

# Literacy and Health Equity

## POSITION STATEMENT

### Oklahoma Health Equity Campaign

#### What is literacy?

Literacy is an individual's ability to read, write, compute, and solve problems at levels of proficiency necessary to function on the job, in the family, and in society.

#### Literacy Statistics Across the Age Continuum

- 43% of Oklahomans (more than one million) have below basic or basic prose literacy skills, and are unable to perform more than simple, everyday literacy activities. (NAAL, 2003)
- A mother's literacy level is one of the most significant predictors of a child's future literacy - more significant than income level and employment status. (National Institutes of Health, 2010)
- On average, one out of every four (24%) students in Oklahoma starting high school as a freshman drops out of school prior to graduation, (Oklahoma KIDS COUNT Factbook 2009)
- More than 31,000 students (2008, latest data) are native Spanish speakers, and 115 separate languages are spoken by Oklahoma school children. School district's capacities are strained by an increase of more than 10,000 new students in one school year (2008-09, latest data).
- More than 17 percent of Oklahoma's college freshmen must begin with non-credit remedial English coursework, and nearly one third cannot expect to make a grade of "C" or better in a regular English course. (Oklahoma Regents for Higher Education, 2010)
- Children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores, improve their reading skills, have improved attendance records and are less likely to drop out of school (National Institute for Literacy- NIFL).

#### Economic Impact for Oklahoma and the Nation

Oklahoma's future economic success is dependent on well-educated and literate citizens.

- **464,367 Oklahomans age 18 or older are without a high school diploma**
- Workers 18 and over with a bachelor's degree earn an average of \$51,206 a year, while those with a high school diploma earn \$27,915; **those without a high school diploma average \$18,734.** (U.S. Census Bureau).
- **A rise of 1% in literacy scores leads to a 2.5% rise in labor productivity** (The Economist, August 28, 2004).
- **Fifty-nine percent of Oklahoma students live in poverty, and in our state's two largest districts the poverty rate is above 83 percent. The link between poverty and low achievement is well-documented.** (2010 DRAFT Oklahoma State Department of Education - Oklahoma Comprehensive Literacy Plan)
- American businesses currently spend more than \$60 billion each year on employee training, much of that for **remedial reading, writing, mathematics and computer skills.** (ProLiteracyWorldwide).

#### How does literacy impact health?

Health literacy is defined in *Healthy People 2020* as: "The degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions". Health literacy requires a complex group of reading, listening, analytical, and decision-making skills, and the ability to apply these skills to health situations.

- Persons with limited health literacy skills are more likely to skip important preventive measures such as mammograms, Pap smears, and flu shots.<sup>1</sup>
- Patients with limited health literacy skills enter the healthcare system when they are sicker.<sup>2</sup>
- Persons with limited health literacy skills make greater use of services designed to treat complications of disease and less use of services designed to prevent complications.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, there is a higher rate of hospitalization and use of emergency services among patients with limited health literacy skills.<sup>3-5</sup> This higher use is associated with higher healthcare costs.<sup>5</sup>
- Low health literacy has negative psychological effects. Those with limited health literacy skills reported a sense of shame about their skill level<sup>6</sup> as a result; they may hide reading or vocabulary difficulties to maintain their dignity.<sup>7</sup>

The primary responsibility for improving health literacy lies with health professionals in both healthcare and public health. However, we must work together to ensure that health information and services can be understood and used by all Oklahomans. We must engage in skill building with healthcare clients/patients and health professionals. Adult educators can be productive partners in reaching adults with limited literacy skills.

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#### **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

**GOAL: Oklahomans will possess the literacy skills they need to fully function in their community, workplace, and family.** Health literacy efforts must:

##### CHILDREN

- Introduce coordinated school education including health literacy concepts for children enrolled in P- K in Oklahoma public schools
- Implement Health and Safety education in all OK schools, complying with PASS requirements K-12 with emphasis on health and safety literacy
- Offer corresponding health and safety literacy education for parents of children enrolled in P- K-12 public schools of Oklahoma.

##### ADULTS

- Oklahomans with limited literacy and/or English skills will realize the impact improved literacy can have in their workplace, family, health, community, and general welfare.
- Individuals with low literacy skills will be aware of literacy resources available in their community including library, community based, and adult education programs.
- Local literacy and adult education programs will have the resources they need to meet the needs of the community.

**GOAL: Low literate Oklahomans will have access to accurate, easy to read and understandable health information, and will be able to use the information to make informed decisions about their health and medical care.** Health literacy efforts must:

##### CHILDREN

- Introduce coordinated school education including health literacy concepts for children enrolled in P- K in Oklahoma public schools
- Implement Health and Safety education in all OK schools, complying with PASS requirements K-12 with emphasis on health and safety literacy
- Offer corresponding health and safety literacy education for parents of children enrolled in P- K-12 public schools of Oklahoma.

##### ADULTS

- Accurate health information will be available in formats suited to adults with limited literacy and English skills.
- Local literacy and adult education programs will be aware of available health related resources, referral organizations, instructional resources, and health literacy training.

**GOAL: Health professionals will have resources available to address barriers to effective patient communication including literacy and English competency.** Health literacy efforts must target:

- ALL health professionals
- Continuing education for ALL health professionals

#### **SOURCES**

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### Indicators of Oklahoma Literacy

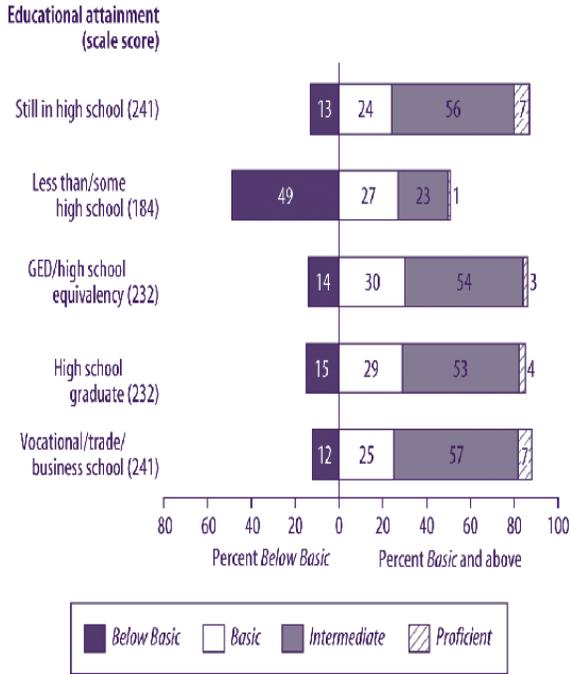
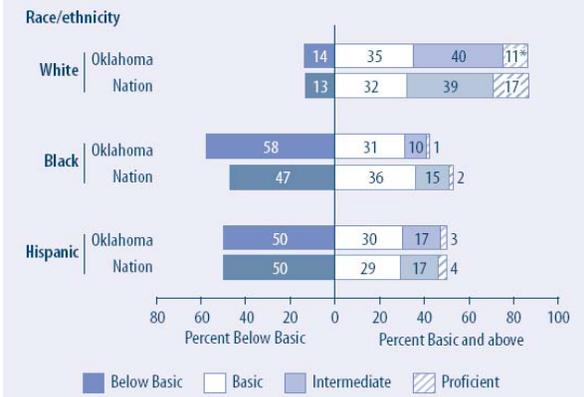


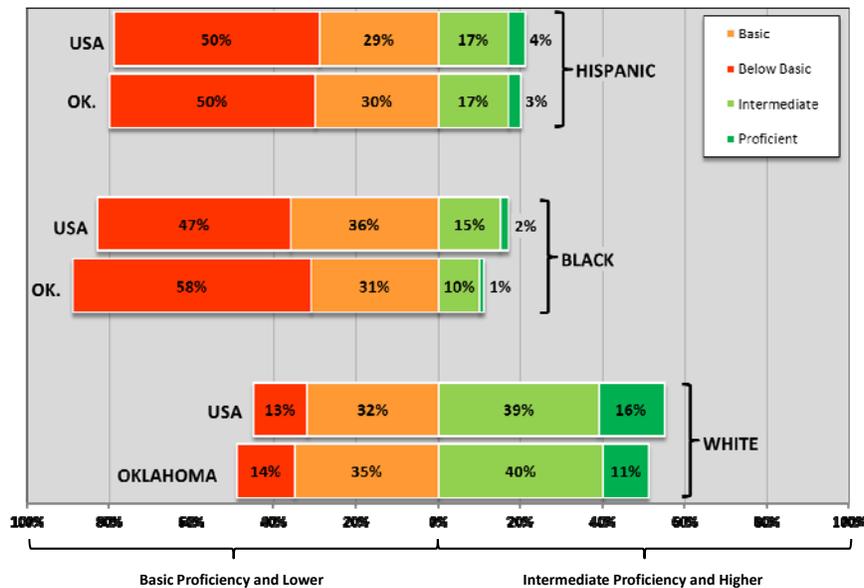
Figure 4. Percentage of adults in Oklahoma and the nation in each quantitative literacy level, by race/ethnicity: 2003



Source: 2003 State Assessment of Adult Literacy and 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy. Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., and Paulsen, C. (2006). *The Health Literacy of America's Adults: Results From the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy* (NCES 2006-483). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

Source: White, Sheida (National Center of Educational Statistics): *Assessing the Nation's Health Literacy*; Key Concepts and Findings of the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) 2003

## Percentage of Adults in Oklahoma & the Nation in Each Quantitative Literacy Level, by Race/Ethnicity: 2003



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Literacy Definitions: **Below Basic**: a grasp of no more than the simplest, most concrete literacy skills **Basic**: Skills needed to perform simple everyday literacy activities **Intermediate**: skills necessary to perform moderately challenging literacy activities **Proficient**: skills necessary to perform complex and challenging literacy activities