literacy Clinic: Facts Shaping Our Mission

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### Adult Literacy and Education Rates

National and state-level literacy rates for adults are staggeringly low.

- To date (2024), 21% of U.S. adults are illiterate (Craft 2024).
- Of the 79% of U.S. adults who comprise the literate population, 54% have a literacy level below 6<sup>th</sup> grade and 20% are below the 5<sup>th</sup>-grade reading level (Craft 2024).
- With an adult literacy rate of 84%, Louisiana ranks 41<sup>st</sup> on the list of U.S. literacy rates per state (Craft 2024).
- Louisiana's graduation rate, 85%, is one of the lowest in the United States. High-level graduation rates range from 97% (Montana) to 91% (Connecticut); lower rates range from 83% (California) to 88% (South Carolina) (*U.S. Career Institute*).
- A 2020 assessment of adult education rates shows that of the 4,657,757 adult state residents (*Louisiana 2020 Census*), 135,046 had less than a 9<sup>th</sup>-grade level of education and 279,532 had 9<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup>-grade education but no diploma (Vorhonen 2023).

### Children Literacy Rates and Post-Pandemic Literacy Gaps

Children's literacy rates are directly related to high school graduation rates. Identifying and supporting these struggling students as early as possible is therefore vital (Diallo 2020).

- A poor reader at the end of the first grade has a 90 percent chance of still being a poor reader at the end of the fourth grade (Diallo 2020).
- Up to 74 percent of these students may still struggle by the ninth grade (Diallo 2020).
- One in six children who are not reading proficiently in third grade will not graduate from high school (this rate is four times greater than that of proficient readers) (*Annie E. Casey Foundation* 2013).

Children within grades K-2<sup>nd</sup> during the COVID-19 pandemic have suffered most significantly with literacy gaps.

- The Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA) Center for School and Student Progress December 2022 report "Progress Toward Pandemic Recovery: Continued Signs of Rebounding Achievement at the Start of the 2022–23 School Year" concluded young students (current third graders who were kindergarteners when the pandemic began) have the largest reading achievement gap and showed the least rebounding (Lewis and Kuhfield 2022).
- Most students are still years away from a full literary and educational recovery—particularly the youngest and oldest students. The oldest (eighth grade in fall 2022) and the youngest (third grade in fall 2022) show less improvement (Lewis and Kuhfield 2022).
- While gaps have decreased by 23 – 43% in reading and math in other age groups, literacy gaps have decreased by just 10 – 17% (Lewis and Kuhfield 2022).

## Race and poverty levels directly affect literacy rates

- Although Black, Hispanic, and students in high-poverty schools are rebounding from educational losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, these students—particularly in the youngest grades—have been disproportionately impacted. As a result, these students have the most ground to regain (Lewis and Kuhfield 2022).
- Graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students who were not proficient readers in third grade lagged far behind those for White students with the same reading skills (*Annie E. Casey Foundation* 2013).

Louisiana children are therefore at high risk of continued low levels of literacy—and as a result, low high school graduation rates.

- 2023 was the first year the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE) administered one universal screener to all kindergarten through third-grade students. Statewide DIBELS® 8th Edition Results Fall 2023 results revealed the following proficiency rankings:
  - 29.5 % of kindergarten students
  - 45.9 % of first graders
  - 50.7 % of second graders
  - 51.6 % of third graders (*LDOE 2023*)
- As of 2023, the following portion of students are therefore considered at-risk for illiteracy (and subsequent lower graduation rates):
  - 70.5 % of kindergarten students
  - 50.5 % of first graders
  - 49.3 % of second graders
  - 48.4 % of third graders (*LDOE 2023*)

## Literacy, Education, and the Economy

Literacy rates are directly related to employment, income, poverty, and crime, which are continuing issues in Louisiana.

- Individuals with low literacy levels are more likely to experience poorer employment opportunities and lower income. In turn, they face low self-esteem and higher levels of welfare dependency and crime (*World Literacy Foundation* 2018).
- Louisiana has more state prisoners serving time in local jails than any other state in the U.S. (Carson 2023).
- Correctional education programs are proven to reduce recidivism by 43% (Davis et al. 2013).
- For every dollar invested in correctional education programs, an estimated four to five dollars are saved on three-year re-incarceration costs (Davis et al. 2013).
- This may in turn improve employment rates after release. The odds of obtaining employment post-release among inmates who participated in correctional education were 13% higher than for non-participants (Davis et al. 2013).
- A 2018 study by the RAND Corporation funded by the Department of Justice reported that incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education were 48% less likely to return to prison within three years than incarcerated individuals who did not participate in any correctional education programs (Davis et al. 2013).
- In 2007, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems concluded that if Louisiana adults were to receive their high school diploma or equivalent, Louisiana could have

experienced an increase in personal income of more than 5 billion dollars (*Literary Alliance of Greater New Orleans*).

## The Impact of Literacy Programs

Literacy programs are proven to work.

- Mississippi is an example of a state that significantly improved literacy instruction over the past decade with its 2013 Literacy Based Promotion Act. The Act requires school districts to identify students scoring below literacy thresholds on the state reading exam, then provide intensive and research-based instructional services, progress monitoring measures, and support (Gendill 2024).
- According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, Mississippi was one of two states to achieve an increase in fourth-grade reading scores between 2013 and 2022 (Gendill 2024).
- By 2022, Mississippi's average reading score was one point above the national average (Gendill 2024).
- Literacy and numeracy programs can improve academic learning and social-emotional skills development, the environment in which children and youth grow, and protective behaviors, and reduce school-based bullying, violent crime, and non-violent crime (*USAid*).
- For U.S. literacy programs, benefits can exceed costs by ratios as high as 12:1 (Heckman et al. 2010 qtd. in *US Aid* 2021).
- Investments in early childhood programs are generally more cost-effective than remediation efforts (Reynolds et al. qtd. in *US Aid* 2021).
- When budget constraints limit the ability to offer high-quality programs, policymakers should target low-income and otherwise vulnerable populations for literacy programs and ensure that offerings have plans for expanding access and offerings (*US Aid* 2021).
- Policymakers should also carefully assess how to adequately prepare teachers to offer literacy support (*US Aid* 2021).

## The Scarcity of Literacy Programs

- For the last two decades, federal literacy initiatives such as Reading First have undergone severe funding cuts. Merely \$190 million is set aside for literacy initiatives in the form of Comprehensive Literacy State Development (CLSD) grants (Diallo 2020). This is a significant cut from 2005's \$1.04 billion 2005 budget for Reading First.
- Educators at the K-12 level have tested various ways to disrupt the pattern of illiteracy and support struggling readers, but experts agree that the advancement of literacy as a national priority has thus far been inconsistent (Diallo 2020).
- Fundamentally improving literacy will require applying an explicit equity lens to understand gaps in developing education policies and standards; increasing investment in public schools and targeting funding to those with the greatest need; and modernizing the teaching profession to meet the needs of students.
- "Without large-scale investments, equitable resources to low-income schools with high concentrations of students living in poverty, and teachers explicitly trained in science of reading practices in every classroom, efforts to progress literacy and reading success will be blunted" (Diallo 2020).

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