



Federal Literacy Facts

an update on literacy-related developments at the national level

Movement for Canadian Literacy

June 2003

Parliamentary Committee releases groundbreaking report on literacy

A parliamentary Committee has just released a groundbreaking report that draws attention to Canada's low literacy rates, expresses concern over the current lack of resources and public policy framework necessary to address the literacy challenge, and calls on governments to take action on a pan-Canadian literacy strategy.

The 100-page-report, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The need for a Pan-Canadian response*, was tabled in the House of Commons on June 12 by the Chair of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities.

Along with an overview of Canada's literacy challenge and its impact on Canada's social and economic future, the report provides 21 concrete recommendations on how the federal government can contribute to pan-Canadian literacy and numeracy skills development.

The comprehensive recommendations range from urging the federal government to take the lead on negotiating a pan-Canadian Accord on literacy and numeracy skills development with the provinces and territories, to developing an Aboriginal Literacy Strategy, to cataloguing a variety of ways the the federal government can invest in and support literacy with the community and on its own.

The comprehensive nature of the report, coupled with the fact that it originates with elected representatives from all parties in Canada's Parliament, makes it an important and influential development on the federal policy landscape.

Key Recommendations from the Report

- The federal HRDC Minister should meet with provincial and territorial Ministers to develop a **pan-Canadian accord** on literacy and numeracy skills development, which paves the way for increased federal investments.
- Develop a **federal literacy policy**, applicable to all federal departments. Review existing and emerging programs through a **literacy lens**, to ensure that they: advance literacy goals, support access to literacy programs, and promote clear communication with the public.
- **Increase the NLS budget** from \$28.2 million to \$50 million per year. One third of the increase should go to eligible projects for a multi-year period to assess the impact of stable core funding on the acquisition of literacy skills.
- Design an **Aboriginal Literacy Strategy** in consultation with the Aboriginal community, provincial and territorial governments. While this is being developed, immediately allocate \$5 million to a new Aboriginal Funding Stream. In addition, allocate \$15 million to Aboriginal Human Resources Development Agreements to fund Aboriginal workplace literacy initiatives.
- Encourage greater use of **prior learning assessment** for low literacy learners. Resurrect the concept of a "learning passport".
- Expand NLS support for **community learning and family literacy** projects.
- Increase spending under **Part II of the Employment Insurance Act** by \$100 million.
- Make literacy development a key component of ongoing efforts to **remove barriers to work and learning for people with disabilities**.
- Include **literacy research** in the mandate of the new Canadian Learning Institute.

Literacy community's strength influences Committee members

After following the Committee hearings closely, MCL is proud to report that our movement's strength, commitment, unity, and knowledge came through loud and clear. Committee members recognized our contribution, and also heard our message that the community cannot carry the heavy responsibility of advancing literacy alone! They recognized that the time has come for government leadership and increased support:

*"We are impressed by the hard work and commitment demonstrated by our witnesses to raise literacy levels among Canadians. But there is only so much that the literacy community can do, and we think that its capacity has been reached. Without **additional public and private sector investments** in this critical area of human capital, Canada will lose a major opportunity to improve the economic and social welfare of many thousands of willing participants who lack the basic skills to participate more fully in Canadian society."*

The all-party Committee reached this conclusion after hearing from 57 witnesses with an interest and/or expertise in literacy. Witnesses came not only from the literacy community, but also from business, labour, government and non-government organizations. As educators, community workers, researchers, bureaucrats, administrators, CEOs and union leaders representing a cross-section of Canadian society and all regions of the country, witnesses were united in their call for action on literacy. The value of our community's efforts over years came through in the unity and conviction of these voices.

For the complete transcripts from the parliamentary Committee hearings, log on to the parliamentary website at www.parl.gc.ca (Click Committee Business, >>> House of Commons Committee List, >>> Human Resources Development, >>> Evidence)

What's next: where do the recommendations go from here?

When Committee reports are finalized and tabled in parliament, the government has 150 days to produce a comprehensive response. As this timetable does not include the summer parliamentary recess, we don't expect to see a response to the Committee report until late Fall. Even then, it is important to keep in mind that governments are only *informed* by Committee recommendations. They are not obligated to act on them. The good news is that this Committee report may receive more attention than most. Here's why:

- HRDC Minister Jane Stewart herself asked the Committee to take on the literacy study.
- After two throne speeches and the federal Innovation Agenda consultations positioned literacy as a national priority, it would be difficult for the government to ignore this important parliamentary "blueprint" for action.
- Officials at Human Resources Development Canada have started developing the framework for a Canadian literacy strategy, and will need to take this input from Parliament into account.
- The Committee heard from dozens of witnesses whose testimony was compelling, consistent, and impossible to ignore.

Want more information?

- For the **Standing Committee report**, *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The need for a Pan-Canadian response*, go to www.parl.gc.ca (Click Committee Business, >>> House of Commons Committee Reports, >>> Standing Committee on Human Resources Development)
- For **MCL's input** to the Committee, including (1) MCL's written brief, *Strengthening our Literacy Foundation is Key to Canada's Future*; (2) a submission from MCL's Learners Advisory Network; and (3) transcripts from MCL's Committee appearance in February, go to www.literacy.ca (under Government Relations)