

**A 10-year, Results-Based
National Literacy Action Plan
2006-2016**

**Prepared by the Movement for Canadian Literacy
in consultation with six other National Literacy Organizations:**

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Executive Summary

Canada's current "system" for adult literacy is best described as an uneven, under-resourced patchwork that reaches only 1% to 2% of the approximately 9 million less-literate working age Canadians who do not have the literacy skills necessary to fully benefit from, and contribute to, the economic and social development of their communities and our country¹. This shortfall is unacceptable and it is time to develop a concerted, national plan to address the serious literacy challenges in Canada. This fact was recognized in the February 2005 federal budget which clearly expresses the government's commitment to action on literacy.

This document outlines a 10-year National Literacy Action Plan (2006 to 2016) to begin addressing Canada's literacy challenges. It builds on the federal, provincial and territorial governments' expressed recognition of the literacy challenges; on the National Literacy Action Agenda widely endorsed by the literacy community in 2002-03², on the all-party parliamentary Standing Committee 2003 report on *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The need for a Pan-Canadian Response*; and on Minister Bradshaw's current pan-Canadian round of consultations on literacy.

The overarching vision for the National Literacy Action Plan is that in 2016, Canadians across the country will have access to free, high quality literacy training and upgrading to high-school completion, regardless of age. Success requires:

1. Reaching more learners by building on the quality programs that do exist and immediately increasing funding for the delivery of programs;
2. Developing a quality adult literacy/basic education system that is analogous to other pan-Canadian social systems, such as other education systems and the child care system;
3. Building a society that is inclusive of less-literate Canadians, for example, enabling less literate Canadians to more easily access understandable health information, avoid workplace injury, exercise their voting rights; and increase their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways whether or not they choose to attend formal programs;
4. Deepening our knowledge about literacy challenges and solutions, and transferring that knowledge into programming and delivery; and
5. Engaging all sectors in building a more literate, more inclusive society, in particular those whose work brings them into contact with less-literate Canadians.

We suggest that Canada attempt to raise the literacy skills of 1 million learners over the 10 years of the Plan, and that the incremental funding necessary to achieve this is in the range of \$5 Billion. This document proposes a results-based Action Plan for the application of these funds and the ensuing results and contributions to the improvement of societal outcomes.

¹ Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL) 2003

² National Literacy Action Agenda <http://www.literacy.ca/govrel/agenda.htm>

1. Introduction and Recommendation

Canada's literacy community has been working for over 25 years to advance literacy in Canada and to make the issue a priority for policy development and action. In recent years, the federal government, provincial and territorial governments, and representatives from business, labour and the community sector have all identified literacy advances as an important and necessary Canadian priority. In the 2001 and 2002 Speeches from the Throne, the federal government made a commitment to work with the provinces and territories and the voluntary sector to develop a national literacy strategy, as part of a comprehensive Innovation Agenda. In June 2003, an all-party parliamentary Standing Committee released *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. The February 2005 federal budget clearly expresses the government's commitment to action on the issue of literacy.

The National Literacy Organizations recommend that the Government of Canada build on this Action Plan as the cornerstone for a more literate and productive society.

2. The Need for Action

We have serious literacy challenges in Canada: according to Statistics Canada, 15% of Canadians aged 16 to 65 (3.2 million) do not read well, and an additional 27% (5.8 million) do not have the literacy skills necessary to fully benefit from, and contribute to, the economic and social development of their communities and our country³. In total, this represents 9 million working-age Canadians.

Only a small percentage of these Canadians are in training programs to improve their skills. There are huge gaps in learner reach and program capacity, and Canada's current literacy infrastructure is not equipped to fill these gaps. As a result, access to literacy services varies widely depending on location and personal circumstances. This is unacceptable in a nation that prides itself on its quality of life and its belief in social equity.

Traditionally, the literacy community has been left to address the literacy challenges alone, with insufficient, short-term funding and too few professional supports; and without the benefit of a coordinated national vision and strategy⁴. As a society, we can no longer afford to ignore this urgent reality. Addressing Canada's literacy challenges will pay off in terms of the most pressing issues of our time: the labour market and the economy⁵, children's outcomes, population health, community development and safety, immigrant settlement, social cohesion, and more.

³ *Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Statistics Canada / OECD, 2005

⁴ According to the Canadian Council on Learning (Lessons in Learning series, September 2005: *Raising the Score: Promoting Adult Literacy in Canada*), "Perhaps most limiting of all are organizational factors, the paucity of adult learning resources and the absence of a coherent and cohesive system of adult learning."

⁵ According to the C.D. Howe Institute (Commentary No. 217, October 2005: *Public Investment in Skills: Are Canadian Governments Doing Enough?*), "...a country's literacy skills rising by one percent ... is associated with an eventual 2.5% rise in labour productivity and a 1.5% rise in GDP per head. ... Moreover, the results indicate that raising literacy and numeracy for people at the bottom of the skills distribution is more important to economic growth than producing more highly skilled graduates."

3. The Purpose and Scope of this Action Plan

The National Literacy Action Plan spans 10 years (2006 to 2016). It recommends activities to be undertaken in the initial three years (2006 to 2008) of the Plan and describes the results that will be achieved over the duration of the Plan as a consequence of those activities. It is assumed that the initial activities, based on performance results, will evolve in accordance with a planned adjustment strategy that will allow for the application of lessons learned and innovative improvements to the Action Plan over time. It also assumes that delivery services will remain on an ongoing basis throughout the Plan (2006 to 2016). Hence any references to costs associated with the Plan are inclusive of activities that would occur over the ten years. These actions will lead to measurable improvements in literacy levels and contribute to the improvement of societal indicators over the next ten years and beyond.

The scope of the Action Plan includes:

1. Organizing and administering a more robust and streamlined pan-Canadian literacy governance infrastructure;
2. Building sustainable delivery capacity and capability;
3. Delivering more and more appropriate literacy services to more learners; and
4. Activities designed to improve social inclusion of Canadians with literacy barriers.

This plan does not provide details about the way in which services should be delivered to learners. The specificities of delivery will vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction, and even from community to community. However, the federal government has a pivotal role in investing in and supporting provincial/territorial delivery systems that build on the foundations that already exist, though under-resourced – at the community level. In addition, the federal government can develop "literacy-friendly" policies in areas of federal jurisdiction that impact less-literate Canadians – for example within the Employment Insurance system. We believe that the pan-Canadian literacy infrastructure we propose will contribute to the strengthening of a quality adult/basic literacy education system that is essential to meet our country's literacy challenges.

4. Overview of the National Literacy Action Plan

4.1 Defining Literacy

Adult literacy programs have existed in Canada for more than a century, yet the issue was virtually invisible before the first Canadian literacy survey in 1987. A century ago, literacy was understood as the simple ability to read and write. The majority did not attend high school, yet most were nonetheless able to make a living, raise their families and participate in community life.

Nowadays literacy has a much more relative definition. For example, the International Adult Literacy Survey defined literacy as "the ability to understand and use printed information at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential". Obviously the degree of ability needed to "achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" today differs from what it was a century - and even a decade - ago.

By the most up-to-date measures we have, 15% of working age Canadians are at the lowest literacy skill level (level 1), and 27% are at level 2; with level 3 being the minimum skill level considered necessary to succeed in today's economy. In other words, a total of 42% of working age Canadians are at risk of falling behind. The range of skill level, learning needs, and personal circumstances in this 42% is enormous.

In today's world, the scope of literacy training that can realistically be accomplished through a "charity" model is not enough to meet the needs either of individuals or of our economy. As noted above, the delivery system is neither far-reaching enough, nor adequately resourced, to meet the current need. We need a range of solutions, from informal one-to-one tutoring at the learner's own pace; to community-based programs that integrate literacy development with parental support, employment preparation, life skills, etc.; to high school upgrading; to "bridging" to further training in the formal systems. This is what "adult literacy" means today.

4.2 Vision

“In 2016, Canadians across the country have access to free, high quality literacy training and upgrading to high-school completion, regardless of age.”

Specifically:

- The literacy infrastructure has become a recognized, organized, and adequately-resourced system, building on the values of grassroots and popular learning and other elements already in place;
- National standards of governance, reach, quality and accessibility exist and are embedded in F-P-T agreements and accountability frameworks; and
- Governments are committed to providing literacy services and training in the English, French, and Aboriginal languages.

4.3 Overarching Principles

All priorities, goals and activities forming the National Literacy Action Plan are subject to a set of overarching principles. These principles might also form part of the foundation for inter-governmental accords negotiated between the federal, provincial and territorial governments.

Broad view of literacy

Literacy / basic education services are 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 of literacy ranges from the most basic reading and writing skills to high school completion, and a range of options is available, from informal, community-based services to formal, credentialed systems. Our strategies include addressing other social issues that impact on literacy development.

Community solutions

Communities are supported to identify their own literacy needs and define their own solutions. Aboriginal governments are involved in developing literacy strategies for their peoples.

Respect for culture and language

Governments are committed to providing literacy services and training in the English, French, and Aboriginal languages. Wherever possible, learners have opportunities to become literate in their mother tongue, and programming is sensitive to the culture and realities of the learner.

Prevention

Family and intergenerational literacy programs are widely available to help ensure that children's chances in life are not limited by their parents' literacy barriers.

Stakeholder involvement

Policies at national, provincial, and local levels are developed and implemented in consultation with literacy learners and educators among other stakeholders.

4.4 Contribution to Societal Outcomes

The National Literacy Action Plan will contribute to the following societal outcomes.

By 2012 there will be a sustainable, diverse, and thriving adult literacy / basic education system. This will be evidenced by number and range of programs, stability of funding; lower turnover in the literacy profession; increased participation rates in adult literacy programs; and increased learner retention and graduation rates.

By 2014, as an outcome of this successful system, society will have become more literate. This will be evidenced by improved literacy survey results; increased use of Internet and communication technologies; and increased rates of enrolment in post-secondary education and other training. Other factors possibly influencing the achievement of these outcomes include development in rural communities, advancements in the Internet and communications infrastructures; and the cost of higher education.

Between 2014 and 2016, higher literacy rates will contribute to creating a more productive society. This will be supported by using evidence of established causality between levels of education and income, employability, employment, and crime. Additionally, the GDP can be influenced over time by higher literacy, education and employment rates⁶.

Between 2014 and 2016, higher literacy rates will contribute to creating a healthier society. Education and net income have been established as clear determinants of health and it is on this basis that this outcome will be measured.

Between 2014 and 2016, Canada will be recognized worldwide as a premier learning country. This will be evidenced by Canada being ranked by the OECD on par with a benchmark country, such as Sweden. Leading indicators will include the coverage and integration of literacy-related programs and services within all sectors of society.

⁶ Source: *Literacy scores, human capital and growth across fourteen OECD countries*. Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Statistics Canada 2004

5. Strategic Pillars

In order to contribute to these societal outcomes, the Action Plan proposes four strategic pillars:

1. Developing a Quality Adult Literacy/Basic Education System;
2. Addressing Barriers to Learning and Social Inclusion;
3. Developing and Transferring Knowledge; and
4. Developing Partnerships.

5.1 Developing a Quality Adult / Basic Literacy Education System

This pillar aims to build a Canada-wide system of high quality adult literacy/basic education services. Like the K-12 and post secondary education systems, the adult literacy system will have strong infrastructure and financial support. At the same time, it will be flexible enough to allow provinces/territories and communities to define their own needs and solutions.

One key to this system is an intergovernmental accord between the federal government and each of the provinces and territories, which establishes priorities, standards, and increased investments for the provision and support of literacy services. In particular, the federal funding envelope must be large enough to ensure that all jurisdictions are motivated to come to the table, and agree to common principles, standards, and accountability frameworks that enhance provincial and territorial literacy delivery. Overarching principles outlined in section 4.3 could provide the underpinnings for the intergovernmental agreements.

Activities will focus on:

1. Ensuring the viability of a strong federal literacy agency that has the capacity, resources, and mandate necessary to administer and provide strategic direction for the National Literacy Action Plan, across jurisdictions and federal departments⁷ - YEAR 1 and ongoing;
2. Developing and securing intergovernmental accords and funding frameworks -YEARS 1, 2, 3;
3. Developing system governance (system purpose, design, roles and responsibilities) – YEARS 1 and 2;
4. Building system infrastructure and operational viability (support for existing delivery and infrastructure organizations, development of targeted literacy strategies, evaluation measures) – YEARS 1, 2 and 3, and then ensuring implementation and ongoing sustainability;
5. Increasing awareness of and access to the system (public awareness and outreach strategies, reducing barriers, articulation and bridging) YEARS 2 and 3, and beyond.

⁷ A revitalized National Literacy Secretariat with the mandate to work beyond HRSDC should be the nucleus for this new agency.

5.2 Addressing Barriers to Learning and Social Inclusion

It is a fact that for various reasons some Canadians are not able to, or choose not to, attend literacy training programs. These people still have the rights to vote and to have a voice and a role in their communities, and the needs to provide financial and other support for their children, and to take care of their families' health. However, our society operates in ways that create unnecessary barriers to their exercising their rights and responsibilities. This pillar aims to remove systemic barriers that prevent less-literate Canadians from contributing to and benefiting from Canadian society. Key to this pillar is creating a federal policy mix - and a system of interdepartmental cooperation - that supports both social inclusion and access to learning.

Activities will focus on:

1. Removing systemic barriers from all federal government policies and programs (implementing recommendation #2 of the Standing Committee Report) - YEARS 1, 2 and 3; and
2. Working with other sectors to integrate literacy with other social issues - YEARS 1, 2 and 3 and beyond.

5.3 Developing and Transferring Knowledge

This pillar aims to sustain the development and transfer of a range of knowledge that build our understanding of adult and family literacy challenges, needs, and solutions. To be useful, research findings must be clear, accessible, linked to the realities of practice, and integrated in the development of policies and practices.

Activities will focus on:

1. Building the research infrastructure (research purpose, needs, roles and responsibilities) – YEARS 1 and 2;
2. Building a dynamic research agenda (priorities, intelligence, resources, stakeholders) – YEARS 1, 2 and 3 and beyond;
3. Disseminating knowledge (delivery channels and media) – YEARS 2 and 3, and beyond.

5.4 Developing Partnerships

This pillar aims to engage increasing numbers of organizations and institutions beyond the literacy community in becoming committed to addressing adult and family literacy and to building a learning-society.

Activities will focus on:

1. Renewing the federal partnership policy (vision, action, protocols) – YEARS 1, 2 and 3;
2. Working with other sectors to integrate literacy with other social issues, as in Pillar 2 - YEARS 1, 2 and 3, and beyond.

6. Logical Links Between Activities-Outputs-Outcomes

The progression between activities, outputs and outcomes over time is presented in **Annex 1**. Indicators for measuring success are presented as well. It is premature and inappropriate at this time to propose targets for most of these indicators because current benchmark information is not available.

7. Resources

As there is currently no common definition or funding framework for literacy in Canada, it is next to impossible to compile pan-Canadian expenditures on literacy infrastructure and delivery. This lack of robust financial information is an example of literacy information shortfalls that speak to the need for a National Literacy Action Agenda and Plan.

Our Action Plan calls for an injection of funds in each strategic pillar; ongoing funding for sustaining these pillars; and funding for the delivery of literacy services to raise literacy levels in Canada. The Plan does not go into great detail about the precise level of funding required, but it does recommend that a federal funding envelope be assigned that would drive progress on Federal-Provincial-Territorial Accords and multi-year Funding Frameworks, which are key activities planned in Years 1 and 2.

For some guidance around the level of investment necessary, we can look to the Government of England's⁸ national strategy for improving adult literacy, launched in 2001. That strategy aimed to improve skills in 750,000 adults with an investment of £1.5 billion over three years. The strategy was then enriched by a further £1.6 billion over five years to reach an additional 750,000 learners. Canada's bilingual, aboriginal and multi-cultural profile is different than England's and impacts on the costs of developing and delivering targeted literacy strategies across this vast land. As our challenges are greater, we might project somewhat higher costs over the long term. As a start, we suggest an initial campaign targeting one million learners with an investment of at least \$5 Billion over 10 years.

If the government of Canada chooses to make a significant investment of this order, the benefits will be exponential. Literacy gains of individuals have social and economic benefits for them, their extended families, their communities and our economy. We know from international comparisons that countries with stronger "learning cultures" are also more prosperous and more equitable.

It is important to emphasize that much of the investment must be dedicated to strengthening delivery capacity and increasing access to literacy services across Canada. Significantly increased support for front line delivery is essential to creating a more literate Canada.

⁸ Skills for Life: The national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills" launched in 2001.

8. Stakeholders

The feasibility of the Action Plan is contingent upon important contributions by various literacy stakeholders. All sectors of society will benefit from enhanced literacy and should therefore be engaged in its development and/or implementation. Please see **Annex 2** for a preliminary (but not exhaustive) list of literacy players and stakeholders.

9. Next Steps

This Action Plan has been developed from the perspective of the national literacy organizations, based on the National Literacy Action Agenda endorsed by the wider literacy community in 2002-03. As key stakeholders, literacy community members are committed and ready for ongoing engagement in defining needs and creating solutions.

Literacy is a very complex issue, interconnected with a range of other social, economic, and educational issues, and solutions will need to be adjusted as we go along. There are no quick fixes! We look forward to working with the government and other stakeholders as together we refine and implement a successful pan-Canadian literacy action campaign.