ILLITERACY SHOCKINGLY HIGH IN L.A. HALF OF WORKERS UNABLE TO READ; [VALLEY Edition]

Rachel Uranga\ Staff Writer. Daily News. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 9, 2004. pg. N.1

Author(s): Rachel Uranga\ Staff Writer

Section: News

Publication title: Daily News. Los Angeles, Calif.: Sep 9, 2004. pg. N.1

Source type: Newspaper

ProQuest document ID: 690094911

Text Word Count: 687

Document URL: http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=690094911&sid=1&Fmt=3&clientId=12996&RQT=309&VName=PQD

Abstract (Document Summary)

Despite hundreds of millions of dollars spent in public schools over the past decade to boost literacy rates, functional illiteracy levels have remained flat because of a steady influx of non-English-speaking immigrants and a 30 percent high school dropout rate, authors of the report said.

Before he enrolled in a literacy class at the North Valley Occupational Center, Adolio Gonzales, 29, was intimidated by filling out job applications or even going to an amusement park.

chart; Chart: READING PROBLEMS SOURCE: U.S. Census, 2000; U.S. Statistical Abstract, 2003; California Department of Education; The L.A. Workforce Literacy Project, 2004 Gregg Miller/Staff Artist

Full Text (687 words)

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Continued immigration and a stubborn high school dropout rate have stymied efforts to improve literacy in Los Angeles County, where more than half the working-age population can't read a simple form, a report released Wednesday found.

Alarmingly, only one in every 10 workers deemed functionally illiterate is enrolled in literacy classes and half of them drop out within three weeks, said the study by the United Way of Greater Los Angeles.

"It's an emergency situation," said Mayor James Hahn, adding that poor literacy rates could jeopardize the region's economy by driving out high-tech businesses and other industries that pay well.

In the Los Angeles region, 53 percent of workers ages 16 and older were deemed functionally illiterate, the study said.

That percentage dropped to 44 percent in the greater San Fernando Valley - which includes Agoura Hills and Santa Clarita - but soared to 85 percent in some pockets of the Valley.

The study measured levels of literacy across the region using data from the 2000 Census, the U.S. Department of Education and a survey of literacy programs taken from last September to January.

It classified 3.8 million Los Angeles County residents as "low-literate," meaning they could not write a note explaining a billing error, use a bus schedule or locate an intersection on a street map.

And despite hundreds of millions of dollars spent in public schools over the past decade to boost literacy rates, functional illiteracy levels have remained flat because of a steady influx of non-English-speaking immigrants and a 30 percent high school dropout rate, authors of the report said.

The last available national study was conducted in 1992 by the National Adult Literacy Survey, which found that 48 percent of the nation's working-age population was functionally illiterate.
"This is a ticking time bomb, a dirty secret we don't want to talk about. We are losing the battle," said Mark Drummond, chancellor of California's community college system.

Dozens of community-based groups, including the Literacy Network of Greater Los Angeles, the Los Angeles Unified School District and other public agencies vowed to improve programs over the next five years by connecting English learners with employers and educating 1,000 workers with English-language deficiencies during the next two years.

A top priority should be making classes more accessible. For example, the report found that no school in the county offered Saturday classes or tailored classes for adult students with families or multiple jobs.

And while nearly 90 percent of adults take literacy classes to improve their employment opportunities, only 30 percent of literacy programs include the workplace in their instruction.

"It's appalling," said Marge Nichols, the author of the study. "A 50 percent dropout rate (for literacy classes) is pretty dysfunctional. We haven't kept up."

Though the report offers no estimate for the cost of functional illiteracy, the National Right to Read Foundation places the price tag nationally at $224 billion. And local observers say untold millions are being lost by would-be employers who move to other cities in search of highly skilled workers.

Before he enrolled in a literacy class at the North Valley Occupational Center, Adolio Gonzales, 29, was intimidated by filling out job applications or even going to an amusement park.

"I didn't want to go to Disneyland because I thought it was so complicated," said the Reseda resident, who waits tables at a Carrows restaurant and wants to become a computer programmer.

Gonzales emigrated from Guatemala seven years ago and taught himself to speak English by watching television programs.

But he often found himself confused by the simplest task, and had trouble filling out an application at a fast-food restaurant two years ago.

"The application asked why I wanted to work for this company and I didn't know what to answer," he said.

Then, he enrolled in the literacy class, which emphasizes the basics, like filling out forms and reading the newspaper.

"I feel comfortable now, like I can do anything."

Rachel Uranga, (818) 713-3741
rachel.uranga(at)dailynews.com

[Illustration]
chart; Caption: Chart: READING PROBLEMS SOURCE: U.S. Census, 2000; U.S. Statistical Abstract, 2003; California Department of Education; The L.A. Workforce Literacy Project, 2004 Gregg Miller/Staff Artist

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