



The Literacy Forum

The Bi-Monthly Newsletter of the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy
December/January 2000-2001

P.O. Box 6085, Santa Fe, NM 87502-6085/website: www.nmcl.org/email: literacy@swcp.com/1-800-233-7587

The Literacy Forum is published bimonthly by the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy. News and commentary may be submitted to the Coalition using our mail address, e-mail address, phone, or fax number. We look forward to hearing from you!

*The New Mexico
Coalition for Literacy
Staff*

President: Dorothy Redd

Executive Director

David Godsted

dgodsted@nmcl.org

Deputy Director

Diane Pinkey

diane@nmcl.org

Training Coordinator

Rena Paradis

rena@nmcl.org

Resource Developer

Charles Schweigert

charles@nmcl.org

**Special Projects
Coordinator**

Rebecca Gault

rebecca@nmcl.org

Technology Trainer

Jacquette Elwell

jacquette@nmcl.org

Business Manager

Arlene Kinart

arlene@nmcl.org

Office Manager

Gesi Shroyer

gesi@nmcl.org

The Crisis That Isn't

This controversial view of adult literacy appeared in Forbes Magazine in October, 2000. It is reprinted with permission.

A CASUAL READER, OR EVEN A casual illiterate, could be forgiven for assuming that illiteracy presents a huge national problem. Coming at us from all directions are authority figures proclaiming that it is a grave threat. George W. Bush has called it a "national emergency." Surveys find that 30% of the adults in Appalachia are "functionally illiterate." The figure for Dallas is said (by the National Institute for Literacy) to be 29%. One learns from the U.S. Department of Education Web site that between 40 million and 44 million people "read at a level less than necessary for full participation in society"--whatever that is. Most of these folks are possibly among the 60 million people who could, according to Time Warner, benefit from more literacy education, like the company's own Time to

Read program. Several years ago the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) was encouraging you to worry about the fact that 70% of the U.S. prison population is illiterate.

You have possibly never read an article stating that the country's illiteracy problem is much overblown. Until now, that is.

Anybody trying to get up to speed on literacy instantly hits a discouraging speed bump: There is no agreed-upon definition of literacy. Instead, as you have possibly already intuited from the examples above, there are infinite data based on endlessly shifting standards. Take that 70% prison figure, for example. It comes with a rather daunting footnote, which states: "About seven in ten prisoners ... are apt to experience difficulty in performing tasks that require them to integrate or synthesize information from complex

or lengthy texts or to perform quantitative tasks that involve two or more sequential operations and that require the individual to set up the problem." This raises two questions: One is whether we really want our bank robbers and drug dealers to become more proficient in dealing with life's complexities. (The NCES answer is a resounding yes: "Literacy programs for inmates cannot afford to be short-changed.") The other question is: On that rather demanding definition of literacy, what proportion of the non-prison population is illiterate? Answer: almost 50%.

Severely criticizing the arbitrariness of all these measures is an excellent entry on illiteracy in the Encyclopedia of Human Intelligence, published by Macmillan in 1994. The entry notes that differing popular definitions have yielded illiteracy estimates

(Continued on page 3)

Excerpted from "Literacy, Document Design and the Florida Controversy"

Thomas Sticht, Applied Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences, Inc., San Diego, CA

Without taking any sides in the current controversy in Florida, it is of interest to me to note that a large amount of the dispute concerns the use of what are purported to be poorly designed voting documents. In Palm Beach county, where much of the concern is centered, there are some 22 percent of adults in the National Adult Literacy Survey's (NALS) lowest level of literacy as determined by a report by the National Institute for Literacy. This means that they would be expected to have difficulty with documents that are of moderate complexity in their design. These [document designs] are likely to pose more of a problem for the least literate adults because [the adults] are burdened by both the requirement to occupy working memory with decoding the printed language while also occupying it trying to figure out the design of the document. I think the current conflict suggests that, whoever wins the vote in Florida, needs to recognize that literacy is indisputably necessary to the conduct of civic life in the age of information. This means that the next President needs to work with the Congress and others to make sure that the funding is forthcoming that is needed for an Adult Education system that can help the millions of adults in Florida and across the nation achieve the literacy needed to both design and effectively use the documents that we trust to accomplish the most sacred rights and responsibilities of U. S. citizenship, including the selection of the President of the United States.

Inside this issue:

Carlsbad Literacy Program.....	2
Current issues in ABE.....	2
Regional Workshop.....	3
Training Corner.....	4
From the Deputy Director.....	4

STORIES FROM NEW MEXICO LITERACY PROGRAMS

Carlsbad Literacy Program submitted by Amy Pence

CARLSBAD LITERACY PROGRAM LAUNCHES WEB SITE

The Carlsbad Literacy Program celebrated National Literacy Day with a reception for students, volunteers, and financial contributors on Friday, September 8, 2000. The occasion was especially significant because it included a roll-out of the Carlsbad Literacy Program Home Page at www.pccnm.com/customer/literacy.

Board Member Mike Antiporda solicited the donation of Internet service by Hughes Internet Services, a Carlsbad business, and built the web site. The launching of the site is to include three phases:

- ? Currently, it is an information source of the history of the program, services offered and current activities
- ? The web site will be used as a marketing tool by encouraging others to offer a link to the literacy site on their web page
- ? Eventually, the web site will include an interactive student exercise for use in the study of literacy and ESL

At the reception, Literacy Assistant Jessie Morales assisted students in browsing the pages of the web site. The grandkids of one of the program's founders, Porky Leyva, listened to their grandmother discuss the beginning of the Program as a GED class in her washroom, and looked at the picture of their late grandfather on the web page.

Board President Ellen Harbaugh presented individuals and representatives of area businesses whose financial donation earned them the designation of 'Partners in Literacy' with appreciation certificates. The reception kicked-off the events of National Literacy Month which concluded with the annual Student/Tutor Appreciation Dinner.



The Carlsbad Literacy Program can now also be contacted by e-mail at literacy@pccnm.com

Current Issues in ABE ...Rebecca Gault

The ABE Staff Development Project is focusing on teachers this academic year, with a series of workshops designed to meet teachers where they live and work, all over the state. "Current Issues in ABE" is the title of an all-day workshop designed especially for teachers of adults. Presented by Rebecca Gault of the NMCL, Staff Development Coordinator for ABE; and Nora Manzanares, ABE Director at the State Department of Education, and Alexandra Kolkmeier of Insight Consulting, Evaluator for ABE, the workshop provides an opportunity for all instructors, part- and full-time, to learn about current issues and opportunities in adult basic education. Featured topics include information about the National Reporting System, goal setting, retention, professional development activities, and instructional resources. The highlight of the day is the Q&A session with the State Director, who has made it part of her mission to have a direct outreach to teachers.

Continued from page 1)

for American adults ranging from less than 1% (when the standard is an ability to sign your name) to more than 90% (when the standard is an ability to delineate the difference between two employee fringe benefits after reading a detailed description of each). A cherished detail from the encyclopedia is the figure on ability to comprehend a New York Times editorial. Of this challenging task the encyclopedia states: "More than 60% could not understand the main idea." My heart goes out to them.

Perhaps your biggest surprise in exploring all these data will be the revelation that "illiteracy" nowadays does not refer merely to reading ability. When you see references to "functional illiteracy," you can

generally assume that what's being gauged is a whole range of mental abilities.

The most recent national sample of literacy is a 1992 study, done under contract for the NCES by Educational Testing Service (ETS)--the out?t best known for SATs and other college placement tests. The study, based mainly on written examinations and interviews conducted with a nationally representative group of 13,600 adults, looked at "prose literacy" (ability to comprehend different kinds of writing), "document literacy" (ability to deal with timetables, read maps, fill out forms, etc.) and "quantitative literacy" (e.g., ability to calculate monthly mortgage payments, given some information about annual percentage rates). In each of these categories the ETS ranked individuals in one of five groups.

The tests for literacy have increasingly come to look like IQ tests, and there is every reason to believe that the test-score distributions look very much like that familiar old bell curve--the one made famous a few years back, when it was the title of a bestseller by Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray.

All of which means, inevitably, that there is a continuum of abilities from the bottom to the top and that the population of people with inadequate abilities can be made arbitrarily large by the placement of the cutoff line on that curve.

Just as it always has been, life is tougher for those in the left tail. But that's hardly anything new. And it's hardly a crisis. If you want to say that 34 million adult

Americans are illiterate, feel free.

But please do not tell us that government or any other institution is going to transform this situation. It will forever be true that those in the lower percentiles are not contributing as much as we are, and they and millions of employers would wish them to. If your figure is 34 million, then you are implicitly telling us that the lowest one-sixth of the population do not meet your standards for literacy. But it will take more than an act of Congress to get them up to the 17th percentile.

Dan Seligman, *Forbes Magazine*, 10.02.00



To read a response to this article by Andrew Hartman, Director of the National Institute for Literacy, please log on to our website at www.nmcl.org. Or, if you would like a hard copy, please call our office at 1-800-233-7587.



Regional Workshop Conference a Success

.... ..Rena Paradis

UNM-Los Alamos Adult Learning Center literacy program and the New Mexico Coalition for Literacy, co-hosted the first of what we hope will be many regional workshop conferences for programs in the northern part of New Mexico. We were provided with a continental breakfast and warm greetings by Juanita Jebbanema and Katie Watson of UNM.

After the general meeting our presenters were led to cozy, well equipped classrooms where 24+ tutors, mentors, teachers and administrators attended a variety of workshops. Tracy Jordan, famed LVA tutor trainer, provided an ESL brush up for active tutors; Steven Davis presented a workshop on Speaking Up in a Group; Lowell Gimbel gave

a much-needed workshop on working with Pre-GED students, and Roberto Mondragon and his partner, Georgia Roybal, presented their exciting workshop on Spanish Literacy.

Programs from Espanola, Santa Fe, and parts in between were represented at the conference. We note that the strongest literacy programs are those who attend these workshop conferences, meet with others in the field and take timely, helpful workshops. Our gratitude to Dr. Carlos Ramirez, Juanita and Katie for initiating what may become the meeting place for northern New Mexico literacy providers; a friendly place to take free workshops and share information.



New Mexico Coalition for Literacy

P.O. Box 6085

Santa Fe, NM 87502-6085

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Training Corner

<i>DATES</i>	<i>TYPE</i>	<i>WHERE</i>	<i>CONTACT</i>	<i>PHONE #</i>
1/26,27– 2/2,3 2001	LVA BR	ReadWest– Rio Rancho	Elizabeth Thomsen	892.1131
2/10 2001	LVA READ/ESLOA	ReadWest–Rio Rancho	Elizabeth Thomsen	892.1131
3/23,24,30,31	LVA ESL	ReadWest– Rio Rancho	Elizabeth Thomsen	892.1131
6/1,2,8,9 2001	LVA BR	ReadWest–Rio Rancho	Elizabeth Thomsen	892.1131

IS THE NEW LEGISLATION IMPACTING YOUR PROGRAM? PARTICIPANTS? TUTORS OR TEACHERS?

Two significant pieces of legislation (Workforce Investment Act (WIA) and Welfare Reform/ Welfare-to-Work) may well be creating changes in the delivery of literacy instruction and adult education in your local programs. The NMCL is interested in knowing if this is the case, and if so, just what those changes might be. Over the new few months, we will use the newsletter to raise issues, inform, ask questions, and engage you in a discussion. If you have any stories to share about the impact of this legislation on your program, please contact Diane Pinkey, so we will start the discussion. Thanks.

(diane@nmcl.org and 1-800-233-7587)