



Improving Literacy Education Across Elementary Schools

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An indisputably fundamental part of developing future generations for our country is ensuring they are guaranteed an education, most often beginning in elementary school with learning to read. However, literacy rates have been declining across the United States of America. This brief will cover the necessity of maintaining reading education, and how we should act to reverse its diminishment.

II. OVERVIEW

For centuries, children have been taught to read either by their family members, preschools, or in their first few years of grade school, which is the most common situation. It is essential to learn how to read to be educated and to develop a successful career. This fact has seemed to slip the mind of recent curriculum designs, with bigger picture ideas becoming more ideal. These include greater graduation rates and smaller achievement gaps. It has caused less personal attention to go towards children who are falling behind, especially within public elementary schools, whose large numbers create little room for flexible education. Literacy rates have been actively declining, developing holes in the foundation of future productivity. Hence, this paper investigates the reasoning behind the decrease, along with the immediate costs that

must be addressed. It then develops plans for advancing elementary education, working towards a solution to the literacy rate crisis, and maintaining the big-picture objectives.

A. Relevance

Widespread literacy has always been necessary for progress, and its importance is growing daily. With a growing proportion of the workforce being knowledge-based fields, developed literacy skills are crucial for employment. However, roughly 14% of the global adult population still cannot read, over half being women, according to UNESCO. This statistic tends to be attributed to a lack of sufficient education in grade school, as it becomes exponentially more difficult to learn new skills as an adult. As of 2024, 40% of 4th grade students in the United States were below the National Assessment of Educational Progress' (NAEP) Basic level of reading, the highest percentage since 2002, as per the National Assessment Governing Board. The necessity of addressing this fall of intellectualism is obvious, as we must be sure to support the success of future generations and world progress.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Literacy has come an incredibly long way, but it is still not enough. It became more relevant when Enlightenment ideas emerged, with the desire for equality being prominent. However, free public

school systems and the priority of basic education was not present until the late 1800s and early twentieth century. From there, long lasting gender gaps and inequities among marginalized populations continued, many of which still exist today.

Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a global quarantine, children missed valuable instruction. For young children, it was impossible to acquire the same level of schooling as could happen in person. As reported in the National Literacy Trust, in elementary schools, the percentage of students reaching the expected reading standard dropped from 75% to 67% between 2019 and 2022. This is a massive percentage, and a clear indicator that literacy instruction proficiency is declining. Furthermore, the amount of children who reported enjoyment in reading fell to 43.4% by 2023, the lowest proportion since 2005. This decrease dismantles the ability to effectively teach reading because practice outside of school is necessary, and often is only successful if the child finds joy in books.

Other factors that tie into the matter are inequities in socioeconomic status, especially when they affect family history of literacy, technology resources, and books available at home. The individual impacts of being closer to poverty along with the lack of literacy have devastating effects. It is crucial that reading skills are obtained in early education because they are major indicators of later success, such as graduation, career trajectories, and future salaries. The lack of reading skill sets proceed to reduce the ability to understand health information, increasing risks. It also is linked to higher incarceration rates, with large percentages of

United States inmates being illiterate or barely reading at a fourth grade level, according to Regis College Online. This signifies correlation between a lack of literacy education and dark life pathways.

The current conditions of youth literacy rates are real, serious, and ever growing in importance.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

With regards to the literacy rate crisis, the primary stakeholders are children, especially those of the youngest generation, given that the consequences will have the largest impact on their future. A lack of literacy skills will prevent them from accessing higher education which could detriment their ability to have successful careers and leadership abilities. A lack of reading abilities may also initiate the aforementioned health and safety risks. Because of this, the first step in the proposed policy shall be determining what methods are most affected for elementary students in this day and age, so that the plan does not take unnecessary measures.

Furthermore, parents and teachers are stakeholders as their relative degrees of success are derived from the literacy achievements of their children and students. That said, much of the crisis is derived from the changes in the educational system and the lack of instruction. Whether that is the teacher and parents fault is at debate, but it is a concern that should be considered when discussing who the proposed policy should address the most.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference to declining literacy rates is that not addressing the issue now promotes a

space to neglect education in the future, including in fields beyond the scope of language arts, which will result in a more vacuous set of young generations. If stakeholders continue to push towards ideas that seem better in the long term, but are actively proving no success, we can be confident that the country's future workforces will be degrees behind what is necessary for a growing world, especially when pushing their way into knowledge economies. The likelihood of unknowingly falling into imperceptive ways or even ending up in situations of poor health or crime is growing. Furthermore, indifference to the root of the decline in education standards and literacy rates will place more direct blame on the children themselves and assert them as a "lazy" age, which could only trigger less motivation. This would last past elementary schooling and into higher education. Therefore, it only makes sense for there to be action, rather than inaction.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

Because the declining literacy rates are a development of entire societies, rather than an issue stemming only from children or from individual school systems, being nonpartisan in developing policies is essential. The benefits of such new policies include but are not limited to the following:

- 1) Equity and social justice: Literacy gaps commonly exist along racial, geographic, and other socioeconomic lines that create structural inequities among youth in different communities. Intervening early on by implementing literacy education policies that address the falling rates can be preventative towards long-standing poverty that is rooted in illiteracy. Furthermore, policies that are applicable

universally will benefit other disadvantaged groups such as children with disabilities and those with English as a second language or who do not have English-speaking parents.

- 2) Improvement from an economic standpoint: Promoting more literate generations will pave the way for a more adaptable and productive workforce, given that the rise in literacy is correlated with a rise in graduation. Improved literacy rates will additionally reduce the costs of remedial education by supporting a better skillset beforehand and reduce spending on social safety net programs, including unemployment benefits and incarceration, that coincide with communities of lower literacy rates.
- 3) Civic and democratic health: Equipping citizens with literacy skills from their youth will make them better versed in the political system of the country. It will also make them more prepared to consider candidates, address claims, and resist misinformation when seeking to vote. Beyond that, it is important to note that regions with higher literacy rates show correlation to greater voter turnout and participation.

V. TRIED POLICY

To begin with, a national, grade school, educational policy that was implemented in 2002 called No Child Left Behind was a program built on four pillars: accountability, flexibility, research-based instruction, and expanded parental options. Its intention was to use standardized

testing to mandate proof of “Adequate Yearly Progress”. It pushed many more students up through the grades quietly because only the big picture was being looked at.

However, there was much debate over the universal effectiveness of this policy, so much so that it was replaced in 2015 by the Every Child Succeeds Act. The issue with No Child Left Behind was that it caused teachers to “teach to the test”, minimized valuable skills like arts, and left behind minorities and those of struggling communities. It also led to no gains in the literacy field, indicating how this was not an effective policy by that standard. Instead, it is advised to focus on solutions that teach real lessons and show real connection and growth to reading education.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Addressing potential issues early on

Often, even with thorough literacy education, children do not meet sufficient standards because of a preexisting condition that needs special attention. This includes dyslexia as well as other neurodevelopmental issues that stagnate educational success. These concerns tend to be preventative towards the effectiveness of standard literacy education such as the “science of reading” that are intended to work universally.

To overcome this, it is recommended to mandate screening from Pre-K to early grade school to detect limitations children may specifically have. Depending on their results, they will be sorted into specific groups that can adhere to people with similar struggles. This will also aid teachers who are trying to manage several kinds of students in the same class. At the end of

elementary school or once a specific standard has been reached, the children will return to synchronized instruction.

Training reforms for teachers

Commonly the problem in literacy comes from the teachers, especially with the COVID-19 pandemic making it hard to recover the learning gaps among young children. To address this, extensive training along with better overall preparation in higher education, and screenings beforehand could be required of elementary schools and their corresponding staff before they are hired. Once they are in the classroom, occasional training that relates to evolving research about reading education could occur, ensuring that teachers manipulate their methods to be most effective. Similarly, this can be integrated with standardized programs and administered by smaller districts, powered by state funding. It would begin with a longer session over the summer, and the updated training could occur once or twice a semester.

The best evidence of this comes from Mississippi, where between 2013 and 2022, Mississippi jumped about 30 states in their proportion of fourth-grade literacy. This was primarily due to training reforms, along with other factors intervening into elementary student’s proficiency.

High quality instructional materials

One option that is seemingly obvious, yet is not consistently represented, is the presence of high quality instructional materials in classrooms. This means that the curriculums, textbooks, and other materials used are up to date and based on evidence. It also refers to lining up teacher training and programming with the materials so

they can be sure of how to use them properly. With the recent development of artificial intelligence and technology access growing, it is becoming easier to integrate better programming that can be done inside and outside of the classroom. This can be produced for statewide unison by the Department of Education of according states and administered by individual superintendents and principals.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I have discussed the continuous decrease of literacy rates and the reasoning behind them, discussing how the changes in instruction and the effects of the pandemic are preventative for up and coming generations. I have also gathered evidence for the consequences of low literacy rates, including more juvenile delinquents and higher chances of failure. I then developed several policy options to address this issue. Out of these, the most effective choice is to administer screenings that can sort children into programming tailored for their learning styles and difficulties. States can mandate testing for this reason.

All considered, literacy is fundamental to the success of the country and of the world, and looking at the reasons behind its decrease along with its impacts is essential to understand the depth of the issue. It is unlikely that we will ever achieve a 100% literate world, given that the abundance of cultures and languages is a barrier, but certain policies can overcome the issue for smaller regions if we work slowly in adapting better ways to teach and to learn. I believe that by believing in the power of higher literacy rates and valuing their importance, we build a safer and more successful world for our children.

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