

State and Local

Illiteracy rate in Brazos Valley reaches 20 percent for adults

Education experts: Problems often start in early childhood

By Audrey Cardenas
Reporter

Literacy is an invaluable tool for survival in a world deluged with a zying array of printed material. Approximately 20 percent of Brazos Valley adults are oblivious to the barrage because they are functionally illiterate — they are unable

Illiteracy in Texas Part one of a two-part series

read or write well enough to survive on a daily basis — and their problem usually starts in high school. A survey by the Bryan Public Library shows that 20.3 percent of Brazos Valley adults are functionally illiterate and a Texas Education Agency survey concludes that one in five Texas adults is illiterate.

Many reasons contribute to illiteracy, but chief among these is high school dropout rates. According to the Texas Education Agency's 1986 annual report, dropout rates exceeded during the 1986 school year. The report also says Texas currently has a 35.4 percent dropout rate and is one of the nation's 10 worst literacy rates.

The increase in dropout rates results from an increase in sociological, economic and cultural problems faced by students, as well as physical and mental handicaps.

"It's a complex thing," says Ches-

ter Christian, a Texas A&M modern languages professor. "All kinds of forces work against considering reading important. It's part of an anti-intellectual society."

Childhood education is one major force that determines an individual's literacy level, he says.

"Once a child gets beyond the physiological age of about three, there are more distractions," he says. "But at an earlier age, it is a matter of interest for the child and he can then read more accurately."

It is this early education that determines whether a child will grow up with an interest in learning, Christian says.

"If a child does not become interested in learning early on, then this could create educational problems later on as a student," he says.

Sociological aspects contributing to illiteracy often come from children's do-as-they-see practices, Christian says.

If they don't see other people reading at home, then they won't read either, he says. Instead, children see their parents watching television, and the satisfaction a child could receive from reading a book he gets from the television, he says.

Sondra Cooke, the Bryan Independent School District's special education director, agrees with Christian.

"We depend too much on tele-

vision," she says. "We have made it too easy for people not to have to read."

Furthermore, Christian says that if neither parent has a complete high-school education and both are functionally illiterate, both will fail to understand the significance of their child being literate.

Cooke, who views the matter as a cycle, says teen-agers may try to help their families financially by dropping out of school and getting a job, but they become adults who can't hold a steady job because of their poor educations. Their children, in turn, fall into the same trap.

Rowena Reed, a Texas A&M Consolidated High School senior counselor, says although many students drop out, some leave with the intent of getting ahead.

"I had a student who couldn't wait until he was 16 because he wanted to get out of school," Cooke recalls. "He wanted to drive a gravel truck for his grandfather's gravel company, but he couldn't read a lick."

"Eventually, his grandfather died and left him the business, but he still couldn't read." Cooke further explains that the teen-ager had to marry someone capable of reading so that he could carry on his grandfather's business.

But not all teen-agers are this fortunate and in an attempt to combat increasing dropout rates, many

schools have established vocational programs designed to give the students work experience and to help keep them interested in school.

Reed thinks these programs are beneficial, but only in some instances.

"Co-op doesn't help all the time, but some students do choose this program and it usually works for them," she says.

However, Cooke says these programs can influence students to drop out.

"Some kids enrolled in these co-op programs see that they could make \$90 a week, and they think that's great," she says. "But later they realize that it isn't that much, and by then it's too late to come back to school."

Cathy Hackett, Travis County Adult Literacy Council's administrative assistant, describes the types of jobs open to illiterate dropouts.

"The jobs that many illiterates receive are janitorial positions or repairing cars," Hackett says, "and they usually get fired when their boss finds out they're illiterate. Also, adult illiterates earn 42 percent less than a high-school graduate."

But Jim Lovan, employment supervisor for the Texas Employment Commission, says most students don't quit high-school for economic reasons.

"If he does, he would have to work in the family grocery store or something like that," Lovan says.

Severe weather causes flooding in Victoria area

Officials said more than 100 homes were flooded near the Victoria area this weekend after the Guadalupe River swelled to nearly three times its usual size.

The flooding caused several hundred residents to leave their homes.

The river waters appeared to crest Sunday at about 30.5 feet, compared to an average normal depth of 8-10 feet, according to river gauger Jim De Leon.

Resident John M. Villafranca said, "We looked out the window when we woke up (Saturday) morning and the houses across the street looked like they were floating away."

He and family members were helped to safety Saturday afternoon by workers from the Victoria Fire Department.

Elsewhere, uprooted trees floated downstream, and car roofs were seen barely protruding above flooded streets.

Victoria Fire Chief Henry Juenke said the river was not wide enough or deep enough to carry the huge overflow that has come down the river from its headwaters in Hill Country.

Juenke said about 125 homes in a 50-block area suffered the worst flooding. He was unable to provide an estimate of flood damage, and he added that city officials had not yet met to consider whether to apply for disaster aid.

Some of the stronger storms Sunday were located near Victoria and offshore southeast of Corpus Christi, the National Weather Service said.

The forecast for today called for mostly cloudy skies in the south and west with a chance of widely scattered showers and thunderstorms. It should be partly cloudy in the north through Monday, the weather service said.

Already, farm experts say heavy rain and flooding that inundated wide areas of Texas last week may have swamped some farmers' hopes for their 1987 crops, although other producers and ranchers welcomed the moisture.

Early estimates put the potential for damage to the state's crops as high as \$500 million, said Dr. Zerle Carpenter, director of the Texas Agricultural Extension Service at Texas A&M University.

However, there were hopes that some crops might recover, and Carpenter said the soaking rain should dampen the subsoil for future production.

Texas Department of Agriculture officials also believe many farmers and ranchers would rather be drenched than face drought conditions, as much of the Southeastern United States did last year.

"They'd rather have moisture in the ground and have it deep," TDA spokesman Andy Welch said.

"It's also going to do wonders for the livestock producers," he added. "Their stock tanks are going to be full. The pastures are going to be green."

The heaviest losses were expected in South Texas, where more than a foot of rain accumulated over several days and kept farmers from getting to their crops, which were ready for harvest.

"In the Winter Garden of the state, the San Antonio area, we've had a substantial loss in onion production, simply because farmers were unable to get into the field," Carpenter said.

Carpenter expected other crop losses in the Rolling Plains region around Wichita Falls and Vernon and some damage in the South Plains and High Plains of Texas.

Prisons to reopen as inmate population dips

HUNTSVILLE (AP) — The Texas prison system will reopen to new arrivals because the inmate population has dropped below a state-mandated limit, a spokesman said Monday.

The doors will open Tuesday at 8 a.m. and officials are expecting to take in about 225 new inmates, Texas Department of Corrections spokesman David Nunnelee said.

On Friday, the prison system announced it

would close the doors to new inmates because the inmate population had surpassed a 95 percent of capacity limit. It was the 12th time this year the system had closed because of crowding.

As of midnight Sunday, the inmate population totaled 38,424, or 94.65 percent of capacity — 143 inmates under the 95-percent cap, officials said Monday.

The inmate population at midnight Thursday

had totaled 38,505 inmates, or 95.18 percent — 74 over the legal capacity, officials said.

The prison system, generally closed on weekends, released 224 inmates on parole Saturday, but it still remained closed on Monday to new arrivals.

The last time the prison department was forced to close its doors because the population exceeded the limit was April 13.

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