

## Adult literacy in the U.S. and in New York

In 1992, the U.S. Department of Education published the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS, <http://www.nifl.gov/nifl/facts/NALS.html>). NALS divided adults into five literacy levels, with 1 being lowest.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3+
Sign one's name	√	√	√
Identify a name in a short article	√	√	√
Write a simple sentence		√	√
Locate an intersection on a street map		√	√
Calculate the total cost on an order form			√
Understand long or dense texts			√

### A literacy crisis

Level 3 represents the **minimum** skill level required in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workplace. Just half of the population nationally reaches that level. In New York City, it's only about one-third.

	adults performing at		
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3+
U.S.	23%	27%	50%
New York State	24%	26%	50%
New York City	36%	27%	37%

### Why literacy rates in NYC aren't getting better

Have New York City literacy levels improved in the decade since the federal study? It's unlikely. Some of the reasons:

- 38% of New Yorkers are foreign-born (2000 Census).
- 47% of New Yorkers speak a language other than English at home (2000 Census).
- Barely one-third of public school students performed at grade level on the 2001 English Language Arts exams (NYC Department of Education).
- 1.5 to 2 million adults in NYC need literacy services. Fewer than 60,000 receive them (NYC Mayor's Office).

### Why literacy matters

When adults become better readers, they're likelier to be healthier, get better jobs, and become more active participants in their community. Their children will almost certainly become better learners.

- About half of unemployed adults read at Level 1 (U.S. Dept of Labor).
- Adults in Level 1 earn 42% less than high school graduates (U.S. Dept of Education).
- Parents' education level is the strongest single predictor of whether a child will be raised in poverty (U.S. Dept of Health & Human Services).
- 70% of prisoners read at Level 1 or 2 (National Institute for Literacy).



## New York's Literacy Education Programs

Some 400 publicly funded programs in New York State provide instruction in basic literacy, English for speakers of other languages, and GED (high school equivalency) preparation. In 2003, there were 138,184 students enrolled in those programs; 51,691 of those were in New York City.

- 45% were in adult basic education programs (generally for native speakers of English), 55% in programs in English for speakers of other languages
- 63% were in the bottom three of the six levels of instruction, as defined by federal accountability standards
- 60% were women, 40% men
- 44% were Latino, 24% white, 23% of African descent, and 8% Asian
- 48% were employed, either full-time or part-time, on enrollment

Only 14% of the 10,486 instructors in literacy programs statewide were full-time paid employees. 40% were volunteers, and 46% were part-time employees. The proportion of volunteer instructors is lower in New York City than in the rest of the state.

## How the LAC Helps

The LAC supports the programs that support the efforts of New York's low-literate and immigrant adults to improve the quality of their lives. To help raise literacy levels in New York, Literacy Assistance Center services include:

- The statewide multilingual hotline, which offers callers an easy way to choose among more than 400 free programs and find the most convenient and appropriate class
- The statewide record-keeping system that helps literacy programs evaluate their efforts and monitor student progress
- An online citywide directory of more than 150 free family literacy programs, a valuable resource for parents, public school parent coordinators, and social service agencies
- Workshops and other programs for literacy instructors and program managers who want to learn about new research, best practices in the field, and methods for making their efforts even more effective
- A Professional Development Center including a computer lab, where teachers can explore new ways for bring information technology to the classroom, and a library of New York's most extensive collection of adult, youth, and family literacy instructional materials
- A network of literacy programs throughout New York City and State who are in the front lines of the battle against low literacy and inadequate English-language skills

## For more information

Visit our website, [www.lacnyc.org](http://www.lacnyc.org), or contact our executive director, Elyse Barbell Rudoph, 212 803 3351 or [elyser@lacnyc.org](mailto:elyser@lacnyc.org).

