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### **Executive Summary: Literacy Update for Cuyahoga County**

Literacy is vital for both healthy individuals and healthy communities. The impact of low literacy is far-reaching, and it can affect aspects of daily life, whether that be promoting education and learning at home, helping children succeed in school, making wise consumer decisions, or advancing in the workplace.

In 2004, a literacy needs assessment was conducted for Cuyahoga County. This document updates that technical report for selected literacy estimates. Three estimates of adult literacy, and four estimates that measure children at risk for developing literacy problems as adults show that progress in some areas is being made, but there is still room for improvement.

#### Adult Literacy

Adult literacy scores can range from 0 to 500, and mean literacy proficiency is a summary measure of literacy skills. **While the mean literacy proficiency in Cuyahoga County and Cleveland was not significantly different between 2000 and 2005–2007, it did increase in 10 of the 14 suburbs studied** (Lakewood, Maple Heights, North Olmsted, North Royalton, Parma, Shaker Heights, Solon, South Euclid, Strongsville, and Westlake). Increases in the percent of the population with college degrees likely contributed to the improvements.

In Maple Heights, the increase in mean literacy proficiency was such that the literacy level went from Level 2 to Level 3. A high school diploma is associated with Level 2 literacy; meanwhile, the skills associated with Level 3 are often required for most post-secondary education and training programs. The National Governors' Association and the National Educational Goals panel view Level 3 literacy as the minimum standard necessary for life in today's complex world.<sup>1</sup>

The other 9 suburbs with the improved mean scores, with the exception of Solon, remained in the Level 3 range (276-325). A four-year degree is the typical educational attainment of those scoring in the upper range of Level 3, and graduate studies or a graduate degree is associated with Level 4 literacy. In Solon, score improvement coincided with entry into the Level 4 category (326-375).

**In only 3 of the 14 suburbs, did low levels of literacy increase.** Literacy is measured on 5 levels, with Level 1 representing the most basic literacy level and Level 5 representing the most complex. For the communities of Lakewood, Maple Heights, and South Euclid, there were greater percentages of adults at the lowest literacy level in 2005 – 2007 when compared to estimates from 2000. Changing employment levels and demographics drove these results. Most at Level 1 literacy are able to read some, but they are at a severe disadvantage economically as they are likely to be excluded from all but minimum-wage work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Comings, J., S. Reder, and A. Sum. 2001. *Building A Level Playing Field – The Need to Expand and Improve the National and State Adult Education and Literacy Systems*. National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy. Accessed online at [http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/op\\_comings2.pdf](http://gseweb.harvard.edu/~ncsall/research/op_comings2.pdf)

In Cuyahoga County, about half of the adult population (44%) has literacy levels in the two lowest categories; this does not represent a significant improvement from the 2000 value of 47%. Similarly, for the City of Cleveland, there has not been a significant decline in the percent of adults with the lowest literacy levels – 69% in 2000 compared to 66% in 2005 – 2007. **Only the suburbs of North Royalton and Solon experienced significant improvements for the two lowest literacy levels.** In Solon, about 16% of adults are at these lowest levels, down from 21% in 2000, and in North Royalton about one-fourth of adults are at the lowest literacy levels, compared to 30% in 2000. Improvements in educational attainment can explain these changes. **Even though measures for Cuyahoga County and Cleveland were not significantly better between 2000 and 2005 – 2007, the trend is in the direction of improvement – higher mean proficiency estimates and smaller percentages in the lowest literacy levels.**

#### Child Literacy

Children born to mothers with low levels of education are less likely to have early literacy skills and are less ready to read when they go to school.<sup>3</sup> The percent of birth mothers without a high school degree remained at 17% between 2000-2002 and 2003-2005 in Cuyahoga County. In Cleveland, percentages also were the same across the two time periods – 31%. These results, however, are geographically uneven.

**Twenty of thirty-six Cleveland neighborhoods experienced declines of varying degrees in the percent of birth mothers without a high school degree; the same can also be said for 23 of 58 suburban municipalities.** The neighborhoods and suburbs with the largest improvements were Goodrich-Kirtland Park and Kinsman, and Independence and Newburgh Heights, respectively.

**The county also failed to make significant gains in other measures of youth literacy – dropouts age 16-19 and idle youth age 16-19 (not in school and not working).** In 2007, 6% of the youth in the County were dropouts, compared to 12% in Cleveland, and 4% in the remainder of the county. Percentages of idle youth at the same time were 7% for the county, 13% for Cleveland, and 4% for the rest of the county.

**In Cleveland, however, the percentage of 18-24 year olds without a high school degree improved significantly between 2007 (28%) and 2003 (43%).** Cuyahoga County's values, though falling from 26% to 18%, were not statistically different. The rest of the county also did not experience significant changes, and values in 2007 were around 14%.

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<sup>3</sup> Child Trends and Center for Child Health Research. 2004. Early Child Development in Social Context: A Chartbook. Accessed online at <http://www.childtrends.org/>.

Conclusion

Greater percentages of Cleveland residents tend to have lower literacy levels when compared with the County's suburbs. Similarly, more children in Cleveland are at risk of developing literacy problems as adults when compared to children in the rest of Cuyahoga County. While many of the changes in indicator values are not substantially different between the years, the trends are moving in a positive direction. Since literacy skills can impact everything from parent-child interaction and graduation rates, to employment opportunities and the quality of life in our communities, even small changes in literacy have the potential for great impact.