

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and
Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn
A Canadian Baseline Study
March 2009



Movement for Canadian Literacy

300-180 Metcalfe St., Ottawa, ON K2P 1P5 • Tel: 613-563-2464 • E-mail: mcl@literacy.ca • www.literacy.ca

Copyright 2009, MCL

Movement for Canadian Literacy
180 Metcalfe Street, Suite 300
Ottawa, ON K2P 1P5
Tel: 613-563-2464
Fax: 613-563-2504
E-mail: mcl@literacy.ca

Researched and written by:

Resources for Results

70 Bertmount Ave.,
Toronto, ON M4M 2X9
Tel: 416-461-7711
E-mail: janet.m.murray@sympatico.ca

Research Team:

Janet Murray, Principal, Resources for Results
Deanna Yerichuk, Senior Associate
Nick Murray-Smith, Research Associate

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Methodology.....	3
Findings.....	4
1. Perceptions of the economic downturn.....	4
2. Literacy is increasingly seen as a continuum of adult learning.....	5
3. Effects of the Downturn on Adult Learners.....	6
4. Observations about the current state of literacy programs and services in Canada	9
5. Additional perspectives regarding literacy coalitions.....	16
Conclusion.....	19
Appendices.....	22
1. List of Respondents	22
2. More on Methodology and Interview Questions	24
3. Summary of Respondents Perceptions to Key Factors.....	26
4. Composite Learning Index	30
5. Provincial and Territorial Overviews	31

Acknowledgements

Resources for Results would like to offer thanks to the many literacy practitioners and convenors who took time to talk to us and to reflect on our questions at the busiest time of the year. The thoughtful and often passionate responses from across Canada gave us a rich and complicated picture of what is happening to the field of Canadian literacy as we move into a worsening recession.

Research associates Deanna Yerichuk and Nick Murray-Smith completed a phenomenal number of interviews within a very short timeline. Their persistence and good humour made it possible to finish this research project efficiently, and gave it added depth and insight.

Finally, thanks to Lindsay Kennedy of the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) for her support and guidance during the process.

Janet Murray
Resources for Results
March 31, 2009

Ready or Not...

Introduction

Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) is the national coalition advancing literacy and essential skills across Canada. For three decades, MCL has provided a national forum and voice for literacy organizations, practitioners and learners across the country. In partnership with its member literacy coalitions from every province and territory, MCL supports the field through professional development, public awareness, research and capacity building. These supports are crucial to provincial and territorial organizations because they often lack the resources to take on these activities themselves.

In March 2009, MCL commissioned *Resources for Results*, a private research and evaluation firm, to conduct a baseline study to explore the effects of the recent economic downturn on literacy and essential skills programs across Canada. The *Resources for Results* research team interviewed 35 people (See Appendix 1) from across Canada who work in some capacity in the literacy and essential skills field. The purpose of the interviews was to explore the implications of the rapidly changing economic, social and political context for the field of literacy and essential skills.

While there are significant differences in the Canadian economic situation regionally, the interviews revealed some common perceptions and observations about the state of literacy across the country. As can be expected, the general reaction to the survey was that it is still “too soon to tell” what the full effects of the downturn will be.

By and large, respondents told us that they expect to see a deepening of the recession. They noted that they will have a much better understanding of its impact on the literacy and essential skills field within the next year or so, as the complex repercussions of the recession move through the economy, and as priorities for government spending are sorted out.

“It's still early days. It could be as long as three years before we see the full impact of the economic downturn.”

~ Blair Dimock, research director for the Ontario Trillium Foundation
London Free Press,
April 1, 2009

As noted above, there are significant differences in the Canadian economic situation from province to province. At this time, however, many respondents reported that the political, social and economic conditions and developments prior to the recession have thus far had more of an impact on the literacy sector than has the most recent economic downturn. These respondents spoke of the vulnerability of their own organizations and the field of literacy coming into this recession. We heard that a crisis is brewing in the field of literacy, and that the effects of the recession will likely further deplete literacy infrastructure and capacity while escalating demand for such services.

Three interdependent factors – diminishing access to funding and resources, declining capacity, and increasing demand – are converging in a ‘perfect storm’. Without substantial new money, supported by a well-considered and coordinated strategy both provincially and federally, capacity will not exist to support adult learners to weather the recession and succeed in our increasingly complex society and job market.

Yet amidst the gloom and doom, respondents acknowledged that this ‘moment’ also provides many opportunities to redefine and revitalize literacy in Canada. Across the country, respondents remain optimistic as they explore new roles, partnerships, approaches and diversified sources of funding in order to survive in this difficult context. Through the interviews, we learned that a profound re-orientation and restructuring of literacy is taking place, offering exciting new opportunities for those who can adapt.

Respondents made a series of suggestions about how to respond to this situation. Clearly, the problems identified have been long in the making, so people were fully aware that the best solutions would be grounded in a long-term, strategic approach.

Suggestion 1: Facilitate the development of a pan-Canadian literacy strategy

Suggestion 2: Prepare a clear business case for literacy and essential skills

Suggestion 3: Identify and support capacity building priorities of the literacy and essential skills sector

These suggestions are discussed in more detail in the conclusions section of this report.

Methodology

In March 2009, the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) commissioned *Resources for Results* to conduct a study to explore the effect of the recent economic downturn on literacy and essential skills programs across Canada. The purpose of this research was to conduct a baseline study of literacy professionals' perceptions, in order to develop a 'snap shot' of the current context of the field of literacy and essential skills, and glean some early insights as to how the recession will affect it. This paper is not intended to detail the provincial differences in economics, social development and literacy funding, but rather to offer a general overview of the present situation.

Our research focused on English language literacy and essential skills programs and services across Canada, although we interviewed respondents from a few organizations that promote Aboriginal literacy, French language literacy and ESL, in addition to English literacy.

The methodology was simple. Resources for Results designed and implemented an interview tool and conducted telephone interviews in every province and territory. The interviews explored three general areas (a list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix 2):

1. Changes in the economic and social context of literacy in each province/territory.
2. Effects on literacy learners, organizations and coalitions (with a holistic focus on the following effects: operational, programmatic, financial, social, and political).
3. Government response to the downturn, exploring the programs/strategies that Provincial and Territorial governments have put in place to promote literacy and deal with the rapidly changing economic context.

The research process had a tight timeframe and was conducted at one of the busiest times of the year for literacy professionals, many of whom were working on year-end deadlines and proposals. It was very difficult to line up interviews with people already stretched and stressed. In the end, however, we were satisfied that the interview process had captured an excellent cross-section of perspectives from the literacy field in Canada.

Findings

1. Perceptions of the economic downturn

Respondents told us that the effects of the recession have been felt differently across Canada. A number of communities in Alberta and Ontario have been exceptionally hard hit, while other areas including parts of Atlantic Canada, have experienced long-term, cyclical decline. Other regions have been somewhat cushioned to date (e.g. economies in the far north that rely heavily on federal funding). Still others like Saskatchewan are not yet out of the economic boom, but see the recession looming. (See Appendix 5 for brief overviews of the current context of each province and territory.)

Nevertheless, respondents across the country told us that they are bracing themselves for worse to come. Many respondents concurred that the global effects of the economic and financial crisis appear to have hit hardest in economies grounded in the resource and manufacturing industries (which have already been experiencing recessionary forces for some time). In other regions less affected, respondents predicted a lag time as the complex effects of the recession deepen: for example, as dislocated workers use up their Employment Insurance (EI), and as the unemployed migrate back to their home provinces.

“So far, there hasn’t been a huge effect – we seem to be a bit insulated. People who went out west are coming back either injured or unemployed and don’t have the skills to get a job [low literacy]. Our unemployment rate is going up – there’s an increase in the use of food banks.”

Many commented on the complexity of the economic, social and political picture, and were reluctant to speculate on future local effects. Nevertheless, this recession seemed to them to be different: for example, more companies are not just laying off workers, but are actually closing.

Many respondents noted that a profound global economic restructuring is occurring, and that while Canada appears to be less seriously hit than other parts of the world, we can expect devastating repercussions. They could not see where it might lead Canada in general, or literacy in particular, yet they were confident that the field is capable, given adequate resources and support, of meeting increases in demand and changing labour needs.

2. Literacy is increasingly seen as a continuum of adult learning

The interviews explored current perceptions of literacy across Canada. Literacy professionals hold a wide variety of opinions about how to define literacy, although all respondents were familiar and comfortable with the use of International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) Literacy levels. The majority of front-line and service support staff with whom we spoke, define literacy as a broad range of skills that allow people to participate in society and the economy.

A high number of respondents advocated a broader, more holistic notion of literacy. Many literacy organizations have generally accepted and adopted the terminology of 'essential skills'. Most respond to a wide range of interests expressed by adult learners.

Some felt that Canadians undervalue education and literacy, and many noted that negative perceptions of literacy create barriers between adult learners and the educational services from which they can benefit. They stressed the importance of creating a continuum of lifelong learning for all Canadians that might remove the stigma attached to literacy learners.

Some programs are therefore re-branding literacy programs as 'training' or 'skill building', which makes it more likely that people will attend. Many respondents also noted that the increasingly technological workplace requires higher literacy and skill levels, and they said that they continually have to 'raise the bar' in their programs.

Some respondents also suggested that literacy in its traditional service delivery form has not served learners as well as it might. Many said that they are in the process of re-conceptualizing their notion of literacy, adapting their approach and their role even as they identify new sources of funding and support to allow them to change and grow. These 'adapters' were the most optimistic and excited about the prospects and potential opportunities that the recession might present.

"... literacy levels have not changed over the past years, so something is not working..."

They have done this by:

- Broadening the scope of literacy and essential skills work to promote a range of adult competencies including: health literacy, institutional literacy (the ability to navigate complex systems), computer literacy, political literacy, and financial literacy.

- Finding new partnerships, and often better-funded entry points for the promotion of literacy and essential skills (Workplace-based training and other training programs driven by employer demand are good examples of these new entry points);
- Embedding literacy and essential skills into programs from other sectors including health and economic development.

3. Effects of the Downturn on Adult Learners

Literacy learners are extremely diverse, as are the reasons for their interest in pursuing literacy and essential skills upgrading. Most literacy learners are adults, although many family literacy programs include children and youth. Priority populations most commonly mentioned by respondents include: those recently unemployed, aging workers in precarious jobs, immigrants, youth, migrant workers, and Aboriginal populations.

“Many young people who left high school during the boom to secure lucrative work, have now found themselves jobless and without basic academic credentials to secure work in a very competitive job market.”

First Nations and northern programs are dealing with literacy in English, French and a multitude of Aboriginal languages and cultures. Aboriginal programs tend to have a very broad, culturally sensitive definition of essential skills, and must address a very wide and sensitive range of economic and social issues.

Language and literacy skills are central to economic and social progress, and urban programs are experiencing heavy demand for a range of literacy and essential skills programs by immigrants. At the same time, the lines between ESL and literacy programs are blurring, and literacy programs increasingly face the challenge of working with people from other cultures who do not have solid literacy in their first language.

How are adult learners being affected by the recession?

People with low literacy levels have great coping skills. They are able to work and function in society despite their low reading skills and their difficulties in processing information. However, problems often manifest themselves when working situations change.

Workers with low literacy levels experience increased vulnerability during a recession and are typically the first to feel the effects of cutbacks and layoffs. Respondents noted that literacy is a skill that must be maintained: “if you don’t use it, you lose it”; and this is what is happening to many workers. In many work environments adults are not required to read or write. When they lose their jobs they find their literacy skills are not sufficient to help them find new employment. Respondents also spoke of a ‘bumping effect’, whereby people with higher skill and literacy levels displace lower skilled workers as unemployment worsens.

Even at this early stage of the recession, literacy programs have seen an increase in demand from workers who have recently been laid off from their jobs.

“We’ve had three major closings recently. We estimate that 40% of the employees being laid off have no grade 12 diploma.”

Many respondents spoke of deepening poverty in their communities and how it is becoming more challenging for literacy programs and services to support the participation of adult learner populations who are living in poverty. During this recession, many literacy learners are experiencing a variety of problems, such as: increased housing insecurity; lack of access to food, difficulty of accessing social protection (e.g. Social Assistance); serious mental health and substance use issues; learning disabilities; domestic violence etc. Programs are anticipating that the costs of supports for adult learners to participate will continue to grow beyond capacity to serve low-income and marginalized adult learners well.

Front-line literacy workers were concerned that the poverty and social exclusion of many literacy learners would not be addressed by the employment-focused literacy and essential skills development strategies promoted by provincial governments to address the recession. They suggested that this could magnify the long-term factors at the root of Canada’s seriously low literacy levels.

“Many of our learners are still poor and now have fewer prospects of getting out of poverty through employment.”

The dynamics of demand for literacy programming are changing as the recession deepens

Respondents noted a strong correlation between economic hardship and growth of the perceived importance of literacy to adult learners, communities and governments. When there are layoffs, workers who want to upgrade or renew their skills go back to school. This pattern holds true for adult learners with a wide range of literacy levels.

As a result, demand for literacy and essential skills programs is expected to grow rapidly, just as in the last recession. Some provinces are experiencing sudden and dramatic increased demand, resulting in full classrooms and expanding wait lists. Other provinces see hints of increased demand, or are forecasting it for the future.

“We estimate that 200,000 of our city’s population have literacy issues and only 5-10% of people who need literacy support are accessing programs.”

Respondents agreed that the economic downturn presents an excellent opportunity to reach new literacy learners. Until recently, only a small percentage of people with low literacy levels actually sought out literacy and essential skills programs, so now it may be possible to broaden the reach of literacy programs. Yet literacy and essential skills programs are already overloaded trying to meet pre-recession demand levels. Organizations told us that they simply do not have the capacity to deal with projected growth levels.

“This recession is much worse than the ones in the 80’s and 90’s. People are in a ‘panic’ to upgrade their literacy skills.”

Some communities have seen a rapid shift from demand-driven to supply-driven literacy as the economy shifts from boom to bust. In the face of previous skills shortages, literacy was positioned as a base for increasing the skills of the labour force. It was demand-driven, as employers actively sought out new talent. Now, literacy is becoming supply-driven, as workers realize that they must upgrade their skills and be competitive in order to get new work.

In addition to the immediate demand for literacy programs and services, respondents predicted a demand lag for literacy skills that may delay the full impact of enrolment increases in literacy and essential skills programs. Respondents variously mentioned adult learners’ inability to judge the

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

adequacy of their literacy skills, and a tendency to avoid re-training until it becomes absolutely necessary. Laid-off workers postpone training in the hopes of immediately finding new work.

People come to training somewhat reluctantly and generally at a time when they are in dire circumstances and realize that their low literacy levels are limiting their employability. In the case of many community colleges, however, learners appear to be highly motivated, since they see the connection between gaining skills and getting jobs.

"[In our program,] demand has almost doubled for services in all locations. Our on-line program is at 800% [of originally expected] capacity."

"We haven't yet seen one [of the recently laid-off employees] walk through our doors for training. They seem to be waiting it out. Once the EI runs out, or worse, the mill actually announces permanent closure, we anticipate many will leave the community to seek out work elsewhere. We really can't anticipate how many will be involved in training."

4. Observations about the current state of literacy programs and services in Canada

This section looks at respondents' perceptions of the contextual factors facing literacy organizations as they enter the recession. It will simultaneously profile the effects on service delivery organizations and service support organizations (e.g. coalitions).

Despite reflecting marked differences across regions of the country, the commentary was surprisingly consistent about the effects of the downturn and other factors, even though these effects were felt to a varying degree depending on provincial funding scenarios and regional economic factors.

The context of government support for literacy

Respondents across Canada told us that the context of literacy funding over the past few years has had far more of an impact on the literacy field than has the recent downturn. Changes in the way that the federal government (and in some cases, provincial governments) treat literacy has

transformed the literacy landscape, leaving some organizations and regions fragile and vulnerable, while others feel optimistic about the future.

Furthermore, the signing of Labour Market Agreements is in various stages of negotiation and implementation across the country. Some respondents noted that these new agreements (once signed) may create new opportunities for literacy programming, but that in the interim, the negotiation and transition process has created delays and uncertainty in the provincial positioning of literacy.

“Literacy work is always arduous – a waiting game. Funding is something that we struggle with from year to year to year – it’s always been hard, and it’s getting progressively harder. I’m not sure I’d blame it on the downturn.”

Respondents reported that Provincial and Territorial governments have made significantly different levels of commitment to literacy in the past, resulting in a range of policy and funding contexts for literacy and essential skills programs and services across the country. Regardless of Provincial/Territorial funding levels, however, respondents generally agreed that none have invested sufficiently in the capacity of the literacy movement to be able to meet the current demand for quality literacy and essential skills programs and services, let alone respond to rising demand in a recessionary economy.

During the interviews, many respondents were expecting their Provincial/Territorial governments to bring down spring budgets that offered more resources for literacy and essential skills programs and services, particularly in connection to job re-training, and skills upgrading. At the time of this report, it is premature to say what those budgets will ultimately offer, although substantial new money has just been approved in Ontario and Manitoba. Some respondents noted recent or impending provincial cuts to literacy funding, and there were some who voiced fears that if the recession deepens, literacy would face serious cuts after initial stimulus spending.

A good number of Provinces and Territories are experiencing a period of policy change, partly due to longer-term provincial literacy consultations that started before the recession but have been accelerated in the desire to include literacy and essential skills programming in stimulus packages.

“[In our province] there have never been any solid provincial policies, no thinking about what this means to the literacy

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

system. There's no vision, no plan about what to do, and virtually nothing saved for a rainy day."

The Northwest Territories does have a long-term funding strategy for literacy, while both Manitoba and Saskatchewan are establishing literacy 'hubs' for workplace literacy. In Nova Scotia, the government recently moved literacy from the Department of Education to the Department of Labour, thereby putting a focus on adult learning and employment. Ontario has already implemented programming to support dislocated workers and recently increased its budget for literacy and essential skills programming.

The potential of a strategic approach to promoting literacy can be seen in British Columbia, where the government has made literacy a key focal point of its Olympic Legacy strategy, changing its Education Act in order to embed literacy into the mandate of School Boards and promote a community development approach to literacy. The BC government is offering incentives to establish community literacy tables that focus on stakeholder mobilization and community-based literacy planning.

"There have been shifts toward more integrated consideration of literacy – e.g. institutional – but literacy organizations are lacking the capacity to advance."

Respondents universally told us that more investment in literacy programming is required, but new money alone will not be enough to revitalize the literacy field. Respondents also agreed that a more substantial, long-term investment in program and staff capacity building will be required to ensure the sustainability of the field.

"It may prove difficult to reach our number one goal if we continue to fund programs a mile wide and one inch thick."

Many noted the patchwork of different federal, Provincial and Territorial literacy policies and approaches that have made it difficult to develop a coherent, strategic, nationally consistent approach to literacy. Federal literacy funding focuses on resource, research and network development, leaving the provinces to fund front-line programming and organizational delivery capacity. This division of responsibility has produced distortions in provinces and territories where there is little investment in literacy delivery, leaving gaps in programming coverage, human resources capacity and organizational continuity.

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

“There are gaps in funding. I worry that our doors will close – projects will grind to a halt. We’ve had to wait for 8-9 months for funding – we’ve had to find other jobs. Many literacy programs limp along until funding comes in.”

Government relations

As a result of these contextual factors, government relations work is increasingly important for literacy organizations. Most respondents saw the role of public funding as central to the long-term viability of literacy and essential skills organizations (with perhaps the exception of some western respondents who suggested that business should play the role of core supporter). Many spoke of a shift in the form and substance of relations with their Provincial/Territorial governments. Coalitions are moving away from the adversarial, activist approaches of the past, to take increased responsibility for building stronger, more positive communication and working relationships with government.

“We want to work in partnership with government rather than agitate against it. We want their initiatives to work—when government programs are successful we all benefit.”

Organizational capacity in the current funding context

Insufficient investment in literacy has created organizational overload for front-line literacy organizations, in the face of ‘flat lined’ budgets. Not surprisingly, urban communities with the most layoffs (particularly those in Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia) are experiencing the most dramatic growth in demand; however, most of the respondents we spoke to said that their programs are already operating well over capacity. Some told us that, as demand increases, organizations will not have the capacity to respond. Even if funding were to increase, they told us that it would take time to build the human resources and capacity to meet demand. Some further predicted an escalating rate of organizational failure for already weakened organizations as they move through the recession.

As we heard in the interviews, the literacy field is clearly entering this recession in a depleted state: program and service delivery organizations and coalitions alike face serious capacity issues. Many of these issues are mirrored across the social development sector, while some are particular

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

to the field of literacy.¹ Signs point to further loss of capacity if, as is expected, the recession deepens and spreads across the country.

A key factor affecting the capacity of front-line literacy organizations is their lack of access to core funding. These organizations mostly have to depend on short-term, fluctuating, project-based funding to support their literacy and essential skills programs. Such funding provides opportunities for both coalitions and service delivery organizations to expand their supports and services to adult learners, but with it comes increased risk. Funders rarely support activities indefinitely, so organizations always face the challenge of renewing funding to ensure the continuity of programs and initiatives.

Front-line organizations told us that they are facing much higher demands from their funders for administrative accountability, results tracking, partnership, professional development and networking, yet these activities are not typically funded.

“We’re being asked to partner, offer advice, take part in meetings; and our capacity is being stretched to the limit.”

A Human Resources crisis is already brewing in many organizations. The profound commitment of literacy workers and convenors cannot be emphasized enough. The sector benefits substantially from its dedicated literacy workers: many spoke of their work as a ‘vocation’, and have carried on with it in spite of negative conditions.

Yet staffing and volunteer capacity has been the most serious casualty of program under-funding in literacy programs and services. Respondents largely agreed that they are experiencing heightened staff and volunteer burnout in the face of growing demand, low salaries, weak benefits, job insecurity and an aging workforce.

“A lot of people are starting to realize that it’s not just a matter of pouring money into infrastructure development. [We] need to be looking at Human Resource components.”

¹ In the years leading up to the recession, the voluntary and educational sectors have experienced a range of trends and factors that have depleted their capacity to manage and deliver effective programming. We have included a chart in Appendix 3 summarizing respondents’ comments about the key issues and trends that have been and still are influencing their conditions of work and sustainability as literacy organizations.

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

“[Increased demand] has put enormous pressure on staff at various times for the physical demands of servicing far more people than time permits. The results are fatigue, less than perfect service, frustration, and, coupled with the inadequacies of employment programs, and failure of the system to succeed in achieving its stated goals.”

Literacy work is increasingly precarious and part-time, resulting in high turnover, loss of organizational memory, and a growing reliance on volunteer labour (for both administration and program delivery). Furthermore, in resource-based economies, the boom and subsequent bust over the past five years has created a ‘brain drain’ in the sector, as staff and volunteers are drawn off into other communities and sectors. We heard that these factors have depleted the depth and quality of literacy programs and services across Canada. This has created a double challenge as surging demand coincides with depleted delivery capacity.

“The poor practitioners involved in training! The same budget has been allocated to literacy for the past ten years – things are costing more – there are more learners and no new money. Some have had as much as a 300% increase in their services.”

On a more positive note – and somewhat paradoxically – other respondents noted the trend of increased professionalization in their organizations as they shift away from the traditional, charitable model of literacy delivery. We heard of organizations that have adapted to these difficult conditions and are thriving, as they pursue a more socially entrepreneurial approach.

Diminished fundraising

Literacy organizations across the board spoke of early signs that their independent fundraising efforts will be hard hit by the recession. Many noted cuts in funding by grant making foundations, corporations and various levels of government. Others mentioned reduced private donations and some told of government cutbacks at various levels. Smaller organizations said that they do not have the capacity to add fundraising to their already overwhelming workload. Not one organization spoke of having an up-to-date sustainability strategy.

“My suspicion is that funding will be harder and harder to come by.”

In a number of cases, coalitions predicted that revenues from fundraising would be much lower in the coming year due to the recession. For example, the Peter Gzowski Golf Tournament is a critical source of independent fundraising for them, and they predict the loss of major corporate sponsors for the event.

Innovation in response to a difficult operational context

The funding context has pushed many literacy organizations to adapt and innovate. The organizational landscape of front-line literacy is slowly changing, as cash strapped organizations seek solutions to under-resourcing. Some respondents said that they had regressed, returning to a heavy reliance on volunteer-driven programming, but many organizations are looking at new, socially entrepreneurial solutions. More strategic and adaptable organizations have been able to thrive and grow in the face of widespread cut backs, although it may be hard to judge by their example, since they appear to be the larger and better-resourced agencies in the field.

Organizations are re-conceptualizing literacy, re-branding' it in order to offer more appropriate programs and services to a range of literacy learners, while simultaneously building sustainability through the diversification of funding sources. Front-line organizations seem to be using a range of strategies, both to fund literacy and to survive as organizations. Some are bringing literacy to adult learners through new entry points, 'embedding' literacy in other social development fields including health, economic development, corrections, financial literacy, and IT. Others are combining literacy with holistic adult learning hubs that offer literacy learners a wide range of supports and services from which to choose. Some are working to develop relationships with employers to provide workplace literacy training and to improve fine-tuning of skills training and workforce development programs.

"Government money dried up in previous recessions. That's been our main reason for switching to private sector programs. It's naïve to base long term programs on government money because funding is likely to dry up."

Partnership

The current context is highly competitive as organizations vie for resources and recognition. However, the flipside of increased competition has been greater organizational collaboration and partnership – important survival strategies for organizations at all levels. While this is not a new trend, respondents told us that collaboration with a range of other stakeholders is becoming increasingly important for their organizations, offering many benefits including improved communication, shared administrative costs, increased access to funding and reduced overlap of effort.

“We’re seeking to manage by broadening partnerships and leveraging other sources of funds that can achieve more than one public policy purpose – training, health, corrections. You can’t live in a silo. We think lots of other people and players need literacy in their game plan.”

A few respondents noted that there has been more interest in mergers and new organizational structures. Others are reorganizing service delivery to respond to demand and reduce costs. Many are referring their program overflow to other, non-literacy social development and educational organizations.

“It’s all about networking. We are currently working with a number of organizations partly as a way of increasing funding and partly to deliver programs more effectively in concert with other organizations.”

Language minority literacy programs in Quebec (English) and Ontario (French) noted that they do not have access to the same social development networks and infrastructure as has the dominant language in their provinces. They cannot make referrals, or integrate their work into the operations of other organizations through partnership. As a result, some of these organizations are broadening the scope of their work to provide holistic services to adult learners. Smaller organizations in this situation tend to be more isolated and may rely on coalitions to connect them to support and peer relationships.

5. Additional perspectives regarding literacy coalitions

The aim of this section is to provide insight into the additional effects of the recession on provincial/territorial literacy coalitions. Most coalitions are member-based organizations that formally represent the interests of

literacy organizations (and, in some smaller provinces and territories, individuals). They offered us very diverse perspectives on the prospects of coalitions weathering this economic downturn.

"We've been drifting – it's time to get focused."

Coalitions across Canada have significantly different perceptions of and attitudes towards the implementation of federal literacy programs and policy. Many praised the federal government for providing multi-year funding, and while funding issues still linger pertaining to criteria and related restrictions, and the funding renewal process, respondents see the federal scene settling into a 'business as usual' mode that will continue unless there are further dramatic setbacks in the economy leading to deep cuts in funding.

Nevertheless, many are still adjusting to the changes in federal literacy funding. At least half of the provincial/territorial coalitions noted the federal funding context as a continuing source of anxiety, frustration and/or insecurity. Staff from coalitions at the beginning of their federal multi-year funding agreements expressed a sense of security coming into the recession. Those who were closer to the end of multi-year funding and/or those who had little provincial support said they were anxious about the likelihood and terms of federal funding renewal.

Quebec has a rare federal-provincial agreement on literacy, but ongoing negotiations over funding from the Federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) have held up the transfer of money to literacy coalitions. The Quebec situation is an exception due to the more complex relationship between that province and the federal government.

Attitudes towards, and capacity for, advocacy vary amongst the coalitions. We did note a clear trend towards the professionalization of policy work. The terms of federal funding a 'chill' has been placed on formal advocacy, so many coalitions are focusing on cultivating collegial, partnership-based approaches to influencing government policy and planning. Some coalitions, where managers have extensive government contacts and/or experience working with/in provincial governments, have become strong partners of and advisors to government.

Most provincial/territorial coalitions rely heavily on federal funding, which places them in a position of vulnerability. Yet many coalitions told us that it has been difficult for them to find the time and resources to diversify their sources of funding, and to develop sustainability strategies.

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

About half of the coalitions are young and relatively small, and do not have the capacity to undertake comprehensive fundraising and advocacy programs. A significant portion of the capacity and staffing of coalitions is funded on a project-to-project basis further increasing potential vulnerability.

Some smaller coalitions noted that they are very happy to be a part of a broader network of literacy professionals, all of which keeps them connected and in tune with new ideas and opportunities. Many commented that they would prefer to be working more closely within and between networks, but at present they have neither the time nor the resources to do this effectively.

Many respondents said that leadership is now more important than ever: vision and a strong sense of direction are critical. Among respondents, there was a sense of urgency and a desire for effective action. People in the field are looking to coalitions for leadership and guidance, and they have high expectations that aren't necessarily being met. Respondents also recognized, however, that coalitions are limited by a lack of resources and as a result, a lack of operational capacity to be more proactive.

Conclusion

Literacy is headed into a ‘perfect storm’

Three interdependent factors— diminishing access to funding and resources, declining capacity, and increasing demand for programs – are converging in a ‘perfect storm’ as the recession unfolds, and eroding the capacity for literacy delivery across Canada. Without substantial new money and human resources development, supported by a well-considered and coordinated strategy both provincially and federally, organizational capacity will not exist to weather this storm or to support adult learners to move through the recession and succeed in our increasingly complex society and job market.

“I believe that the constant pressure on adult learning centres will too soon result in an inability to attract people to provide this mostly volunteer service. The resulting collapse will be a direct result of the financial strangulation of these programs. The current economic situation is unlikely to affect these organizations in any positive way, and is most likely to have only negative effects.”

Respondents had many suggestions as to how the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) can prepare and strengthen the field for the increase in demand of literacy programs and services that is sure to come. Three general suggestions offer a compelling case for a proactive strategy to reposition and rebuild literacy in Canada.

Suggestion 1: Facilitate the development of a pan-Canadian literacy strategy

“I would like to see governments conducting more consultations with key players to plan strategies for funding and programming. Have literacy groups as partners ... and let them have a say in what that strategy looks like.”

MCL should engage stakeholders in a discussion to re-conceptualize literacy and essential skills in Canada and promote the integration of literacy into a holistic continuum of adult learning. Organizations will require this broad and sustained support to embed literacy and essential skills into a wide range of adult learning initiatives.

Strengthened communication and coordination is critical. MCL could provide a forum for ongoing discussion and learning both within the literacy and essential skills sector, and across sectors (including health, social and economic development), involving all key stakeholders. Such a forum would be well positioned to undertake a contextual analysis of the changing needs of adult learners and the literacy sector in Canada, identifying overlaps and gaps in programs, services and funding. The objective would be to create a strategic plan with clear mandates and roles for different stakeholders and different funding levels/jurisdictions.

“I have hopes that we can develop a pan-Canada literacy approach. We need something along the lines of the National Literacy Trust (UK): They provide a national view on every level of literacy.”

MCL could facilitate the adoption of a more consistent, commonly held conception of literacy and essential skills across Canada. A few respondents suggested that the Canadian Council on Learning’s notion of literacy be adopted nationally (the Composite Learning Index is an annual measure of progress towards life long learning; for further explanation, please see Appendix 4).

“The literacy field would benefit from more consistent treatment of literacy, and improved coordination, cooperation and communication between and within different levels of government.”

Suggestion 2: Prepare a clear business case for literacy and essential skills

It was suggested that MCL should draft a sample business case that literacy organizations can use to enhance support for literacy. This case should provide statistical evidence of the relationship between literacy and economic productivity, health, poverty, etc.

Respondents identified a ‘moment’ in which MCL can play a leadership role in promoting the literacy sector. It will be crucial to devise a plan to ‘market’ this business case in order to increase support for literacy from government, business and the broader community. It will also be important to address the stigma facing adult literacy learners, in order to convince Canadians that attending literacy and essential skills programs will improve their prospects.

Suggestion 3: Identify and support the capacity building priorities of the literacy and essential skills sector

There should be comprehensive investment in the literacy sector's staffing and operational capacity for both delivery and service organizations. Such investment will be vital to the sector's ability to absorb and manage any new literacy spending that may result from various governments' responses to the recession.

MCL can offer solutions to provinces and territories that are seeking to scale up literacy programs in order to respond to increased demand for literacy and essential skills programs. By making an inventory of the sectors assets and capacities, and then identifying capacity building priorities, MCL can plan and package appropriate, cost-effective strategies and initiatives to guide funders and coalitions in their efforts to support front-line organizations to meet rising demand. MCL can then begin to influence a shift in government resources to focus on the long-term development of the field.

“Coalitions need to be working together, strategizing together and learning from one another to build capacity overall.”

In addition to others' efforts to increase financial support for the literacy sector, MCL and provincial/territorial coalitions must increase their collaborative efforts to build the viability and sustainability of literacy organizations. They can do this by promoting the sharing of effective practices, by facilitating professional development and training, and by supporting members to diversify their partnerships and funding sources.

Appendix 1

List of Respondents

1. Lorri Apps, Executive Director, Literacy Partners of Manitoba
2. Helen Balanoff, Executive Director, NWT Literacy Council
3. Suzanne Benoit, Executive Director, coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes, ON
4. Lesley Brown, Executive Director, Ontario Literacy Coalition
5. Michelle Brown, Random North Development Association (Bridging the Gap: from Education to Employment), Newfoundland & Labrador
6. Kim Crockatt, Executive Director, Nunavut Literacy Council
7. Tracy Defoe, adult education consultant and researcher specializing in workplace education, BC
8. Julia Dodge, Director, Literacy Coordination, Development and Outreach, University of the Fraser Valley, Chilliwack
9. Ann Marie Downie, Executive Director, Literacy Nova Scotia
10. Barbara Gosse, Director Asset-Building Initiatives, Social and Enterprise Development Innovations, Toronto
11. Pam Gunnlaugson, Literacy Coordinator, Estevan Area Literacy Group Inc., Saskatchewan
12. Connie Jones, Adult Literacy Coordinator, Saskatchewan Literacy Network
13. Lindsay Kennedy, Field Development Officer, Movement for Canadian Literacy
14. Janet Lane, Executive Director, Literacy Alberta
15. Carolyn March, Project Coordinator, Quebec English Literacy Alliance
16. Lin Maus, Coordinator of Community Programs, Aurora College, NWT
17. Patti Moore, Coordinator of Quebec Literacy Working Group, Eastern Quebec Learning Centre
18. Denise Morley, Executive Director, Halifax Community Learning Network
19. Jeni Mutch, Project Coordinator, Workplace Learning PEI Inc.
20. Beth Mulloy, Executive Director, Yukon Literacy Council
21. Lambrina Nikolaou and Judy Snively, Adult Literacy Program Coordinators, St. Christopher House, Toronto
22. Catherine O'Bryan, Executive Director, PEI Literacy Alliance

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

23. Penelope (Penny) Pacey, Executive Director, Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick
24. Rachel Posch, Principal, Edmonton John Howard Society
25. Anne Ramsay, Executive Network Director, Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo-Wellington, Ontario
26. Heather Robinet, Manager, Literacy and Basic Skills Avon Maitland District School Board, Ontario
27. Dr. Linda Shoheit, Executive Director, The Centre for Literacy of Quebec
28. Janet Skinner, Executive Director, Labrador Literacy Information & Action Network (LLIAN)
29. Ron Torgerson, Program Manager, Saskatchewan Labour Market Commission
30. Denise Tremblay, Executive Director, Iroquois Falls Adult Learning Centre, Cochrane, ON
31. Carol Vandale, Executive Director, Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network Inc.
32. Caroline Vaughan, Executive Director, Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador
33. Lynne Wallace, Executive Director, College Sector Committee for Adult Upgrading (CSC), ON
34. Jeannette Wanchuk, Coordinator, Write Break Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Program, Alberta
35. Cynthia Whitaker, Executive Director, Literacy BC

Appendix 2

Interview Questions and Further information about our methodology

The MCL interviews were conducted over a ten-day period from March 16th to March 26th, 2009. The research team consisted of two senior interviewers (Janet Murray and Deanna Yerichuk) and a junior associate interviewer (Nick Murray-Smith). The team met on March 27th to review provincial/territorial findings, to analyse the context, issues and trends, and to draw conclusions.

The researchers interviewed 35 people from front-line literacy and essential skills organizations and their coalitions from across Canada, with representation from every province and territory. The interviews captured the perspective of literacy coalitions in every province and territory (15 interviews), and the front line perspective (20 interviews). The slate of respondents represented a broad range of types of programs, target populations, and approaches to literacy delivery. As a result, the interviews offered a fair balance of rural, urban and northern perspectives.

The interviews went well. Respondents were open, honest, and often passionate about the subject matter. In a few cases, they were initially reticent to speak, and fearful about possibly losing their government funding. The questions were well focused and allowed us to delve into the effects of the recession. In the one-third or more cases when respondents told us that it was “too early to comment” and those respondents commented generally on the current context of their work.

Movement for Canadian Literacy Survey Questions

The Movement for Canadian Literacy has commissioned *Resources for Results* to research and write a report that explores the effect of the recent economic downturn on literacy and essential skills programs across Canada. The priority is to identify the programs/strategies Provincial and Territorial governments have put in place to deal with the rapidly changing context.

1. Economic and Social Context

- Please tell me about your organization.
- How has the economic downturn affected your Province or Territory to date?

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

2. Effects on your organization and programming

- Have there been any direct effects on your coalition and/or your member organizations as a result of the downturn?
 - Financial effects
 - Operational effects
 - Social effects
 - Political effects
 - Design effects

- Are there any further effects that you will expect will happen as a result of the downturn?

3. Government response to the downturn

- What is happening at the Provincial/Territorial level that affects your work?

4. Other

- Are there any additional contacts or resources that you strongly recommend we look at?

- What is your overall assessment of the current context?

Appendix 3

Summary of Respondents' Perceptions of the Context of Literacy

Negative	Positive
Operational capacity and programmatic factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Declining operational budgets and capacity; Picture of long-term depletion of assets and capacity • Retrenchment – long-term adaptation to shrinking real budgets. Declining numbers of staff and stretching of services • Heavy reliance on project funding which only lasts a short while. Consequent inability to continue to work on program priorities. • High demand in the face of “flat lined” budgets • Long-waiting lists – already over capacity – demand higher than ability to respond – difficult to tell demand in some cases because organizations are not keeping waiting lists • Many don’t turn people away – sense that this lowers quality and depth of services • Lack of capacity for documentation and evaluation • Lack of sustainability planning • Lack of funding for Adult HS learning and high school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some moving towards shared infrastructure and administration • Lean operations, reduced overhead • Pockets of innovation – new partnerships, approaches • New ways of defining literacy and essential skills • Development of new resources and methods • Use of new technologies and distance learning • Many organizations adapting • Opportunity-driven work – social entrepreneurship • New forms of literacy and new emphasis – e.g. workplace literacy

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

Negative	Positive
<p>equivalency preparation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exclusion of levels 1 and 2 – less investment – falling behind – creates structural barriers to long-term progress • Dilution of quality and depth of services due to excess demand 	
Financial factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little time and resources to focus on fundraising • Lack of diversification of funding • High dependency on narrow sources of funding • Heavy focus on project funding • Lack of core funding • Lack of budget for program delivery – Federal funding focused on resource and network development • Some programs are entirely voluntary based on lack of budget • Lack of financial autonomy – many restrictions on terms and use of funding. <p>Funding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy is a low priority for some provincial governments • Federal funding builds in disincentives to fundraising • Focus on program development, research and sharing/networking – 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have learned how to operate efficiently with little resources • Shared services and resource sharing

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

Negative	Positive
<p>has created an imbalance – not enough funding for delivery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconsistency and unreliability of funding • Too little, too late – insufficient funding often delayed, resulting in lay-offs, erosion of services and stability and shut downs. 	
Human Resources factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aging workforce; Low wages and benefits • Not a power position – many literacy workers are women working part-time • High job insecurity – project-based funding; High turnover • Low capacity for staff/volunteer training and professional development • Difficulty in bringing workforce up to capacity • Jaded and pessimistic perceptions by many – they have seen this all before and despair of literacy ever being funded properly – have seen hard times • Increasing dependence on volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment and dedication of literacy workers: ‘labour of love’ • Strong methods and resources
Social factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased competition among 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased cooperation, sharing and

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

Negative	Positive
<p>organizations for funding and resources</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Isolation of smaller organizations • Weak connections to government 	<p>collaboration between organizations and with new stakeholders (e.g. workplace – unions and employers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased interest in community-development models in some provinces (e.g. BC and Sask) • New partnerships • Increased work with businesses and perception of business as a stakeholder • Increased collaboration and sharing
Political factors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Black October 2006 – funding cuts and their legacy of instability have been far more influential than recession at this point • Frustration with renewal of funding, gaps in funding cause lay-offs • Lack of capacity for advocacy – time, knowledge, connections • In some cases – antagonistic relationships with government • Inter and intra-governmental turf wars over jurisdiction and control – lack of coordination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Growth of government relationships in cases where organizations have skills, connections – some investing in building government relations capacity – others have staff with experience as senior bureaucrats • In BC, exciting changes in provincial investment in literacy – creation of a community-base and changing the education act to ensure that literacy is a priority for School Boards.

Appendix 4

Composite Learning Index

“The Composite Learning Index (CLI)² is an annual measure of Canada’s progress in lifelong learning. It is based on statistical indicators that reflect the many ways Canadians learn, whether in school, in the home, at work or within the community. The first index of its kind in the world, the CLI is a valuable measurement tool that recognizes how learning throughout a person’s life is critical to their success, the success of the community and the success of the country as a whole.”

Learning pillars:

Learning to Know

“Learning to Know” involves the development of skills and knowledge needed to function in the world. These skills include literacy, numeracy, critical thinking and general knowledge.

Learning to Do

“Learning to Do” refers to the acquisition of applied skills that are often linked to occupational success, such as computer training, managerial training and apprenticeships.

Learning to Live Together

“Learning to Live” Together involves developing values of respect and concern for others, fostering social and inter-personal skills, and an appreciation of the diversity of Canadians.

Learning to Be

“Learning to Be” refers to learning that contributes to the development of a person’s body, mind and spirit. Skills in this area include personal discovery and creativity, and can be acquired through reading, use of the internet and activities such as sports and the arts.³

² The Composite Learning Index is generated by the Canadian Council on Learning.

³ This information was retrieved from the Canadian Council on Learning’s website at:
<http://www.ccl-cca.ca/CCL/Reports/CLI/AboutCLI.htm>.

Appendix 5

Provincial and Territorial overviews

Resources for Results has prepared a series of brief overviews on the condition of literacy in the recession for each province/territory. Most summaries provide a short account of: respondents' perceptions of the state of the economy; the context of literacy; and prospects and priorities for the field.

We wish to caution readers that we were able to interview just a small number of literacy professionals in each province/territory, so the summaries vary in both form and depth depending on the responses we received, and we cannot claim to have captured the 'full picture'.

Alberta

Alberta is on the verge of a substantial economic downturn; only one of its seven large resource-based projects (representing \$85 billion) is going ahead. Labour has been in short supply for years, but this is no longer the case, and there may be significant increases in unemployment rates and demand for college and community-based adult education programs.

Literacy programming is not fully developed in Alberta, mainly because jobs have been so readily available for so long. This has contributed to high staff turnover in literacy organizations as staff tended to move on to better-paying employment, leaving the field with little expertise or knowledge retention. As jobs disappear and workers turn to community and college adult education programs, the system will not be able to handle the demand. One respondent pointed out that "if more literacy learners are being identified, we can't keep going with programs being offered: they are too small for too few, not as intensive as we need."

Some communities, such as Fort McMurray, have seen a significant slowdown in growth that has actually eased the pressures of the community. Some respondents found the provincial government very supportive of literacy programming, while others considered that it had little strategic direction, and in the face of government cutbacks they are not sure how literacy will fare in the

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

April 2009 provincial budget. Alberta's funding pool is shrinking: foundations have less to give or are closing up, and corporations are cutting back their community investment programs. One respondent said that the Alberta literacy sector is going to have to prepare for literacy to "be done differently. Literacy will need to be embedded into all of the other learning opportunities and training programs." Respondents seemed to suggest that it was up to employers rather than government to invest in the skills development of the Alberta workforce.

British Columbia

Literacy has recently become a focal point of Provincial government interest in BC, and the field of literacy and essential skills is in transition – evolving towards new forms of decision-making, program delivery and funding. The research team noted a split in perception amongst respondents about the prospects for literacy and essential skills programming in BC: some were optimistic about the future, and others took a more pessimistic view, based on their longer-term experience delivering literacy programs and services.

Over the past two years, there have been many exciting developments in Provincial support for literacy and essential skills. The BC provincial government has taken a bold, strategic approach, making literacy a key focal point of its Olympic 2010 Legacies Now strategy. It has implemented a two-pronged plan to build provincial infrastructure for literacy by investing in a community-building strategy, under the rubric of Read Now (a policy framework to promote literacy through a community-development approach). One part of the plan has been to provide funding to promote multi-sectoral literacy round tables. As a result 400 communities have initiated community discussions to set local priorities for literacy and essential skills. The second part has been to change the Education Act to embed literacy in the School Board mandate. By law, School Boards across the province are required to work in collaboration with community partners to prepare annual District Literacy Plans that identify literacy strategies for their communities.

While it is too early to tell how this new structure will work in a recession, some respondents were cautiously optimistic that these efforts would serve community-based interests more effectively. In general, community planning tables were granted \$10,000 (and in some instances more than this amount) for the planning phase. Implementation grants were also provided. In addition, last fall (2008), the Ministry of Education granted additional funding to each district to support the planning work.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

The province recently announced a cutback of 10% for funding to Community Adult Literacy Programs (CALP) for 2009-10. Some respondents were concerned about this cut, but the cut was an attempt to free up money being used within the CALP programs to allow for other literacy activities to be added. In addition to this shift of funding, the province is using labour market agreement (LMA) funds to develop labour market and workplace programs for low skilled adults.

The economic downturn in British Columbia has been quite severe, with firms closing, credit markets tightening and serious impacts on resource industries and real estate. Things are changing dramatically, and respondents talked about the early effects of deepening poverty. During the economic 'good times', learners were drawn away from literacy by the robust labour market, and will now probably return to literacy and essential skills programs as they lose their jobs.

Respondents noted that literacy organizations have adapted to the changing environment by seeking new sources of program funding, broadening partnerships and leveraging other sources of funds so they can provide programs and services to a wide range of learners (in terms of skill levels and needs). One trend is a move towards funding for workplace literacy from business and other sources. Organizations are also trying to break down funding silos and are working towards embedding literacy into other social and economic development initiatives.

Founded in 1990, Literacy BC is an independent, non-partisan, membership-based, registered not-for-profit organization. Through a variety of programs and services they promote and support literacy and lifelong learning. To help learners and others find programs they provide a toll free number and searchable database. They have extensive experience in designing and conducting custom research projects and provide training opportunities for people working in the field.

Manitoba

Manitoba has not yet experienced large impacts from the recession. Some lay-offs are happening in companies, while at the same time other large companies have landed large contracts and are hiring. Corporate community investment has noticeably declined, as companies move to protect their money in the face of looming recession.

Manitoba has an active and well-developed workplace program that has since been used as a model by British Columbia and Nova Scotia. Respondents anticipate that these workplace literacy programs will see an increase in demand

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

as people losing jobs realize that they need new skills in order to be employable in new areas. Respondents also predicted an impact on community-based literacy programs, as secondary industries that employ lower skills workers downsize or go under. Even now, literacy groups do not have capacity to meet current demand, so the situation will become much worse once the recession really hits.

Literacy Partners of Manitoba, the provincial literacy coalition, is moving the sector towards broader definitions of literacy and researching how to bring together networks that work with Levels 1-2 learners across different sectors. The coalition is developing an institute for literacy and learning that will act as a connector and hub for information and groups to strengthen literacy and build partnerships. Respondents said that governments should step in to support adult learners with low literacy levels, since workplaces do not have the capacity or money to educate these people. Moreover, little programming exists to support the growing number of immigrants and their families. One respondent said, "We're not sure our province is ready for the demand that we're facing [including from immigrants and low-level workers who are being laid off]."

New Brunswick

As with other Atlantic provinces, New Brunswick has been feeling the effects of the recession for some time; as resource industries suffer and manufacturing declines, the province is facing long-term hardship.

In March, the provincial government held a series of roundtables during which key stakeholders in the province were asked to identify their top 28 priorities for promoting self-sufficiency in New Brunswick as it prepares itself for the new economic landscape. One coalition respondent commented that "the top five [priorities] were unanimous, and all involved education and therefore literacy. Literacy was number three. We are therefore confident the government will be putting proper emphasis on literacy and education in the near future. This would be as a result of the economic downturn." At the end of March, the Provincial budget came down but it is still too early to see how stimulus spending will influence literacy.

The Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick (LCNB) is an umbrella organization for Anglophone literacy in the province. It does no direct delivery, but represents and supports the all key literacy stakeholders including: NGOs, tutors, learners, educators, business, labour, and all government departments involved with literacy.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

LCNB does not receive provincial funding at this time, although in late 2008 it received a grant to do a survey for the Department of Education to identify gaps, in order to find out how government and business could improve the return on their literacy investments. LCNB advised them to pool resources to support family literacy, and provide in-kind and/or financial support for networking and workshop sessions for family literacy. The province has not, however, acted on that advice at this time.

LCNB is gaining a reputation for working well with business and has been asked to contribute to a plan to train volunteer mentors to go into the school system at Grade Two or Three to tutor children in reading, in an effort to address the root causes of literacy in the province. This is a business driven initiative with the full support of two government departments. Respondents also noted an emerging interest in the measurement and evaluation of programs and business models.

Newfoundland and Labrador

Newfoundland and Labrador have faced so many economic challenges that the notion of a downturn seemed inapplicable: as one respondent commented, “Economic downturn? Do you mean the latest one?!” With the collapse of the fisheries and pulp and paper industries, the province has long been hard hit by recessionary forces. The growth of the oil and mining operations created a boom in production and employment, but with the drop in global production/demand, these industries have also begun to lay off employees.

Demand for literacy already exceeds program availability and it is likely that the end of the boom in the west and Atlantic will soon create a spike in demand for literacy and essential skills. Many laid off and injured workers who had migrated out west in search of work are now returning home on EI. They are already seeking upgrading, and demand will probably rise when their benefits run out.

The Federal funding cuts in 2006 seriously undermined literacy in Newfoundland. During the subsequent ‘re-funding’ process, many literacy programs were not granted new funding and closed permanently. Since that time, organizations have felt acute uncertainty about their funding and their viability. Provincially, Literacy is positioned in the Department of Education, but its Adult Basic Education program has not provided a great deal of funding. The provincial government initiated a provincial consultation process on Adult Literacy in 2008, and has not yet released its proposed strategic Adult Literacy plan. No one knows what to expect from that process.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

Newfoundland is also now working with the Federal government to devolve the Labour Market Agreement, which could also present a 'moment' to promote literacy funding. Respondents are hoping this might lead to policies more responsive to regional needs. But whatever the case, the current lack of core funding has pushed many organizations to rely heavily on volunteer labour. Given the rising labour required to meet government accountability expectations, smaller organizations are greatly stretched to meet their operational demands: one respondent told us that "unless the federal government changes, it's not a pretty picture and we'll have to find our own ways to do things."

The literacy sector has been coping with cuts and under-funding for so long that it has had to adapt in order to survive by collaborating in multi-sectoral partnerships and turning to new sources of funding. Literacy practice has been increasingly embedded into other social and economic priorities and programs, and some organizations have gone to the private sector for program funding. Some organizations greatly benefited by repositioning literacy and devising innovative practices. They are optimistic about their prospects during this recession, having built strong, collegial relationships with both business and government, both of which are interested in replicating their approach.

Literacy Newfoundland and Labrador (Literacy NL) is a grassroots network of individuals and community-based groups committed to advancing literacy and lifelong learning in Newfoundland and Labrador. Founded in 2006, it is a fairly new organization and holds one of the newest Federal 2 year multi-year funding agreements. As a result, it is fairly stable and has been putting as many resources as possible into building partnerships, cross-sectoral information sharing, newsletters and professional development for its struggling members.

Northwest Territories

The Northwest Territories (NWT) are somewhat buffered from the recession thus far, in large part because much of its funding comes from the Federal government. Yet the diamond mines (NWT's largest employers) have recently laid off staff and announced shut-downs that will last over several weeks.

The territorial college recently stated that it expects more demand for courses from people wanting to upgrade skills. Literacy initiatives in NWT define literacy very broadly to include a social/cultural understanding that involves traditional Aboriginal activities as a part of essential skills. This understanding of literacy is mainly due to NWT's complex literacy context: nine Aboriginal languages, plus

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

English and French. The territorial government has recently launched a ten-year literacy strategy, requesting and receiving increased funding from the territorial government for implementation. So far, government investments focus mainly on family literacy and adult literacy, and funding for community programs has generally remained constant.

Workplace literacy is less of a focus, and community groups do not have capacity or consistency in funding to establish effective workplace literacy programs. In fact, businesses have so far been the most hurt: a prominent mining company ran the one well-established and effective workplace literacy program, but this has recently changed. The mines have quotas of roughly 50% NWT Aboriginals, who will likely be among the first to be laid off because of their lower skill sets. As unemployment rises over the next couple of years, NWT will experience increased demand/pressure on the system for training programs. If the Mackenzie Oil and Gas Pipeline project goes through, it will create some jobs as well as provide a sizeable investment in funding to counter social impacts from the pipeline. Increased investment is required in programs targeting learners with lower literacy levels (Levels 1 and 2), in order to serve NWT's literacy needs adequately.

The NWT Literacy Council provides support for literacy development in all the official languages. They do this mainly through research, training, resource development and literacy promotion. The cornerstone of their work is community capacity building, so that community members have the skills to identify literacy issues in their community and develop solutions to these issues. A main focus of their work is family literacy, although they also provide support to adult literacy providers. At this point, the economic downturn has not impacted their work.

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia was not hit immediately by the recent downturn as other provinces. Over the past few years, however, there have been serious layoffs and plant closures (particularly in Cape Breton and in the Annapolis Valley). At this time the overall expectation is that the province will likely weather this recession well.

The recession has presented an opportunity for literacy organizations to promote the increased involvement of the province in supporting literacy. The collapse of the traditional economy (including farming, fishing, forestry etc.) has meant that many adults have found themselves out of work, and without the skills to compete in a more knowledge-based, technology-driven economy. They are also coming back from other provinces, such as Alberta.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

So far, there have been no major signs of the recession's effect on literacy. There have been no spikes in demand for literacy programs reported nor have organizations reported any substantial changes in their program operations or design. Respondents mentioned fundraising as an area likely to be hit, although they did not speak of any other serious effects.

The provincial government has not, in the past, invested sufficiently in literacy. A good but under-funded infrastructure exists; literacy workers want the province to do more for program funding. It is unclear what will happen. The province already has a substantial deficit, which will present long-term challenges, yet the coming devolution of the Labour Market Agreement could mean that more money will be invested in literacy. In spite of a sound delivery model, workplace literacy has long been underfunded and under-promoted by the provincial government.

Respondents were simultaneously optimistic and realistic about the future. The government has shifted responsibility for literacy from the Department of Education to the Department of Labour and Workforce Development, which will likely present opportunities for community-based and college-based literacy programs. It is not clear if the existing infrastructure has the capacity to respond to this growth opportunity as quickly as will be expected. Also, at the time of writing, the province was in the middle of an election campaign. Therefore, it is difficult to predict what will happen in terms of the funding and direction for literacy and essential skills upgrading for adults.

Literacy Nova Scotia (LNS) is a not-for-profit organization with a mission to ensure that every Nova Scotian has equal access to quality literacy education. LNS was formed in 1992 and provides a provincial forum for organizations and people to work together towards this goal. LNS has a long-standing, collegial relationship with the provincial government from which it has developed a number of important project-based initiatives to develop the field of literacy in Nova Scotia.

Nunavut

Nunavut has not felt the recession to the same degree as the south. While the mining industry has seen some layoffs, a substantial labour shortage persists in the Territorial government, Nunavut's largest employer. At the same time, the recently released Economic Outlook for Nunavut revealed a growing and significant divide between the haves and the have-nots, which respondents say is "causing significant social tension."

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

The Nunavut Literacy Council is increasingly being asked to partner, advise and present around the Territory, as literacy is becoming recognized as a priority. The Territorial government has an Adult Learning Strategy, although it lacks the money to implement it fully. Corporate investment in community literacy programs has dropped noticeably. For the future, more investment should be made in programming that supports learners with lower literacy levels, to fill out the current focus on workplace literacy programming. In particular, a Federal government investment in literacy programming will extend the effectiveness and reach of the literacy sector in Nunavut.

Ontario

The economic downturn has hit Ontario particularly hard. In southern Ontario, manufacturing and automotive sectors as well as support industries have seen massive lay-offs and closures. Meanwhile, northern Ontario has been dealing with the diminishing forestry sector for more than a decade. When one considers the forestry sector problems in the light of current economic conditions and the consequent slowdown in mining plus difficult financial times, the cumulative effect has extensive long-term consequences for people in northern Ontario communities. Major metropolitan areas in Ontario such as Toronto appear not to be feeling the economic downturn as intensely at this time as the rest of Ontario, although indicators such as food bank usage suggest that poverty is rising.

Overall, Ontario's literacy field appears to be receiving increasing recognition and support from the provincial government. In the most recent provincial budget (March 2009), the province announced an extra \$90 million investment in literacy over the next two years, and opened up the opportunity for workplace learning, an avenue that had been closed for over ten years. This money is desperately needed: all respondents, whether from school boards, colleges or community-based organization, rural or urban, reported an overwhelming demand on adult education and upgrading programs. Programs are filled beyond capacity, and many locations are now keeping wait lists. There are reports of staff burnout all around Ontario, as staff operate programs at over-capacity to accommodate as much demand as possible. Respondents also talked about lack of space and other resources.

Northern Ontario is dealing with a particularly exacerbated economic downturn. A respondent reported that few laid-off workers in the north have accessed community supports set up following job losses, and worries that as EI runs out for these workers, they will simply leave the community and seek work in other

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

places. “Many will be looking for jobs, not upgrading or training, in order to pay the bills,” said one respondent in a northern community.

Across the province, francophone organizations are struggling with increasing demand (particularly in urban areas), but do not have as many options in terms of partnerships and resource-sharing. As a result, they are collaborating more with other programs in the community, and some are initiating programs that broaden the definition of literacy and ‘embed’ it in social and economic development.

The provincial government’s Second Career Strategy was mentioned several times. Respondents found it a basically solid program that is failing its clientele because of weak implementation. The province has made some changes that have improved the system, but literacy providers want more attention paid to supporting foundational skills development that will ensure more successful completion of this program.

The OLC continues to work in conjunction with the Ontario government to provide informed advice to the provincial government on matters pertaining to literacy and skills enhancement. The recent acknowledgement of literacy and skills training in the 2009 Budget demonstrates the government’s commitment to literacy support in the province. The OLC, and other literacy stakeholders come together to consult with the government on spending priorities for 2009-2011.

Prince Edward Island

Thus far, Prince Edward Island (PEI) has not been greatly affected by the current economic situation because it does not have a manufacturing-based economy. Although there have not been a lot of job losses, consumers are more hesitant to spend due to the situation across Canada. It is likely that the lobster and tourism industries will not do well this coming summer, as people in harder hit areas see a reduction in their disposable income.

Respondents reported that literacy in the province is in a relatively stable situation. In 2008, the province introduced a new literacy strategy to help businesses to meet their increasing demand for skilled labour. As a result, businesses are setting up workplace learning centres. Some new government projects were introduced in 2008, and this increase in funding has supported adult upgrading, especially within government jobs.

Ready or Not...

Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

There have been no major effects on organizations as a result of the relatively stable economic climate. Literacy services are not in high demand in PEI, even though the province has among the highest populations of IALS Level 1 and 2 learners in Canada. Many adults at these levels do not self-identify. Although literacy services are not in high demand, practitioners told us they are struggling to meet this demand. If people, due to lay-offs, begin to enrol in literacy programs, the programs will be unable to cope with the increase in demand.

Respondents also told us they are still working to deal with the stigma attached to the word 'literacy'. They commented on the fact that learners are more likely to enrol in skills development programs which translate directly to employment.

The PEI Literacy Alliance noted that the current situation for its organization is more or less business as usual, while its fundraising events may not be as successful this year, reducing its flexible, discretionary funding that tops off its Federal funding and is so vital to its operations. The province provides some project funding and rent-free office space. The organization also noted more interest in creating a business case to promote increased provincial investment in literacy

Quebec

Respondents reported that Quebec has not been as hard hit by the recession as other parts of the country. However, there have been plant closures and lay-offs creating a rising demand for literacy and job re-training. It is too soon to tell what the long-term effects on literacy will be.

English language literacy in Quebec is a sensitive subject. The lines between mother tongue literacy, second language literacy and ESL have blurred as demand for combinations of these services rise. Language policy in the province has made it challenging to advocate for English language literacy.

Quebec has an entente with the Federal government which at times creates funding delays as obstacles impede negotiations. Currently, IFPCA funding is expected to be delayed at least one year. Officials from the federal Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) and the Quebec Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport (MELS) are in negotiations to renew a five year entente. Meanwhile some literacy programs and projects have been closed or postponed causing employee layoffs. When funding is reinstated, these organizations will need to rehire and rebuild their programs.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

Further, Quebec literacy organizations were hit hard by the 2006 funding cuts. Organizations are still recovering and the field is very vulnerable. Funding gaps have depleted organizational capacity as literacy groups struggle to raise funding from a variety of projects and fundraising activities.

The Quebec English Literacy Association (QELA), a minority language organization, relies heavily on federal funding and was immobilized by a recent funding gap. However, the future looks promising as a new multi-year stable funding agreement with OLES is allowing QELA to rebuild capacity and strengthen its partnerships and networks.

Saskatchewan

Saskatchewan is hearing about the economic downturn while still in the middle of a boom. Only in the second month of the new year has the province started to experience layoffs, mostly in the mining and potash sectors. As the recession hits, there will be a domino effect as hospitality and support services to the resource industries lose business and initiate layoffs. These workers are the most vulnerable and the first to be laid off. Northern communities are already starting to experience layoffs throughout direct and supporting industries.

Saskatchewan's literacy sector appears to be well developed and coordinated. Given the large Aboriginal population, some literacy initiatives work to bridge broader cultural, social and economic divides. The provincial and federal governments support literacy overall, although with the new business-focused Saskatchewan Party, some organizations in the sector worry whether literacy will receive continued support. Nevertheless, there are reports that the provincial government is in the midst of reorganizing internally in ways that will improve support to the field of adult literacy, so respondents were cautiously hopeful that literacy would remain a priority of the current government.

The Saskatchewan literacy field is currently operating at capacity and will not be able to handle the anticipated increase in demands for adult education programs as the recession hits the province. The provincial government is working to build community hubs (one-stop service providers for surrounding areas) for literacy and settlement, yet respondents reported a lack of funds for community groups to come together and plan properly.

Saskatchewan is experiencing an influx of immigrant workers, both from outside the country and also migrating from Eastern Canada. Respondents talked about the specific literacy needs of immigrant workers and their families, and the importance of investing in literacy programs that meet these needs. Federal

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn

literacy dollars cannot currently be used for program delivery and marketing, only for development, which leads literacy service providers to conclude that the money is not getting to the right places.

Yukon

The Yukon has not fully experienced the downturn yet; this is likely due to the Federal funding for the territory. For the past few years, there have been more jobs than people; this is just starting to shift. Recently housing prices have dropped and people talk about hanging onto their jobs, and some of the college campuses expect enrolment to increase as the downturn affects employment.

The Yukon Literacy Coalition was established only about five years ago as an independent coalition and the literacy sector is working hard and would benefit from more prioritized and/or significant investment from both the Territorial and Federal governments. The Yukon Literacy Coalition is launching a Family Literacy Center with many community partners in order to better to support family and community literacy throughout the territory. Yukon Government investment currently focuses on workplace literacy but it is hoped by stakeholders that family and community literacy will also become more of a priority, as it was in previous years.

Yukon literacy groups will continue to act as partners to work with the governments to identify priorities in spending and target initiatives effectively.

Ready or Not...
Perspectives on Literacy and
Essential Skills in this Economic Downturn
A Canadian Baseline Study
Copyright 2009, MCL

Movement for Canadian Literacy
180 Metcalfe Street, Suite 300
Ottawa, ON K2P 1P5
Tel: 613-563-2464
Fax: 613-563-2504
E-mail: mcl@literacy.ca