



## A Quick Guide to

# Community Literacy Needs Assessments

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## Why a literacy needs assessment?

A community literacy needs assessment is a planning tool used to determine the gap between the community's present overall literacy capacity and its desired capacity. In other words, a needs assessment takes measurement not only of services required, but services available and successes achieved within your community. This is the information gathering phase of developing a solid program plan.

Community engagement is key to the success of any program that you hope to develop. Since funding is an ongoing issue for most, if not all, literacy programs, you'll need to find committed partners who are willing to support the program in various ways. This is often done by providing facilities, use of office equipment, etc. so that any program funding you receive can be used to pay for instructor salaries, materials and learner supports.

Community engagement begins by talking to key stakeholders and potential partners and asking some strategic questions. The answers to these questions will then guide you in developing a solid needs assessment strategy, followed by the needs assessment tool itself.

**Who are your potential partners?** Who are the literacy stakeholders in your community, and why would literacy programs be important to them? Determining potential partners for your project is a key first step. Stakeholders may have a need for capturing specific information, and they can provide valuable insight on what info should be collected, and where.

Potential partners might include:

- Chamber of Commerce
- Local businesses
- Co-op
- Bank
- Library
- Education (regional college, elementary and high school)
- Service clubs (Lions, Rotary, etc.)
- Local newspapers or media

As you seek to identify partners who will commit to supporting your intended program, be sure that everyone understands the purpose of this particular partnership, the funding criteria and the goals and objectives of the program to come.

## **Developing your needs assessment strategy**

Conducting a community literacy needs assessment means asking good questions and gleaning information from a variety of groups of people, from a variety of angles. First, your partnership will need to discuss the following:

**What do we need to learn about our community?** Define the information you wish to collect. Stakeholder input is key here – brainstorm together what information you need to gather, and from whom. Be sure that your partnership is representative of your community's various demographics and people groups, so that your needs assessment will be developed as an accurate reflection of your community as a whole.

**With whom can this information be found?** You'll need to develop a list of people to be surveyed. Remember to survey a cross-section representative of your community as a whole. Also be sure to include those who are potential participants in your future program; they will provide valuable information on the type of program that would be successful in your community.

Again, solid partnerships make this process go more smoothly. You may need to gather information on your partners' property or through their services. Partnering with the local grocery store, school or business could provide you with the opportunity to set up a booth for one-on-one verbal questionnaires, send a survey with the monthly newsletter or conduct a focus group on-site at a place of work.

**How will you gather the information?** Be sure to advise the community that they will be surveyed so that they are prepared and willing to participate. Consider advertising through local media, schools and in public areas.

Some people who struggle with literacy may feel intimidated by the local library. Others may not read the school newsletter or might struggle with a written questionnaire. Be prepared to gather your information in a variety of ways, such as:

- A written questionnaire or survey
- An oral interview (in person or by phone)
- Focus groups

You may need to ask your questions not only using different formats for different people, but at various locations in your community. You may need to conduct verbal

surveys with individuals for whom English is not first language, or for whom filling out forms is a struggle.

**Who will gather the information?** Consider who will be responsible for conducting or delivering/retrieving the questionnaires, and how much time should be allotted. Then, set a timeframe for conducting interviews, select specific dates, times and locations for specific information gathering, and arrange for the required facilities and amenities, with the help of your community partners. Be sure individual responsibilities and timelines are clearly outlined for everyone involved.

Also consider who will be writing the final report, how in-depth the findings need to be, and how much time will be allotted for this.

**What should your final report look like?** Consider how the information will be processed and summarized. Remember, your findings must clearly interpret the results and analyze the gap.

**How will you use this assessment?** It cannot be stressed enough that this needs assessment must steer the development of your program. You may have a general understanding of what your literacy program might look like, but be sure that your entire partnership understands that the program must be planned based on the findings of your needs assessment.

Your report will also likely be used to seek funds to support the literacy program you plan to implement. Be fully aware of any individual funder's requirements, such as the Literacy Office SaskSmart Innovations Fund.

## Developing your needs assessment tool

Once you have committed community partnerships in place and you have a good understanding of your needs assessment strategy, consider using the following questions to guide the development of your needs assessment tools. The answers to these questions will guide you as you develop the questions for your survey:

- What are the characteristics of your community?
  - Are there many immigrants or foreign workers in your region?
  - Are there other people groups, such as First Nations, Métis, francophone or other people for whom English may be second language?
  - Are there many teen mothers, seniors, or people with physical or intellectual disability?
  - What is the economic makeup of your community?
  - Are there political, religious or other factors that influence the makeup of your community?
- Who are your potential learners? Can they be clearly defined and identified?
- What barriers might be encountered when doing this project? How will these be addressed?
- What are the views of the stakeholders on the best approach to the project?
- Is there information that already exists that may be useful to the project?

### **In conclusion...**

A comprehensive community literacy needs assessment should provide a snapshot of your community's current literacy capacity. It should include information about services currently provided as well as literacy needs currently unmet. It should include information pertaining to people with special needs, immigrants, Aboriginal people, families, children, adults and seniors – everyone, really. And most importantly, it should steer the development of any subsequent program plans.

You may discover gaps that you didn't know existed. Don't feel pressured to meet every need immediately. Be realistic in what you can accomplish with the assets you have. The literacy plan that you develop from the assessment should concentrate on what is positive and possible within a reasonable time frame.

Remember also that communities are constantly in a state of change. Consider how long a needs assessment is relevant, and how often the process should be repeated in

order to best meet ongoing needs within your community. Remember also that follow-up to this assessment need not always be formal. Informal, continuous anecdotal feedback can easily be gleaned on a continuous basis simply when you and your partners keep an ear to the ground.

The Saskatchewan Literacy Network would be pleased to discuss any questions that you may have along the way. We can also provide you with sample surveys, including those targeting industry, educational providers, learners, and others.

For further support, please contact Connie Jones, Adult Literacy Coordinator at [connie.jones@sasktel.net](mailto:connie.jones@sasktel.net) or call 1-306-651-7286 or toll free 1-888-511-2111.

**References/Additional Resources:**

[Manitoba Education, Training and Youth](#). *Before you Start: Developing a Community Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy Programs*. Winnipeg: Department of Education and Training, 1995. <<http://library.nald.ca/item/437>>

L. McElroy & Associates. *Conducting Needs Assessment for Adult Literacy Programming*. Victoria: Province of British Columbia Ministry of Skills, Training and Labour, 1993.

Literacy Alberta Literacy Audit Kit: <http://www.literacy-alberta.ca/shop.htm>