



PERSPECTIVE

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LITERACY: DON'T TAKE IT FOR GRANTED

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This Saturday is International Literacy Day, which provides an opportunity to highlight and emphasize the importance of literacy as an essential skill. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which established this day of commemoration in 1965, stresses that literacy is a fundamental human right and is the foundation for life-long learning. I cannot agree more. Simply put, literacy is the great enabler that allows individuals to unlock their potential. It is the basic skill set upon which most other capabilities are built. While International Literacy Day is really focused on efforts to raise literacy skills on a global basis, I'd like to take this occasion to focus on literacy here at home.

Make no mistake, Canada has a literacy challenge. Awareness of this fact is low because most think of literacy as a binary outcome – you are either literate or not. This is simply not true. Like all skills, there is a wide range of proficiency, from non-existent to almost complete mastery. Along this proficiency spectrum, one can assess the level of capability consistent with succeeding in a modern knowledge-based economy. In other words, the level of proficiency that correlates with markedly better employment and income outcomes. The sad fact is that almost 1-in-2 Canadian adults fall short of the desired proficiency level in the official languages of English or French, while close to 3-in-5 lack the desired level of numeracy skills. This is troubling.

Literacy skills are more critical today than ever before, and they will become even more vital in the future. Consider that stronger literacy skills make it more likely that youths will complete secondary school, go on to post-secondary education, and will succeed at that level of education. In labour markets, more proficient language and numeracy skills make it more likely that an individual will be employed, have a better paying job, be less likely to become unemployed and will experience a shorter duration of unemployment if such an unfortunate event occurs.

There are material gains from investment in literacy not only to the economy, but also to society more broadly. I challenge you to come up with a current public policy challenge that higher literacy cannot contribute to reducing. Worried about rising income inequality or poverty? Higher literacy can help raise incomes for low-income Canadians by improving education outcomes and job prospects. Concerned about integration of newcomers? Strong communication skills in the official languages can help immigrants to better convey the value of foreign work experience and education. Anxious about future shortages of skilled work-



ers? Improved literacy allows workers to do greater continued education and skills development. Higher literacy skills also contribute to more civic involvement, volunteering and other social actions. Competence in basic literacy is also a necessary condition to literacy in other areas, such as financial literacy. Stronger literacy skills also correlate with better health outcomes. I could go on, but you get the idea.

The bottom line is that there are enormous benefits from improved literacy to individuals, businesses, the economy and society. One of the greatest challenges is that literacy is deeply underappreciated. Those with strong communication and numeracy skills take them for granted and cannot imagine a world without them. Many of those with weak literacy skills do not recognize how they are being held back and the opportunities they are forgoing. In today's ever-changing and skills-based economy, robust literacy is not a nice to have, it is a must have. So take a moment this Saturday to reflect on the value of your language and numeracy skills. Be self-reflective and ask whether reading more or taking some classes could be beneficial. For those with well-honed skills, consider how you might support and promote stronger literacy skills in others; either through personal action, volunteering or donating to literacy organizations.

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