



# REACH OUT AND READ WISCONSIN

## LITERACY AND HEALTH LITERACY

### WHAT IS LITERACY?

Literacy is the ability to read and write. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines literacy as the:

*“ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute, and use printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.”*

### WHY DOES LITERACY MATTER?

Roughly 20 percent of American adults are functionally illiterate. This impacts their ability to find work that provides a living wage and to participate fully in their communities. Learn more at [www.wisconsinliteracy.org](http://www.wisconsinliteracy.org).

- About 10 percent of Wisconsin adults over 25 have not graduated from high school.
- Wisconsin African-Americans have the worst high-school graduation rate out of all 50 states.
- The number one indicator for childhood poverty is the mother’s education level.
- Parents who struggle with literacy are less likely to read to their children.
- Over 30 percent of Wisconsin children start school without the basic pre-reading skills they need to be successful. 88 percent of these children never catch up.

### WHAT IS HEALTH LITERACY?

Health literacy takes the concept of literacy to the next level and discusses how literacy skills are used to make informed health decisions. The Institute of Medicine (IOM) defines health literacy as the:

*“degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their health.”*

### WHY DOES HEALTH LITERACY MATTER?

Only 12 percent of American adults are deemed proficient in health literacy; 36 percent of adults have only basic or below-basic health literacy skills. Health literacy skills are the strongest predictor of health status—a stronger predictor than age, income, employment status, education level, or racial/ethnic group (*Partnership for Clear Health Communication*). Low health literacy puts individuals and families at higher risk for poor health outcomes and creates an economic drain on our communities. Learn more at [www.healthliteracywisconsin.org](http://www.healthliteracywisconsin.org). People with low health literacy skills:

- Have less health knowledge and poorer health.
- Have difficulty taking their medications properly.
- Get admitted hospitals more often.
- Use hospital emergency rooms more often.
- Cost Wisconsin an estimated \$3.4 to \$7.6 billion a year.