

Database

Our Real Literacy Problem

It's not the kids: It's the adults who can't read



Patte Barth

HEADLINES ABOUT AMERICA'S SO-CALLED failing schools have been written so many times that their veracity is generally taken for granted by the public. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the way American students' international standing tends to be reported, usually dressed up with words like "lagging," "sliding" and flat-out "bad."

But as we have pointed out many times at the Center for Public Education, the reality isn't as bleak as the headlines would have the public believe. True, we are not No. 1 on any international test of student performance. But our elementary school students

are very close to the top in reading, and they

are outperformed by only four of 49 nations. Plus, they and their middle school counterparts score comfortably above the international average in math. More importantly, they are improving.

High school is a different story, and

policymakers have been right to call attention to the need to do better. Compared to their international peers, our 15-year-olds are average in reading and slightly below it in math—results that have been fairly consistent since 2000.

Yet there is a larger, underreported segment of the American population that falls behind most of our economic competitors, and it's not our students. Alarming, it's our adults whose abilities in reading, math, and problem-solving rank significantly below the international average.

DEFINING ADULT LITERACY

The Paris-based Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is probably best known for administering the Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) of 15-year-olds.

In 2012, OECD tested a representative sample of adults, aged 16 to 65, in each participating country through its Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC). This assessment focuses on literacy, math competency, and "problem solving in technology-rich environments."

According to OECD, the assessment includes tasks "drawn from real-life situations that are expected to be of impor-

tance or relevance in different contexts." The emphasis is on the skills needed to navigate daily life and work.

In this way, PIAAC more closely resembles the applied skills assessed by the PISA test of 15-year-olds than the international tests of 9- and 13-year-olds that are more closely aligned with academic content typically learned in school.

Consider the sample reading item from the test in our example on pg. 47. In it, the test-taker is provided a list of rules for a preschool and asked to identify the latest time children should arrive. This item is an example of a level 3 skill out of 5 performance levels.

The percentage of U.S. adults scoring at level 3 or higher overall was 48 percent compared to the 53 percent international average. Note that this doesn't mean that only 48 percent answered this particular item correctly, but that the overall performance on the test placed them at level 3, 4, or 5.

In our other Level 3 example—this one from math—the test-taker is asked for the temperature in degrees Fahrenheit as shown on a thermometer (see illustration 2). On the overall math test, 36 percent of U.S. adults performed at level 3 or above compared to 47 percent internationally.

DEGREES MATTER

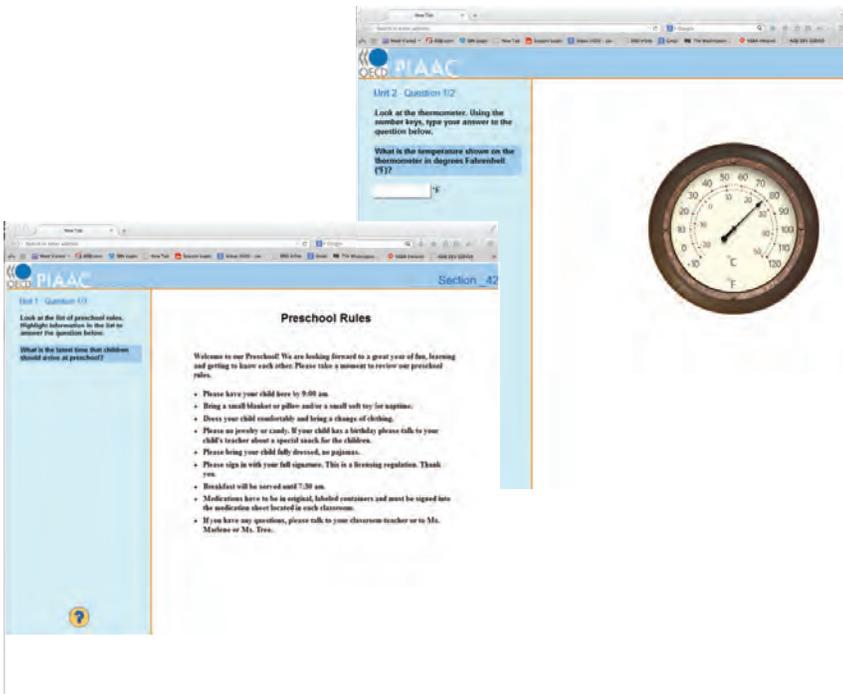
According to PIAAC results, academic degrees matter when it comes to literacy, and the U.S. is no exception. Not surprisingly, across the OECD countries, each credential earned relates to an increase in literacy. However, the gap in literacy rates between high- and low-credentialed adults is significantly higher in the U.S. than it is internationally.



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Reading and math examples from PIAAC.



In reading, for example, the difference between having a graduate degree and not finishing high school in the U.S. is 80 points on the PIAAC 500-point scale. In contrast, the international average gap is 61 points.

Knowing this, it's a good thing that the U.S. can boast of having one of the most highly educated populations in the world. We are second only to Norway for the proportion of citizens with a bachelor's degree or higher.

Yet all of our credentials aren't making our overall literacy rates competitive. Americans with a Bachelor of Arts degree perform at the international average for their like-credentialed peers in literacy, and significantly below them in math. At the low end—individuals who lack a high school diploma—the differences are even greater between them and their counterparts in other nations.

Having more degree-holders, as noted earlier, has not lifted our aggregated performance to even international averages. But without them, we would no doubt be doing even worse.

One positive fact: Our younger adults outperform their elders by significant margins. This is possibly a sign that the gains we've been making with younger students are beginning to influence adult scores.

Since the 1990s, the performance of our elementary and middle-school students has been steadily improving on several measures. These students, now in their 20s and 30s, are likewise producing better scores on the PIAAC than older generations of adults. This suggests that continued gains in P-12 can help improve the U.S. rankings in the future, although that alone probably will not be enough.

NO EASY ANSWERS

There are many factors to weigh in trying to understand why U.S. adults do so poorly next to adults in other countries, especially when compared to the relative performance of American children internationally.

Right now, there are no clear answers. The demography of the U.S. may have an effect. Our population is changing

and includes more non-English-speaking adults who may actually be fluent in their native language but not in English—the language they were tested in.

The nature of the testing instruments themselves and what they assess might tell us something, too. Unlike more traditional academic tests on which our younger students do well, both the PISA test of 15-year-olds and the PIAAC emphasize the application of skills—areas where we seem to be the weakest.

Elementary and secondary education have a role, of course. Indeed, efforts are currently under way in schools across the country to integrate real-world applications into instruction. An emphasis on reading for information, as called for in the Common Core State Standards, and the continued focus on closing achievement gaps are likely to help, too.

But improving literacy cannot be a solo act for public schools. We also need to examine the part higher education plays and the impact it is having on the reading and math performance of postsecondary students. This means we need some way to measure it—something the higher education community has successfully resisted until now.

Finally, we have to ask if there is something in American culture that contributes to our collectively weak literacy as adults. If we are truly to be a nation of lifelong learners, we first need to show that it's something we value in society as well as in our own lives.

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