

Looking at illiteracy: Consequences and solutions

Ellen Ciurczak, USA TODAY NETWORK - Mississippi 7:05 p.m. CST December 17, 2016

VIDEO: Sixteen percent of Mississippi adults are illiterate. Some of those with limited reading skills turn to the state's community college system for help. The Hattiesburg American's Ellen Ciurczak reports. Ellen Ciurczak/Hattiesburg American

Story Highlights

- See detailed statistics and resource information contacts at end of story.

When Victoria Norman was growing up in Laurel, she didn't have anyone to help her with her homework. She and her brother were raised by her grandparents, who didn't do much reading and couldn't assist with her English lessons.

"I wasn't that good in my English class," she said. "When we had to read the stories and take the test, I would get low grades.

"I understood most of the words, but as they got bigger, it was a problem — and putting the punctuation in and the spelling."

Norman, 28, dropped out of high school near the beginning of 12th grade when she had a child. Norman's literacy problems plagued her until recently when she enrolled in adult education classes at Jones County Junior College. There, she got the reading and vocabulary help she needed.

"When I first came, my score was low, but when I tested on a harder book, I improved a lot and it just kept going on and on," she said. "The stuff I know now I never even learned in high school."

Many Mississippians never get the help Norman has received. According to the most recent figures available — from the [2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#) — 16 percent of adults in this state are illiterate. The national rate, according to a study conducted in late April by the U.S. Department of Education and the National Institute of Literacy, is 14 percent.

In Mississippi, there are few places for adults who can't read to turn.

"There are only about 23 entities in the state who do (reading instruction)," said Caleb Smith, director of adult education at JCJC. "That includes 15 community colleges. There are a few school districts that do this around the state."

Smith said a lack of literacy skills puts an adult at severe disadvantage.

"Without reading skills, they can't read the fine print of contracts, get a loan, order food," he said. "You can't participate in social media, you can't read a newspaper or a past-due bill (that you get) in the mail. You have to go to someone else and say, 'Can you read this to me?'"

According to the [Literacy Project Foundation](#), 50 percent of adults in this country cannot read a book written at an eighth-grade level. Three out of four people on welfare can't read, and 50 percent of unemployed people between the ages of 16 and 21 cannot read well enough to be considered functionally literate.

Smith said most of the students who come to JCJC with reading problems are seeking a high school equivalency degree or GED.

"The first thing we do is we give them an assessment and determine what subjects they need to focus on and what skills in those subjects we need to focus on," he said. "Then we place them in a class and using the diagnostics the test gives us, we teach them the skills."

The students typically need both math and reading instruction. They come to class Monday through Thursday for three hours each day.

"Most everyone who comes in has some reading skills," Smith said. "Most of our folks are at least a third- or fourth-grade level."

JCJC typically has about 800 students at a time seeking a high school equivalency degree. Smith said about 150 actually complete the work.

"Considering some of these folks are coming in at a fourth-grade level — that's pretty good," he said.

Illiteracy leads to myriad problems. According to the literacy website [Begintoread.com](#), more than 60 percent of prison inmates are functionally illiterate and so are 85 percent of teens in the juvenile court system.

Girls, 16 to 19 years old at the poverty level and with below-average reading skills, are six times more likely than their reading counterparts to become single mothers.

The journal [Pediatrics](#) estimates 90 million U.S. adults lack the literacy skills to negotiate the health system, resulting in their poorer overall health, increased hospitalizations and higher mortality.

For nearly 30 years, the [Jackson County Literacy Council](#) in Pascagoula has been fighting to improve those statistics. About 30 adults come through its day and night literacy and English as second language classes each month.

"A lot of them come in saying, 'I need help. I would like to be able to read my Bible. I would like to be able to read to my grandchildren,' or 'I need help filling out this job application,'" director Alexandria Taylor-Barial said. "We also help people with their GED. They go somewhere to take the test and they can't pass it due to literacy issues, and we help them out."

Taylor-Barial said people with reading problems are crippled in every aspect of their lives.

"They can't find a job if they can't get on the internet," she said. "Literacy affects the bond and connection they have with their families, understanding what the doctor is telling them, reading (the label) on the medication.

"When people walk through our doors, they are quiet, shoulders down. Within three weeks, their confidence is building."

Cause and effect

The causes of illiteracy are varied. According to the [Literacy Foundation](#), the most frequent causes of illiteracy in adults are having parents with little schooling, lack of books at home and lack of reading stimulation as a child, dropping out of school, difficult living conditions including poverty, and learning disabilities.

Lack of reading skills in parents is one big cause of illiteracy in Mississippi, according to Rose Jones, University of Southern Mississippi assistant professor in elementary and early childhood education.

"The parents aren't capable of being the first teacher," Jones said. "Sometimes the parent doesn't have the background to teach the child.

"The child may come to school, and (he) may not have had books or the parents reading to (him)."

Jones said economics also plays a part.

"Some of these kids live in poverty," she said. "They don't have extra money at home. They can't get books. A lot of their parents aren't comfortable in the library. They may turn on the TV at home."

The Mississippi Department of Education's April draft version of the [Mississippi Literacy Plan](#) states literacy development begins early in a child's life through interactions with adults.

"A child of college-educated, professional parents hears 48 million words by age 4, whereas a child from a low-language, low socioeconomic family hears a mere 13 million words by the same age," the plan states.

The plan also points out that of the state's children who live in low-income homes, 90 percent of their parents do not have a high school diploma. These children lack the language and opportunities for learning.

"They're not hearing the sounds or the rhythm and flow of language or when to accent the syllables," Jones said. "Some parents in poverty are non-verbal. They're tired. They're not talking much at home. The kids aren't getting any stimulation.

"If I haven't been trying to stimulate you, you might not be saying any sounds at all. (Children) have got to get oral language."

According to the Literacy Foundation, the consequences of illiteracy go beyond the individual and affect society at almost every level. Many jobs requiring high-level skills remain vacant for lack of personnel adequately trained to hold them. The gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate is slowed by the higher the proportion of adults with low literacy skills. Societal and political discourse is cramped when not all can participate. Community and civic involvement is limited when there are those who cannot understand societal issues.

JCJC President Jesse Smith sees some of the students who come to the college to learn reading, and he knows how their lack of skills affects them.

"There are so many factors that are going to inhibit their success," he said. "Based on anecdotal observation, if a student doesn't read, they aren't going to be able to navigate the social systems.

"They don't have the confidence in themselves that they can learn. They don't have the self-sufficiency that they can learn. That's an enormous barrier — lacking the confidence to know, no matter what it is, they can overcome it — the grit factor."

William Lewis, Pearl River Community College president, said Mississippi's community college system spends about \$28 million per year on remedial courses for students who need help with reading and math.

"That's a lot of money," he said. "If folks had those skills when they came to us, the potential for freeing up resources that could go to other sources would be enormous."

Steps toward improvement

State legislators took a big step to improving the literacy rate in this state when they passed the [Literacy Based Promotion Act](#), signed by Gov. Phil Bryant in 2013. It required all third-graders to score above the lowest achievement level on the reading portion of the

state test in order to move on to fourth grade. That act was later amended to say, beginning in the 2018-19 school year, a student must score above the lowest two achievement levels to progress to fourth grade.

"The Literacy Based Promotion Act is a huge piece," said Angela Rutherford, director of the [Center for Excellence in Literacy Instruction](#) at the University of Mississippi. "The longer we have that in place, the more kids we'll have reading proficiently at the end of third grade."

Mississippi's adoption of the Common Core State Standards in 2010 is also a big help, Rutherford said, along with increased training in reading instruction for teachers.

"The [College and Career Ready Standards](#) is a huge piece," she said. "Teacher preparation is a huge piece."

The [National Council on Teacher Quality](#) recently said three Mississippi colleges and universities rank in the top tier nationally for elementary teacher preparation programs: University of Southern Mississippi, University of Mississippi and Mississippi College. Overall, early reading is a strength for the state's programs, with 82 percent of the programs earning an A or a Pass in early reading, compared to 29 percent nationally. That is a higher proportion of top grades for Mississippi programs in the early reading area than any other state.

Rutherford said schools must also help parents help their children.

"I haven't met a parent who doesn't want their own child to be successful," she said. "(We need to be) thinking of new ways to help parents with their children before they ever get to the school door."

Jesse Smith said the effects of the Literacy Based Promotion Act eventually will be felt at JCJC.

"It will have a tremendous impact at the college level in the next 10 years," he said. "It will allow us to redirect resources from catching up to providing degrees that could advance our economy and society itself."

For Taylor-Barial, who only works with adults, the literacy outlook in Mississippi is not so rosy.

"We need to have more people on the adult literacy side," she said. "We're not going to move up if we just focus on children. If we focus on both, we will move up a lot quicker."

"We need funding and grants on the adult side. You can't just work with the children and expect the adults to keep up. We need help across the board."

Norman is one of the adults who has made it. Although she has been unemployed since she was laid off her job at Wayne Farms poultry processing plant, now that she can read, she's set her sights on a sales position.

"My goal is to get my GED, go to college and keep getting better," she said. "I've become a more positive person and more hopeful.

"Someone who used to be struggling like me, I'll help someone now. It's not going to be easy, it's going to be a hard journey, but I'll just keep going."

By the numbers

16 percent: Mississippi adults who are illiterate

44 million: U.S. adults unable to read a simple story to their children

50 percent: U.S. adults who cannot read an eighth-grade level book

6 out of 10 households: Do not buy one book in a year

3 out of 4: People on welfare who can't read

85 percent: Juveniles in court system who are functionally illiterate

60 percent: Prison inmates who are functionally illiterate

1 in 4: Children who grow up not knowing how to read

14 percent: Illiterate adults in Forrest County

9 percent: Illiterate adults in Lamar County

16 percent: Illiterate adults in Jones County

19 percent: Illiterate adults in Marion County

Source: Begintoread.com, Literacy Project Foundation, 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy

For more information on Adult Education or reading programs

Jones County Junior College: Admissions (601) 477-5430

Pearl River Community College: (601) 554-5551 or adulthoodeducation@prcc.edu

Jackson County Literacy Council: (228) 762-2814