

Reading

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Are We a Nation of Illiterates?

Almost every day, I hear or read that we are a nation of illiterates. Some reports suggest that this condition affects as many as one in five adults. We have some problems, but surely the numbers are not that great. But how high are they, and what do the authors of these reports mean when they say "illiterate"?

Everybody who shares my concerns about illiteracy in America should read *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults* (Kirsch and Jungeblut 1986), a study based on a 1985 nationally representative survey of 3,600 young adults, aged 21-25. Participants were interviewed for 30 minutes and then individually administered 105 tasks that simulated real-life situations. The assessment measured their ability in the areas of prose literacy (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers); document literacy (e.g., graphs, forms, schedules); and quantitative literacy (math in combination with printed materials, e.g., checkbooks). The measurement also included some exercises in reading from the last National Assessment of Educational Progress in order to compare the performance of young adults with the in-school population.

Results of the study showed that 95 percent of young adults tested reach or exceed the average reading profi-

ciency level of fourth-grade students. Eighty percent reach or exceed the average reading proficiency of eighth-grade students, and 62 percent reach or exceed the average reading proficiency of eleventh-grade students. The study concluded that "illiteracy" is not a major problem for the young adult population. Thomas G. Sticht, a literacy expert who wrote the forward for the report, states that the United States has the world's highest rate of basic literacy. He reports that other countries that claim nearly total literacy have much lower standards than ours.

To most people the word "illiterate" means "can't read." According to this definition, then, the fact that 95 percent can function at or above fourth-grade level suggests that the overwhelming majority of people are not illiterate. They can read well enough to get information and perform common tasks. The degree of their literacy, however, is another question.

The report's statistics are particularly disturbing for Hispanics and blacks. While more than 96 out of 100 white young adults read at or above the fourth-grade level, only 92 out of 100 Hispanic and 82 out of 100 black young adults have attained that level. This difference persists at the eighth- and eleventh-grade proficiency levels.

According to this large, repre-

sentative assessment, America is not a land of illiterates. Thirty-eight percent of the young adults tested could not function as well as the average eleventh-grader, but most young adults have achieved basic reading skills, which suggests that our literacy problems do not come from the often claimed "lack of basic decoding skills." The report concludes that sizable numbers of people perform in the middle ranges on each scale and, while not illiterate, may not be literate enough to be fully functional in a technologically advanced society. This suggests a literacy problem that can be solved only if our schools focus on higher-level reading and thinking skills.

Reference

- Kirsch, I. S., and A. Jungeblut. *Literacy: Profiles of America's Young Adults*. Princeton, NJ: National Assessment of Educational Progress, 1986. (To obtain this report, write to NAEP CN6710, Princeton, NJ 08541-6710, or call 1-800-223-0267. The price is \$12.50 per copy, \$6.25 for three or more copies.)

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Textbooks

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The Key to Success: Monitoring and Modifying

There is only one way to ensure that any program will succeed with your teachers and students: determine whether or not it's doing what you want it to do and then change whatever is necessary to make it succeed. To install any new program and not monitor and modify is asking for trouble. Yet this is what most districts do with new textbook programs. They buy it, then forget it!

A monitoring/modifying system need not be complicated, time-con-

suming, or expensive. One simple two-track system that any size district can implement involves the principal and one teacher "monitor" in each building. In the first track, building principals monitor student end results: student products and tests or whatever gauge your district uses to measure success. In the second track, teacher monitors are responsible for the successful operation of the new program. One person, usually the subject supervisor (or, in small districts, the person responsible for curriculum), oversees the teacher monitors

and keeps a district perspective. This separate two-track system holds standards high, while at the same time providing support for anyone responsible for meeting those standards. This article will describe only how the teacher monitoring works.

Monitors are selected because they are good listeners and are respected by the other faculty. Although they may be experts in the subject, this is *not* the criterion for selection. Their first task is to listen and log teacher comments and questions verbatim by grade level, referencing specific pages.

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Their second task is to provide teachers with answers that work.

Monitors must know where to go for help. Often they can consult monitors in other buildings, the district curriculum or subject specialist, the publisher's consultant via the toll-free 48-hour return answer telephone number,¹ or teachers in other school districts identified (and visited) during the in-depth selection process.² If these resources fail, monitors get back to the individual teacher and say, "I can't find an answer, so our districtwide monitor team will try to do something to fix it. Thanks for alerting us!"

How does this system help you? First, districtwide analysis of verbatim questions and page references will spotlight concrete evidence of potentially serious problems. Second, getting back to individuals with answers, gratitude, or even concern will reinforce that your district cares about and respects individual teachers.

What happens when a district follows this system? Fifth-grade teachers in various buildings throughout a district observed, "My students can't read and understand the concepts"; "I skip those chapters; my students don't like them"; "These chapters are boring; they're just too difficult." Because

teachers in the same grade level identify the same pages, it is easy to identify that the textbook is likely the problem. Further analysis of the fifth-grade text proves that answers to end-of-chapter questions cannot be found in the text. The writing is dull and ambiguous. By collaborating with the publisher's consultant and other user schools in the area, teachers devise new questions, write study guides to supplement the troublesome chapters, and purchase for their libraries multiple copies of far-better-written trade books. In the fall, the curriculum director holds a special districtwide grade-level meeting to thank all fifth-grade teachers for identifying the problem, inform them of the proposed solution, and encourage continued evaluation.

In another situation, logged comments state: "Too many answers vary"; "I don't have time to teach the program"; "There are too many papers to correct." However, the program's purpose, to teach critical thinking and problem solving, means student responses should vary. It appears at first that the teachers are at fault until subsequent contact with the publisher's consultant reveals a combination of problems: the district has not scheduled enough time for discussion, which is essential for the program's

success; and teachers are coping by requiring students to write out all answers. The solution: class time is rescheduled and a series of teachers' workshops is offered for college credit on how to teach critical thinking and creative problem solving through class discussion.

The key to success with any new program is *monitoring*, which includes a system for listening to teachers in every building, and then *modifying*, responding with specific grade-level help. If new programs are installed without such a system, then questions and concerns will rapidly grow into serious problems, and the program will be rejected. □

1 See Connie Muther, "The Service Guarantee Means Help from the Publisher," *Educational Leadership* 42 (May 1985): 79-81.

2 See Connie Muther, "Alternatives to Piloting Textbooks," *Educational Leadership* 42 (March 1985): 79-83.

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Please send questions, ideas, responses, or suggestions for this column to Connie Muther at the address below.

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Home Economics

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Home Economics Places New Emphasis on Basic Skills

Two movements are at the forefront of home economics curriculum today. The first aims to strengthen the contribution of home economics to the education of students who learn basic academic skills more easily in a real-life context.

Barbara Hanauer, for example, is a consumer and homemaking teacher in Indiana's Bloomfield School District. She reinforces students' computation skills as they figure the unit price of grocery items for different package sizes or multiply or divide ingredients to change the quantity of a recipe. In her unit on child care, Hanauer, who is also a certified science teacher,

makes sure her students learn that many common household cleaners contain poisonous chemicals.

New state legislation requiring schools to enhance academic skills and to increase mathematics and science graduation requirements has stimulated a reexamination of the home economics curriculum. Oklahoma, for example, permits students to satisfy some of these requirements in vocational home economics courses. Teachers such as Hanauer apply the academic basics to real problems students must solve.

In a recent study, however, Darlene Moss (1985) found that home economics teachers regret they are not able to incorporate mathematics and

science as much as they think they should. Many home economics teachers recommend more collegial interaction and inservice work with academic teachers to strengthen basic skills in both areas.

A second trend affecting home economics curriculums is toward stating learner outcomes in terms of critical-thinking and decision-making skills. For example, students in a consumer education class contrast the results of impulse buying with deliberate buying. In another example, Joanna Connors' Interpersonal Relationships students in Northview High School (Brazil, Indiana) predict outcomes of alternative actions, compare them with individual goals and values, and take

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