

Published: March 1, 2006

Graduates Can't Master College Text

Study finds students fall off track after 10th grade.

By Kathleen Kennedy Manzo

Both as an 8th grader and a 10th grader, Johnny may be on track for mastering the advanced reading skills he'll need to succeed in college and the workplace. But by high school graduation, he and many other aspiring college students will likely be unprepared to tackle the complex reading and writing tasks they'll encounter, a study set for release this week concludes.

While science and mathematics are claiming the spotlight in the latest push for improving high schools and sharpening the nation's competitive edge, the study by ACT Inc. makes the case for doing so through better reading instruction, clear and rigorous state standards for high school reading, and the use of more sophisticated texts and teaching materials.

"Reading is the critical core skill underlying all the curriculum areas," said Cynthia B. Schmeiser, ACT's vice president for research and development. "If kids are reading at a college level, they are also ready to go into, in greater proportions, college-level math and science courses."

Ms. Schmeiser and her colleagues at the Iowa City, Iowa-based company known for its college-entrance exams mined data for the more than 1 million students who took the ACT exam last year, as well as the results for the students who took preliminary ACT exams as 8th and 10th graders.

The study, "Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading," found that just 51 percent of test-takers who were planning on higher education met the ACT "college-readiness benchmark in reading." The benchmark represents the level of skill required for students "to have a high probability of success" in college courses. Students from some minority groups and lower income levels were far less likely to meet those benchmarks.

Among white and Asian-American test-takers, 59 percent and 54 percent, respectively, met the ACT standard for college readiness in reading, while 25 percent of African-American and 42 percent of Hispanic students were able to do so. When broken down by income levels, 71 percent of students whose parents earned \$100,000 or more a year demonstrated advanced reading skills, while 40 percent of their peers with annual family incomes of less than \$30,000 did so.


As 8th and 10th graders, however, nearly two-thirds of the students overall, and larger percentages in every subgroup were on course to be prepared for college.

"In terms of readiness for college-level reading, students are actually losing momentum during high school," the report says.

'Unlocking Meaning'

Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress have shown that at key transitions during their academic careers—as they encounter increasingly complex texts in 4th grade, in middle school, and in high school—students' achievement tends to dip, experts say. But the ACT data suggest the problem among high school students is widespread, even among the college-bound.

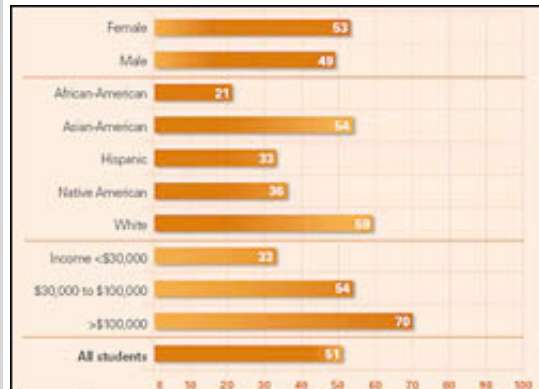
FOR MORE INFO

"[Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reveals About College Readiness in Reading](#)" is posted by [Act Inc.](#) 

Prepared for Higher Education

Only half the ACT-tested high school graduates in 2005 met the test-maker's college-readiness benchmark for reading.

*Click image to see the full chart.



SOURCE: ACT Inc.

“This shows us, like the [NAEP] data, that a very small amount of kids are really at the proficiency level,” said Andrés Henríquez, who oversees the adolescent-literacy initiative for the Carnegie Corporation of New York. “This problem gets at not just poor kids, but middle-class kids and kids in exurbs and suburbs, too.”

Those reading skills, or the lack of them, have significant consequences for students later on, according to the report.

Students who were able to “work at unlocking meaning by calling upon sophisticated reading-comprehension skills and strategies,” regardless of their backgrounds, were more than twice as likely as their less-prepared peers to meet benchmarks set by the ACT in English, math, and science as well.

Moreover, the ACT’s supplemental analysis, in which researchers tracked test-takers’ success in college—data not included in the report—found that students who met the reading benchmarks tended to do better in college English, math, and science courses than those who had not met the benchmarks.

Text-Selection Guidelines

The ACT analysis comes on the heels of several reports that outline the need for more attention to adolescents’ literacy needs, including those from the Carnegie Corporation, the National Governors Association, and the Alliance for Excellent Education.

“The report gives us data and information that confirms what many of us intuitively knew or believed,” said Ilene Berman, a program director for education for the NGA, “that strong performance in literacy is critical to strong academic performance, both in high school and postsecondary education.”

Ms. Berman helped write the NGA’s recommendations for improving state policy efforts on adolescent literacy last fall. The governors’ group last week awarded eight grants of \$50,000 each to help states—Arizona, Delaware, Florida, Idaho, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, and North Carolina—craft stronger reading policies and programs for older students.

The ACT report’s call for professional development for content-area teachers, effective interventions for struggling students, and state standards for reading beyond grade 3 are in line with the ideas of the NGA.

But the report sets its own course in highlighting the need for better text selection and higher teacher expectations for students’ literacy tasks.

“The type of text to which students are exposed in high school has a significant impact on their readiness for college-level reading,” says the report, which outlines the elements of what it deems complex materials and includes excerpts from and analysis of literary and informational texts.

State standards for adolescent reading, according to the recommendations, are “insufficient or nonexistent.” Fewer than half the states have any standards at all for reading at the

Reading Connections

Test-takers who met the reading-readiness measure were more likely to meet ACT benchmarks in other subjects.

Of those who *met* the reading benchmark:

- 94 percent also met the **English** benchmark
- 63 percent also met the **Mathematics** benchmark
- 47 percent also met the **Science** benchmark

high school level, the study found. It suggests that all states' standards should include guidelines for teachers' choice of texts that are appropriately challenging for their students.

But some experts question whether more difficult texts—the first of the five ACT recommendations—would ease or exacerbate the problem.

“If kids have difficulty reading the texts they have, just giving them a diet of [more complex] texts, that’s not going to work. ... You have to create the conditions that would allow them to read the texts,” said Michael W. Smith, a reading researcher at Temple University in Philadelphia. “We have to build the conceptual knowledge they need to read complex texts.”

And given that the ACT data represent students who expect to go to college, Mr. Henríquez said, that finding may not translate to the general population.

Inseparable Success

Nevertheless, Mr. Henríquez and other experts agree that drawing more attention and resources to attempts to improve adolescents' reading proficiency is a critical step in raising their achievement at large.

The report “reminds us that succeeding in math and science is inseparable from succeeding in reading and writing,” said Rafael Heller, a senior policy associate at the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based group that promotes high school improvement initiatives.

But in the rush to bolster math and science instruction, Mr. Heller added, there is concern in the field that literacy will be left out of the mix.

“Imagine if the surgeon general said this year we can forget about eating our fruits and vegetables and just eat dairy,” Mr. Heller said. And that, “doesn’t make sense.”

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FROM THE ARCHIVES

“**Studies Connect Behavior, Reading,**” February 22, 2006.

“**To Build a Nation of Readers,**” February 8, 2006.

“**More Focus on Reading Fluency Needed, Study Suggests,**” November 9, 2005.

“**States Urged to Focus on Adolescent Literacy,**” October 26, 2005.

“**Trends in Reading and Math: 1971-2004,**” July 14, 2005.

“**The Scientific Teaching of Reading,**” January 26, 2005.

“**Teens Unlikely to Meet Reading Goal, RAND Report Warns,**” January 5, 2005.

“**Reading Researchers Outline Elements Needed to Achieve Adolescent Literacy,**” October 20, 2004.

“**RAND: Don't Let Basics Obstruct Comprehension Strategies,**” March 6, 2002.

“**Panel Urges Study Of Reading Comprehension,**” February 7, 2001.

For background, previous stories, and Web links, see [Reading](#).

RESOURCES ON THE WEB

The **National Governors Association's Center for Best Practices** offers **additional resources and**

Of those who *did not meet* the reading benchmark:

- 41 percent met the **English** benchmark
- 16 percent met the **Mathematics** benchmark
- 5 percent met the **Science** benchmark

SOURCE: ACT Inc.

reports on literacy.

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