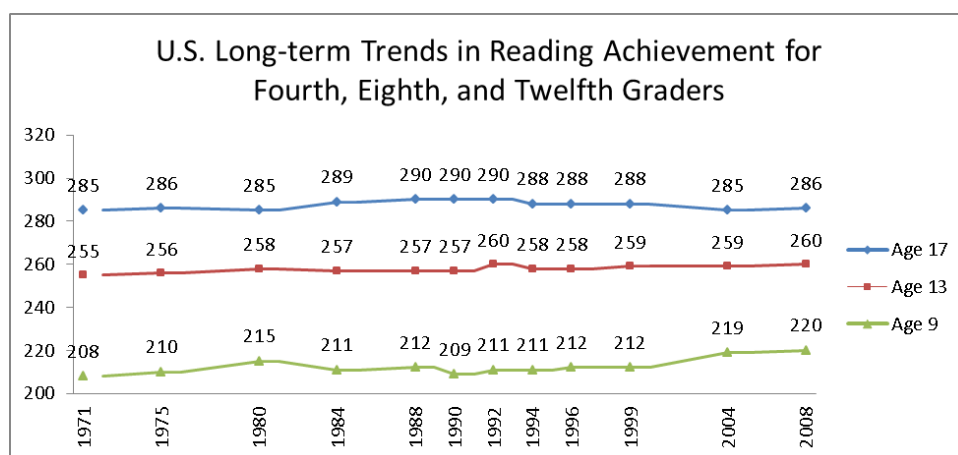


Adolescent Literacy

The majority of students are leaving high school without the necessary reading and writing skills needed to succeed in college and a career. Many of the 1.2 million students who leave high school each year without a diploma have low literacy skills.¹ In America today, one in four students fails to graduate from high school on time. African American and Hispanic students drop out of high school at nearly double the rate of their white peers.² The consequences for the individuals and the costs to the nation are staggering in terms of lost wages and earnings over a lifetime, which are estimated at about \$335 billion per year.³ For those who earn a diploma, an increasing number of students must take remedial course work upon entering college, but the results are not promising: students who enroll in a remedial reading course are less likely to eventually earn a degree or certificate.⁴

Between 1973 and 2008, the share of jobs in the U.S. economy requiring postsecondary education increased from 28 percent to 59 percent.⁵ More than ever, students need advanced literacy skills to succeed in a fast-paced global economy. Yet, over the past four decades, the literacy performance of seventeen-



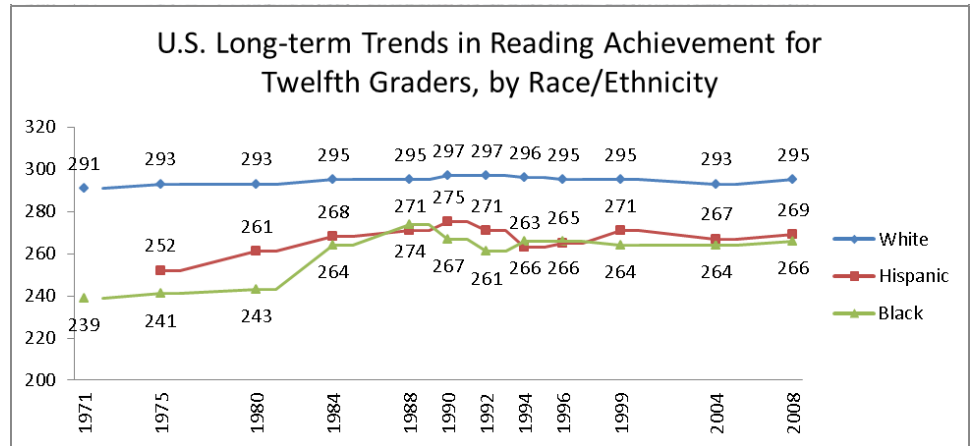
year-olds on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has remained flat.⁶ International measures of reading place American fifteen-year-olds fourteenth among developed nations in reading, lagging behind countries such as Poland, Estonia, and Iceland.⁷

In the face of this literacy crisis, the majority of states have agreed to improve reading and writing instruction dramatically across all grade levels by adopting the English language arts common core state standards. Students must show a steady increase in their ability to read complex texts and write reasoned arguments based on evidence. The development of strong literacy skills requires explicit instruction and a continuum of supports from birth through grade twelve. Ensuring that all young people graduate from high school with advanced literacy skills is essential for their success in the modern world.

The facts below make a case for comprehensive federal and state initiatives and investments to improve reading and writing skills of adolescent learners across the nation.

- According to NAEP, more than 60 percent of middle and high school students scored below the “proficient” level in reading achievement.⁸ These results reveal that millions of young people cannot understand or evaluate text, provide relevant details, or support inferences about the written documents they read.

- Twenty-nine percent of American Indian and Alaska Native, 21 percent of Hispanic, and 16 percent of African American twelfth graders scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment, compared to 45 percent of white students.⁹



- Twenty-five percent of eighth-grade students and 27 percent of twelfth-grade students scored below the “basic” level in reading, which means they do not even have partial mastery of the appropriate grade-level knowledge and skills.¹⁰
- Only 18 percent of eighth-grade students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch reached the proficient level in reading, compared with 44 percent of their more affluent peers.¹¹
- Only 14 percent of African American, 18 percent of Hispanic, and 22 percent of Native American eighth graders scored at or above the proficient level in reading.¹²
- Only 3 percent of eighth-grade English learners scored at or above proficient on the NAEP reading assessment; 71 percent scored below basic.¹³
- Half of incoming ninth graders in urban, high-poverty schools read three years or more below grade level.¹⁴
- Students with low literacy skills ultimately drop out, making up a sizeable portion of the nearly 7,000 students who drop out of high school every school day.¹⁵
- Poor and minority students comprise a significantly large percentage of the 1.2 million students who drop out of school every year. Only 58 percent of Hispanics, 57 percent of African Americans, and 54 percent of Native Americans graduate from high school, compared to more than three-quarters of white and Asian students.¹⁶
- Advanced literacy skills across content areas is the best available predictor of students’ ability to succeed in introductory college courses.¹⁷ Yet, since the 1960s, there has been a steady decline in the difficulty and sophistication of the content of the texts students have been asked to read.¹⁸



- Only 52 percent of high school graduates tested on the 2011 ACT met the reading readiness benchmark, which represents the knowledge and skills a student needs to succeed in credit-bearing, first-year college courses.¹⁹
- High school students' ability to read complex texts is strongly predictive of their performance in college math and science courses. Only one in four of ACT-tested graduates met or exceeded the college readiness benchmarks in all four academic areas—English, reading, mathematics, and science.²⁰
- Roughly one-third of high school graduates are not ready to succeed in an introductory level college writing course.²¹ Remedial education at the postsecondary level costs the nation an estimated \$3.6 billion annually.²²
- About 40 percent of employers indicated that they were dissatisfied with high school graduates' ability to read and understand complicated materials, think analytically, and solve real-world problems.²³ For those who gain entry into the workplace, the private industry spends an estimated \$3.1 billion annually to bolster the literacy skills of entry-level workers.²⁴

This publication was made possible in part by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.



Endnotes

- ¹ Editorial Projects in Education, “Diplomas Count 2011: Beyond High School, Before Baccalaureate: Meaningful Alternatives to a Four Year Degree,” special issue, *Education Week* 30, no. 34 (2011).
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Alliance for Excellent Education, “The High Cost of High School Dropouts: What the Nation Pays for Inadequate High Schools” (Washington, DC: Author, August 2009).
- ⁴ Alliance for Excellent Education, “Paying Double: Inadequate High Schools and Community College Remediation” (Washington, DC: Author, August 2006).
- ⁵ A. Carnevale et al., “Forecast of Education Demand to 2018” (Washington, DC: Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce, 2010), available at http://www9.georgetown.edu/grad/gppi/hpi/cew/pdfs/CEW_press_conference_ppt.pdf (accessed December 6, 2011).
- ⁶ Alliance for Excellent Education analysis of U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2009* (NCES 2010-458) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2010).
- ⁷ Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/54/12/46643496.pdf> (accessed December 6, 2011).
- ⁸ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2009* (NCES 2010-458) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2011* (NCES 2012-457) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011).
- ⁹ U.S. Department of Education, *The Nation’s Report Card: Grade 12 Reading and Mathematics 2009 National and Pilot State Results* (NCES 2011-455) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010).
- ¹⁰ U.S. Department of Education, *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2011* and *The Nation’s Report Card: Grade 12 Reading and Mathematics 2009*.
- ¹¹ U.S. Department of Education, *The Nation’s Report Card: Reading 2011*.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ R. Balfanz, J. M. McPartland, and A. Shaw, *Re-conceptualizing Extra Help for High School Students in a High Standards Era* (Baltimore, MD: Center for Social Organization of Schools, Johns Hopkins University, 2002).
- ¹⁵ Alliance for Excellent Education, “The High Cost of High School Dropouts.”
- ¹⁶ Editorial Projects in Education, “Diplomas Count 2011.”
- ¹⁷ R. Heller and C. L. Greenleaf, *Literacy Instruction in the Content Areas: Getting to the Core of Middle and High School Improvement* (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, June 2007).
- ¹⁸ National Governors Association, Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects, Appendix A: Research Supporting Key Elements of the Standards, Glossary of Key Terms* (Washington, DC: Author, 2010).
- ¹⁹ ACT, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2011), www.act.org/readiness/2011 (accessed December 3, 2011).
- ²⁰ ACT, *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading* (Iowa City, IA: Author, 2006).
- ²¹ ACT, *The Condition of College and Career Readiness*.
- ²² Alliance for Excellent Education, “Saving Now and Saving Later: How High School Reform Can Reduce the Nation’s Wasted Remediation Dollars” (Washington, DC: Author, 2011).
- ²³ Peter D. Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies, *Rising to the Challenge: Are High School Graduates Prepared for College and Work?* (Washington, DC: Achieve, Inc., 2005); Council on Competitiveness, *Competitiveness Index: Where America Stands* (Washington, DC: Author, 2007).
- ²⁴ National Commission on Writing, *Writing: A Ticket to Work ... Or a Ticket Out: A Survey of Business Leaders* (New York: College Entrance Examination Board, 2004).

