

LITERACY ASSESSMENT EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WHAT IS LITERACY?

The Workforce Investment Act defines literacy as “an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family of the individual and in society.” All of these abilities are outlined and measured by the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which tested a sample of over 19,000 American adults in 2003 and found that literacy levels had changed very little since the previous assessment in 1992.

People often think of literacy solely in terms of reading and writing, but there are many aspects of literacy that are broader than just the basic skills. These include health literacy, workforce literacy, financial literacy, computer literacy, family literacy, and English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

The definition of literacy has broadened over time because of the changing nature of society. With the growth of technology and the need for higher skill levels in the workplace, students who might once have succeeded effectively in life with an eighth grade reading level and a minimum package of basic skills must now have a high school diploma and college coursework demonstrating a more diverse and complex set of abilities.

The definition of literacy has also expanded from just adult literacy to include lifelong learning, including children’s acquisition of the pre-literacy skills needed for success in kindergarten, such as understanding the relationships between symbols and sounds, and the early concepts of numeracy. Research shows that children who are unable to gain these pre-reading skills are unlikely to catch up with their peers during the elementary years and are more likely to drop out of school when they are older.

Community literacy involves establishing a process of shared problem-solving that unites communities around the vision of 100 percent literacy with 100 percent community engagement. Community literacy includes all family members and all community stakeholders in order to facilitate literacy infusion, the practice of incorporating literacy in all community initiatives. Incorporating literacy into diverse community efforts helps to promote literacy more effectively and increases the general awareness and understanding of the issue of literacy. The implementation of community literacy is both bottom up and top down. It can change the way literacy is viewed at all levels, from the local level to the national.