



Federal Literacy Facts

An update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

May 2006

Canadian Council on Learning releases Learning Index

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) has released a new Composite Learning Index (CLI) that could help shape the focus of future public policy priorities.

This new annual Index gauges Canada's performance on lifelong learning by using a "basket" of 15 indicators to measure progress. By assigning varying weights and connecting the dots between these 15 indicators, the Index provides an overall national score on Canadian learning. Over time, comparing annual scores will allow Canadians to measure progress. This year, the Council assigned a national CLI rating of 73 out of 100. It's like getting a B-minus on our national lifelong learning report card.

As with all indexes, it is crucial to consider what the Council chose to include among its 15 constant indicators. In this respect, the Council was far-reaching in its scope. Borrowing from the UNESCO definition of lifelong learning as "learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be", the Council looked at a wide array of indicators from availability of workplace training (learning to do) to volunteer rates (learning to live together) to literacy (learning to know). Linking our performance on each of these scales provides one composite score.

Canada is the first country in the world to develop and employ this tool as a catalyst for discussion and for change. Of special note, is the Council's stated intent: "to move beyond the rhetoric about lifelong learning to find ideas, strategies and programs that really work."

Full results of the Composite Learning Index, with regional breakdowns, are available through an interactive Canadian map at www.ccl-cca.ca/cli.

Learning Index highlights adult literacy as key challenge

The Composite Learning Index shows that low literacy among adults is a serious challenge that is undermining Canada's overall performance in lifelong learning.

The Council on Learning reports that Canada is doing a fairly good job of fostering literacy among students, but we fare poorly on adult literacy. This is not surprising to members of the literacy community. Nor is it new, considering that the Index relies on the results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey to gauge Canada's progress. In the report's supporting documents, it is pointed out that not only is the number of adults with low-level literacy skills relatively high, but also adult literacy does not appear to be improving.

Council CEO Paul Cappon had this to say about missing the mark on adult literacy:

"Canada has failed to prepare a large number of Canadian adults to meet their day-to-day challenges, despite the significant resources that all levels of government have committed to improving adult literacy."

There's no mention in the documentation about the amount of these "significant resources", nor about their speculation as to why adult literacy rates continue to hover around 42%.

What is clear is that the CLI release will lead to further research on literacy as a key indicator of Canada's success in creating a life-long learning culture in Canada. The index might also be an important catalyst for discussion and strategic direction at the CCL's Adult Learning Knowledge Centre's first national symposium in Fredericton on June 21st. The symposium theme is: "Adult Learning in Canada: What?...So what?...Now what?"

Literacy doesn't make the federal budget's priority list

There was no mention of literacy in the federal budget plan released on May 2. True to the new government's promise, the budget focused on stated priorities – including reducing the GST and other tax reforms, reducing hospital wait times, introducing a child care benefit for kids under 6, programs for addressing crime, and some increased funds for security. In addition, there were some surprise announcements. For example, new funds were assigned to housing and post-secondary education infrastructure support.

Even though no money was assigned to literacy or basic skills, there were some announcements in the budget that could have an impact on literacy. For example, the budget did announce a billion dollar program review for this year and next year. This means that federal programs will be reviewed to ensure that they are meeting their objectives and that they are in sync with the government's priorities. All programs, including literacy programs, could be affected by this review.

Also, the government announced a review of the fiscal framework that, in part, will look at federal and provincial responsibilities with a view to decreasing overlap and providing better service for the public. It's not clear how literacy will fare under this review. Clearly, literacy training is delivered by the provinces and territories. However, the federal government has always played an important role in advancing literacy through its support of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS), and numerous other programs across federal departments that support literacy upgrading (for example, Correctional Services Canada commits millions to literacy training in prisons). Consultations on the fiscal framework will take place this summer and fall.

The fiscal and program review could have an important impact on federal support for literacy. Stay tuned for developments that affect our field. To access budget documents look to:
<http://www.fin.gc.ca/budtoce/2006/budliste.htm>.

Community still waiting for federal call for literacy proposals

As of today, May 18, the NLS has not issued its annual call for proposals for literacy programs, projects, or organizations. Nor has the new program that will replace the NLS been announced. (For background on this issue see back issues of Federal Literacy Facts at www.literacy.ca.)

While community groups await some kind of announcement, there are increasing concerns about the impact of the delays and what they might mean. For example, will some NLS-supported organizations have to close their doors? What does the delay really mean to the future of a federal role in literacy? MCL has participated in meetings with decision-makers, but as yet, no clear-cut answers have been forthcoming. As information becomes available, MCL will share it with the community.

AG calls for streamlined process for grants and contributions

The Auditor General's 2006 status report (May 16) gives HRSDC a passing grade on its financial management of grants and contributions and recommends that the department, and government in general, streamline "daunting" application and audit procedures. In 2001 the AG slammed HRSDC for poor financial management in what the media dubbed the "billion-dollar boondoggle". For more info, look to: www.oag-bvg.gc.ca.

Bill would remove GST from literacy materials

NDP MP Judy Wasylycia-Leis has introduced a Private Member's Bill to eliminate the GST on literacy materials. Removing the GST on books and audiovisual materials for literacy training would complement existing tax relief programs given to organizations that conduct literacy work. MCL will monitor the progress of this Bill with interest.