



# Federal Literacy Facts

*an update on literacy-related developments at the national level*

## Movement for Canadian Literacy

May 2005

### **Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey shakes things up!**

The much-anticipated Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) Survey, released by Statistics Canada on May 11, sheds light on Canada's literacy challenges.

According to the ALL survey, too many (four in ten) Canadian adults do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the ever increasing demands of our information-based economy and society. The survey found that 9 million of Canada's 21 million working age Canadians rank below level 3 on literacy tests - the level most experts say is necessary to meet everyday literacy challenges in the modern world.

The survey is generating media attention and public discussion. Since the release, literacy has been covered on the front pages and editorial sections of many of Canada's daily newspapers as well as on radio and TV. Along with the coverage have come questions. What do the statistics really mean? Why do the numbers matter? What are the policy solutions?

### **Release leads to diverse response**

MCL, and others in the literacy community, used the release as an opportunity to press for concrete action, especially action on a pan-Canadian literacy strategy. The media demanded explanations, but also highlighted the need for action. The reported response from federal officials was that the issues surrounding our literacy challenges are complex and the solutions elusive. Others raised questions about the intricacies of how the survey was conducted.

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### **Some ALL Highlights**

- 42% of Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the demands of today's society.
- There are fewer Canadians in the lowest literacy *level* (level 1) – 15% today compared with 17% in 1994. There are also fewer Canadians at the highest levels (level 4/5). However, these changes are not considered statistically significant.
- Average literacy *scores* have not changed significantly since 1994, except for the average score of the bottom 5%, which improved significantly (up 50 points).
- Low literacy undermines success in the labour market. Less literate Canadians earn less, and if unemployed, they're unemployed for longer periods of time.
- People who need training the most are least likely to access it. Government and business still tend to invest in training for those who are already highly educated.
- 35% of youth between the ages of 16 and 25 score below level 3.
- Parents' education level has a significant impact on their children's skill level. Canadian youth aged 16-25 who had parents with little or no education scored lower on average in 2003 than similar youth surveyed in 1994.
- Literacy skills erode if not used regularly.
- Canada ranks 4<sup>th</sup> of the countries compared in this study: behind Norway, Switzerland, and Bermuda but ahead of the USA, Italy and also the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon.

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Still others, like coordinators of the Festival of Literacies from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), used the survey as a launch point to create an inventive booklet that encourages the community and learners to “ask our own questions” about literacy. (See <http://www.literaciesoise.ca/IALLSActivityBooklet.pdf>)

### The stakes are high

Regardless of the differing perspectives that literacy community members and others bring to the debate about the ALL survey, one thing is clear – the findings have enormous potential to influence public policies around literacy in Canada. What’s more, the release of the ALL survey comes at a time when the stakes are high.

The federal budget allotted \$30 million in new funds to the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and committed the government to action on a comprehensive literacy strategy. With a minority government in Ottawa struggling to pass the budget *and* hang onto power, an election certain within the next year, and a new Minister at the head of HRSDC (see page 3), we need to work hard to ensure that these budget commitments remain intact.

In this regard, ALL may be the wake-up call that our leaders at the national and provincial/territorial level need to inspire action. Blueprints for action on literacy, based on widespread input, have been developed by the Movement for Canadian Literacy and also by an all-party parliamentary Standing Committee. The ALL survey may give our leaders cause to revisit these blueprints and to take leadership in coordinating a nation-wide response. The findings may also initiate discussions with our partners in the voluntary and social development communities, as the survey helps to draw connections between literacy and a broad array of social issues, including health, social equity and more.

### The ALL survey: What’s Next?

In the coming months, MCL will work with the community to determine how best to ensure that ALL findings support grass roots advances on literacy. We’ll ask important questions about how we should use and apply the lessons learned from ALL to help shape policy directions that truly support the field and support learners.

We’ll also gear up for phase two. In the Fall and Winter of 2005, the next phase of data will be released. This will include a much anticipated national snapshot that will dig deeper into the Canadian statistics (late October), and also provincial/territorial releases that will provide regional analyses (mid-December). Statistics Canada has renamed these upcoming releases the IALSS (International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey).

#### For more information on ALL

*Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey: Learning a Living* (full report):

<http://www.statcan.ca:8096/bsolc/english/bsolc?catno=89-603-XWE>

Statistics Canada *Daily* (summary report):

<http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/English/050511/d050511b.htm>

HRSD presentation on key ALL findings:

<http://www.nald.ca/fulltext/all2003/cover.htm>

MCL’s background material and press release:

<http://www.literacy.ca/all/all.htm>

ABC CANADA’s background material:

<http://www.abc-canada.org/>

Commentary on the ALL methodology:

<http://www.nald.ca/WHATNEW/hdlnenws.htm>

Watch for more discussion on the ALL survey in the next issue of MCL’s *literacy.ca*.

## **Belinda Stronach: New Minister of HRSDC – and literacy**

When federal Conservative MP Belinda Stronach crossed over to the Liberal Party, she secured a seat at the Cabinet table as Minister responsible for Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC). With this position, Ms. Stronach takes over from Lucienne Robillard and becomes the Minister with lead responsibility for literacy.

Ms. Stronach is said to be conservative when it comes to economic issues, but progressive on social issues. We don't know yet where she stands on literacy. However we do know that personally and professionally she appears to value education and training. On the personal front, Ms. Stronach is a member of the Dean's Council at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, and the Dean's Advisory Council at the University of Toronto. We also know that as recently as last Fall, Ms. Stronach rose in the House of Commons and called for a "fix" for our education and training systems. On October 8, 2004, she had this to say about the role of government in providing the right environment for competition and productivity:

***“This environment includes tax structures and support for research and development, but more important, a fix for our education and training systems to ensure that we have the skilled and knowledgeable workforce the country needs to sustain our quality of life.”***

Ms. Stronach is the MP for Newmarket – Aurora in Ontario. Along with taking on responsibility for HRSDC, she has been appointed Minister Responsible for Democratic Renewal. In this role, she will help guide the implementation of the recommendations that flow from the Gomery Commission's final report. Prior to political life Ms. Stronach was the President and CEO of Magna International Inc., one of the world's largest suppliers of automotive systems and components.

## **Canadian Council on Learning: Moving forward on an ambitious agenda**

The Canadian Council on Learning (CCL) has initiated an ambitious agenda to establish five Knowledge Centres (KCs) in various regions of the country by the end of 2005. Each of the KCs will have a distinct focus, including: (1) work and learning; (2) early childhood learning; (3) adult learning; (4) aboriginal learning; and (5) health and learning. The Council will use the KCs to fulfill its mandate to support a pan-Canadian learning architecture.

At this point, the organization of these KCs appears to be a hybrid of regional representation, community collaboration and pan-Canadian vision. CCL refers to the KCs as their “conduit to Canadians”. Although each KC represents one particular learning theme and is located in a specific geographic area, they are all intended to be national centres of excellence and expertise.

The Council is hosting separate development conferences for each KC. In April, MCL participated in the conference on the Adult Learning KC in Halifax. Literacy was well-represented. However, MCL has also made the case that literacy is an issue that is cross-cutting and, as such, literacy stakeholders should have a seat on the advisory boards of each of the five KCs.

This idea of literacy as cross-cutting seems to be gaining ground. Recently, in response to the ALL survey, CCL Director Paul Cappon said: “Literacy is a cornerstone of all aspects of learning and is therefore a cross-cutting theme for all areas of CCL's work, from early childhood learning through the structured school system and into the workplace and beyond.” For more information, go to [www.ccl-cca.ca](http://www.ccl-cca.ca).

### **Budget vote: does it secure literacy commitments?**

Numbers are important – in life and in politics! The recent parliamentary vote in support of the federal budget did more than delay an election; it may also have helped to secure hard-won advances for literacy. An additional \$30 million for the National Literacy Secretariat and a budget promise to advance a comprehensive literacy strategy might have been lost if the budget had not passed. However, in politics nothing is ever assured and the budget must still pass through a series of “tests” before the money can flow.

For example, the recent and highly dramatic vote in the House of Commons was a vote on the budget at *second reading*. Now the budget must be referred to the Standing Committee on Finance and pass there (possibly with amendments) before returning to the House for a vote at *third reading*. This vote would also be deemed a vote of confidence and has the potential of bringing down the Liberal’s minority government. After third reading, the Budget Bill would go through the same process in the Senate before returning to the House of Commons for royal assent. Since June 23 has been set as the last day the House can sit before rising for the summer, the budget might not wind its way through the system until Fall.

### **CMEC to host conferences on literacy**

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada, (CMEC) has approved the implementation of an action plan to address literacy. Look for two national forums, one on literacy and early childhood education to be held in Ontario in Fall 2005 and one on adult literacy to be held in British Columbia in Spring 2006. CMEC says the forums will help identify concrete ways to increase literacy significantly among children, youth, and adults, a key to enhancing all Canadians’ well-being and standard of living. MCL hopes that this will lead to further intergovernmental cooperation on the creation of a pan-Canadian literacy strategy.

### **Claudette Bradshaw reaches out to literacy community**

Over the past few months, as Secretary of State for HRSDC, Claudette Bradshaw has been criss-crossing the country attending literacy events and meeting with literacy stakeholders to gauge the extent of the challenge and to identify possible solutions. Her efforts to reach out to the community have been in support of the department’s mandate to develop a comprehensive literacy strategy.

Ms. Bradshaw has been a literacy champion for some time. Before joining political life, she worked in the community sector. In 1974, she founded the Moncton Headstart Early Family Intervention Centre. In addition, Mrs. Bradshaw has represented New Brunswick on the National Crime Prevention Council and was the Atlantic representative on the National Council of Welfare. This background in community development gives her a sound understanding of the connections between literacy and many other issues related to equity and social justice.

### **Election Buzz ...**

The Liberal Party’s recent by-election win in Labrador means that as long as the Liberals are able to sustain NDP support, they will be able to defeat a non-confidence vote in the House of Commons. This means that a Spring election is unlikely. Instead, Prime Minister Martin has promised to call an election after the report of the Gomery Inquiry is released in mid-December. For that reason, sources on Parliament Hill suggest that there is a high chance that Canadians will go to the polls in February 2006 (after the Christmas season is over). This would be the first winter election in Canada since February 1980, when Pierre Trudeau’s Liberals defeated Joe Clark’s Progressive Conservative minority government. Whenever the election is called, be sure to look to MCL’s website for useful election information and resources ([www.literacy.ca](http://www.literacy.ca)).