

**HOUSTON'S LITERACY CRISIS:**

# **A BLUEPRINT**

**FOR**

**COMMUNITY ACTION**

An overview from

**BARBARA BUSH HOUSTON LITERACY FOUNDATION**

“If you help a person to read,  
then their opportunities in life  
will be endless.”

BARBARA BUSH  
FIRST LADY

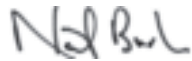


The mission of the Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation is to improve the quality of life of Houstonians across all ages through the power of literacy. Since September 2013, the foundation has taken on the important role of convening more than 100 community leaders to identify Houston's literacy crisis and solutions to this problem. This companion document provides an overview of the findings, goals and key strategies in *Houston's Literacy Crisis: A Blueprint for Community Action*. A full version of the report may be accessed at [www.bushhoustonliteracy.org](http://www.bushhoustonliteracy.org).

We are grateful to Deloitte Consulting, LLP, who provided pro-bono services leading up to and including the preparation of the full report. We are also appreciative of the many community leaders whose expertise provided valuable insight for the creation of the *Blueprint for Community Action*.

Everyone deserves the opportunity to reach his or her God-given potential, which is why it is critically important that we attack Houston's literacy crisis with every resource possible and invest in effective strategies. We must take action to reverse the disastrous social and economic impacts caused by the vicious cycle of low literacy in our society. **We call upon everyone in Houston to make the literacy promise – join us in bringing an end to Houston's literacy crisis.**

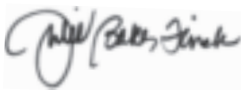
Sincerely,



**NEIL BUSH**

Chairman,

Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation



**JULIE BAKER FINCK, PH.D.**

President,

Barbara Bush Houston Literacy Foundation

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## EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

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**LITERACY – THE ABILITY TO READ, WRITE, SPEAK  
CLEARLY AND THINK CRITICALLY – IS, INDISPUTABLY,  
A FUNDAMENTAL SKILL NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS IN  
SCHOOL, WORK AND LIFE.**

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60%

OF HOUSTON'S CHILDREN  
DID NOT POSSESS THE  
READING-READINESS SKILLS  
EXPECTED UPON  
ENTERING KINDERGARTEN

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24%

OF HOUSTON  
3RD GRADERS  
PERFORMED AT AN  
UNSATISFACTORY ACADEMIC  
PERFORMANCE LEVEL ON  
THE STAAR READING EXAM

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50%

OF HOUSTON  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS  
WHO TOOK THE  
STAAR ENGLISH I EXAM  
PERFORMED  
UNSATISFACTORYLY

### Houston's Literacy Crisis

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Year after year, Houston's youngest children enter kindergarten lacking adequate reading-readiness skills. Based on 2013 assessments administered by Houston-area school districts, as many as 60 percent of children did not possess the literacy skills expected upon entering kindergarten. This readiness gap constrains the education system and fuels the achievement gap in later years without appropriate resources and interventions.

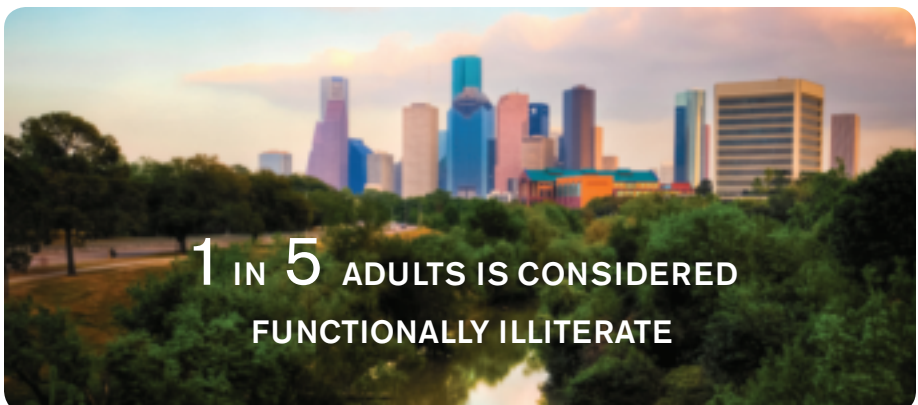
Third grade is a critical milestone in a child's education because this is when the child transitions from **learning how to read to reading to learn**. Research has shown that 3rd-grade reading proficiency is not only related to future school success, such as graduation rates and college readiness levels, but is also related to dropout and incarceration rates. That is why it is particularly alarming that 24 percent of Houston-area 3rd graders performed at an unsatisfactory academic performance level on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) reading exam. According to research, these children are four times more likely not to graduate from high school on time. Furthermore, only 18 percent of 3rd graders scored at the advanced academic performance level, which indicates that children are ready for 4th grade. This data is concerning, because national research shows that children who do not read on grade level by the end of 3rd grade have only a one in eight chance of ever catching up.

Low literacy rates among Houston's students persist through middle school and into high school. For example, approximately half of the Houston high school students who took the English I reading and writing end-of-course exams, which are required for graduation, failed to meet minimum expectations. In addition, the achievement gap – as wide as 30 percent – is evident across every grade in reading and writing on mandated exams.

Finally, one in five adults – roughly 330,000 people – in Houston is considered functionally illiterate, unable to manage daily activities and employment tasks that require reading skills beyond a basic level in any language. This rate is similar to the U.S. Census Bureau 2012 *American Community Survey* results in which one in four Houston adults do not have a high school diploma, GED or equivalent. These low literacy levels have significant social and economic impacts on the well-being of individuals, families and the community.

School-age data is aggregated across the five major Houston-area school districts: Aldine Independent School District (ISD), Alief ISD, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Houston ISD and Spring Branch ISD – and other districts and charter school networks with a majority of schools in Houston city limits.

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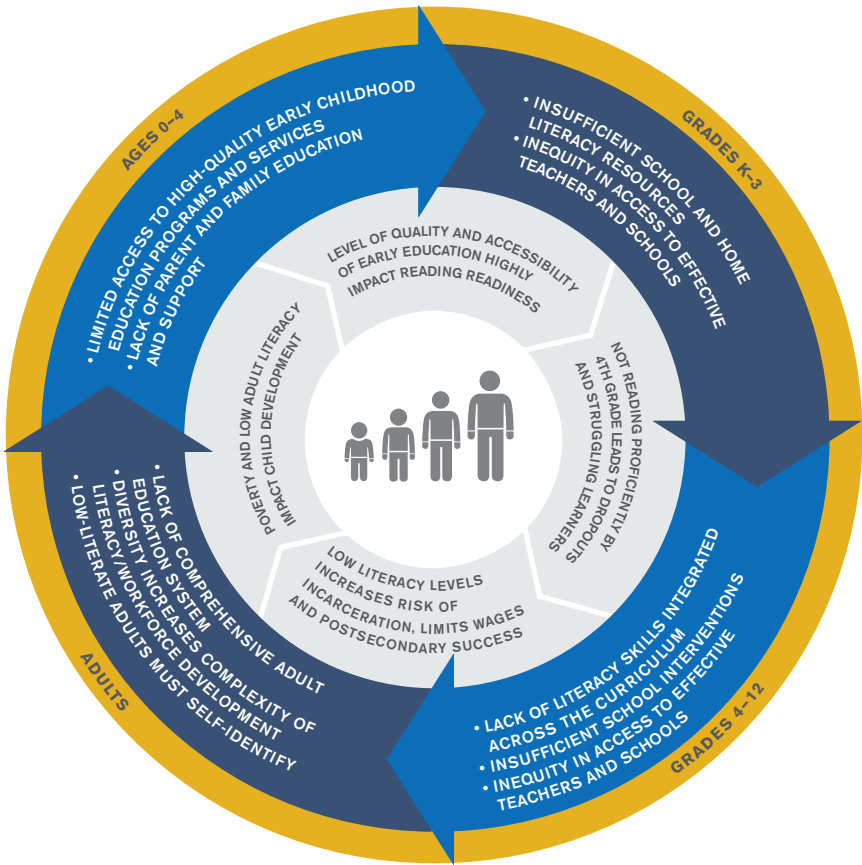
EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

The Cycle of Low Literacy among Families

Research has shown that a child’s literacy level is strongly correlated with his or her mother’s education level, thus triggering the likelihood of low literacy in the next generation. In essence, **until the cycle of low literacy is broken, the cycle of poverty will remain unbroken.** Figure 1 depicts the cycle of low literacy, the implications and the complexity involved in breaking the cycle.

The implications of low literacy on an individual can have life long impacts and lead to a perpetual cycle of low literacy within families.

FIGURE 1: CYCLE OF LOW LITERACY



## Social and Economic Implications on Communities

Literacy is a foundational skill for individual and family prosperity and is necessary for the social and economic vitality of Houston. As illustrated below, low literacy levels have profound impacts on communities.

SOCIAL ISSUES CORRELATED WITH LOW LITERACY LEVELS	IMPLICATIONS
Crime rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» 85% of juveniles who interface with the court system are functionally illiterate, and over 70% of inmates cannot read above a 4th-grade level.</li> <li>» It costs \$21,390 per inmate, per year in prison costs alone.</li> </ul>
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Adults with low literacy skills have poorer overall health, which leads to higher healthcare costs for all.</li> </ul>
Personal income	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» 43% of adults with the lowest levels of literacy skills live in poverty, compared to only 4% of those with the highest levels of literacy skills.</li> </ul>
Job-readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Only 34% of Houston adults ages 25 and older hold an Associate's or higher-level degree. Trends suggest that the 2016 market will demand a workforce in which 55% will need to earn an Associate's or higher-level degree.</li> </ul>
Welfare and government subsidies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» "Low basic skills," which include literacy, are seen as the most common barriers for welfare recipients who want to transition from welfare to work.</li> </ul>
Education remediation costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>» Houston-area colleges, thus taxpayers, spent almost \$70M in 2013 to provide developmental education courses.</li> </ul>

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## BLUEPRINT FOR COMMUNITY ACTION

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The enormity and complexity of Houston's literacy crisis will be solved neither quickly nor simply.

The purpose of the  
*Blueprint for Community Action*  
is to outline a plan of action  
to mobilize the Houston  
community and to elevate  
solving the crisis of low literacy  
as a top priority in our city.

**IT'S TIME THAT WE FOCUS ON THIS CRITICAL CHALLENGE,  
ENSURING EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD  
DEVELOPS STRONG LITERACY SKILLS NECESSARY  
FOR LIFE LONG INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY  
SUCCESS. THE *BLUEPRINT FOR COMMUNITY ACTION*  
OFFERS PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS.**

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GOALS	STRATEGIES
#1: Raise awareness of Houston's literacy crisis.	» Elevate the priority of Houston's literacy crisis in public opinion.
	» Use emerging technology and social media tools to engage and inform the public.
	» Create a focal point to champion community literacy efforts.
	» Influence policy and legislation.
#2: Ensure every child enters kindergarten ready to read.	» Improve measurement and tracking of young children's readiness for school.
	» Increase access to and evaluate quality of early childhood programs.
	» Expand training and professional development for early childhood education instructors and providers.
	» Assist parents and informal care providers with home-based literacy programs and interventions.
	» Increase children's access to print and digital books and reading-level-appropriate materials.
#3: Ensure every child reads proficiently by the end of 3rd grade.	» Improve measurement and tracking of student achievement.
	» Improve teacher effectiveness in grades K–3.
	» Improve campus and district leadership effectiveness.
	» Support summer, after-school and out-of-school literacy programs.
	» Promote family literacy initiatives in Houston.
	» Support school districts' efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.
#4: Ensure every young adult graduates on time with the literacy skills needed for the workforce or higher education.	» Increase student access to more rigorous, college-ready courses.
	» Improve resources and effectiveness of in-school interventions for below-level students.
	» Support summer and after-school literacy programs.
	» Encourage students to strive for education beyond high school.
	» Support districts' efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism.

GOALS	STRATEGIES
#5: Ensure every functionally illiterate adult is able to integrate into the workforce and succeed in everyday life.	» Build capacity for literacy programs, including English as a Second Language, Adult Basic Education, Adult Special Education and others in community-based agencies and community college programs.
	» Create citywide awareness regarding the importance of literacy and adult education.
	» Develop options for education of citizenship-seeking adults.
	» Provide support for adult students with learning challenges and special needs.
	» Promote the distribution of technology-enabled, self-study applications as part of a blended adult education approach.
	» Create workforce literacy initiatives.
#6: Establish a sustainable system that supports and builds capacity for ongoing literacy success.	» Measure and monitor progress and results of <i>Blueprint</i> implementation.
	» Increase public and private monetary giving to support literacy efforts.
	» Implement technology solution for volunteer matching and monitoring.
	» Increase volunteer and literacy tutor skills and capacity.
	» Improve citywide systems that provide important services necessary for learning success.

To download the full report, *Houston’s Literacy Crisis: A Blueprint for Community Action*, which includes an extensive review of the literacy crisis in Houston, the complete plan of action and all research supporting the *Blueprint*, go to [www.bushhoustonliteracy.org](http://www.bushhoustonliteracy.org).

EVERYONE DESERVES AN OPPORTUNITY  
TO REACH HIS OR HER FULLEST POTENTIAL IN LIFE,  
AND ALL MEMBERS OF THE HOUSTON COMMUNITY  
CAN PLAY A ROLE IN MAKING THIS HAPPEN.

## CONTRIBUTING ORGANIZATIONS

### Deloitte Consulting, LLP Houston Center for Literacy

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5Works, Inc.	Houston Public Library
Adult Reading Center	Houston's First Baptist Church
Aldine Independent School District	International Emergency and Development Aid
Alief Independent School District	Jewish Family Services
All Kids Alliance	Judson Design
Alliance for Multicultural Community Services	KIPP Houston Public Schools
Amaanah Refugee Services	Legacy Community Health Services, Inc.
Association for the Advancement of Mexican Americans	Literacy Advance of Houston
AVANCE-Houston, Inc.	Literacy Connexus
Big Brothers Big Sisters-Greater Houston	Literacy Texas
Books Between Kids	Making It Better
Boys & Girls Clubs of Greater Houston	McGraw-Hill Education
Breakthrough Houston	Memorial Assistance Ministries
Catholic Charities / Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston	Multicultural Education & Counseling through the Arts
CHILDREN AT RISK	NAACP Houston Branch
Citizen Schools of Texas	Neighborhood Centers, Inc.
The Clinton Foundation	Neuhaus Education Center
Collaborative for Children	Parents for Public Schools of Houston
College of the Mainland, Texas City	Pasadena Independent School District
Communities In Schools	Phillips 66
Community Family Centers	Presbyterian School of Houston
Cristo Rey Jesuit School	Region 4 Educational Service Center
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District	Salient Partners
Dancie Perugini Ware Public Relations	SEARCH Homeless / House of Tiny Treasures
DePelchin Children's Center	Spring Branch Independent School District
Empower Events, LLC	Star of Hope Mission
Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston	Teach For America
Family Services of Greater Houston	The Alliance for Multicultural Community Services
Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, Inc.	The Center for Hearing and Speech
Literacy County of Fort Bend County	The Links, Inc.
Harris County Department of Education	United Way of Greater Houston
Harris County Public Library	Volunteer Houston
Houston A+ Challenge	Wesley Community Center, Inc.
Houston Area Urban League	WISE Learning & Sports
Houston Community College	Writers in the Schools
Houston Hispanic Forum	Volunteer Houston
Houston Independent School District	YES Prep Public Schools
	YMCA Community Center, Alief
	YMCA of the Greater Houston Area



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