



Rodney's Take

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Literacy or (Economic) Bust: U.S. vs. India

Derek Zoolander (Ben Stiller) may have been onto something. In the movie *Zoolander*, he was swayed to fight illiteracy because lots of American kids “can’t read good.” Per the 2023 National Assessment of Education Progress, only 43% of U.S. fourth graders read proficiently. Lots of adults can’t “read good,” either: 92% can read at the most basic level (Level 1). Only 79% can read above this level, and 54% can’t read above a 6th grade level. This implies 130 million American adults aren’t literate enough to read a story to their kids, earn a living wage, or even read a drug label.

The U.S. may be the top economy in the world, but it is 36th in adult literacy. We already don’t have enough workers to pay for the burgeoning swell of aging Boomers. If we want to stay top dog economically, keep our infrastructure, and have a well-functioning military, we need to be a nation of readers.

For those who are wondering, adult literacy rates hover around 100% in more than a handful of (mostly developed) nations. Even China’s adult literacy rate is roughly 97%. But while China has the No. 2 economy in the world, it’s aging fast. What nation isn’t? India.

As of 2018, India’s adult literacy rate was 74%, per the World Population Review (UNESCO lists it as 81%). That’s not terrible for a nation much larger and poorer than the U.S. India, home to roughly 20% of the adolescents in the world, is a global economic up-and-comer.

COVID hampered child literacy in India, like in the U.S. One source estimates that by 2030, pandemic-associated learning loss could reduce India’s future economic productivity by \$98.84 billion. Lack of Internet access in poor areas

hindered learning in the 18 months India's public schools were locked down. Yet India had issues educating its kids even before the pandemic. In addition to a shortage of teachers and classrooms, schools don't have enough bathrooms. Add to that a caste system and a tendency to undereducate girls, and it's no wonder India's literacy rate is not 100%. At least now the girls are catching up to the boys, in terms of literacy.

In contrast, over the past 20 years, Americans have plowed huge amounts of money into public schools and have changed reading instruction methods. It might look like we have little to show for it in terms of adult literacy, but it's complicated. For one thing, we have a lot of immigrants; they make up 34% of adult non-readers in the U.S. While we need immigrants, many we get are not equipped to do much more than menial jobs.

For children, some of the educational reforms we used haven't worked. Fewer people are choosing to be teachers, parenting has gotten laxer, and many in the lower socioeconomic groups don't see the value in school-based learning, essentially consigning future generations to a self-imposed lower "caste." Like with India, reading scores among American children tanked after the pandemic. It's been a couple of years, but scores aren't up much.

Kids who can't read tend to zone out or disrupt others at school—or don't show up at all. And nine of 10 high school dropouts were poor readers in grade three. This matters: 90% of jobs are not appropriate for high school dropouts. It's not just the dropouts who are an issue: per the College Board, average ACT scores recently were at the lowest level in over 30 years.

Seventy-five percent of people on welfare can't read, and, to quote Zoolander, three of every five adult prisoners and 85% of juvenile offenders "can't read good." In 1999, the cost to taxpayers of U.S. adult illiteracy was estimated to be \$224B per year, or \$409B in today's dollars. The cost to U.S. companies was an estimated \$40 billion per year, or \$73B in today's dollars—and reading scores were better back then.

Recently, the Chicago Teacher's Union demanded, in a \$50B contract, \$145,000 annual teacher salaries and a grab bag of perks, including free abortions, weight loss surgery, green schools, money for migrants, and Ozempic. I guess they felt justified, since student math scores went up last year on the Illinois Assessment of Reading by ...wait for it...2%, from 17% proficiency to 19%. Of course, that means that almost 80% of third graders to

eighth graders are not proficient in math. As for reading, a whopping 31% of elementary students reached grade-level proficiency on the test.

If this is the best we can do, other nations will pass us at light speed. But at least the teachers won't be fat.

Rodney and Brook Johnson

Got a question or comment? You can contact us at info@hsdent.com