



THE CRISIS

NAACP
SUBSCRIBE

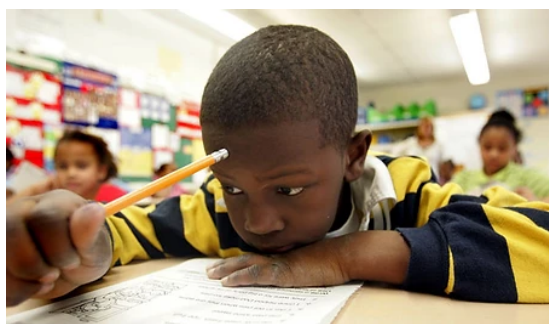
 SPEAKING TRUTH TO
POWER SINCE 1910


FOUNDING EDITOR W.E.B. DU BOIS

THE CRISIS MAGAZINE IS THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE NAACP

HOME | SOCIAL JUSTICE | POLITICS + HISTORY | ARTS + CULTURE | OUR COMMUNITY

WITH COVID-19, THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN LITERACY CRISIS WILL GET MUCH WORSE



As a former Los Angeles middle school teacher, I know firsthand what statistics show: schools are failing to prepare the majority of African-American students for success. Our Black teenagers are in a learning crisis. Covid-19 is about to make it much worse.

A 2017 report by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) found that just **18 percent** of Black eighth-graders reach reading “proficiency.” And in 2015 NAEP found that only **17 percent** of Black 12th graders were proficient at reading. This means that during normal times, fewer than two out of every ten African-American

high school graduates have the baseline skills they need to succeed. Compare that to the nearly half of **White 12th graders** who tested “proficient,” a rate about three times higher than that of Black high school seniors.

These aren’t normal times, though. It’s April, and schools around the country are shuttered. Education is supposed to have moved online, but for the many students who don’t have Internet access, learning has simply **come to a halt**.

African-American students are more likely to be missing out on instruction during this pandemic, since they’re more likely to **lack the connectivity** needed for remote schooling than their White peers. They’re also more likely to be struggling with literacy. African-American students’ low literacy levels — which inequitable access to online schooling will exacerbate — won’t just impact grades and graduation rates. Low literacy levels can also hinder kids’ success in college, career and life.

Reading is associated with school, but it enters every crevice of society. The Literacy Center, a nonprofit organization based in South Carolina, found that “Low literacy individuals struggle to find employment or settle for low-paying jobs. They also under-utilize and over-utilize the healthcare system because they are unable to follow written instructions on prescriptions or discharge papers”. In addition, the center noted, “Individuals with low literacy are less likely to vote or participate in civic activities.” The Center also pointed to a link between low literacy and crime. Seventy-five percent of adults incarcerated in state prisons lack a high school diploma or have low literacy skills.

Even more importantly the Center noted, “Low literacy becomes intergenerational: the strongest indicator of a child’s success in school is his mother’s level of education.

Elected officials have tried for years to address the issue of illiteracy. Some have created policies that focus on younger kids — literacy programming and funding for students in kindergarten through second grade, the years when students are learning to

read. This makes logical sense. But it alone won't work.

There are about eight-million African-American students in U.S. schools today. K-2 literacy initiatives can only help about a quarter of them. Those remaining, roughly five-million students, nearly 80 percent of the 3rd-12th graders not reading "proficiently," will be left behind to fend for themselves.

Accessible early childhood education is a major key to addressing the nation's literacy problem. **Researchers have found** that children read better in elementary school when they start off with exposure to a wealth of words from a young age. If parents can't provide that, universal pre-K could.

Some states, **like Alabama**, are passing strict laws around early-elementary literacy. These regulations mandate that schools must retain students in third grade if they don't reach reading benchmarks. But many factors limit the power of these guidelines. Student reading success is dependent on several components which would need to change along with the law.

Crucially, teachers need better training on how to teach literacy. For decades, there have been "**reading wars**" going on in education with hot debates over how to properly instruct young learners. Studies have shown that old methods don't work to foster reading success.

In addition to having well-trained instructors, schools need to lower class sizes. When I worked in LAUSD, I had groups of up to 35 adolescents of varying reading levels and needs at a time. It was impossible for me to give kids the individually-differentiated attention that they needed to maximize their potential.

Also, it's important that young people see themselves in the reading material, so that the material feels relevant. African Americans have a long history as literary masters — from poet Phillis Wheatley in the 18th century to Harlem Renaissance writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston to Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison. The reading material should represent and excite students, so that reading doesn't feel like drudgery.

Most importantly, schools need to be welcoming places for African-American students. **Google's research** on team productivity at work, Project Aristotle, found that psychological safety was the key to success. The same element is needed to thrive in a classroom. Educational institutions aren't exempt from bias, racism or classism. For many African-American kids, schools don't feel and aren't secure. Recently, police arrested **a six-year-old African-American** child at school. Would you feel safe learning to read there?

If we are to increase literacy among African-American youth we need to reach them at a young age, engage them in material that reflects their background, have smaller classrooms and create spaces in which everyone feels safe. Reading is still the best route to liberation. As Frederick Douglass counseled, "Once you learn to read, you will be forever free."

— Colette Coleman is a former classroom teacher now writing about educational equity.

Photo: AP/Jose F. Moreno



Education

3 