Other experts noted that the slip in scores could be attributed to most state schools not being particularly selective, accepting most high school graduates to bolster enrollment. In addition, Schneider said schools may not be taking into account a more diverse population, and the language and cultural barriers that come with shifting demographics.

That would account for the dramatic drop in average prose literacy for Hispanics, which slipped by 18 percentage points, he said. "The Hispanic scores were somewhat understandable based on the changing demographics," Schneider said. "Diversity may lead to more difficulties in education."

Dolores Perin, a reading expert at Columbia University Teachers College, said that her work has indicated that the issue may start at the high school level. "There is a tremendous literacy problem among high school graduates that is not talked about," said Perin, who has been sitting in on high school classes as part of a teaching project. "It's a little bit depressing. The classes are left holding the bag, trying to teach students who have challenges."

On average, adult literacy is virtually unchanged since 1992, with 30 million people struggling with basic reading tasks. While adults made some progress in quantitative literacy, such as the ability to calculate taxes, the study showed that from 1992 to 2003 adults made no improvement in their ability to read newspapers or books, or comprehend basic forms.

One bright spot is that blacks are making significant gains in reading and math and are reaching higher levels of education. For instance, the report showed that the average rate of prose literacy, or reading among blacks rose six percentage points since 1992. Prose and document reading scores for whites remained the same.
Expert says that problems actually begin in high school.

From A1

Experts could not definitely explain the drop.

"The declining impact of education on our adult population was the biggest surprise for us, and we just don't have a good explanation," said Mark S. Schneider, commissioner of education statistics. "It may be that institutions have not yet figured out how to teach a whole generation of students who learned to read on the computer and who watch more TV. It's a different kind of literacy."

"What's disturbing is that the assessment is not designed to test your understanding of Proust, but to test your ability to read labels," he added.

The test measures how well adults comprehend basic instructions and tasks through reading — such as computing costs per ounce of food items, comparing viewpoints on two editorials and reading prescription labels. Only 41 percent of graduate students tested in 2003 could be classified as "proficient" in prose — reading and understanding information in short texts — down 10 percentage points since 1992. Of college graduates, only 31 percent were classified as proficient — compared with 40 percent in 1992.

Schneider said the results do not separate recent graduates from those who have been out of school several years or more.

The results were based on a sample of more than 19,000 people 16 or older, who were interviewed in their homes. They were asked to read prose, do math and find facts in documents. The scores for "intermediate" reading abilities went up for college students, causing educators to question whether most college instruction is offered at the intermediate level because students face reading challenges.

Gorman said that he has been shocked by how few entering freshmen understand how to use a basic library system, or enjoy reading for pleasure. "There is a failure in the core values of educat-