

PRESS RELEASE

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Low literacy costs the Netherlands 537 million a year

If low literacy were to be tackled structurally, it would amount to savings of 537 million per year for our society. In addition, eradicating low literacy has a welfare effect of 10 to 22 percent of the Gross National Product (GNP).

The Government can save 456 million on welfare and benefits, 61 million on health care and 19,5 million on police and legal work. This is what Wim Groot and Henriëtte Maassen van den Brink of the University of Amsterdam state in their research report *Stil vermogen* (Dormant Capital) on the social expenses of low literacy. Margreet de Vries, director of Stichting Lezen & Schrijven presented it today to minister Wijn of the Economy Department.

'Better education results in savings for health care, police and justice', Groot and Maassen van den Brink state. In order to realise the saving and welfare effects, they feel that great investments need to be made in education.

Stichting Lezen & Schrijven will use the research to bring organisations throughout the entire educational chain to collaborate, making sure that pupils leave school with better language and arithmetic skills. In addition, the 47.000 dropouts in vocational education should also be reached. De Vries: 'When we say 'it's about people', when we really want this country to become better, when we truly want to be a society with ambition and when we want to improve the trust in one another and in the Netherlands, we, politics, government, education and society, can no longer close our eyes to low literacy.'

Professional market

Nearly 11 percent of all Dutch people is low literate. Of the total professional population, an approximate six percent is low literate. Low literacy occurs most often in elementary positions such as cleaning and sales employees. 18 percent of employees is low literate in these professions. Almost 20 percent of the employees in elementary positions does not have sufficient arithmetic skills. People who work in agriculture or construction are relatively more often low literate.

Training level

The higher the training, the higher the level of literacy this person can attain. Up to 45 percent of people who have only attended primary school experience difficulty with reading, writing or arithmetic. Higher education contributes 39 percent to the reading and writing skills compared with someone who has a lower vocational training or less. The training level of parents is also determining: parents who have only attended primary school have lower literate children. Age also plays a role. Those who have not attended training for a while, are less skilled in reading and writing.

Income

The loss of labour potential caused by low literacy is large. Of the low-literate people, 5% does not have any personal income whatsoever and over 70% does not have a paid job. And another 18% belongs to the 20% of people with the lowest incomes.

One out of five low-literate people is fully unemployed. And only one percent of the wealthiest people is low literate.

Health and use of care providers

Low-literate people feel unhealthy more often and they actually are less healthy. An ample six percent of low-literate men has had a heart attack, as opposed to one percent of high-literate people. Low-literate women also run a relatively larger risk of having a heart attack. Virtually the same is valid for other illnesses, such as cardio and vascular diseases, strokes and diabetes. Six percent of low-literate women suffers from diabetes, compared with 0,9 percent of the highest-literate people. Low-literate people visit a general practitioner and a medical specialist relatively more often. They make more use of physical therapy and they are more often admitted to hospital.

Criminality

Almost half of the high-literate people occasionally do not pay for using public transport. Tax fraud, shoplifting, stealing from work, switching price tags, fencing and stealing bikes or money occurs slightly more often amongst low-literate than amongst high-literate people. Lower literate people also commit more offences such as threats, abuse or physical damage.

Social benefits

Almost one quarter of the lowest literate men has an unemployment benefit, compared with three to seven percent of the highest literate people. Low-literate people receive welfare benefits considerably more often.

Note for the editors, not for publication:

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