



## **American Library Association Conference**

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I was asked to talk about the National Adult Literacy survey (NAAL) -- to give some historical perspective and tell you what I think it's most important to know about the findings. I was also asked to offer some thoughts on how libraries can use the NAAL data to make a case for improved services, access, and resources. This last challenge is a tougher one by far.

One of my favorite operating guidelines is that we can plan better for the future if we know where we've been. I've pulled together a handout to help with that. You can read it at your leisure. The first section is a primer on important benchmark studies and reports in adult literacy since the early 70s. It gives the historical framework for considering the NAAL. The second part – issued by the National Center for Educational Statistics – answers many of the “who-what-why-where” questions about the NAAL survey. The last few pages contain a few Useful Facts. Some of them may surprise you.

So, what DOES the NAAL tell us? Mainly, in my view, that the percentage of adults with low literacy proficiency is not really *that* different from a decade ago, even though the make-up of the low literate population is somewhat different.

In fact, about 30 years ago, looking all the way back to the Adult Performance Study, we were told that 27 million adults were

“functionally illiterate.” At the Below Basic level of the current NAAL survey, the number is around 30 million. There are some apple and orange problems in making this comparison, I know, but the point is generally valid and I make it for this reason:

Some people claim that the adult education and literacy system is a failed enterprise because the numbers *haven't* changed very much. Actually, *different* people make up the pool of adults being tested at different points in time. We're dealing with markedly different demographics today than we were 30 years ago or even 10 years ago. The adults we speak of now as being at the lowest proficiency level are not the same people as the APL study counted.

Another variable that affects this is growth in the changing high school drop out rate), compounded recently by the “push-out” problem, an unintended result of No Child Left Behind. Still another variable is that the pool of new immigrants to America are more and more made up by people who not only do not speak English but weren't literate in their home countries.

The numbers tell *me* that the adult education system has, in fact, been doing a rather *remarkable* job – despite poor funding, waxing and waning public awareness, and the fact that we have been in a fight for our lives in the past few years.

If the NAAL tells us anything, it's that the need for our adult education and literacy system is greater now than it has ever been. Some 40 percent of the adult population has reading, math, and ESL problems that seriously limit their employability and job prospects and their ability to function as parents and community members. But we're reaching only about 3 million adults in our adult education and literacy system now. Why? Because that's all that federal and state funding levels support.

A broad general finding of NAAL, compared to a decade ago, is that *average prose and document literacy scores have risen for Blacks and Asians but have decreased significantly among Hispanics.*

This is a good news-bad news finding. And it needs to be understood in context. It relates strongly to the demographic change I just mentioned. The percent of White adults in the population decreased between 1992 and 2003 from 77 to 70 percent, the percent of Blacks increased slightly from 11 to 12, the percent of Hispanic adults increased from 8 to 12, and the percent of Asian-Pacific Islanders increased from 2 to 4. Those percentages for 2003 translate into these numbers: 155,400,000 for Whites, about 26,640,000 for Hispanics, about 26,640,000 for Blacks, and some 888,000 for Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Here are some *specific* findings that seem to me to have special importance:

At the BELOW BASIC level, *the lowest level of NAAL*, people can perform no more than the most rudimentary literacy tasks. In prose literacy, 12-15 percent of the adult population (the numbers are for women and men respectively) performed at this level. In document and quantitative literacy, the corresponding percentages were 11-14 percent (w,m) and 22-21 (w,m) percent.

Here are some breakout percentages:

**By race and ethnicity:** Whites constitute 7-13 percent of the Below Basic population across the three scales. But in prose literacy, Blacks (who make up only 12% of the adult population) make up 24 percent of the Below Basic group. Hispanics (they also make up only 12% of the total population) make up 44 percent.

In document literacy, Blacks make up 25 percent, Hispanics 36 percent. In quantitative literacy, Blacks account for 47 percent of the group, Hispanics 50 percent.

**By age:** The percentages are consistent for all age groups under 65: ranging from 9-12 percent. At 65 and older, the percentages increase substantially, up to about 30 percent.

An important variable in NAAL is **language spoken at time of school entry** in the U.S. People who speak “English only” represent 52 percent of the Below Basic Group. People speaking Spanish represent 35 percent of Below Basic. About 4 percent of the NAAL sample spoke neither English nor Spanish and were excluded from testing. Another 7 percent, due to language deficiency, were given an alternate test. In general, *compared to 1992, the percentage of adults who spoke English before starting school decreased in 2003, while the percentage speaking Spanish or another non-English language increased.*

**Education attainment:** On average, 55 percent of adults scoring at the Below Basic prose level had less than or some high school (though these people made up only 15% of the total population). About 27 percent of high school graduates made up the group. Some 46 percent of the NAAL population had some college, undergraduate degrees, or graduate study (more than in 1992); 10 percent of these people scored at Below Basic.

And, finally, in terms of **employment status**, over 60 percent of all adults were employed either full or part-time in 2003. Of these, 35 percent scored Below Basic (and 44% scored at the Basic level).

I’m talking here mostly about the Below Basic Level. That’s because I presume that providers and planners should target this level.

Probably, people at the BASIC level ought to be a priority, too. (At this level, adults are able to perform simple, basic everyday literacy activities.) At the Basic level, the percentages are much higher: In prose, 29 percent of men and women make up the level; the percentages for document and quantitative are 22-23 percent (w, m) and 35-31 percent (w, m) respectively.

What does all of this add up to?

Well, we're dealing with a VERY large pool of people. The Below Basic and Basic levels combined translate into more than 86 million with about 30 million persons at the Below Basic level. If we add in the 4 million non-speakers of English or Spanish, we're at an incredible 90 million adults.

It's obvious that *Hispanics* with low literacy and ESL skills *are disproportionately represented* in these findings. That's likely to be more so as their numbers keep increasing in the population. *High school dropouts, high school graduates, and Blacks are also disproportionately represented* at the lowest level.

Clearly these areas need a lot more attention. Incidentally, it would be easy to conclude that those at age 65+ need not be an area of concern because they are out of the workforce. But a recent paper by Andrew Sum of the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University puts this "conventional wisdom" into question. Future planners should consider this group carefully.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> That paper is called "The Graying of the U.S. Population: Projected Impacts on the Size of the Older Population and Their Consequences for Adult Education, Libraries, and Workforce Development Policy". It was prepared for Senior Service America for the "Race, Poverty, and Aging Baby Boomers" session of the ALA's June 2006 conference.

By the way, it's worth noting that in international comparisons, the U.S. is one of two countries (out of 22 studied) with the worst record when it comes to measuring adult literacy levels in terms of "inequality." (The other country is Canada.)

In considering what the findings of NAAL mean for you – meaning largely public libraries -- I have two immediate cautions:

First, most people in the field tend to speak of ESL as a Hispanic need, and most ESL service programs are for Spanish-speaking people. And that's what the NAAL measured. But, in fact, many other language groups make up the pool of adults needing ESL-literacy services. The makeup and diversity of the immigrant and ESL population is changing all the time. And immigrants are known to be a very mobile population, which further challenges the service system.

I assume that Basic and Below Basic should be the target areas of policy, planning, and services. Am I right to do this? It's probably too soon to know, and the answer is likely to be slow in coming.

In a listserv posting from last December, Bob Bickerton had *this* to say about the matter:

*The field in Massachusetts didn't get immediate benefit from the release of the NAAL in 1994 but several years later the data was used to build a case for increased funding in MA that was successful. We should take this approach. We now have new data, and we should BEGIN to use it to make our own case, and not worry about how it is pitched by politicians who have temporary jobs. Intermediate and Proficient are the levels needed by workers, parents, and citizens. Adults can succeed without these skills but success is more difficult and will only become more difficult in the future.*

My second cautionary concern has to do with numbers. No one who cares about the viability of our democracy and about principles of equality and inclusion can doubt that we need to pay serious attention to ethnic, racial, and language minorities. But, in doing that, we ought to remember that while Whites make up a small *percent* of the low-literacy population, in sheer numbers they're a *lot* of people: In 2003, they made up 70 percent of the adult population, or more than 155 million people – and they are more than 22 million of those at Below Basic and Basic levels. *A low-literate adult is 3 times more likely to be White than Black or Hispanic.*

My point is that policy, planning, and program work needs to be just as sensitive to the numbers as it is to the percentages. For some purposes, numbers are just more useful.

What does all of this mean for public libraries?

I can't offer anything new or startling on this question. I think the library role, as we move ahead, needs to be shaped in relation to how the field as a whole is shaped, or reshaped. But I don't doubt at all that libraries are an essential part of the service delivery system. I take it as a given.

NAAL does reconfirm the urgency of the need and how essential it is to use – actually, use to *better* advantage – every resource and provider type that makes up our adult education and literacy system.

Even though I don't have a blueprint for how libraries should develop their library literacy programming, it's reasonable to assume several things:

- the libraries' role in providing adult literacy service is unique, substantial, and cost-effective;

- library literacy programs should be a major part of the libraries' missions – whether that takes the form of direct instruction (a third of public libraries now do this), providing space and services, or offering book collections and material.
- the use of technology and computers is increasingly important to library literacy programs;
- state and local libraries need to be more actively involved in statewide planning, to be at every important planning table;
- libraries need substantially more funding for their literacy services.

When funding is short, and where use of technology is concerned, library literacy programs were apt to lose out in competition with other library services and programs ten years ago when this issue was examined in *Even Anchors Need Lifelines*. And, back then, library literacy personnel were often treated as second-class citizens in the library setting. I suspect this hasn't changed much.

A decade ago, there was a shortage of state-level program data to help guide *planning* in library literacy programs (or in any other adult education and literacy programs). The regular collection of data was being undertaken in only a few states. The situation isn't that different today. In fact, it's an area of very high priority need for everyone as we think about how best to direct our future energies.

*Even Anchors* polled state librarians, library agency literacy contacts, state level planners (heads of units then called SLRCs), and heads of local programs. We asked them how well understood the role of libraries as service providers was by librarians, national



legislative and funding entities, and literacy and education professionals.

All categories polled felt that the role, or potential role, of libraries was *not* well understood. I'd be willing to bet we have the same problem today. Better marketing and publicity can help that some, especially with state and national legislative bodies. Getting more involved in local, state, and national planning activities would help, too. But you can add to this list as well as I can.

As I see it, you face two problems as you consider your future role. One is the continuing reluctance of many libraries or head librarians to see literacy service as a central, ongoing part of their mission. The other is that you can't plan well in a vacuum. You're part of the larger adult education and literacy system. A good many of us at the national level believe we're at a juncture where we need to find a way to thoroughly assess what our collective effort adds up to and how best to chart our future course.

In late 2004, CAAL hired a summer intern to conduct interviews with about two dozen national and state leaders in library literacy. We wanted to get a more current sense of what they thought the key issues were today in library literacy. We asked how things had changed over the past ten years.

A key finding of that exercise was that library literacy programs are hampered in shaping their own role and programs because the adult literacy system in general lacks a good policy framework – and the system (or the field) *lacks* a good policy framework because it doesn't have a cohesive message. It needs leadership and a bold new clear plan for the future.

As I just noted, most national leadership organizations are keenly aware of this problem and want to actually do something about it. In fact, some of us are working behind the scenes right now to try

to launch an initiative to do the comprehensive review and planning needed. But until we do that “something”, we’ll all have to keep on keepin’ on as best we can. But, stay tuned!

By the way, here are some other findings from our round of interviews:

- A majority of those interviewed felt that library commitment to specific population groups has shifted. Not surprisingly – considering the NAAL data – service to immigrant populations with ESL needs has increased, while service to English speakers has fallen. *This shift in service, according to those interviewed, is due to “an overstressed library literacy network” which can’t handle the demand.*
- Federal public policy has always played an important role in adult literacy. But public policy has shifted away from adult literacy in a number of ways. The focus on K-12 is one reason. Adult literacy isn’t in vogue right now. Money and policy tend to follow an administration’s particular interest. *This in turn has an impact on library literacy programs.*
- Another key finding in my view is that federal (and state) accountability and outcome-based measures aren’t framed with library literacy programs in mind. A perfect example is the Workforce Investment Act. It aims to improve students’ employability, although library literacy programs usually have different purposes, and tend to serve persons at the lower end of the literacy spectrum. *The interviewees believe that the federal government should adjust its accountability measures to take account of these realities.*

I’ll end now by stressing four issues that I think are especially important to your future thinking:

You can't be all things to all people. Millions of adults need literacy help. NAAL certainly reconfirms that. From everything we know about current and emerging workforce needs, ESL patterns, program waiting lists all across the country, and other variables, we face an enormous challenge. But libraries, like other components of the adult education and literacy system, can't do it all. *You have tough choices to make.*

That incredible 90 million. The two lowest levels of NAAL data tell us that some 90 million adults need help with their basic skills, about 30 million of them at the lowest level. But *we need to be realistic and operate in the realm of the possible.* We're serving only around 3 million adults in all parts of the system now (with community colleges providing about a third of that service). We will be doing great if we can build the capacity to serve, say, 10-15 million adults. And even this will take time and political will. *Again, there are tough choices to make.* And you'll be able to make better choices about your role as the rest of the system gets clearer about the course it ought to take.

What does a NAAL level mean? Although the data is spread across four clearly defined levels, those levels are to some extent arbitrary because literacy operates in a continuum. You can count on hearing that message from researcher Tom Sticht, who works hard to keep us all honest, and from a few others as we work to make sense of the data. For instance, it isn't always exactly clear what the tests measure, or even *how* serious at the lower levels literacy problems *really* are. The NAAL numbers can, in my view, be taken as "reasonable indicators." But what we can say with *absolute certainty* – take a look at the primer I handed out – is that accumulated surveys done over decades confirm and reconfirm that tens of millions of adults need literacy services and skills upgrading, and that the numbers are *far* more than we serve. I'm not arguing that we shouldn't use and think about the 30 million and the 90 million figures. We *should* and I certainly will. But we

ought to be careful about *how* we use the numbers, remembering that the eyes of most people, including the U.S. Congress, glaze over at the 60 million figure we've been using in past years.

Persistence of adult learners in literacy programs. This set of comments is for programs that provide instructional services. As you know, a series of studies have been done on learner persistence in adult literacy programs. One in particular – called *One Day I Will Make It* -- deals with the experiences of nine branches of five public libraries involved in the Lila Wallace grant program a few years back. It examined factors that undermine persistence in library literacy programs. A major finding was that the students stayed in programs on average only about 58 hours. That was considered a negative! Research evidence indicates that it takes 100-150 hours to gain one grade-equivalency level. I mention this because persistence levels in any adult education and literacy programs are of increasing interest to federal and state funding agencies. Library literacy professionals ought to pay attention to this development and be ready to respond effectively if they hope to compete for public funds.

I should note that I have some trouble with the specific finding on this because I'm not sure how much meaning it has in a context where students are probably at the lower proficiency levels and come to a program with a whole variety of goals. Also, a small number of programs were studied, and the findings may not be broadly applicable. Just the same, the report has been widely disseminated and the best defense is a good offense.

Three major recommendations were made by the authors of *One Day I Will Make It* for improving retention in library literacy programs. They are: adopting support services that directly help students deal with barriers to participation (something many libraries are often reluctant to do)...making services more

accessible and appealing...and focusing more on educational needs and goals.

And finally –

I believe that the viability of our democracy depends on how our field and our nation respond to the adult literacy challenge. Even if we could fix all K-12 problems tomorrow, that wouldn't solve problems at the adult level. Even if community colleges and the higher education system generally become more actively engaged – and they need to – there'll be a huge amount for libraries and the adult education system to do.

I don't have to tell you that libraries benefit from sound readers and literate people. Libraries are an indispensable community resource. They have a unique ability to reach and serve adults at the community level. They are trusted, secure, user friendly.

They have shown over and over again that they are this nation's *first and perhaps last line of defense* in protecting, preserving, and advancing individual liberty, access to information and knowledge, and core democratic values.

To draw on the *Even Anchors* report one more time: “a case can be made for library literacy programs as the irreducible backbone of the literacy movement during the hard times when literacy and government support for it falls from the public spotlight.”