



Federal Literacy Facts

an update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

April 2004

Federal Budget a big disappointment for the literacy community

The March 23 federal budget promises up to \$5 billion over the next five years to boost Canadians' skills and learning, yet offers little to less-literate Canadians. Instead, the *Learning* section of the budget targets post-secondary education, virtually ignoring those barred from higher learning because they lack the necessary foundation. Even when the budget does attempt to boost learning opportunities for marginalized Canadians, it does so by dedicating millions to the establishment of an education savings bond to help fund the future post secondary education of poor children, completely ignoring the learning needs of their low-income parents - whose literacy levels strongly influence family incomes and children's educational outcomes.

In the full budget document, MCL found one specific reference to literacy - as one of several areas that could be considered in consultations on a proposed *Workplace Skills Strategy*. Although this venture might hold some promise for the future, it still positions literacy solely as a labour market issue and contains no commitments.

MCL's response? Immediately following the budget, MCL released a preliminary analysis and worked with the national literacy organizations on an open letter to the media outlining our joint concerns. We will ensure that the HRSD Minister, Finance Minister and Prime Minister also receive copies of this open letter. MCL will also explore ways to inform the development of the *Workplace Skills Strategy* so that it best serves less literate Canadians. In addition, MCL will continue to look for opportunities to influence positive change. One way to do so is to work with partners to position literacy as a priority election issue in constituencies across the country.

Some Budget highlights:

- **Workplace Skills Strategy:** HRSD Minister Joseph Volpe will be seeking advice from representatives of employers and workers; industry associations; skills providers; provinces; and communities, with a view to developing a strategic plan for workplace skills of the future and identifying practical options and priorities for action. Literacy training and essential skills upgrading for workers are among the "key issues to be considered".
- **Training Centre Infrastructure Fund pilot project:** With funding of \$15 million for two years, this measure will provide partial funding to help union training centres to replace aging equipment.
- **Support for Aboriginal initiatives:** \$125 million over five years for the Aboriginal Human Resources Development Strategy and \$25 million increase for the Urban Aboriginal Strategy.
- \$150 million increase for **early learning and childcare** (could help ease barriers for learners)
- Initiatives to **support the voluntary sector**, primarily through changes to some of the tax regulations governing charitable organizations
- Creation of a **Canada Learning Bond** to help low income parents invest in the possible future PSE of their children and introduction of a new grant of up to \$3,000 for first-year post-secondary students from low-income families

Want more budget information?

The **Federal budget documents** are online at <http://www.fin.gc.ca/budtoce/2004/budliste.htm>

The national literacy organizations' **joint response** is online at: www.literacy.ca

Should we expect a Spring election?

A few months ago, a Spring 2004 election seemed like a sure thing. Now, with the media focusing on reported government "scandals" and inappropriate spending, the timing of the election is still uncertain. In fact the Prime Minister could wait until 2005 to call Canadians to the polls, although this is unlikely.

Political insiders say that despite the uncertainty, we should still gear up for a federal election in May or early June. In anticipation of this, MCL is working on two online election resources. The first (with support from Elections Canada) will include factual information about the federal election along with activity plans, worksheets and other resources to help learners get ready to exercise their right to vote. The other will include information on where the political parties stand on literacy and learning, along with resources to help make literacy an election campaign issue in your region or riding. These resources will be posted on the MCL website at www.literacy.ca

Council of the Federation targets literacy as a priority

In February, Canada's premiers announced their decision to create the "Council of the Federation Literacy Award". The award will recognize organizations showing leadership in workplace literacy and will assist those organizations in further developing their ideas and sharing them with smaller companies. At the same meeting, Premiers also asked their Education and Labour Market Ministers to review best practices in each province and territory in order to share successful strategies.

By prioritizing literacy as an area that merits joint attention, the Premiers have acknowledged literacy's importance to the social and economic well being of the country. MCL hopes that this commitment is something we can build upon in the future as we continue to push for the development of a pan-Canadian literacy strategy.

Canadian Council on Learning: what's happening?

Although the Canadian Council on Learning (initially known as the Canadian Learning Institute) was assigned \$100 million in funding in the February 2003 federal budget, it has been difficult to get a clear idea on its status. After some digging, here is what MCL has been able to find out:

- The one-time \$100 million in federal funding for the Council is meant to last 5 years.
- Other than a small administrative secretariat, the Council is expected to be a "virtual" organization with various outside agencies taking responsibility for key areas.
- Apparently no money will be designated to research for program, practice or policy development. Instead, the Council will fund tools to measure progress in learning outcomes and to support testing and analysis of different approaches.
- A final report on the initial consultations, released by the Public Policy Forum in November 2003, proposed that the Council be designed like a wheel with five spokes or "nodes" of expertise: K-12 education, post-secondary education, early childhood development, adult/workforce learning, *and literacy*.
- However, whether literacy will have its own node or be addressed within other nodes such as adult and workforce learning will be up to the Council's Board of Directors.
- At this point, a three-person interim Board has been tasked with recruiting additional members. In the coming weeks and months, the full Board will determine the parameters and design of the final organization.

MCL will be working with literacy and other partners to ensure a place for literacy within the Council's structure and mandate.