

BEYOND THE HEADLINES

At a Glance: Jobs, Workers & the Economy

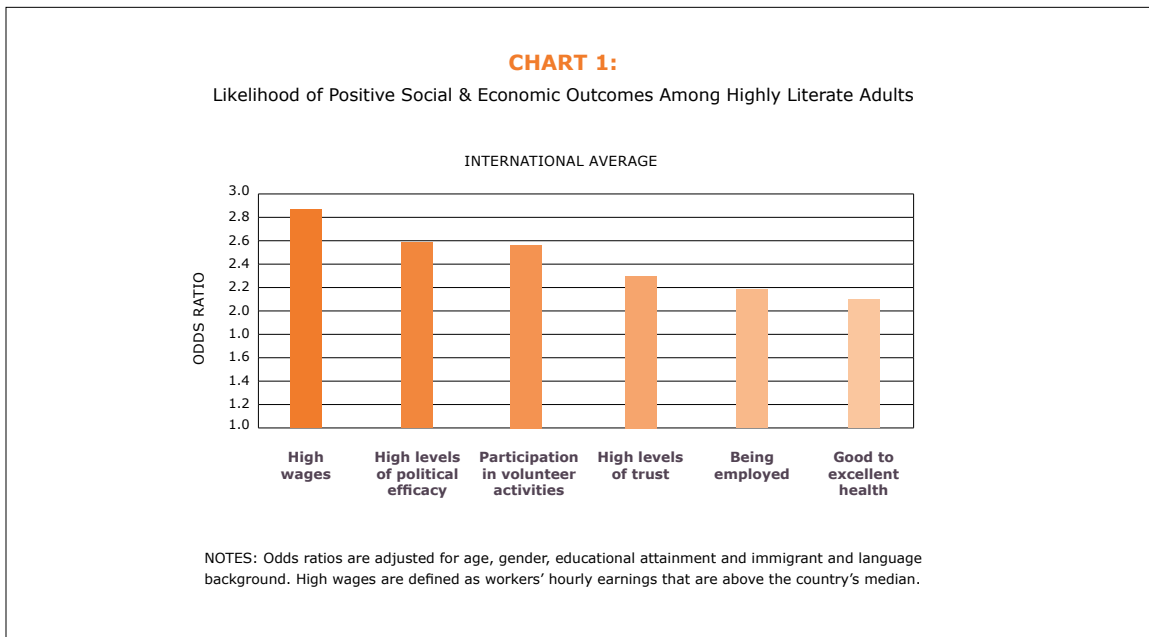


OCTOBER 2013 | FOCUS: UNITED STATES

International Survey of Skills Shows U.S. Adults Are Lagging Behind

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recently released the results of its first-ever *Survey of Adult Skills*ⁱ – results which show that the skill-levels of adults in the United States are lagging behind those of other developed nations. The test assessed adults’ literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills in technology-rich environments (the latter being defined as “the ability to use digital technology, communication tools and networks to acquire and evaluate information, communicate with others and perform practical tasks”ⁱⁱ). The survey included 166,000 adults (aged 16-65) in 24 countries (the 22 OECD member countries plus Cyprus and Russia).

Across OECD countries, the survey results demonstrate a strong positive correlation between adults’ skills and their social and economic outcomes. As portrayed in **Chart 1** (below, adapted from an OECD summary report), highly-literate adults (levels 4 and 5 on a 5-point scale) are much more likely than adults with low literacy (level 1) to experience benefits such as high wages, employment and good health.ⁱⁱⁱ As shown in the chart, for example, highly-literate adults are nearly three times as likely as those with low literacy to have high wages.



SOURCE: Based on data from the Survey of Adult Skills (PIAAC) (2012).

Unfortunately, the Survey also found that adults in the U.S. possess relatively low skills in the areas measured compared to adults in other OECD nations. As shown in **Charts 2, 3 and 4**, on the following page, the U.S. ranks below average in literacy and problem-solving in technology-rich environments, and nearly last in numeracy.^{iv}

CHART 2:

Literacy Rankings

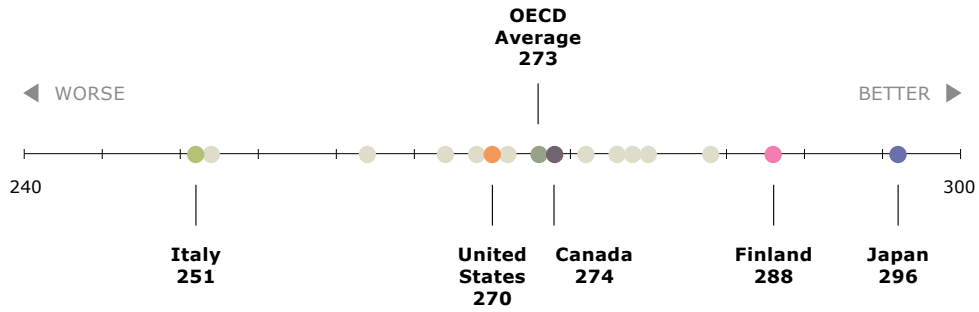


CHART 3:

Numeracy Rankings

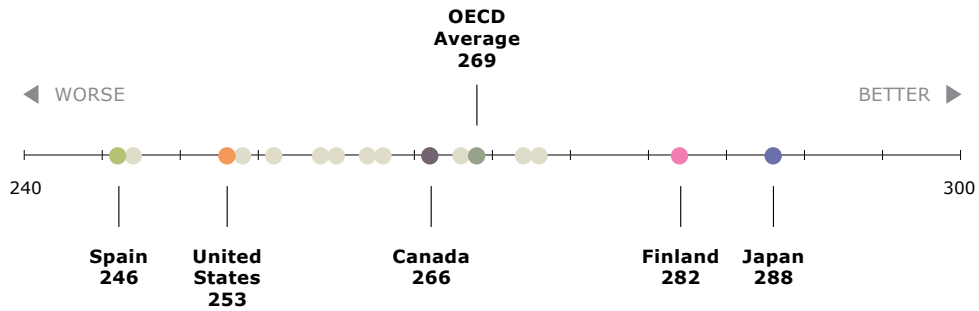
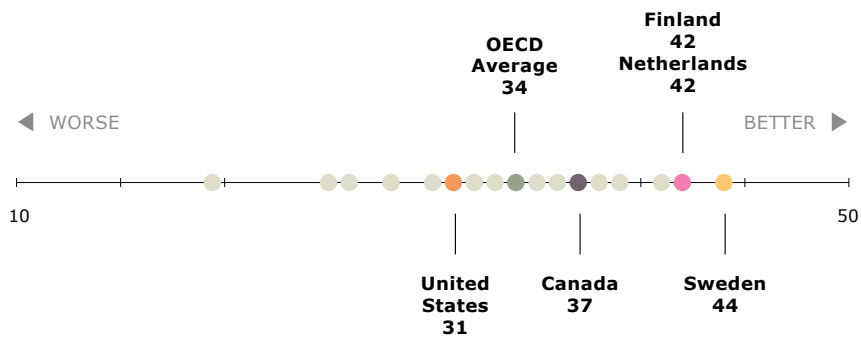


CHART 4:

Problem-Solving Rankings: Percentage Scoring at Proficiency Level



NOTE: Italy, France and Spain did not participate in this aspect of the test.

What may be more concerning is the survey's finding that young adults (aged 16-24) in the U.S. performed more poorly than U.S. adults as a whole, demonstrating that the generation preparing to enter the U.S. workforce is in particular need of greater skills to compete in the global economy.

The average literacy score for this age group in the U.S. was 260, second to last among nations surveyed (only Italy had lower scores), and trailing leaders such as Finland (297) and Japan (297). The average numeracy score of 16- to 24-year-old Americans (240) ranked last among nations surveyed, well behind leaders Finland (285) and the Netherlands (283).

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- i. OECD (2013), *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Publishing, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>
 - ii. *Ibid.*
 - iii. OECD (2013), *Skilled for Life? Key Findings from the Survey of Adult Skills*, OECD Publishing, <http://skills.oecd.org>
 - iv. *OECD Skills Outlook 2013: First Results from the Survey of Adult Skills.*

BEYOND THE HEADLINES: Policy & Labor Market Updates for Those Working to Help Low-Income and Low-Skill Individuals Advance through Education, Training & Living-Wage Jobs

About Seattle Jobs Initiative

Seattle Jobs Initiative creates opportunities for students, workers and business to succeed by helping education and job training programs meet the demands of a new economy. We find and apply solutions for people to gain the skills they need for good jobs that create prosperity for all in today's marketplace.

Supported by the City of Seattle Office of Economic Development

Contact Information

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