

## **Introduction**

This backgrounder will focus on how poverty affects literacy during one's lifetime and continues throughout generations. Due to poor funding of the local public education system, literacy rates in Lee County continue to stay low. The sections that will be discussed will be poverty in the area and how poverty impacts public schools' quality of education, how poor public schools lead to low rates of high school and college graduates, and lastly, how all these factors contribute to the cycle of poverty and the cycle of illiteracy. The issue of illiteracy, or rather of literacy, is quickly spreading. The Lee County Literacy Coalition (LCLC) has set out to help our community better ourselves and others through not only education but better education, as well as help those who lack the resources to improve their literacy.

## **Overview of the Social Issue**

Literacy is the ability to receive, understand, relay, and seek information orally, in print/written word, art, or other forms of communications ([UNICEF](#)). The ability to read and write may seem natural to many of us, however, it is out of reach for many others. Single-person households who have an income of \$12,784 and multiple-person households with an income of \$25,701 are considered to be living in poverty ([Alabama Possible](#)). There is a direct line that can be drawn between poverty and illiteracy. In Lee County, as of 2019, 19.6% of people live in poverty ([Data USA](#)). Thirty-seven percent of children raised in a household below the poverty line do not complete high school. When people do not finish high school by the age of 20, they are seven times more likely to be persistently poor for the remainder of their lives ([Child Fund](#)). The next paragraph will explain how the cycle of poverty can impact the quality of education in the public school system.

The cycle of poverty is defined as an occurrence of poor families staying impoverished for three or more generations ([World Vision](#)). If households are living on or below the poverty line, it is hard for them to find extra funds to donate to their local public school system. With a population of almost 20% of households living in poverty, Lee County's public schools are ranked as the 70th best school system in the state of Alabama. Their access to resources is rated "C" on its Niche Report Card; with their proficient reading score at 47%. While these reports are not great, it is easy to see how the resources are easily overlooked because the expenses per student are \$10,085 each year ([Niche](#)). The following paragraph will explain how literacy is essential to thriving in the college and professional world.

When students continue onto higher education, literacy and critical thinking skills are necessary to thrive. This prospect may detour many students who have not benefited from living above the poverty line from pursuing a degree. Today, it is difficult to find any job without a college degree. This creates the cycle of poverty: as a high school graduate continues to work and live on or below the poverty line. Therefore, their children will be going to the same public

school and gaining the same quality of education and reproducing the same apprehension of attending college, and so on. The rest of this backgrounder will be going into more detail about this cycle and how it impacts our community.

### **Poverty in the Area and How Poverty Impacts Public Schools**

Children growing up below the poverty line tend to have more physical health and mental health challenges than children being raised in a more affluent area. These disadvantages impact the children's readiness for school because they "[weaken] a child's ability to concentrate and remember information and reduces attentiveness, curiosity and motivation" ([Child Fund](#)). When a child grows up in a high-poverty area, he/she is more likely to experience low confidence in school readiness due to poor physical health and motor skills ([Child Fund](#)). A child's poor physical health, due to their home life, which may include improper nutrition and/or lack of sleep impacts their ability to remember information, whether it be the information taught or information about an assignment. When a parent has been raised below the poverty line, it's possible that they weren't educated on the importance of nutrition and sleep and how it impacts a child's ability to learn. Because of these reasons, a child growing up in a poverty-stricken area will have more disadvantages than one growing up in an affluent area.

As this backgrounder already addressed, poverty hits very close to home. Having areas of great poverty and illiteracy in Lee County is eye-opening when we now investigate how literacy rates are lower in this area. Even though Lee County is home to a world-renowned university, only 35% of people older than the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree in Lee County ([Census Bureau](#)). Most residents of Lee County are not college students or college graduates. As explained in the above section, uneducated parents tend to raise their children in a poverty stricken area with the same lack of resources they experienced. The following section will discuss how the lack of resources at home impacts a student's success.

#### *Lack of Resources at Home*

Students in high-poverty areas lack resources to thrive in grade school. At home, they lack what they need for homework, such as high-speed internet, access to computers or laptops, and a parent or caregiver at home to aid with homework. They can also lack what they need to be healthy and stay alert in school, such as food and a clean environment. Today with online school being vital to a student's success, it is imperative for a child to have a full stomach to focus, a parent to help guide their work, and access to online school ([NASSP](#)). The next section will address the connection between poor public grade schools and low graduation rates.

### **Poor Public Schools Lead to Low Rates of High School and College Graduates**

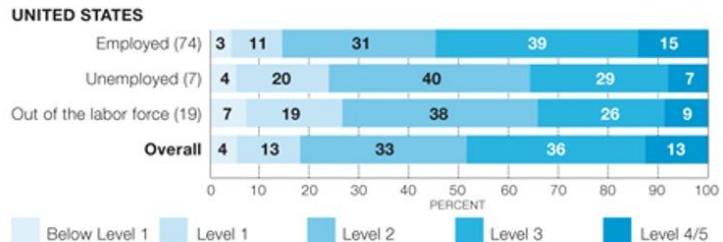
Because public schools in low-income communities have fewer resources, these public schools reduce a student's education in grade school. It also reduces a student's confidence in their intelligence. This lack of confidence directly impacts a student's assurance in their ability to get the grades they would need to enter into a university and to thrive in a university. Therefore, many students from grade schools in high-poverty communities do not possess this confidence,

which directly affects their grades, thus they do not attend universities. As this backgrounder already addressed, less than 40% of Lee County residents over the age of 25 have a college degree ([Census Bureau](#)). The possession of a bachelor's degree can make or break a person's chance of getting a job.

The graph, created by [Library Journal](#), showcases the different levels of literacy and the percentage of adults' employment status that directly correspond with those levels. It is clear that most people who are employed have a literacy level above a three and those with a reading level of two or below tend to be unemployed or out of the labor force. It is also clear to see that the majority of people have a literacy level of a two or a three. It is the responsibility of the public schools to better educate their students to thus raise the levels of literacy in the workforce.

### LITERACY & EMPLOYMENT

PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS AGE 16 TO 65 AT EACH LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY ON THE PIAAC LITERACY SCALE, BY EMPLOYMENT STATUS: 2012 AND 2014



SOURCE: NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS: PROGRAM FOR THE INTERNATIONAL ASSESSMENT OF ADULT COMPETENCIES

### Funding into Public Schools

As explained in the social-issue overview section, the expenses per student are high for an area where over 30,000 persons are living in poverty, therefore it is easy to see that the public school system may not be offering the resources and the quality of education as other places in the country. It is also easy to see how in an area where a small amount of its population possesses bachelor's degree, and it is hard to find a job without a degree, it is difficult for the public-school funding to increase. It is impossible to break the cycle of poverty without providing a good education in grade school because those skills will carry over into college. If students are provided with the tools necessary to be successful in the classroom, they would then graduate from college with a job and be able to create a better life for their future, as well as the future of their family.

### The Cycle of Poverty and the Cycle of Illiteracy

After everything described in the past sections, one can draw a connection that the lack of quality education in grade school can lead to students in poverty-high school systems not obtaining a college education. It is also understandable how the lack of college education can lead to unemployment, resulting in a poverty-stricken adulthood and parenthood, creating a cycle of poverty.

There are many ways to break the cycle of poverty. LEAP Academy University Charter School Founder and Huffington Post contributor, Gloria Bonilla-Santiago believes that the key to breaking the cycle is by creating programs in and out of the school that focuses on learning and development while giving support to students and their families ([Thrive Global](#)). Schools need to realize and address their shortcomings by supporting students and their families, in order to help

students thrive. For Bonilla-Santiago and LEAP Academy, this means allowing parents to have hands-on time with their students during the school day, whether it's online or it's after school. They also have structured their class schedules in a similar way that colleges do to prepare them for what is to come.

## **Conclusion**

After reviewing the sources and the statistics revolving around low-income households and literacy in Lee County, a clear line can be drawn from the poor education being provided by low-income area public schools, to the low rates of college graduates who grew up in these areas, as well as the lack of funding that goes into the public schools in low-income communities. This cycle, dubbed the cycle of poverty, is closely linked to the cycle of illiteracy. The cycle of illiteracy shows how if one has a poor education and a low-paying job, they cannot afford to raise a family in a community with better public schools, nor help fund the public schools to raise the quality of education given there.