

Backgrounder on the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey (ALL)

This backgrounder was prepared by the Movement for Canadian Literacy. It highlights some of the key findings from the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, provides additional survey background, and summarizes the literacy community's response. Statistics Canada's official highlights appear in an issue of its own information bulletin, the "Daily", which is available electronically at www.statisticscanada.ca.

Overview

A study by Statistics Canada released on May 11, 2005, shows that millions of Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to keep pace with the escalating demands of our society and economy. This loss of potential impacts on the social and economic well-being of individuals, families, communities and our country.

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey sheds light on our current literacy challenges and also connects those challenges to some of Canada's most pressing social and economic issues. The link is clear in this conclusion: "... *investments in foundation skills would lead to improved levels of health, increased productivity, reduced social costs and higher growth*".

Some Key Findings of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey

- Four in ten Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the ever-increasing demands of modern life, where skills are the key to success in our knowledge-based economy and society.
- The ALL survey showed that average literacy scores for Canadians had not changed significantly since the last survey was conducted 9 years ago.
- We have seen some progress among Canadians with the most serious literacy challenges. The ALL survey showed that 15% of Canadians score in level one, the lowest performance level. This was down slightly from 17% in 1994.
- Literacy skills have a large impact on earnings. Canadians with literacy barriers tend to be stuck in low-paid, low-skilled jobs that offer little chance of advancement or of improving their skills.
- Among the unemployed, those with the most serious literacy barriers only had a 50% chance of finding a job, even after 52 weeks of unemployment.

- There has been an apparent decline in literacy scores among Canadian youth. A parent's level of education has a significant impact on the literacy scores of their children. Canadian youth aged 16-25 who had parents with little or no education scored lower on average in 2003 than similar youth surveyed in 1994.
- In the international ranking, Canada ranks 4th of the countries compared in this study: behind Norway, Switzerland, and Bermuda but ahead of the USA, Italy and also the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon. More countries will be added later.
- Currently, the people who need training most are the least likely to be able to access adult education and training programs. Governments and business tend to support skill upgrading for people with the highest skills and do less for people with the lowest skill level.
- Literacy skills erode if not used regularly. Canadians who do not exercise their literacy skills at work, at home, or through continued education, will experience a deterioration of their skills over time.
- The ALL survey confirms the existence of a digital divide and this appears to be connected to skill levels. About 20% of Canadians do not have access to home computers. Those without computer access tend to have lower literacy levels than the rest of the population. Computer proficiency is strongly tied to earnings.
- Adults who say they are the healthiest have higher average literacy and numeracy scores, while those who report poor health have the lowest average proficiencies.
- Labour markets no longer replenish themselves sufficiently through young people coming out of school. We need to help less-skilled adults acquire the skills they need to participate fully in our economy and our society.
- Most immigrants to Canada (regardless of their skill level) are disadvantaged in terms of employment, even compared to low skilled native-born adults.
- The relationship between formal schooling and literacy skills is complex. Even a high school education is no guarantee that a person has the literacy skills they need to succeed.

More about the ALL Survey

The Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey is a large-scale, comparative study that profiles the skills of adults in 6 OECD countries and also provides national snapshots. ALL follows up a similar study from 10 years ago (the International Adult Literacy Survey, 1994). More than 23,000 Canadians from every province and territory participated in the new study; five times the sample in the IALS study ten years ago.

The survey rated peoples' ability to deal with everyday literacy demands. Literacy is defined as *"using printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential"*.

Participants were tested and their literacy skills were gauged on a continuous scale from 0-500 (with 0 being a complete lack of skills and 500 being the theoretical maximum proficiency). These “scores” were grouped into five proficiency levels derived from a theoretical framework that identify increasingly more complex skills as the level increases (Level 1 is the lowest skill level and level 5 is the highest). Grading skill levels on a spectrum accepts that we no longer speak of literacy as an either/or skill set, but rather, as a continuous measure that ranges from less skilled to higher skilled.

On this scale, level 3 is the minimum skill level considered necessary to meet the challenges of today’s world. This idea of ‘minimum skill level’ recognizes that the demands of our knowledge-based society and economy are escalating faster than ever before and the minimum literacy skills required to meet these challenges is evolving to match.

The ALL survey measured skills in the following areas:

- prose literacy: understanding text, such as newspaper articles
- document literacy: understanding informational text, such as maps and charts
- numeracy: working with numbers
- problem solving: the ability to solve problems by clarifying the nature of the problem and developing and applying appropriate solution strategies
- and looked at self-assessed health measures that demonstrate a clear link between proficiency and physical/mental/emotional health.

The Literacy Community’s Response to ALL

ALL is a serious wake up call for Canadians and for decision-makers at all levels of government, regardless of political affiliation. It confirms what the literacy community has said for years: our literacy challenges are serious and demand serious attention and investment. We work with the issues every day as learners, educators, and organizers. We see the extent of the challenge and the inadequacy of the provision.

Literacy is connected to some of the key social challenges of our time - unemployment, poverty, health, integration of newcomers, child well being, and more.

Today literacy services in many communities struggle to survive. There is wide variation in access to literacy services across the country. Demands on literacy organizations are increasing while resources remain static from year to year. Less than 10% of Canadians who could benefit from literacy services are being helped.

Canada's literacy challenges are undermining our economic potential. Literacy is strongly connected to Canada’s productivity and position in the global economy as it becomes increasingly clear that skills drive economic growth. In 2004, another study showed that a 1% increase in average literacy rates would yield a 1.5% permanent increase in GDP (Coulombe, Tremblay and Marchand, 2004).

We need a pan-Canadian literacy strategy that is national in scope, vision and standards, but flexible enough for provinces, territories and communities to identify their own needs and solutions. This will require intergovernmental agreement and cooperation. As a contribution to that strategy, the Movement for Canadian Literacy has worked with the literacy community to develop a framework for literacy action in five priority areas:

1. develop policies to ensure increased resources and capacity
2. create a comprehensive, flexible delivery system to meet a wide variety of needs (both formal and informal)
3. address the barriers that prevent many potential learners from taking part in literacy training
4. expand our knowledge about literacy challenges, needs and solutions (i.e., research)
5. engage all sectors in building and supporting an inclusive, literate society (i.e., partnerships)

We've also worked hard to deliver policy recommendations to the federal government that reflect our community's needs.

Recently we've seen some hard-won progress towards a strategy. After years of effort on the part of the literacy community to get literacy on the federal "agenda", Canadian leaders acknowledged the need for action. The last budget called for the creation of a comprehensive literacy strategy and boosted the federal budget for literacy by \$30 million over three years.

The ALL survey findings show that this recent commitment and down payment for literacy is crucial first step if Canada is to remain an economically and socially prosperous nation. We must not let shifting political tides derail progress on a comprehensive pan-Canadian strategy.

In the literacy community, we'll do our part to keep literacy on the agenda and to ensure that meaningful progress is made. We hope the ALL survey will help decision-makers to recognize literacy as a priority as well.

What's Next?

In the Fall and Winter of 2005, the next phase of data will be released. This will include a much anticipated national snapshot that will dig deeper into the Canadian statistics, and also provincial/territorial releases that will provide regional analyses. Stats Canada has renamed these upcoming releases the IALSS (International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey).

These surveys (ALL and IALSS) have enormous potential to educate and influence public policies around literacy in Canada. As a national literacy organization with the structure and mandate to represent the English literacy community across Canada, Movement for Canadian Literacy will work with the community to develop a thoughtful response and to identify opportunities to apply lessons learned in the hope of creating a more literate Canada.