

INFORM. INSPIRE. DEVELOP CIVIC LEADERS.



THE POLICY CIRCLE

FAILING GRADE: LITERACY IN AMERICA



LITERACY

Low literacy is defined as being unable to complete tasks related to comparing and contrasting, paraphrasing or making low-level inferences. it is correlated with higher unemployment, reduced income, higher incarceration rates and poorer health outcomes.

LITERACY IN AMERICA

More than 60% of America's students are reading below grade level. In addition, 54% of American adults read below a sixth-grade level and nearly 20% reads below a third-grade level.

FACTS TO KNOW

- Literacy rates for students in the United States **have not increased since 2000**.
- The United States ranked **13th out of 79** countries and regions for reading levels.
- The average adult literacy score in the United States was also below the international average, with the United States **ranking 13th out of 24** countries tested.

FACTS TO KNOW

- Multiple studies have found that the **rates of reading levels** in school-aged children in the United States have **decreased** since the onset of Covid-19.
- Further decreases can be found along **demographic lines** as well, with larger gaps between wealthy and poor children, and between white students and Black and Hispanic ones.

FACTS TO KNOW

- Dyslexia, a brain-based condition that impairs the ability to read, **affects 20% of the population**, making it the most common learning disability in the United States.
- Dyslexia is difficult to diagnose, with studies showing many cases of dyslexia are misdiagnosed, or missed altogether.

GOVERNMENT

The largest federal programs, ranked by the amount of funding received in 2020, are Pell grants, Title 1 grants, special education, the federal student loan program And impact aid.

The Congressional committees that work on issues related to education are The U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions.

Each state has its own department of education that is responsible for establishing schools, developing teaching standards, as well as testing, enrollment, and graduation requirements

FRAMING THE ISSUE

There are **levels of literacy**, ranging from low to high. **The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)**, a test of adult skills, ranks literacy skills from 1-5. This test defines “low literacy” as being below level 2, where people cannot complete tasks related to comparing and contrasting, paraphrasing, or making low-level inferences.

The federal government has a **limited role in education policy**, as the policy and funding dedicated to education is primarily a state and local responsibility. This stems from the **Tenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, which says: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

In 2019-20, U.S. per-pupil spending averaged **\$13,494 annually**, which was the ninth consecutive year with an increase. Spending varied considerably by region, with the Northeast averaging \$21,123 per pupil and the West averaging \$12,802 per pupil. The United States **spends more on education** than the global OECD average.

FRAMING THE ISSUE

There are **levels of literacy**, ranging from low to high. **The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)**, a test of adult skills, ranks literacy skills from 1-5. This test defines “low literacy” as being below level 2, where people cannot complete tasks related to comparing and contrasting, paraphrasing, or making low-level inferences.

The federal government has a **limited role in education policy**, as the policy and funding dedicated to education is primarily a state and local responsibility. This stems from the **Tenth Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution, which says: “The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.”

In 2019-20, U.S. per-pupil spending averaged **\$13,494 annually**, which was the ninth consecutive year with an increase. Spending varied considerably by region, with the Northeast averaging \$21,123 per pupil and the West averaging \$12,802 per pupil. The United States **spends more on education** than the global OECD average.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

School Choice

School choice allows families to choose other options to public schools. Examples of school choice include charter schools, which are publicly funded independent schools established by teachers, parents or community groups under the terms of a charter with a local or national authority. Unlike most public schools, charter schools do not have geographic boundaries that enroll students based on where they live.

Another option is an **education savings account**, which is a state program for families to choose schools or supplement resources (such as tutoring, textbooks or online courses.)

Curriculum

Several states have enacted their own versions of science of reading laws that mandate teaching phonics. As of July 2022, 30 states, across all regions in the United States, had either passed full science of reading laws or implemented policies related to them; 19 of these states initiated legislation since 2020.

Alongside these changes, several textbook publishers have changed how they teach reading, with a greater focus on phonics.

Testing

Since the passage of the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, states set standards for the performance of students in their schools. Each state submits an ESSA consolidated state plan to the federal Department of Education, which includes individual state profiles, summaries of elements of the state plans, and relevant legislation. The ESSA State Plan database includes state-by-state benchmarks for reading, literacy and graduation rates along with state-specific legislation.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

MEASURE -

Use the Nation's Report Card to see what percentage of fourth-grade students are reading at grade level in your state and in your district. Use a skills map from the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) to see what the adult literacy rates are in your district.



IDENTIFY -

Do any of your state's congressional representatives serve on a committee with jurisdiction over education? What commissions address literacy in your state?



REACH OUT-

All it takes is a small team of two or three people to set a path for real improvement. Ask your local school-board member how your district is addressing literacy rates. Is there a community-based initiative or task force addressing adult literacy in your neighborhood?

PLAN -

Set milestones based on your state's legislative calendar or local community calendar.



EXECUTE -

Consider volunteering with a literacy-serving organization in your community. ask yourself, Are you aligned with its mission statement? What is the organization's budget? How is the organization funded?