



Creating a National Literacy Action Agenda

Discussion Guide



Recent issues of *literacy.ca* have focused on literacy in relation to families, the workplace, and the community. Those of us who are learning – or teaching – adult literacy know that it is a complex issue that interrelates with many other social and economic factors. Perhaps that's why as a nation we have yet to come up with a coherent approach to this important foundation for learning throughout life.

In early 2001, the government of Canada launched a national initiative to address concerns that many Canadian adults do not have the higher literacy skills needed in the new economy. Since then, they have been consulting widely on skills and learning as part of what is now called the "Innovation Agenda". Throughout that time, MCL has also been working hard to see that adult literacy has the place it deserves in a national skills and learning strategy for all Canadians.

Government strategies and policies are not created in a vacuum. In this case, we are the ones whose work, whose lives and futures will be affected by skills and learning policies developed in Ottawa or in our provincial / territorial capitals. That's why it's important that as a field we are clear on what we need, what we can do ourselves, and what we should ask our governments to do.

One of MCL's goals this year is to develop a national Literacy Action Agenda in consultation with the literacy community. Once developed and approved, this Agenda can guide our advocacy, our partnerships, and our development as a field for years to come. In addition, it will allow the community to "speak with one voice" during the Innovation Agenda consultations.

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By participating in this process you will ensure that the policies MCL advocates are grounded in the realities of literacy learners, workers, and organizations. Even more ...→

importantly, you will be helping to build the foundation of a national literacy strategy that we can all get behind.

Within the literacy community, there have been a number of discussions on what needs to be done about adult literacy in Canada, and we have drawn on these to draft a preliminary *Literacy Action Agenda*. Now we need your help to make sure we “get it right”.

This special issue of *literacy.ca* has two parts, a draft *Literacy Action Agenda* and a tear-out *Workbook* for sending in your feedback. We look forward to hearing from you!

How to use this *Discussion Guide*

You can participate in this consultation on your own, with a group of colleagues, or with your students. If you wish, you can even respond in all three ways. Discussion with others who have different perspectives on the issues may lead to deeper reflection and richer responses.



- 1** Review the draft *Literacy Action Agenda* (cream paper, pages **1** – **15**), then glance over the *Workbook* (white).*
- 2** If you are organizing a group or classroom discussion, note the suggestions on pages **13** and **14** of the guide.
- 3** Once you /your group have thought about the questions and decided on your responses for each section, record them in the workbook. If responding as a group, the facilitator or “note-taker” should make sure the final responses reflect the consensus (see pages **13** and **14** in the guide).
- 4** See the back of the workbook for instructions on sending your responses back to MCL.* The deadline is November 30, 2002. However, the earlier we have your input, the more likely we’ll be able to incorporate it in our recommendations to the government as we participate in their Innovation Agenda consultations throughout the Fall.

* Please note that the draft Agenda is also available online with an interactive feedback workbook at www.literacy.ca (click on “Literacy Action Campaign 2002”).

Creating a National Literacy Action Agenda:

Overview



Some background on the Innovation Agenda

What we know of the federal government's Innovation Agenda is outlined in two discussion papers: Industry Canada's *Achieving Excellence* and Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC)'s *Knowledge Matters*. *Achieving Excellence* focuses on industry, productivity and competitiveness, while *Knowledge Matters* deals more directly with skills development and life-long learning.

Knowledge Matters focuses on four priority action areas: children and youth; post-secondary education; labour market development; and immigration. Although literacy is recognized throughout the paper, it is not addressed as a separate policy area, and is viewed primarily in relation to labour market development. Also, not much action is proposed on the part of the federal government, as literacy is under the jurisdiction of provincial and territorial governments.

Industry Canada and HRDC are engaged in consultations that are scheduled to wrap up in an Innovation Summit in November 2002. MCL and other national and provincial / territorial literacy organizations have participated in a number of roundtables, regional consultations, and "best practices" workshops. The Innovation Agenda consultation process provides an opportunity to raise awareness of literacy issues and encourage all sectors and levels of government to give adult literacy the in-depth attention it deserves.

For more detailed background on the Innovation Agenda and MCL's related efforts, refer to back issues of Federal Literacy Facts, under publications at www.literacy.ca. *Achieving Excellence* and Human Resources and Development Canada's *Knowledge Matters* can both be found on the Innovation website, www.innovationstrategy.gc.ca.

The need for a National Literacy Action Agenda

Canada is one of only a few industrialized countries without a national system for adult literacy / basic education. Literacy is related to economic success, population health, safer communities, better outcomes for children, greater community participation and social cohesion. But in Canada, 22% of adults have serious literacy challenges, and another 26% do not have the literacy skills necessary to participate fully in the “knowledge economy”.¹

The federal government’s Innovation Agenda initiative provides an excellent opportunity for governments and sectors to work together to develop a comprehensive literacy strategy. It’s important that we bring the collective knowledge and expertise of the literacy community to this process. The National Literacy Action Agenda we are developing will outline concrete policy priorities, goals and recommended actions for governments, other sectors and the literacy community. To build this agenda, we will draw on recent consultations and research, learn from best practices, and gather your ideas about what needs to be done to improve literacy in Canada. In the end we hope to have a “map and compass” to guide our work in the coming years.

Our objectives in creating the National Literacy Action Agenda

- to bring a unified literacy community vision to the federal government’s Innovation Agenda consultations and ensure that adult literacy / basic education is a component of any national strategy for skills and learning
- to promote the development of a high quality system for adult literacy / basic education that is national in scope, vision and standards, but flexible enough for provinces / territories and communities to identify their own needs and solutions
- to ensure that this system is backed up by policies, funding, infrastructure, and research
- to ensure that literacy services are accessible to all who need them, along with the supports necessary to enable them to participate

The ultimate goal of our National Literacy Action Agenda is to have a comprehensive national strategy for adult literacy and basic education within a larger national strategy for learning throughout life. Provision for adult literacy and basic education must be comparable to the K-12 and post secondary education systems in terms of legitimacy, recognition, infrastructure, and financial support.

1. International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) 1996

Proposed principles for the National Literacy Action Agenda

All priorities, goals and action steps in the evolving Literacy Action Agenda would be subject to a set of guiding principles:

- ***Broad vision of literacy:***
Literacy / basic education services must be available to any adult who needs them to achieve the goals they set for themselves at work, at home, and in the community. Our definition must encompass a range from the most basic reading and writing skills to the end of high school. Our solutions must range from very informal, community-based services to formal, credentialed systems. As well, we must recognize that literacy problems are often interrelated with issues such as poverty, injustice and abuse, and that as a society we must tackle these too.
- ***Community solutions:***
Communities must be allowed and supported to identify their own literacy needs and define their own solutions. As well, Aboriginal governments at all levels must be involved in developing literacy strategies for their peoples.
- ***Respect for culture and language:***
If possible, learners should have opportunities to become literate in their mother tongue. In the case of French Canadian and Aboriginal learners, this should be a right. Literacy programming and materials should be culturally appropriate.
- ***Prevention:***
Although our focus is on adult literacy, it is crucial that we ensure that children's chances in life are not limited by their parents' literacy barriers. Family Literacy programs are a key preventative approach to intergenerational literacy.
- ***Stakeholder involvement:***
Policies at national, provincial, and local levels must be responsive to the current and changing population of learners and potential learners, and must be developed and implemented in consultation with the literacy community.

Proposed components of the National Literacy Action Agenda

Our draft Literacy Action Agenda addresses five inter-related priority areas:

1 *Developing policies:*

We need to develop policies for advancing literacy in Canada that ensure increased resources and capacity.

2 *Building a high-quality adult literacy / basic education system:*

We need a comprehensive, flexible system of quality literacy services to meet a wide variety of needs.

3 *Ensuring access to the system:*

We need to address the barriers that prevent many potential learners from taking part in literacy training.

4 *Developing knowledge:*

We need to nurture a research base that will contribute to our understanding of literacy challenges, needs and solutions.

5 *Developing partnerships:*

We need all sectors of our communities and our country to commit themselves to building and supporting an inclusive, literate society.

Within each priority area we have proposed a set of goals. When the Agenda is fully developed, it will also include action steps related to each goal.

Our vision for adult literacy will require action by many players, including the federal government; provincial or territorial governments; national, provincial, and local literacy organizations; business and labour; other community partners; and individual learners and literacy workers. Keep this in mind as you prepare your responses about “what can be done and by whom”.

Priority 1:

Developing Policies



Why is this a priority?

Adult literacy has tended to fall through cracks created by the division of responsibilities between the federal and provincial / territorial governments. The federal government plays a role in developing policy directions and funding some literacy initiatives through the National Literacy Secretariat and other federal programs, but has only a very limited role in delivery. The provinces and territories officially have jurisdiction over this area, but with no national standards in place, provide widely varying levels of service delivery and access. Some provinces and territories have developed their own literacy strategies.

The Social Union agreement signed by the federal government and the provinces in 1999 could provide a framework for joint policy development in this area. In it, the governments committed themselves to (among other things) “promote equality of opportunity for all Canadians”; “ensure access for all Canadians ... to essential social programs and services of reasonably comparable quality”; “promote the full and active participation of all Canadians in Canada’s social and economic life”; and “ensure adequate, affordable, stable and sustainable funding for social programs”.

Literacy Policy Vision

Federal and provincial governments resolve jurisdictional issues and commit themselves to a pan-Canadian Adult Literacy / Basic Education strategy. Policies at national, provincial, and local levels are responsive to the current and changing population of adult literacy learners and potential learners, and are developed and implemented with the involvement of all stakeholders. As a result of these policies, Canadians across the country have the right to free literacy and upgrading to high school completion, regardless of age.

Literacy Policy Goals

- a** develop a national Adult Literacy / Basic Education strategy with input from all stakeholders
- b** resolve jurisdictional issues and develop a pan-Canadian agreement
- c** develop national standards and accountability systems in consultation with stakeholders
- d** develop appropriate provincial / territorial and local literacy strategies within the national standards and in consultation with literacy organizations
- e** ensure that the necessary infrastructure is in place to support the Adult Literacy / Basic Education strategy (this infrastructure could include national and provincial / territorial literacy organizations, resource centres, technology, etc.)
- f** ensure that policies around income security, social services, health, education, employment, etc. at all levels take adult literacy / basic education issues into consideration
- g** develop government clear language policies and practices to ensure that vital information is accessible to less-literate Canadians

Priority 2:

Developing a Quality Adult Literacy / Basic Education System



Why is this a priority?

Canada is one of only a few industrialized countries without a national system (or even strategy) for adult literacy / basic education. Instead of being treated as an important and necessary education subsector (like the K-12 and post-secondary systems), it has been marginalized, with a number of unfortunate results. There is wide variation in access and conditions across the country, the poorest provinces generally having the lowest access as well as the highest need. Few communities can provide a continuum from basic literacy to the end of high school. Literacy programs, workers and learners often have no security from year to year due to the lack of ongoing funding. Although most literacy workers are highly educated, wages and benefits are generally low and there are limited opportunities for professional development or advancement. Less than 10% of the Canadians who could benefit from literacy programs are being helped.

If we want to build a more literate Canada, we will have to build a system that has the capacity to meet the learning needs of the 22% (or more) of adult Canadians who do not have the basic literacy skills to participate fully in today's society. Building a quality system means not only setting up quality standards and evaluation frameworks, but providing the resources to support excellence – including infrastructure, training, research, technology. It is impossible to deliver quality services over the long term without secure ongoing support.

Delivery System Vision

A Canada-wide system of high quality adult literacy and basic education services helps adults in every community achieve their goals as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners. The system is comparable to the K-12 and post secondary education systems in terms of recognition, infrastructure, and financial support. At the same time, the system is flexible enough to allow provinces / territories and communities to define their own needs and solutions.

Delivery System Goals

Range of programs

- Ⓐ ensure that a range of high quality literacy and basic education services are readily available depending on community and learner needs, including
 - intergenerational (family) literacy
 - workplace and employment preparation literacy
 - literacy programs based in the learner's first language and culture (especially for French and Aboriginal learners)
 - functional / life skills literacy
 - informal (non-institutional) learning

Professional development, Quality standards

- Ⓑ develop the literacy field as a profession, with employment standards, opportunities for professional development (staff and volunteers), standards for (optional) certification of literacy workers, ways of sharing new knowledge and best practices, adequate compensation, and increased social recognition
- Ⓒ develop assessment and accountability strategies that support, rather than control, teaching and learning, and ensure that resources for meaningful program evaluation are built into program funding

Learner focus

- Ⓓ ensure that curriculum, materials, and teaching are relevant and responsive to learners' goals and needs, and that learners have input into program approaches and design

Technology

- Ⓔ ensure that up to date, appropriate technologies are built in to programs and that students have opportunities to develop their computer skills as well as their literacy skills

Infrastructure

- Ⓕ ensure that the infrastructure is in place to support quality programming and access

Priority 3:

Ensuring Access to the System



Why is this a priority?

In some areas, programs may simply not be available. As mentioned, access varies from province to province, and the poorest provinces generally have the lowest access as well as the highest need. Urban areas typically provide more opportunities than rural areas do. Few communities can provide a continuum for basic literacy to the end of high school, and there are problems moving between programs, education systems, and jurisdictions.

In other areas, there may be programs available, but they may not accommodate the learners' needs, other responsibilities, needs, goals or culture. Increasingly, resources tend to be concentrated on those most likely to succeed in the shortest time.

Even when programs are both available and appropriate, many students are unable to take advantage of them due to a lack of necessary supports such as quality assessment services; referrals to health, mental health, and other support and social service agencies; income support; books; computers; transportation; childcare; and specialized assessment and programming to meet needs of those with learning and other disabilities.

Access Vision

Across the country, Canadian adults regardless of age have access to high quality literacy and basic education services that respond to their realities, needs and goals, and these can be accessed when and where they are needed.

Access Goals

- (a)** ensure that a range of adult literacy / basic education opportunities is available and accessible
- (b)** ensure that Learners receive the supports they need to take advantage of learning opportunities
- (c)** develop positive public awareness messages to make potential learners aware of the learning opportunities available and encourage learning throughout life

Priority 4:

Developing Knowledge (Research)



Why is this a priority?

Adult literacy is a “moving target”. Our definition of literacy and our literacy statistics keep changing as the skills demands of the “knowledge society” escalate. The demographics and learning needs of the potential learner population are changing over time as well. Ongoing research is key to establishing policies, programs and practices that respond effectively to current and evolving realities.

A great deal of excellent research on literacy has been, and is, happening across the country. However, there has often been a disconnect between research and practice. The literacy community has had very little input into literacy research agendas and initiatives, and literacy research findings are seldom accessed and applied by practitioners. Fortunately some researchers are or have been practitioners, and there have been a few program-, practitioner-, and even learner-based research initiatives.

At a “Policy Conversation on Literacy Research” in 1996, participants identified the needs for closer collaboration between the research and literacy communities, the development of a “grounded” research agenda, and strategies for communicating research findings.

Knowledge / Research Vision

A range of research on adult literacy contributes to our understanding of literacy challenges, needs and solutions. Research findings are clear, accessible, and linked to the realities of practice.

Knowledge / Research Goals

- a** ensure that existing Canadian and international literacy research is catalogued and easily accessible
- b** identify changing research priorities on a regular basis, in consultation with the literacy community and other key stakeholders
- c** ensure that adult literacy receives increased attention and support from research bodies and funders.
- d** support a range of literacy research, including learner-based, program-based, and “action” research as well as academic research
- e** develop the research capacity within the literacy community
- f** develop ways and means of effectively communicating literacy research findings to the literacy community and to literacy policy-makers

Priority 5:

Developing Partnerships



Why is this a priority?

Even with increased government investment, we will not be able to achieve our goals without much wider societal buy-in and support. Countries that have higher literacy rates than Canada's tend to have a stronger "learning culture" that is part of the social consensus.

Because of the relationships between literacy and employment, income support, families, crime prevention, offender rehabilitation, youth at risk, and community economic development, partnerships with these and other social and economic sectors have the potential to help advance not only literacy but other important social benefits as well.

Partnerships can range from streamlining referral processes between community agencies, to articulation agreements to help literacy learners make the transition to formal educational institutions, to media groups supporting literacy campaigns, to sector councils such as the trucking or tourism industry working with literacy organizations to ensure that their workers have foundational skills, to major companies taking on literacy as a cause.

Community literacy partnership and "learning community" projects across the country have demonstrated the power of this approach.

Partnership Vision

An ever-increasing number of non-literacy organizations and institutions become aware of the benefits of addressing adult literacy, and become active contributors and supporters. All sectors become committed stakeholders in building a learning society.

Partnership Goals

- (a) help other sectors learn more about adult literacy, and how they can benefit and contribute
- (b) build a broad intersectoral alliance to increase the profile and strength of the adult literacy / basic education movement
- (c) increase cooperation between organizations to help learners access the supports they need to take advantage of learning opportunities
- (d) increase employer investment in learning opportunities and support services
- (e) establish agreements and mechanisms to enable learners to make effective transitions between programs, as well as to employment, community participation, and other areas of life
- (f) increase private sector investments in literacy and other lifelong learning opportunities

Holding a group discussion

If you are thinking of organizing a discussion group on the National Literacy Action Agenda, here are some things to consider before and after you sit down at the table.

Who does your discussion group include?

Try to invite at least 4 people (and not more than 12) who have a stake in adult literacy. If you are a group of peers (co-workers, the Board of Directors of a literacy organization, or a community group of “literacy colleagues” from different organizations), you will probably be able to jump right in to the discussion. However, if you are drawing in others (for example, literacy students or community partners from other sectors) you may need to do a little facilitation.

Preparation

- Schedule a time that suits everyone. You will likely need at least two hours of meeting time.
- If possible, choose a setting where you can sit in a circle to encourage discussion.
- Photocopy this *Literacy Action Agenda Discussion Guide* and *Workbook* or print it off from www.literacy.ca. Make sure each participant gets a copy at least a week before the meeting so they can review it at their own pace. You may suggest that they use their workbooks to make notes before or during the meeting. Remember that you’ll need an extra copy of the workbook to send the group’s feedback to MCL.

A Sample Agenda

- 1 Introductions:** If necessary, introduce yourself and go over the purpose of this discussion. (Review points on page 4) If participants don’t know each other, have a “go-around” of introductions. As an icebreaker you may want to ask participants to explain why they think this is important. At the same time, send a blank page around so people can leave their names and contact information for future follow-up.
- 2 Fine-tune the Agenda:** Go over the Agenda and decide how you want to divide your discussion time between the sections of the discussion guide (overview and four priorities).
- 3 Assign roles:** You will need someone to keep notes during the discussion, and to fill in a workbook to send to MCL on behalf of the group. You may also want someone to keep time.
- 4 Discussion:** Using the Guide, discuss the points under the first priority area. Spend some time talking about each of the discussion points before narrowing down the key points that you want to include in your group response. Taking good notes during the open discussion is crucial. Then, after the discussion, take a few minutes to agree on and record your group’s answers for the corresponding section of the Workbook. Repeat for each priority area.
- 5 Wrap up:** Allow a few minutes for final comments. The discussion may have given your group members ideas for follow-up. Thank everyone for participating. After the meeting, make sure the group’s responses are entered into the workbook along with your contact information, and send the completed workbook to MCL.

Additional suggestions for a classroom discussion

The directions above may need to be adapted considerably if your discussion will take place in a classroom situation. Most learners will not be familiar with how adult literacy is organized, who makes decisions about literacy policy, what MCL is, or why we would want to hear from them. For this reason you may need to do a bit of bridging. Your discussions may lead to some interesting research and learning about the larger picture if students get interested.

You don't need to address all the sections in the workbook. What's important is to offer people a chance to have their say about parts they can identify with. Again, you may have to do some bridging if learners don't recognize their issues because of the way they are presented in the guide.

We don't mean these directions to be prescriptive – just some steps you may want to consider.

- 1** First, review the document to familiarize yourself with it and to flag sections that may be of particular interest to the group and /or key ideas that may need to be explained.
- 2** Make a copy of the Discussion Guide and Workbook for each participant. These can also be printed off from the MCL website (www.literacy.ca).
- 3** Explain to students why their input is important (in a nutshell, literacy policy affects their lives, and literacy messages will carry more weight with decision-makers if learners have been involved in developing them).
- 4** Discuss / explain key vocabulary and concepts. Use this opportunity to have some general discussion about larger literacy issues before focussing on the Guide and Workbook. This activity could take place over several sessions. The MCL website has a number of resources that may come in handy, especially in the “Literacy Facts” and “Learners in Action” sections.
- 5** Using the Guide and Workbook, address the priority areas that are of interest to the group. Depending on the literacy level of your group, you may want to read parts of the discussion guide out loud, or have students take turns reading. After reading a particular section in the Guide, go to the Workbook and discuss the questions in the corresponding section.
- 6** Record the group's ideas on a flipchart or blackboard or encourage learners to take a turn at this task. Make sure all points of view are recorded, even if they contradict each other. Finally, narrow down the key points that the group wants to include in their feedback.
- 7** After the discussion, fill in a group copy of the workbook either in hard copy or using the interactive online version. Students who have the skills may want to help with this.
- 8** Students can also respond individually using either the hardcopy or the online workbook.

Next Steps

What's Next for the National Literacy Action Agenda?

While you are discussing and responding to the draft National Literacy Action Agenda, MCL will be reviewing the findings from provincial and territorial consultations that have already taken place to see if we can translate those regional and local findings to a national level. We will also consult key policy-makers, academics, and analysts from the literacy community and the broader policy arena as we develop initial recommendations to feed into the current round of federal government consultations on the Innovation Agenda. By next spring we expect to have a comprehensive, grounded National Literacy Action Agenda to guide our advocacy, our collaborations, and our development as a field for years to come.

In addition to helping develop a collective literacy community vision and agenda, you can respond directly to the federal government's *Knowledge Matters* discussion guide, online at www.hrhc-drhc.gc.ca/sp-ps/sl-ca/workbook/workbook_e.shtml.

What else is up?

In addition to our work together on this National Literacy Action Agenda, we hope you'll help us make the most of several other important opportunities to advance our cause this Fall.

- The Canadian launch of International Adult Learners Week (the week following International Literacy Day, September 8) provides an opportunity to highlight learners' achievements, build partnerships, and position literacy in the spectrum of adult learning. Even if you don't plan an event, you can tune in with your students and colleagues to the Adult Learners Week webcast on September 5.
- In early October, Human Resources Development Canada will hold a national Literacy Best Practices Roundtable. Although this event is "invitation only", your early feedback to the National Literacy Action Agenda can help guide the invited literacy community representatives (the roundtable will also include representation from other sectors).
- On Literacy Action Day 2002 (October 24) literacy representatives from across the country will meet with MPs and Senators on Parliament Hill to discuss literacy issues, as they have done annually for almost a decade. This year we will be seeking their support to ensure that adult literacy has a secure place in the government's Innovation Agenda. Please help by reaching out to your Member of Parliament this Fall, using resources from MCL's online Literacy Action Campaign 2002.

For more information on these and other action ideas and resources, go to www.literacy.ca (click on "Literacy Action Campaign 2002").

Coming events

September 8, 2002
International Literacy Day

September 8 - 14, 2002
International Adult Learners' Week
Information available at www.adultlearning.unesco.ca

September 26 - 29, 2002
Plain Language Conference
Toronto, Ontario
Check for details at www.plainlanguagenetwork.org

October 24, 2002
Literacy Action Day
Ottawa, Ontario
Contact MCL for details at 613-563-2464 or go to www.literacy.ca

November 4, 2002
Deadline for grant applications
for Valuing Literacy in Canada which is a strategic joint initiative of the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). Information at www.sshrc.ca/english/programinfo/grantsguide/literacy.html

January 13, 2003
Deadline for nominations
for the Awards of Excellence in Workplace Literacy. Contact the Conference Board of Canada for details at 613-526-3280 (ext. 277) or www.conferenceboard.ca/education/awards/literacy.htm



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The Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL) is a national non-profit organization representing literacy coalitions, organizations and individuals from every province and territory. Our mission is to be a national voice for literacy for every Canadian.

The *literacy.ca* newsletter is a vehicle for literacy workers and supporters to share information, ideas, resources and research on emerging literacy issues. We welcome letters to the editor, articles, photos and suggestions for future issues as well as feedback on what you find in these pages. The views expressed in *literacy.ca* are not necessarily those of MCL, its Board of Directors or the editor, but are published to stimulate discussion on a range of adult literacy issues.

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Celebrating
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as a voice for literacy
for all Canadians

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