

# An Overview of the National Literacy Secretariat Business and Labour Partnership

Policy Digest



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### Introduction

The Business and Labour Partnership Program is a program of the National Literacy Secretariat, Human Resources and Social Development Canada started in 1988. Its aim was to develop and sustain partnerships between business, labour, education, and government sectors that would support adult work-related literacy. The Program began at a time when no program model existed for fostering partnerships or for engaging partners in work-related adult literacy. When it was initiated, most people did not believe that Canada had problems with literacy.

The Business and Labour Partnership Program supported a range of types and levels of partnership and linked organizations in new ways. Some were formal, with legal terms of agreement. Others operated with informal terms of conduct. Each partnership was unique and complex.

The projects and activities supported through the Business and Labour Partnership Program affected five groups of people involved in workplace literacy and essential skills:

- business organizations and employers
- labour organizations and their local constituents
- educational practitioners and experts
- project participants
- the community at large.

This case study documented the ideas and approaches that were used by the National Literacy Secretariat to implement the Business and Labour Partnership Program. It also outlines the different types of partnerships that developed under the Program. The aim of this report is to demonstrate how this partnership program worked so that government employees and literacy practitioners can learn from the approach. In this report, the Business and Labour Partnership Program is referred to as 'the Program'.

Fostering partnerships is a difficult process. Few people have a clear understanding of how to develop partnerships, how the process of partnering affects the broader community, or what a partnership

includes. For this case study, we viewed partnerships as collaborative action in which organizations from multiple sectors interact to achieve common goals.

### **Major Accomplishments of the Business and Labour Partnership Program**

Between 1988 and 2006, the partnership projects supported by the Program were able to develop assessment and evaluation tools, create innovative models for delivering workplace literacy, support practitioner training and consultations, and compile best practices for workplace literacy. Here are some examples from each area.

#### **Assessment and evaluation tools:**

- Many projects developed tools for workplace instructors, such as the Organizational Needs Assessment and Literacy Task Analysis.
- A multi-year project by Bow Valley College and Skillplan developed the groundbreaking Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES). TOWES built on the HRSDC research identifying the nine essential skills required for entry-level jobs in a wide range of sectors. TOWES has been instrumental in twinning essential skills with workplace literacy. It is widely used across the country and has attracted attention outside of Canada.

#### **Create innovative models for delivery:**

- Support for provincial initiatives laid the foundation for business, labour, and government to work together. One example is the Workplace Education Manitoba Steering Committee (WEMSC), which has changed the perception of workplace literacy in the province. The model from Manitoba has been adopted in other jurisdictions.

- The Ontario Federation of Labour developed the Basic Education and Skills Training (BEST) program, which focussed on peer teaching and developing functional curriculum. BEST attracted a great deal of interest and soon spread to other provinces. In Saskatchewan, it became known as the WEST program.
- To recognize these initiatives, the Conference Board of Canada developed an annual Excellence in Workplace Literacy Award.

### **Training and consultations:**

- WWestnet organized a number of conferences that became key training events.
- NLS held Policy Consultations in three areas—workplace literacy, research, and technology—which reviewed past NLS activities, analysed roadblocks, and created a vision for the next five to ten years.

### **Compile best practices:**

Many projects led to publications or reports, including:

- The Canadian Manufacturers and Exporters' *Business Results through Literacy*
- Sector Council manuals in healthcare, pulp and paper, oil and gas.

The publications were used for specific events such as:

- The national Research-in-Practice workshops
- Practitioner conferences in various provinces, including Nova Scotia
- Clear language trainings.

### The Three Phases of the Business and Labour Partnership Program

The work of the Program can be divided into three phases: the foundation years (1988–1995), the development and demonstration years (1996–2000), and the program change years (2001–2006). This section outlines the features of each phase.

#### *Foundation Years (1988–1995)*

##### What happened in this period?

The NLS saw the workplace as an innovative venue for literacy work. Key business and labour needs were identified, and the leadership of the NLS moved the program from vision to reality. The NLS believed that the Program would be most effective if it was used to build capacity and assist with community development.

During this period:

- Stakeholders recognized that workplace instructors were needed and must be trained.
- The NLS recruited prominent people from government, business, and labour to lend credibility to literacy as a workplace issue. The resulting change in awareness extended to decision makers and, to some extent, the general public.
- The increased consciousness of workplace literacy issues helped lay the foundation for provincial involvement. Ties between federal and provincial/ territorial government representatives were strengthened, and the NLS encouraged each region to develop their own strategy for workplace literacy.
- The NLS supported strategies to showcase innovative workplace literacy models and projects. Later, the NLS supported projects to seek and document best practices in workplace literacy.

### How was workplace literacy affected?

Between 1988 and 1995, the Program had widespread impacts on workplace literacy practices. The program supported many projects that customized curriculum for specific groups of workers or particular workplace settings. During this period:

- The BEST program became a beacon for other Federations of Labour.
- Unions held training events that increased awareness about the importance of workplace change. One result of the training was that many unions recognized that ESL was a training need in many workplaces.

Much of the knowledge gained from these activities and projects was disseminated through the International Workplace Learning conferences and at plain language forums.

### What contributed to success in this period?

The NLS played a strong leadership role in this period by:

- Advocating for business and labour projects that came from the ground
- Informing stakeholders about what was happening nationally, so that individual partnership projects could further evolve
- Forming strong alliances with provincial and territorial governments
- Supporting connections among new partners.

Project accountability was always present but did not overshadow workplace issues. During this period, all partners felt comfortable in experimenting and taking risks. The NLS encouraged innovative project ideas that reflected unique and diverse local needs. They were open to interpreting program guidelines. To match this risk-taking, partnerships were based on complete openness and trust.

Since projects were rooted in the local needs of the community, they were focused on practice and stakeholders felt they owned their projects. Project budgets were in line with NLS funding guidelines. All partners understood the spirit of the Program.

### ***Development and Demonstration Period (1996–2000)***

#### **What happened in this period?**

In the following five years, the Program enabled and supported new ideas that sprung up from the field and the stakeholders. The NLS played a crucial role in helping to shape these potential projects, and to determine how viable ideas were. To avoid a “siloed approach” to development and demonstration, the NLS made sure that partners in the field had opportunities to understand the bigger picture of workplace literacy. One way to do this was to bring people together from the diverse corners of the workplace milieu in Canada. These gatherings created a forum for open discussion. The developments in this period reflect the NLS belief that new knowledge could be created from the accumulation of field practices.

During this period:

- The NLS funded national forums for all key stakeholders in literacy. These Think Tanks encouraged divergent points of view and helped consolidate the emerging field of workplace practice.
- New workplace structures were created. For example, the Directors of Training Centres from one labour organization formed a national committee to help coordinate labour’s response to the literacy issue.
- Consortia, provincial project teams, and steering committees developed. They became successful vehicles to leverage and bargain for more resources in the community.
- Stakeholders developed a deeper understanding of how to integrate literacy into apprenticeship and Sector Council training.



- Publications, such as *The Changing Landscape of Workplace Education*, documented many of these experiences.

Toward the end of this period, literacy began to be subverted and replaced by an essential skills agenda. In addition, there was also a loss of momentum on workplace literacy as provincial governments prepared and signed training agreements with HRSDC.

### How was workplace literacy affected?

Workplace literacy projects continued to be supported by the Program. During this period:

- Practitioner training institutes increased. In some provinces, workplace instructors sought to professionalize their practice by creating organizations such as the Association of Workplace Educators of Nova Scotia (AWENS).
- Test of Workplace Essential Skills (TOWES) was, by this time, widely used. TOWES increased the credibility of workplace literacy.
- National organizations took on important roles. For example, ABC Canada investigated patterns of literacy participation and used the results to revise its national LEARN campaign to better reach out to adult literacy learners.

### What contributed to success in this period?

During this period, partners continued to feel comfortable taking risks and experimenting, and the NLS supported this flexible approach. When a project idea was outside the program guidelines, NLS staff gave advice about how to rethink or revisit the idea. Staff also helped potential partners revise proposals and project budgets. The open dialogue and regular reconsideration of project ideas encouraged partnership development. Faced with funding constraints, partners felt free to decide whether or not to continue their work or to continue as a partnership. In some cases, funding constraints discouraged potential partners.

### ***Program Change Period (2001–2006)***

#### **What happened in this period?**

In the last period under study, effects from some projects from the earlier years of the Program began to be felt across the country.

- Pockets of best practice were spreading to regions where workplace literacy had just started to develop. For example, provincial field officers from Nova Scotia began training people in other Atlantic provinces on how to conduct Organizational Needs Assessments and Educational Needs Assessments.
- Training modules for practitioners and union stewards were being revised to reflect the changes in economics, demographics, and special groups of workplace learners.
- Provinces where workplace literacy was less developed were now considering strategies that had been used to encourage sectoral involvement in other provinces.
- The increase in workplace education projects in some regions, such as Manitoba and Nova Scotia, helped provincial governments see the value of releasing additional resources for workplace education.
- Empirical studies with a focus on labour and workplace literacy, funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the NLS Joint Initiative Valuing Literacy in Canada, were well underway during this period.
- New insights on the lived experiences of workers and how they use literacy at work were published in the book *Reading Work*.

However, this period was also marked by a change in government policy. The delivery methods for the Program were changed in accordance with a government-wide focus on top-down accountability. The partnership dynamics were tarred by the federal government's accountability chaos.

### How was workplace literacy affected?

The balance of power among partners also changed during Program delivery between 2001 and 2006. Most markedly, partners found it increasingly difficult to advocate for local needs. The top-down accountability ethos made reciprocity in partnerships more challenging, and business and labour organizations became frustrated trying to figure out government priorities.

The new accountability features changed the way some organizations went about the business of workplace literacy.

- When NLS introduced a tier system to prioritize projects according to the type of applicant, some partners were no longer eligible to apply. Innovation was defined more rigidly.
- New project review structures increased changes in federal accountability, and reporting requirements seemed to take precedence over real workplace issues and proposal ideas.
- Partners who had submitted successful projects in the past found that they were no longer eligible to apply.
- Funding from NLS changed from grants to complex contribution agreements. Some partners chose not to apply because they did not have the capacity to conform to these new requirements. Larger organizations appeared to be more able to deal with these changes, but smaller organizations were more pressed for funds and bowed out quietly.
- Project applications were examined by peer-review committees rather than NLS staff, so proposals took more time to develop and required different writing skills.

### What affected success in this period?

During this period, NLS was less able to provide support and advice for proposal ideas. The one-way communication was more bureaucratic and less responsive to the project goals. All of the

changes helped transform the Business and Labour Program into a narrower model for partnership development.

## Factors of Successful Partnerships

This section discusses the six factors that supported partnership development through the NLS Business and Labour Partnership Program.

### *Receptivity of NLS*

The early interest by NLS in fostering partnerships between business, labour, and education was crucial to the success of the Program. During the first two periods of this program's existence, the atmosphere of experimentation and risk-taking supported projects. Stakeholders shared an awareness that the open model was a good way to move forward, in contrast to the more rigid structures adopted in the United States under the Workplace Literacy Initiative. The receptivity by NLS to a range of ideas from the field helped to build strong alliances among stakeholders. In the period of program change the NLS was less receptive and flexible, and more administrative.

### *Role of NLS Personnel*

During the foundation and the demonstration and development years, NLS personnel assisted partners with proposal development, acted as a resource, and interpreted policy guidelines. Through a number of changes in HRSDC, these personnel provided stability in the NLS and in the Program. They were committed to helping local communities identify models of workplace literacy that suited their regions. Their vast web of connections helped connect stakeholders with innovative practices across the country. This role changed in the third period, when NLS staff focused more on accountability.

### *Visioning Possibilities*

Successful partnership development relied on visioning the full range of possibilities with the field. During the foundation period (1988–1995), the NLS used a social development approach to understand all of the complexities of workplace literacy. The intricacies and difficult issues that surfaced as project work got off the ground were always at the forefront of discussions. This visioning continued into much of the second period (1996–2000) and was accompanied by a recognition that a new field of knowledge was emerging. The search for champions to carry forward this vision continued as the workplace literacy agenda now included essential skills. As the NLS implemented the tier system for funding projects during the period of program change (2001–2006), less visioning took place and problems arose.

### *Commitment*

Successful partnerships required the full commitment of all partners, including the NLS. During the first decade, in the foundation building and development periods, stakeholder values and differing points of view were respected and open and frank discussions were possible. Project partnerships were based on an equal sharing of the workload and did not include hidden agendas. During the period of program change, the sense of commitment was not as solid, as stakeholders repeatedly expressed the need to evaluate how the Business and Labour Partnership Program was operating.

### *Information Flow*

Successful partnerships need information to flow among members. In the first and second periods, the NLS acted as a skilful facilitator. Mechanisms for dialogue were plentiful and, as national training trends and policies shifted, partners were kept informed. During the period of program change, however, the NLS became more of an administrator of regulations. The flow of information was inadequate: stakeholders needed more NLS resource people, espe-

cially in regions with no provincial office for workplace literacy. As peer review committees replaced the role of NLS staff in reviewing project proposals, unsuccessful applicants did not always get feedback on their submissions, and had to wait a long time for any response.

### ***Structure of Projects***

The structure of individual projects developed by the partners was critical to success. During the foundation demonstration and development years, smaller projects focused on local needs. Business, labour and education partners determined how a project was conducted. Each project had some access to the NLS staff and a certain amount of leeway around deadlines. During the period of program change, the NLS added layers of administrative structure, such as proposal review committees, and focused more attention on internal project evaluation. These structures moved the focus away from the project's content and instead focused on accountability issues.

## **Factors of Unsuccessful Partnerships**

In this section, we describe the key factors that contribute to unsuccessful partnerships. The information in this section is drawn primarily from interviews and from the experiences of key stakeholders in other partnership development initiatives.

### ***Factors in Partner Relationships***

Partnerships can fail if stakeholders have conflicting objectives and hidden agendas in the early stages, or if partners do not agree on basic working principles when they are trying to develop the partnership. These characteristics can also surface halfway through the process. If one partner's goals change, the partnership can turn into a "one-person show." In these circumstances, the partnership's work will be shaky. In a broader sense, when project objectives are

tied to accountability rather than social development, they are less likely to be successful.

When a partner organization chooses a champion from inside the organization to increase visibility of a workplace literacy issue and that individual leaves the organization, the project can suffer.

Another factor affecting success is the working relationship among partners. Partnerships can be dampened if trust is broken, a partner is not honest, or if the flow of information among partners is not clear. At some point in the development of every partnership, the group's norms are established. These must be followed. An imbalance of work among partners can affect the relationship. Or, if a new partner is brought in after the group has established norms, the project work can be negatively affected.

Power struggles can damage partnerships. In some cases power struggles occur when members do not understand each other's organizational cultures. Struggles can also begin early in the process if partners do not follow operating principles or formal agreements. Power struggles can be verbal or non-verbal and can occur when a funder controls the partnership. When a partner loses the ability to compromise, it is usually an indication that a power struggle is waiting to happen.

### ***Factors in Project Funding***

Finally, changes in project funding structure can contribute to unsuccessful partnerships in a variety of ways.

- When funding policies change and bureaucrats appear cold and distant, it is more difficult to develop successful partnerships.
- When there is uncertainty and flux around funding, potential partners spend time and energy just waiting around. In this situation, their energy decreases and impetus for the project and the partnership dissipate.

- Rigid reporting requirements and micro attention to project financial accountability can take partners away from the “real” work. This affects project results and impacts.

### Lessons and Program Changes

The most important lesson to be learned from the Business and Labour Partnership Program is that partnership development and sustainability is possible when a funding agency understands the work of the stakeholder organizations and becomes an equal partner in the process. When this occurs, a sense of trust develops among its members, who then feel able to fully engage in building the endeavour. Trust and engagement result in real partnerships in which people do their jobs well.

When project work stemming from a partnership is regularly supported, strong networking is established and can spread across the country. The work is further facilitated when champions for a workplace literacy issue help carry the message forward. In the first decade, the NLS was able to support partnerships by acting as a “cushion on politics”, but in the period of program change, it was not as successful in this role. The Business and Labour Partnership Program taught the country what partnerships are all about. The NLS was very aware of the delicacy of partnership arrangements and used their role as a broker to facilitate change rather than to direct it.

### Implications for Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills

#### *Practice*

During its first decade, the Business and Labour Partnership Program provided a much-needed framework for developing and delivering literacy in the workplace. Canada has no national literacy strategy and, as a result, lacks a system for adult education. Unlike



other fields of education, practitioners in adult literacy are not recognized as professionals.

In this context, the approach modeled by the Business and Labour Partnership Program enabled comprehensive development of the field of workplace literacy. One of the Program's major contributions was its support for training and development of literacy practitioners. Where volunteers were involved, for example as peer tutors, they were also trained. Training lends credibility to workplace-based programs and establishes literacy learning as a legitimate educational goal.

The Business and Labour Partnership Program helped to develop all aspects of a framework for workplace literacy and essential skills. It supported promotion and awareness, coordination and information sharing, professional development, research, and sharing of best practice models. All of these elements led to the development of further partnerships. As the focus of the Program shifts further and further away from social development objectives, this valuable framework is at risk.

### ***Policy***

This case study points to the strategic importance of involving multi-sector partners in designing and implementing government policy. The Business and Labour Partnership Program was based on a federal government commitment to literacy as a means to improve economic performance and employability. Partners from business, labour, and non-governmental organizations helped achieve the federal policy objective by developing skills in the workplace, creating new knowledge from the shop floor, and building capacity for development and supporting workplace literacy programs.

The study also reveals that the government must explain its “big picture” policy interests if it wishes to realize program objectives. The Program's success in the foundation building and development years was due, in part, to the time government spent to research the implications of literacy for the economy and to disseminate those results.

This study also shows that policies can only succeed if they are systematically adhered to once they are established. This is especially true in long-term and slowly evolving fields like literacy and essential skills. The government's clearly stated literacy policy objective was accomplished in the foundation and development and demonstration years. Its steadfast commitment to this policy over time built a willing coalition of partners committed to working to help advance the agenda. During the period of program change the policy objective of achieving literacy gains in the workplace became secondary to accountability.

### **Research**

This case study provided a rich description of the partnership process. It revealed what factors could affect the success of partnerships and what potential problems could arise. For example, it explored the importance of trust and honesty in the process compared

to other factors, and explored how significant common goals and shared vision are to successful partnerships. The study also revealed that partnerships evolve over time. Consequences, actions, and outcomes can each affect the overall success of the partnership process. But how are these two research issues related?

The literature from organizational life-cycle management includes the idea that organizations move through a process of growth and change over time. The theory also states that each phase of an organization's life cycle can lead to a crisis that must be resolved in order for growth and change to continue. These ideas can help to frame the unfolding partnership process described in this study and the factors that either contributed to the success of a partnership or threatened its survival.

By capturing the unfolding of partnerships and the key factors that critically affect each phase of the process, the organizational life-cycle perspective can address what factors are important for each phase and why they are important.