

Lit Scan

Facts & Figures from the Colorado Literacy Research Initiative

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PUBLIC OPINION FAVORS STATE FUNDING TO ADDRESS ILLITERACY

In November 1996, the Office of Adult Education helped to fund a statewide public opinion poll on library and literacy issues. The answers given to the literacy-related questions by 800 adult Coloradans during telephone interviews amount to a clarion call to action.



SUPPORT FOR STATE FUNDING

Told that the State of Colorado does not fund adult literacy programs, and given four possible types of programs to choose from, *the overwhelming majority of Coloradans expressed support for state funding for literacy programs*. Nine out of ten respondents supported state funding of basic literacy programs and family literacy programs, eight out of ten supported workplace literacy programs, and almost three out of four supported programs to teach English as a second language.

Table 1 ♦ Types of Literacy Programs For Which the General Public Supports State Funding, 1996

| Percent Supporting State Funding | Type of Literacy Program |
|---|---|
| 91% | Basic literacy programs (reading, writing, math, communication & thinking skills) |
| 90% | Family literacy programs |
| 83% | Workplace literacy programs |
| 72% | Programs to teach English as a second language |

PERCEPTION OF THE PROBLEM

When asked, "Overall, how much of a problem is adult illiteracy in Colorado?," more than three out of four respondents identified it as a serious problem. Almost two out of three expressed particular concern about the effects of adult illiteracy in the workplace. (Notably, support for state funding of programs that combat adult illiteracy was not limited to those who perceive it as a serious problem. Even some of those who regard it as an only somewhat serious problem expressed support for state funding.)

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Table 2 ♦ Perception of Adult Illiteracy as a Problem in Colorado, 1996

| Percent Perceiving Problem | Type of Adult Illiteracy |
|----------------------------|---|
| 76% | Adult illiteracy in Colorado is a serious problem. |
| 62% | Adult illiteracy is a serious problem in Colorado workplaces. |



SOCIAL PROBLEMS RELATED TO ILLITERACY

Why is support for state funding of programs to combat illiteracy so high—even higher than the perceived seriousness of the problem appears to warrant? Evidently, the answer to this question lies in the panoply of social problems which most Coloradans believe are related to illiteracy. Nine out of ten respondents expressed beliefs that illiteracy is related to underemployment, unemployment, and crime. Four out of five respondents indicated that they relate being on welfare to illiteracy, and more than three out of five respondents indicated that they relate teen pregnancy to illiteracy. Clearly, most of the general public in the state understand the larger social costs of illiteracy.

Table 3 ♦ Social Problems Perceived by the General Public To Be Related to Illiteracy, 1996

| Percent Perceiving Relationship to Illiteracy | Social Problem |
|---|--|
| 90% | Under employment (only being able to qualify for entry-level or low-paying jobs) |
| 86% | Unemployment |
| 86% | Crime |
| 81% | Being on welfare |
| 68% | Teen pregnancy |

FACE TO FACE WITH ILLITERACY

One of the difficulties in addressing adult illiteracy is the perception that most adult illiterates have learned to cope, one way or another, with their disability. One key result of this survey may help to dispel this myth. More than one-third of the survey respondents (37 percent) reported that they personally know someone who has a literacy problem which has limited their ability to succeed. One in three! Apparently, adult illiterates have not done as good a job of hiding themselves as some might think. Or, perhaps, the demands of daily life and the workplace in the Information Age are making it more difficult for them to hide than in the past. Doubtless, the increasing awareness that some



of those around us are not functionally literate also contributes to the concern of most Coloradans that the state take a hand in addressing the problem.

PROGRAM AWARENESS (OR LACK THEREOF)

Yet another factor that may be contributing to the general public's belief that the state should fund literacy programs is their lack of awareness of such programs. Only two out of five respondents (44 percent) reported any awareness of programs that address adult literacy issues in Colorado. To some extent, the issue may really be one of establishing programs where none now exist. It is equally likely, however, that a majority of the public is simply unaware of existing programs and that those programs are not funded adequately through federal and private grants.



CONCLUSIONS

The overwhelming majority of Coloradans favor state funding of adult literacy programs. Why? Partly, because they perceive illiteracy, in and of itself, as a problem, particularly in the workplace. Beyond that, however, it is clear that most Coloradans understand the close relationships between illiteracy and a wide range of social problems, including crime, unemployment, and teen pregnancy. The combined costs of illiteracy and social problems with which it is associated have become too high--high enough that it is clear to the typical Colorado resident that the time has come for the state to act.

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