



# Meeting Literacy Goals Set by No Child Left Behind

## A Long Uphill Road

**D**espite recent progress in reading achievement among children in primary grades, many children are not moving beyond basic decoding skills as they advance to the fourth grade and classes in history, mathematics, and science. This situation is especially troubling, because adolescents increasingly face a job market that demands high levels of literacy skills. Continuous instruction beyond the third grade is needed; however, teaching reading and writing to adolescents is an “orphaned responsibility” in secondary schools.<sup>1</sup>

To focus national attention on the problem of adolescent literacy, Carnegie Corporation of New York launched a new initiative, *Advancing Literacy*. As a first step, Carnegie asked the RAND Corporation to undertake a study examining the state of achievement in adolescent literacy in the nation. The results are documented in a RAND report by McCombs, Kirby, and colleagues. The report provides a comprehensive portrait of where the nation’s adolescents stand relative to state and national literacy goals and underscores how far we are from the goal of 100-percent proficiency set under No Child Left Behind (NCLB).

### Data Sources

The researchers examined data on state assessments to understand how states define and measure adolescent literacy and set proficiency standards. They also used the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to analyze how well adolescents were faring on a national assessment. Data from the NAEP and the state assessments provide multiple indicators of student performance in the states and show how students are shaping up with respect to national and state literacy goals.

<sup>1</sup> deLeon, Anne Grosso, “Moving Beyond Storybooks: Teaching Our Children to Read to Learn,” *Carnegie Reporter*, Fall 2002, Vol. 2, No. 1, p. 3.

### Abstract

Carnegie Corporation of New York has launched an initiative focusing on improving the literacy skills of adolescents. In support of this initiative, Carnegie asked the RAND Corporation to examine adolescents’ literacy achievement across the nation. The results of that examination provide a sobering portrait of where adolescents stand relative to state and national literacy goals.

The researchers caution that, because of the differences in the tests themselves and in the definitions of proficiency levels in the NAEP and state performance standards, these data are not directly comparable. They offer two reasons for examining both sets of results: (1) It is important for state policymakers, practitioners, and parents to examine both sources of data and to make their own judgments regarding the relative performance of students against both sets of standards; and (2) under NCLB, states are now required to participate in the NAEP in order to help verify state results using a common measure—a reason for states needing to become familiar with the NAEP, what it measures, and how what it measures differs from their own assessments.

### The NCLB Context

NCLB requires states to adopt standards-based accountability systems that set challenging content and performance standards for all students. To ensure that students are meeting these standards, states must test all children annually in reading and math in grades 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and once in high school by 2005–06 and in science at least once in grades 3–5, 6–9, and in grades 10–12 by 2007–08.

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States must establish goals for performance on the assessment and track performance for all students and subgroups of students (for example, racial/ethnic groups, students with disabilities, students with limited English proficiency). By the end of 12 years, schools in the state should all have reached 100-percent proficiency—that is, all children in the school must pass the state test.

## Findings

The research findings suggest some major concerns about the ability of states to meet NCLB's ambitious goal:

First, in several states, fewer than half the students meet the state proficiency standards, and in no state do even half the students meet the NAEP national literacy standard of proficiency. Moreover, the pass rates on state assessments vary significantly from state to state:

- The pass rates on the elementary-school state assessments (4th- or 5th-grade assessments) differed widely across states, ranging from 28 to 90 percent. In seven states, less than half of the students passed at the elementary level.
- Fourth-grade state proficiency rates on the 2003 NAEP Reading Assessment ranged from 10 to 43 percent, and the average proficiency rate on the NAEP was 30 percent. Three states had proficiency rates of less than 20 percent; 15 states had proficiency rates of 20 to 29 percent; and 30 states had proficiency rates of 30 to 39 percent. In only three states—Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut—did the proportion of students scoring at the proficient level reach 40 percent and above.
- The pass rates on the middle-school state assessments ranged from 21 to 94 percent. Three states had pass rates of less than 30 percent. In 12 states, less than half of the students passed the reading assessment.
- Overall, between 10 and 43 percent of 8th-graders scored at the proficient level on the 2003 NAEP Reading Assessment. The District of Columbia was the only jurisdiction to have a proficiency rate of less than 20 percent, whereas New Hampshire and Massachusetts were the only states to have proficiency rates of 40 percent or higher. In 17 states, 20 to 29 percent of students scored proficient and above; in 31 states, 30 to 39 percent scored proficient and above. The average proficiency rate of 8th-graders was 32 percent.
- Pass rates on the state and the NAEP writing assessments tended to be somewhat lower than on the reading assessments.

Second, the wide disparity in the achievement of subgroups of students makes reaching the 100-percent proficiency goal for all students a more challenging task for certain schools and districts. The NAEP and state assessments show large and surprisingly similar achievement gaps between subgroups of students disaggregated by race/ethnicity and poverty status. For example:

- At the 4th-grade level in reading, national and state assessments show, on average, a difference of 27 percentage points between

the proficiency rates of white and of African American students; 24 to 26 percentage points between white and Hispanic students; and 23 to 25 percentage points between economically advantaged and economically disadvantaged students.

- These large differences are found at the 8th-grade level in reading as well.
- At both grade levels, students with limited English proficiency and students with disabilities trailed well behind their peers.

## Multiple Sources of Data Provide a More Complete Picture

It is clear that while states are operating under a common mandate for proficiency, there are large differences in the rigor of the assessment and cut-scores for proficiency rates, leading to quite disparate outcomes. Compare, for instance, South Carolina, Wyoming, North Carolina, and Texas. At the 8th-grade level, 21 percent of students in South Carolina and 39 percent of students in Wyoming passed the state assessment, compared with 86 to 88 percent of 8th-graders in North Carolina and Texas. However, when one looks at the 8th-grade NAEP scores, 24 percent of students in South Carolina and 34 percent of students in Wyoming scored at the proficient level, compared with 26 percent of students in Texas and 29 percent of students in North Carolina. Clearly, even if each state were to meet its 100-percent proficiency goal for reading, students in those states would likely have quite disparate abilities, knowledge, and skills.

Further, simply looking at proficiency rates on state assessments may not provide the public and parents all the information that they might want about student achievement. For example, examining individual states, we see both similarities and marked differences in some states about what the state assessments show about the relative performance of subgroups and what the NAEP shows about that performance. If state assessments show small performance gaps between these groups of students while the NAEP, arguably using a more challenging standard of literacy, shows large performance gaps (for example, as in Massachusetts and Texas), it is important for state policymakers and parents to reflect on what this disparity might imply for the likely future employment and educational opportunities for these students.

If we fail to give due attention to multiple sources of information regarding literacy achievement, we may fail to miss important problem areas and may end up shortchanging those most in need of assistance.

## Conclusion

Overall, the data paint a sobering portrait of the literacy levels of U.S. adolescents. It is clear that simply mandating standards and assessments is not going to guarantee success. Unless we, as a nation, are prepared to focus attention and resources on this issue, our schools are likely to continue producing students who lack skills and are ill-prepared to deal with the demands of post-secondary

education and the workplace. Policymakers, schools, and teachers need to step up and accept the “orphaned responsibility” of teaching

students to read to learn. The costs of inattention are very high, in both personal and economic terms.

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This research brief describes work done for RAND Education documented in *Achieving State and National Literacy Goals, a Long Uphill Road: A Report to Carnegie Corporation of New York* by Jennifer Sloan McCombs, Sheila Nataraj Kirby, Heather Barney, Hilary Darilek, Scarlett J. Magee, TR-180-EDU (available at [www.rand.org/publications/TR/TR180](http://www.rand.org/publications/TR/TR180)), 2004, 84 pages, \$30, ISBN: 0-8330-3710-2. TR-180-EDU is also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free: 877-584-8642; or email: [order@rand.org](mailto:order@rand.org)). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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