

What is Functional Illiteracy?

Functional illiteracy refers to the inability of an individual to use reading, speaking, writing and computational skills in everyday life situations. For example, a functionally illiterate adult is unable to fill out an employment application, follow written instructions, read a newspaper, do simple math problems or use a computer. In short, when confronted with printed materials, adults without basic literacy skills cannot function effectively. Today, literacy skills would also include computer skills as well as smart phone/cell phone skills.

Although functionally illiterate adults can be found in every sector of society, studies have found that there is a heavy concentration of people with low literacy skills among the poor and those dependent upon public financial support. Although the percentages of functionally illiterate African Americans and Hispanic adults is much higher than the percentage of white adults, the actual number of white non-readers is twice that of the number of African-American and Hispanic non-readers.

What about the next generation.....our children?

U.S. Department of Education statistics show that the high school drop-out rate indicates the problem begins not in the schools but at home. Preschool children whose parents read to them are much better prepared to start school and perform better in school than those who have not been exposed to reading. Functional illiteracy is an inter-generational problem following a parent-child pattern. Poor school achievement and dropping out before completing school is commonplace among children of functionally illiterate parents.

What are the reasons for adult illiteracy?

The answers are as varied as non-readers. Adult non-readers may have left school due to a learning difference/difficulty, had an emotional disability, may have had ineffective teachers or simply not been ready to learn at the time reading instruction begins. Parents who can't read are unable to help their children learn and this perpetuates the inter-generational cycle of illiteracy. Without books, newspapers, computers or magazines in the home and a parent who reads to serve as role model, many children grow up with severe literacy deficiencies. Clearly, there is no single cause of illiteracy.

The 2000 Census cites more than 14 million people age five and older in the U.S. who speak English poorly or not at all. In addition 19.8 million immigrants enter American communities every year and 1.7 million aged 25 and older have less than a 5th grade education. These immigrants often don't speak English at home and those who are illiterate in English are also often illiterate in their native language.

The economic impact of illiteracy has a significant impact on the economy. 15 million adults holding jobs today are functionally illiterate. Three-quarters of the Fortune 500 companies

provide some level of remedial training for their workers. Business losses attributable to basic skills deficiencies run into hundreds of millions of dollars because of low productivity, errors and accidents. 60% of the unemployed workers lack the basic skills necessary to be trained and retrained for high tech jobs.

How does Literacy Volunteers of Monmouth County address the needs of the functionally illiterate?

Our primary premise is that well trained and supported volunteers can be effective tutors of adults. Mobilizing the talents of large numbers of diverse people can make a significant impact on the problem of illiteracy both those born in the United States and those who have immigrated here.