



Federal Literacy Facts

an update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

December 2005

Election 2006: An Important Opportunity to Advance Literacy

On January 23rd we will go to the polls to elect our future federal leaders. Let's not let winter weather get in the way of making the most of this opportunity. Gaining the support of politicians is key to building a country where less-literate Canadians have the opportunity to improve their skills and where all Canadians benefit from the economic and social prosperity that comes from advancing literacy. As a community, we've never been better prepared to champion literacy and to inform decision-makers about the need for a comprehensive literacy agenda. Here's why:

- Literacy is in the spotlight. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) was a wake-up call for decision-makers. IALSS confirmed that literacy is a serious issue that demands serious attention (see page 4).
- The CD Howe Institute released a report making the economic case for literacy – showing that a 1% rise in average literacy rates would increase GDP by \$18 billion a year!
- The federal government has promised a comprehensive literacy strategy and has already committed millions to improve skills in the workplace (see page 3). We need to encourage decision-makers to move forward.
- The community is united and ready for action (see page 2). An election provides an opportunity to share and promote our vision for a more literate Canada.

The election campaign gives us an opportunity to harness this momentum, educate and influence future leaders, and ensure literacy is a priority during the campaign and after Election Day.

Check www.literacy.ca for Useful On-line Election Resources!

MCL has developed a series of on-line election resources and toolkits, from an interactive “how-to” on voting for learners, to an election study kit for use in programs, to a Literacy Action Kit designed to help make literacy an election issue. Look for these resources soon in the “what’s new” box at www.literacy.ca:

1. Interactive Voter Information:

MCL has worked with Elections Canada to develop this easy-to-understand election resource. The animated, interactive resource provides voiceovers, step-by-step demonstrations, and interactive tools to make the election process understandable. This is a great resource for programs, or for any community organization that works with the public.

2. Study Kit for use in programs:

This downloadable resource offers interesting and fun activities and resources to support student learning about the federal election.

3. MCL's Literacy Action Kit:

This toolkit contains tools, templates, and step-by-step guides to help you make the most of this chance to raise awareness and commitment around literacy. In this section of our website, you will also find political parties' official responses to MCL's election questionnaire. Their responses may help to inform your vote.

Literacy Advisory Committee Presents Pan-Canadian Literacy Action Plan

In late October, Minister of State Claudette Bradshaw assembled a multi-sectoral committee from across the country and asked the group to report to the government on what needs to be done to address Canada's literacy challenges.

The committee's report, *Towards a Fully Literate Canada: Achieving National Goals through a Comprehensive Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy* was presented to the Minister and to government officials on November 18.

The 42-page-report outlines a unified community vision along with key principles, strategic objectives, and recommendations. At the heart of the committee's report is an urgent call for the federal government to work with all jurisdictions, across departments, and with multiple stakeholders to create a quality adult literacy system for Canada that builds on current best practice, respects diversity and local realities. The hope is that the federal government will help to provide coherence and adequate resources for adult literacy across Canada.

The report builds on years of study and community consultation, specifically: the *10-year Results-Based National Literacy Action Plan*, prepared by MCL in consultation with the other national literacy organizations in September; the *National Literacy Action Agenda*, which was widely endorsed by the literacy community in 2002-03; an all-party parliamentary Standing Committee report on literacy, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response (2003)*; and on Minister Bradshaw's cross-Canada consultations which took place this past summer and fall.

Committee members included leaders from the literacy community, business and labour, the community college system, libraries, provincial literacy coalitions, front-line literacy providers and learners. To access a copy of the committee's report, look to www.nald.ca.

Key Points from the Action Plan

Towards a Fully Literate Canada: Achieving Goals through a Comprehensive Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy encourages the federal government to dream big – to set a goal of raising the literacy skills of millions of learners over the next decade. A preliminary costing associated with this goal suggests an initial federal investment of \$1 billion over the next three years with increasing investments in subsequent years. Here are other key elements:

- We need a major increase in funding for front-line delivery – without this we will not be able to accomplish significant change.
- Cooperation between levels of government is crucial in building a coherent literacy system. A tangible way for jurisdictions to work together is through the development of bi-lateral literacy accords between the federal government and the provincial/territorial governments.
- We need to address the barriers that prevent many Canadians from upgrading their skills.
- Low literacy often leads to social exclusion. We need federal policies and services to take literacy and less-literate Canadians into account.
- We need research to assemble essential information, establish baselines, and identify the best ways to measure progress.
- We need targeted strategies for workplace literacy, family literacy, Aboriginal literacy, Francophone literacy and literacy for new immigrants. These strategies must build on current best practice.
- All sectors of society can contribute to, and benefit from, a more literate Canada. Partnerships with other sectors are crucial to success.
- We need ongoing federal leadership. The government should establish a Minister Responsible for Literacy and Essential Skills as an ongoing federal Cabinet position.

Developments at the National Literacy Secretariat

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) has a long history of excellence in literacy policy, practice and development. That's why the community is paying close attention as the government moves forward on establishing a new program, the *Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program*. We understand that this new program will take on much of the mandate of the current NLS – for example, setting funding guidelines and priorities. If the Secretariat does continue to exist as a separate body, it would operate within the confines of this new program. It is expected that these structural changes will come into effect in April 2006.

Clearly these changes are important and will most likely have an impact on our community. They also raise many questions. For example, at this point it remains unclear as to how the new program will continue with the NLS practice of working in partnership with the provinces and territories, business and labour, and the community sector. It is also unclear how the \$30 million (over three years) allotted to the NLS in the February 2005 federal budget will be affected by the program change.

MCL has written to Minister Bradshaw about these planned changes (look for our August 22nd letter under government relations at www.literacy.ca). We have also raised questions with key departmental officials and will continue to seek a clearer understanding of how these changes will affect the field.

We will continue to monitor developments and to urge that the best aspects of the NLS, honed and developed over decades, will be preserved. We will also work to ensure that any new literacy program operates in the best interest of learners, programs, and the broader community. Watch MCL's website (www.literacy.ca) for further developments.

Federal "Mini-budget" Promises Billions for Skills Agenda

In November, the federal government presented an economic statement and a "Plan for Growth and Prosperity". The plan commits the government to \$3.5 billion worth of initiatives over five years to enhance Canada's workforce. Increasing access to literacy and essential skills for workers is one of the priorities targeted.

We understand that the bulk of these new investments will still have to be approved by a newly elected House of Commons before they can roll out. However, it's clear that some funds have already been approved and represent the federal share of newly negotiated Labour Market Partnership Agreements with the provinces. In past weeks, multi-million-dollar cost-shared agreements have been announced in Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan. All of these announcements include investments for literacy and essential skills.

In addition to assigning funds for workplace and workforce skills development, the Plan for Growth and Prosperity also makes an explicit commitment to "work with provinces on the development of a comprehensive national literacy strategy". This is a commitment that our community can and will build on into the future.

CD Howe Report Links Literacy to Economic Prosperity

Canada needs a comprehensive skills strategy to boost wages and economic growth, according to a new report from the CD Howe Institute. *Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough* reports that raising literacy skills by 1% will lead to a 2.5% rise in productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP. The report also asserts that raising the literacy skills of people at the lowest skill level is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates. You can access this report at: www.cdhowe.org.

IALSS: More Evidence that Literacy Action Should Be a Priority

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), released by Statistics Canada in two parts (November 9th and 30th), looks at Canadians' ability to deal with everyday literacy demands. The report sheds light on Canada's serious literacy challenges and lends credibility to our call for federal government action and increased investments.

The survey assigns Canadians to five literacy skill levels, with level 5 being the highest and level 3 being the threshold considered necessary to succeed in today's society. The survey found that nine million working-age adults (42%) rank below level 3. Three million (15%) score at the lowest skill level. Although the findings included some specific areas of improvement, in general the proportion of working-age adults with low literacy skills remains exactly as it was in 1994. In fact, due to population growth, there are almost a million more people in Canada today with low literacy skills than there were a decade ago.

Clearly, IALSS is another serious wake-up call for Canadian decision-makers. Literacy barriers are sidelining too many Canadians and this inequality and loss of potential has serious consequences for them, their families and for communities in every province and territory.

Analysis of this data is sure to occupy researchers for months and even years to come. Next year, look for analysis from Stats Canada that digs deeper into demographic breakdowns. For example, we've been told to expect a release that takes a closer look at the characteristics of respondents at level 1 (the 3 million Canadians who have the most serious literacy challenges). Interactive data tools are also on the way. The first of these, expected in mid-December, will allow users to extract various statistical tables at the provincial/territorial level.

Key Findings from IALSS

- 4 in 10 working-age Canadians do not have the literacy skills experts consider necessary to meet the ever-increasing demands of our information-based society (i.e., they rank lower than level 3).
- The average (mean) score for all Canadians was at the low end of level 3.
- Literacy is a serious challenge in every province and territory. In even the highest performing jurisdictions, 3 out of 10 adults have literacy challenges.
- When those aged 66 and over are included in the statistics, the proportion with low literacy increases to nearly one-half (48%).
- 55% do not have the minimum numeracy skills necessary to meet modern demands.
- Across all jurisdictions, more than one third of youth (age 16-25) score below level 3 literacy.
- Linguistic minority populations face serious challenges. The proportion of Francophones who scored below level 3 in prose literacy is higher than the proportion of Anglophones.
- The situation is critical in the Aboriginal populations studied.
- Overall, immigrants have greater literacy challenges than the Canadian-born population. About 60% of immigrants rank below level 3.
- Canadians with lower literacy levels are more likely to be unemployed and if employed, to earn less.
- People with low literacy are more likely to report being in poor health.

You can access IALSS reports on-line at www.statscanada.ca or www.nald.ca. Find tools prepared by MCL at www.literacy.ca.