

## Public Libraries and Adult Literacy

Adult literacy levels correlate to employment and wages. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) done in 1992 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found that literacy proficiency is strongly related to levels of formal schooling. In general, literacy proficiency is lowest for individuals who have not graduated from high school rising to highest for individuals with postsecondary schooling. Individuals with higher literacy levels are more likely to be employed, work more weeks in a year, and earn higher wages than those with lower literacy levels.

The United States 2000 Census found that 13% of the Colorado population 25 years of age and older had not graduated from high school. This is an improvement over 1990 when the census found that 15.6% of people age 25 and over living in Colorado had not finished high school, but still represents a large number of adults. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1. Colorado Educational Attainment Statistics from the U.S.**

Census	1990	2000
Total Population age 25 and over	2,107,072	2,776,632
Less than 9 <sup>th</sup> grade education	118,252	134,348
9 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> grade education, no diploma	209,804	228,691

Adult literacy programs seem to fit naturally in public libraries. Key findings from a 2000 study on Programs for Adults in Public Library Outlets show that adult literacy programming is offered by 17% of public library outlets. Large urban public library outlets were more likely to offer adult literacy programs than small rural ones. The

**Table 2. Percent of public library outlets that offered any adult literacy programs during the last 12 months, and of those, the percent that offered specific types: 2000**

Adult literacy programs	Percent
Offered any adult literacy programs.....	17
Type of adult literacy program offered*	
Adult basic literacy skills (skills at 4 <sup>th</sup> grade level and below).....	63
Pre-GED (skills from 5 <sup>th</sup> through 8 <sup>th</sup> grade levels).....	42
GED (skills from 9 <sup>th</sup> grade through high school equivalency).....	45
English as a second language (ESL).....	48
Family literacy.....	46

\*based on library outlets that offered any adult literacy programs

NOTE: Percentages for the type of program offered sum to more than 100 because library outlets could offer more than one type of adult literacy program.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, "Survey on Programs for Adults in Public Library Outlets," 2000.

study points out public libraries also support adult literacy activities in ways not measured by the survey. For example, libraries may develop and maintain appropriate collections to support adult literacy programs and provide space to outside groups for literacy activities.



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Of the libraries surveyed that did not provide adult literacy programs, lack of staff or resources was indicated by most (77%) as very important in their decision not to provide these programs. Only 20% of respondents indicated their libraries had chosen not to provide adult literacy programs because the communities they served did not have a strong need for such programs. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3. Among public library outlets that did not offer adult literacy programs, percentage distribution of the importance of specific reasons in the outlet’s decision not to offer adult literacy programs: 2000**

Reason	Not important	Somewhat important	Very important
This outlet does not have the staff or resources to offer adult literacy programs.....	9	14	77
Other groups or educational institutions in the community (including other library outlets) offer adult literacy programs.....	24	22	53
The programming in this outlet emphasizes other groups (e.g., children, senior citizens).....	36	28	37
The community served by this outlet does not have a strong need for adult literacy programs.....	48	32	20

NOTE: Percentages are based on the 83 percent of library outlets that did not offer any adult literacy programs. Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System, “Survey on Programs for Adults in Public Library Outlets,” 2000.



In Colorado there are public libraries with very active and effective adult literacy programs. Westminster Public Library’s Adult Literacy Program pairs interested adults reading below the 8<sup>th</sup> grade level with trained volunteers for one-to-one tutoring. Three of the program’s former students from have opened their own businesses, demonstrating the life-altering potential of the service. BoulderReads! Program at the Boulder Public Library is another successful program. Every year 30% of program participants accomplish at least one major, life-changing goal--getting a better job, reading an entire book or reading with a child for the first time, or passing a driver’s license or citizenship test. Other successful programs for adult learners include Pikes Peak Library District’s LitSource, Security Public Library’s Literacy Quest, and programs in the Delta Public Library District, Basalt Regional Library, and Sterling Public Library.

This year’s Colorado Public Library Survey includes a question about adult literacy programs in the library. The information will enable the Library Research Service to assemble more specific data about adult literacy programs in the public libraries of Colorado.

**Sources**

- *Measuring Literacy Success*, BoulderReads! Program, Boulder Public Library. Available at <http://www.boulderreads.org/measuring.htm>
- *Programs for Adults in Public Library Outlets*, National Center for Education Statistics, November 12, 2002. Available at <http://www.nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2003010>
- *The 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey*, National Center for Education Statistics. Available at <http://nces.ed.gov/naal/design/about92.asp>
- U.S. Census Data, State and County Quick Facts. Available at <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/>