

**Brief to Senate Standing Committee  
On Social Affairs, Science and Technology**

**Re: Hearings on Literacy**

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## **Introduction**

We want to thank the Senate Standing Committee on Social Affairs, Science and Technology for inviting Canadians to participate in the ongoing national discussion on literacy and its impact on education and employment skills in Canada.

The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. is a federally incorporated, non-profit service organization which fills the crucial need for a bilingual single-source, comprehensive, up-to-date and easily accessible database of adult literacy programs, resources, services and activities across Canada. NALD is an award-winning service that provides access to its on-line library through the World Wide Web, to people in all parts of Canada, and indeed around the world. NALD was established in 1989 to serve French and English literacy communities across Canada. It has existed in its current model, as a World Wide Web-based information and resource distribution system, since 1995. NALD connects with major literacy organizations and advocacy groups in communities, schools, and local government departments across Canada. It also links with other services and databases in North America and overseas. These major partners help to extend the NALD network more efficiently to smaller, more specialized service groups and program deliverers in both remote and urban areas. In this way, NALD levels the playing field in an often resource-poor adult education environment. The NALD website can be found at [www.nald.ca](http://www.nald.ca) and at [www.bdaa.ca](http://www.bdaa.ca).

The organization has had a steady growth in both the depth and breadth of services provided and in user following and activity.

In the fiscal year ended March 31, 2001, 1,005,621 users accessed the site, viewed 7,027,192 pages, and downloaded 100,529 documents in PDF format. These numbers have increased significantly over the years. In the fiscal year ending March 31, 2006, there were 9,151,477 visits to the site by people who viewed 32,776,599 pages of information and who downloaded 4,418,195 documents in PDF format.

## **The Future of Literacy**

From the days of the Reading Camp Movement at the turn of the previous century until the present day, literacy training has been built on a solid base of passionate, dedicated and often volunteer trainers and teachers who affect life-changing influence on the lives of adult learners across this vast and often diverse country. However, in spite of this strong beginning, the need for literacy training only grew greater with the passing of years. The Newstart Program, created under the 1967 Adult Occupational Training Act, inadvertently revealed that there remained a substantial number of Canadian adults who lacked the literacy skills needed for them to qualify for retraining.

Despite early efforts, the second International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) concluded that low literacy levels persist. Why is it that the numbers of people facing difficulty remain high in spite of significant public and private funds dedicated to literacy training and promotion?

The answer may lie, in part, in the 2003 report of the Standing Committee on Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities, which envisioned “...a Canada where everyone reads and writes; where all children have people who read to them every day; where people who have difficulty reading and writing feel valued and supported; where language is plain; where literacy organizations have the resources to serve the literacy needs of their communities; where literacy in all its forms is celebrated and supported; and a Canada where a pan-Canadian literacy strategy facilitates the accomplishment of all this.”<sup>i</sup>

Within this vision is a belief that the ability to read and write well is a basic right of every person in Canada. Not only is it a basic right, but it is the key to participation in the democratic process and civic affairs, to learning new skills and accessing jobs and better employment, and to leaving a legacy of literacy to families. But the achievement of this vision will require that all Canadians look into the future through a literacy lens. Leadership that focuses on the learner, creative enterprise, extensive and effective networks and partnerships, and strong support systems and organizations will be of primary importance.

There is a need for literacy programs throughout the country to be systematized into a pan-Canadian action plan. In its response to the 2003 Standing Committee Report, the Government of Canada made a clear commitment to provide a leadership role in fostering a concerted effort to address literacy issues in our nation – by engaging “partners in discussions to work towards a pan Canadian strategy on literacy”.<sup>ii</sup> That commitment was severely tested last September when the federal government cut funding to literacy groups. The future for literacy programming is bleak unless the government not only restores resources to the important organizations that were affected during the cuts – but more importantly, is serious about implementing a pan-Canadian literacy strategy. That strategy must be all-inclusive; that is, any person with a learning need must be able to enter the program at their point of need – and then progress to move into the workforce or further education programs. Additionally, they must be able to return to the learning cycle whenever their workplace or life situation requires.

A key component in the development of such a strategy, as indicated in the 2003 report, is that the federal government partner with provincial and territorial governments to ensure that adequate resources are available to meet the literacy and numeracy skills development needs of learners across the country. Two factors were cited: education falls under the constitutional jurisdiction of the provinces and territories; and because each region of the country has unique literacy needs, flexibility is needed to respond to federal/provincial/territorial priorities. The committee further affirmed the leadership role of the Government of Canada, recommending that such local and regional flexibility be bolstered.

The current system is sporadic and lacks any real coherency and connectivity. For example, a specific delivery model or program might prove to be highly effective in a certain community or region. But the lack of coherency within the system hinders other communities and programs throughout the country from benefiting from the positive experience. An effective national

strategy must build coherency among the provinces and territories, as well as among researchers, practitioners, learners, and other stakeholders and partners. Most importantly, federal leadership is required to pull all the pieces together and ensure the strategy is implemented.

### **Consolidation of Funding**

Since its creation in the late 1980's, the National Literacy Secretariat has made funding available for literacy activities in Canada through specific funding streams. Through its federal-provincial/territorial funding stream, it sponsored projects, which are directed to regional or local needs. Through its national funding stream, it supports projects in partnership with a variety of non-governmental and voluntary organizations, both literacy and non-literacy groups as well as business and labour organizations. However, the elimination of the funding for the federal-provincial stream has resulted in a drastic decrease in funding resources being available to respond to local needs and which complement provincial/territorial programs. The partnership created almost twenty years ago between the federal government, the provinces and territories and literacy organizations has been broken. It is not just a question of a lack of funds for local projects, which of course is a significant loss to the country, but also of the capacity of the federal government to partner with provinces and territories towards building coherence in the literacy system. Removing \$ 17M from the literacy system has significantly hampered Canada's capacity to improve the literacy skills of adult Canadians.

The federal/provincial/territorial funding stream, which facilitated rapid response to local needs, is in need of more funding, rather than less, if we are to see a pan-Canadian improvement in literacy function. The current funding cuts eliminated or drastically reduced funding where it was most needed.

Any examination of current funding consolidation must be conducted with some consideration of what has been accomplished in the past. NLS funding has facilitated

- Research, which has articulated literacy needs and how to better address them.

- Networking of people with expertise in providing training, learning, and literacy services.

- The networking of provincial/territorial literacy coalitions has resulted in the clarification of literacy issues and the provision of leadership to service providers and deliverers.

- Distribution systems which enable resource developers to distribute learner materials to any person, in any place, at any time, in both official languages, and at no cost to the user, through the World Wide Web.

- A means for organizations not traditionally involved in literacy to become involved - organizations such as the Canadian Public Health Association, the Conference Board of Canada, the Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters, or the Canadian Labour Congress.

Not only were funds cut, but also conditions that are more stringent were attached to funding. These onerous conditions have resulted in smaller local organizations not being able to access funds, while others have found themselves spending more money administering the projects than actually providing services to literacy learners. This represents lost opportunities and lost time that could have gone to providing services that benefit learners.

In addition to this consolidation of funding, the Government of Canada chose to meld the National Literacy Secretariat with several other programs so that the focus is now on literacy, learning and essential skills. The National Office of Learning and Literacy has a broader mandate than just literacy - so assurances are needed that a priority will be given to literacy.

- . It is our belief that funding consolidation could have a positive impact if (and only if):
  - More money were made available, especially in the federal/provincial/territorial funding stream.
  - Literacy partners and practitioners were able to access funding more easily.
  - Less stringent reporting requirements were developed while meeting accountability standards.
  - Funding for literacy were maintained for literacy activities and not allowed to cover all areas of learning, no matter how important those other areas might be.
  - Literacy funding were preserved for literacy activities.

### **Role of literacy organizations in promoting education and employment skills**

Non-governmental Literacy Organizations have been the backbone of literacy effort in Canada from the early days of the Reading Camp Movement until the present. Highly skilled and dedicated people, whose driving passion is to advance learner literacy skills and witness the dramatic life change that results, lead these organizations. These organizations fall into one of two main categories: direct service delivery and infrastructure support.

Direct service delivery organizations deliver teaching and training to the learner, in both formal (institution-based service delivery) and informal (community-based service delivery) settings. This includes the workplace and workplace learning organizations as well.

People have both social and civic needs for literacy, workplace literacy, and essential skills. These skills are needed to enable people to enter the workforce, to move within the workforce in response to changing workforce and workplace needs, and to advance within the workplace. Literacy organizations are uniquely positioned to assist Canadians in achieving learning and employment objectives. In addition, the important role families play in developing and instilling literacy values in the next generation must be recognized. We support the recommendation of the 2003 Parliamentary Committee in calling for an expansion of both community based learning and family literacy partnerships.

A cohesive, coherent, and effective national literacy strategy cannot exist or be implemented without strong and effective infrastructure support, which can be provided efficiently and effectively by the literacy community's non-government organizations. Provincial/territorial literacy coalitions provide professional development of practitioners, give learners a voice in the literacy process, and provide overall leadership within the sector. Solid and comprehensive infrastructure support provides a vital foundation leading to improved resource availability and facilitation of practical applications of current research. Infrastructure support enables the engagement of the private sector in supporting literacy activities both financially and with in-kind donations, and raises awareness by engaging people and making literacy issues more

visible. In short, the supporting infrastructure serves as a track on which the literacy train carries the needed training to the learner in the most effective and cost-efficient manner possible.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

The National Adult Literacy Database Inc. recommends that the Senate strongly urge Cabinet to:

1. Recognize that literacy is not simply a children's education issue; it is an adult issue that is a limiting factor in civic and democratic participation, personal and national economic prosperity, and, ultimately, the literacy function and success of the next generation.
2. Renew its commitment to provide leadership and work with partners to develop and implement a coherent pan-Canadian literacy strategy, which recognizes both the uniqueness and commonality of regional needs.<sup>iii</sup> Any national strategy must clearly commit the federal government to providing ongoing leadership and resources which are adequate for implementation.
3. Repair the broken partnerships with the provinces and territories that are so vital to build capacity and coherence in a truly pan-Canadian strategy by:
  - a. Restoring and increasing funding to the Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program, including (but not limited to) the federal/provincial/territorial funding stream, in a manner consistent with recommendations contained in the body of this brief.
  - b. Reinforcing its support of literacy organizational infrastructure, which is critical to the delivery of literacy skills training to learners throughout Canada. A strong and effective infrastructure is the necessary foundation on which a pan-Canadian strategy must be executed and through which literacy services are delivered.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Longfield, Judy (2003). *Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. Retrieved January 26, 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/raisinge.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. (2003) *Government of Canada Response to: Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. Retrieved January 26, 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/raisgove/raisgove.pdf>. p.25

<sup>iii</sup> Human Resources Development and the Status of Persons with Disabilities. (2003) *Government of Canada Response to: Raising Adult Literacy Skills: The Need for a Pan-Canadian Response*. Retrieved January 26, 2007, from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/raisgove/raisgove.pdf>.