

Literacy in the Northwest Territories: Results from IALSS

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, or IALSS, is the Canadian part of a large international study. It tells us how well adults understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work, and in their community.

In *Information Series #1: The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, we showed the current state of literacy in the NWT and Canada. Copies of that pamphlet are available from the NWT Literacy Council at the address on the back page, or on our website, www.nwt.literacy.ca. More detailed results about the NWT are now available. These results give us a snapshot of adult literacy skills in the Northwest Territories. In this pamphlet we look at . . .

- What IALSS is, what it tells us and why it's important.
- The general literacy levels of adults in the NWT.
- The relationship between literacy and other indicators like age, and the findings from the NWT.
- Literacy levels of the Aboriginal population in the NWT.

Who took part in the survey?

In Canada, more than 23,000 people took part in the survey. In the Northwest Territories, 818 out of 1286 people responded to the survey. This was a 69.6% response rate—the fourth highest in Canada. Approximately 50% of those who took part were non-Aboriginal and 50% were Aboriginal.

Why is the survey important?

The survey is important for several reasons.

- It changes the way we talk about literacy. The survey defines literacy skills on **a continuum**. It moves us away from the idea of **literate** and **illiterate**.
- We currently measure literacy skills by **educational attainment**, but this is only an approximate measure. The survey now gives us a more precise way to talk about literacy in the NWT.
- This is **a starting point** for the NWT that will let us monitor our progress over time.
- The survey creates **an international, national and local standard** that we can measure ourselves against.

What can we find out from the survey?

The Northwest Territories report tells us:

- How well adults in the NWT understand and use literacy in four specific areas—prose literacy, document literacy, numeracy and problem solving—in their everyday lives.
- The percentage of our population that faces literacy challenges.
- How literacy levels change according to specific indicators such as:
 - Age
 - Gender
 - Educational level
 - Labour force status
 - The Aboriginal population

What does the survey measure?

The survey measures how well people understand and use printed information in their daily lives, in four areas and on five levels.

- **Prose literacy** – in texts like newspaper stories, brochures and instruction manuals
- **Document literacy** – in formats like job applications, payroll forms, maps, tables, diagrams and charts
- **Numeracy** – in daily situations like balancing an account, figuring out a tip, working out interest on a loan, or filling out an order form
- **Problem-solving** – understanding and solving problems

Prose, document and numeracy scale	
Level 1	0-225 points
Level 2	226-275 points
Level 3	276-325 points
Level 4	326-375 points
Level 5	376-500 points

Problem solving scale	
Level 1	0-250 points
Level 2	251-300 points
Level 3	301-350 points
Level 4	351-500 points

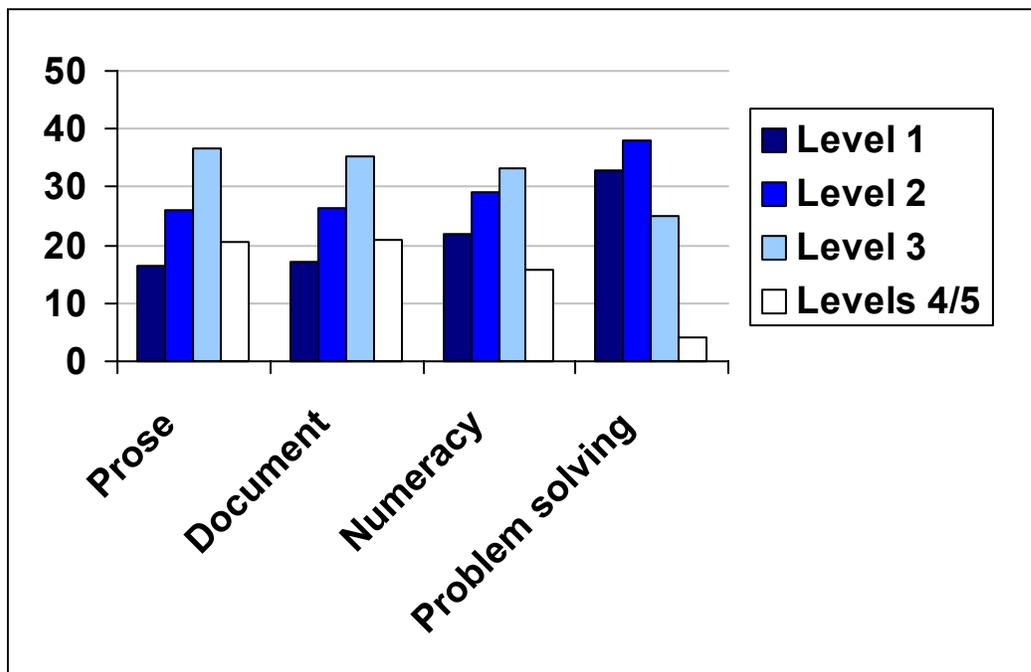
- **Level 1:** A person has difficulty dealing with any printed material.
- **Level 2:** A person can deal with material that is clear and well laid out.
- **Level 3:** A person can understand and use the information they need for daily life.
- **Levels 4 and 5:** A person can understand and use complex written material.

Experts believe people need **Level 3** to get a job in today's knowledge-based world. Ideally, the average literacy score should be **Level 3** and above.

1. Literacy levels in the NWT

Roughly 42.6% of working age adults (16-65) in the NWT had an average prose literacy score **at Levels 1 and 2**. This means they are **below Level 3**, the level they need to function in today’s world.

Fig. 1 Percent of NWT population at each proficiency level (16-65)



Source: IALSS 2003

Although this is almost the same as the Canadian average, it means more than 4 out of 10 people in that age group in the NWT face literacy challenges. This translates into about 11,000 people. In **Fig. 2**, the **Total %** column gives an idea of **the burden** it places on the economy and the taxpayers. The **Total Number** shows **the effort** required from literacy programming to improve the skills of those with low levels of literacy.

Fig. 2 Impact of low literacy of NWT adults based on prose literacy scores (aged 16-65)

	Level 1		Level 2		Total	
	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number
NWT	16.5	4,000	26.1	7,000	42.6	11,000

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

The following chart gives you an idea of some of the characteristics of the people in the NWT at Levels 1 and 2.

Fig. 3 Main characteristics of people at Levels 1 and 2 in prose literacy in NWT (aged 16-65)

Level 1	Level 2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 4,000 people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 7,000 people
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 62% male; 38% female 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Gender <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 71% male; 44% female
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employment status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 56% employed - 22% unemployed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employment status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 47% employed - 11% unemployed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 70% less than high school - 18% completed high school - 12% had post-secondary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 37% less than high school - 29% completed high school - 34% had post-secondary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mother tongue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 60% English - 40% other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mother tongue <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 74% English - 20% other
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aboriginal status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 75% Aboriginal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Aboriginal status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 48% Aboriginal

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Level 3 is the desired level for prose, document and numeracy. In the NWT, people’s literacy skills varied in each skill area. In prose literacy, document literacy and numeracy, overall we placed **below Level 3** for the population 16 and older. If we take out those over 65, our average in prose and document literacy puts us **at Level 3**. In numeracy, we still place **below Level 3**. There is no set standard for problem solving.

Fig. 4 Comparison of average NWT adult scores in each skill area

	Prose	Document	Numeracy	Problem Solving
16 and older	275 (276)	275 (276)	265 (276)	265
16 to 65 years of age	280 (276)	280 (276)	269 (276)	269

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

The number in brackets (. . .) indicates the low end of the Level 3 score. Shaded boxes indicate performance below Level 3.

What does this mean?

Literacy barriers are sidelining many Canadians, including people in the NWT. People with low literacy face inequalities in areas like poverty, health, justice, economic opportunities, children’s learning and more. This has serious consequences for them, for their families, their communities, and the NWT as a whole.

Today literacy is more important than ever. Yet only a small percentage of people with low levels of literacy are getting the training and support they need. We need to look seriously at targeting literacy programs and services to people with low literacy and we need to ensure that our programs better meet their needs.

2. Age and literacy

Like other provinces and territories, in the NWT people aged 26 to 35 had the highest scores in each of the four skill areas.

Fig. 4 Average scores for the highest scoring group in the NWT compared to the NWT average (16-65)

Age Group	Prose	Document	Numeracy	Problem Solving
26 to 35	287	287	276	276
NWT Average	280	280	269	269

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC

Young people (aged 16-25) make up about 21% of the NWT's population. The majority of NWT youth are **at Level 3** in prose and document and **below Level 3** in numeracy. However, the percentage of young people at the lower literacy levels (**below Level 3**) is considerably higher than the national average.

Fig. 5 Percentage of NWT youth aged 16-25 performing below Level 3 compared to the national average

	NWT	Canada
	%	%
Prose	48	38
Document	49	35
Numeracy	53	45

Source: IALSS 2003

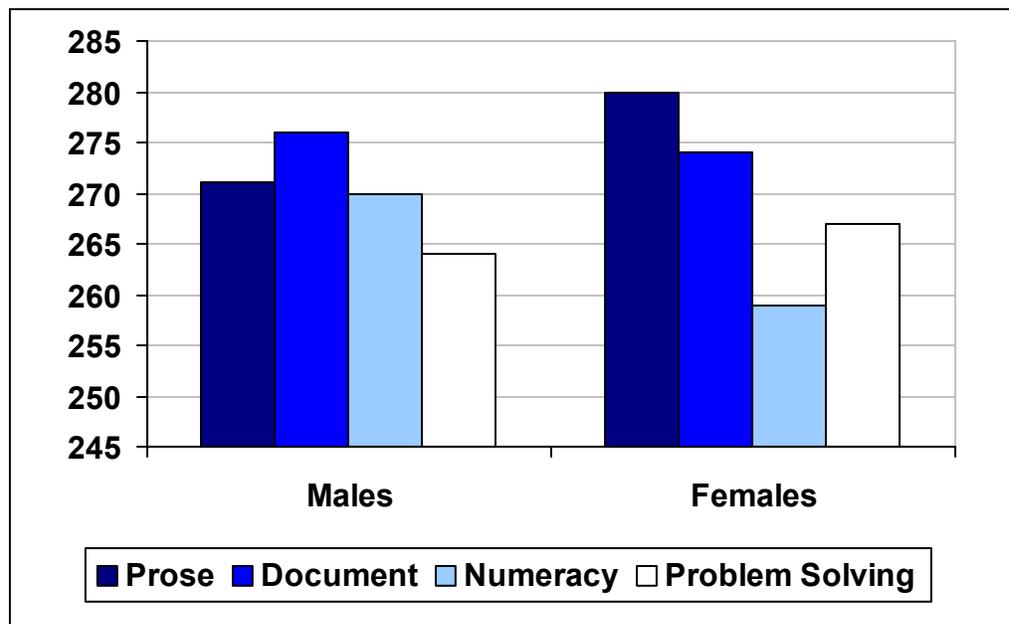
What does this mean?

The literacy skills of young people are important. This group has the most time to contribute their knowledge and skills to their families, their communities and the labour market. It's time to focus on our youth and make sure they have the skills they need for the future.

3. Gender and literacy

In the NWT, males and females show significant differences in prose literacy. Females score eight points higher than males. On the other hand, males in the NWT score 10 points higher than females in numeracy. This is smaller than the national difference, which is 18 points. More women score at **Levels 1 and 2** in numeracy, while a higher percentage of men score at **Levels 4/5**. Unlike the rest of Canada, the differences between males and females for document literacy are not significant in the NWT.

Fig. 6 Average scores of males and females in the NWT population (16 and older)



Source: IALSS 2003

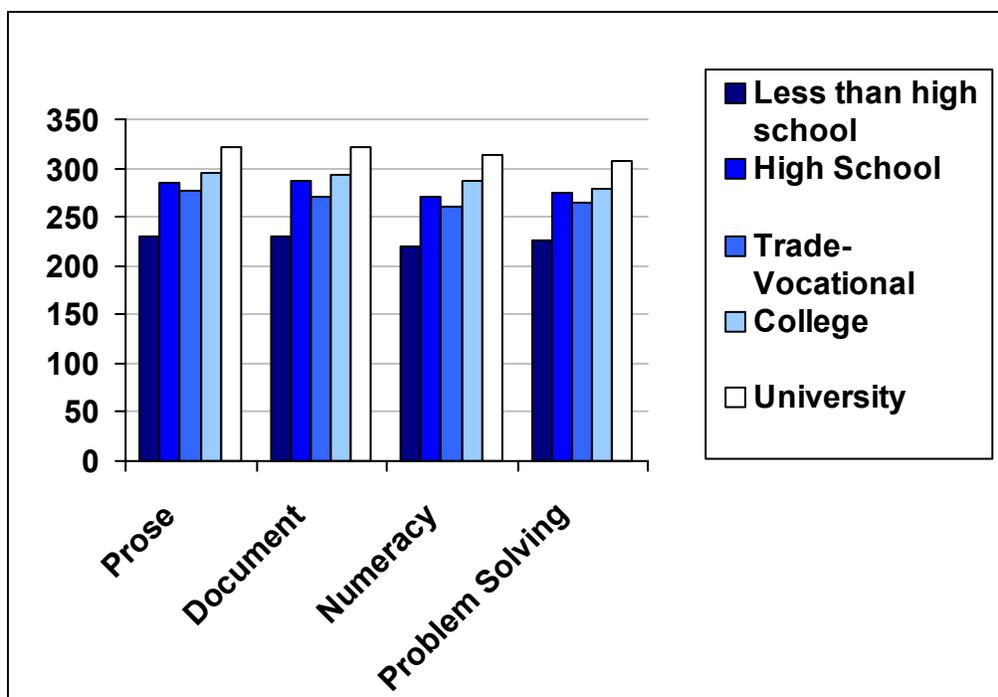
What does this mean?

It is difficult to determine what causes gender differences. It may be individual preference, or later in life, it may be career choice and training. There are some implications for developing education programs and services, however. It is important to ensure policies and practices don't foster differences, and that strategies are developed to try to close these gaps.

5. Education levels and literacy

In general, there is a strong relationship between levels of education and literacy skills. The higher a person’s level of education is, the higher their literacy skills. Overall the pattern in the NWT is similar to the pattern for Canada. However, in the NWT, there is a bigger gap in scores between those with higher levels of education and those with lower levels of education.

Fig. 7 Average scores in the NWT by education levels (aged 16 and older)



Source: IALSS 2003

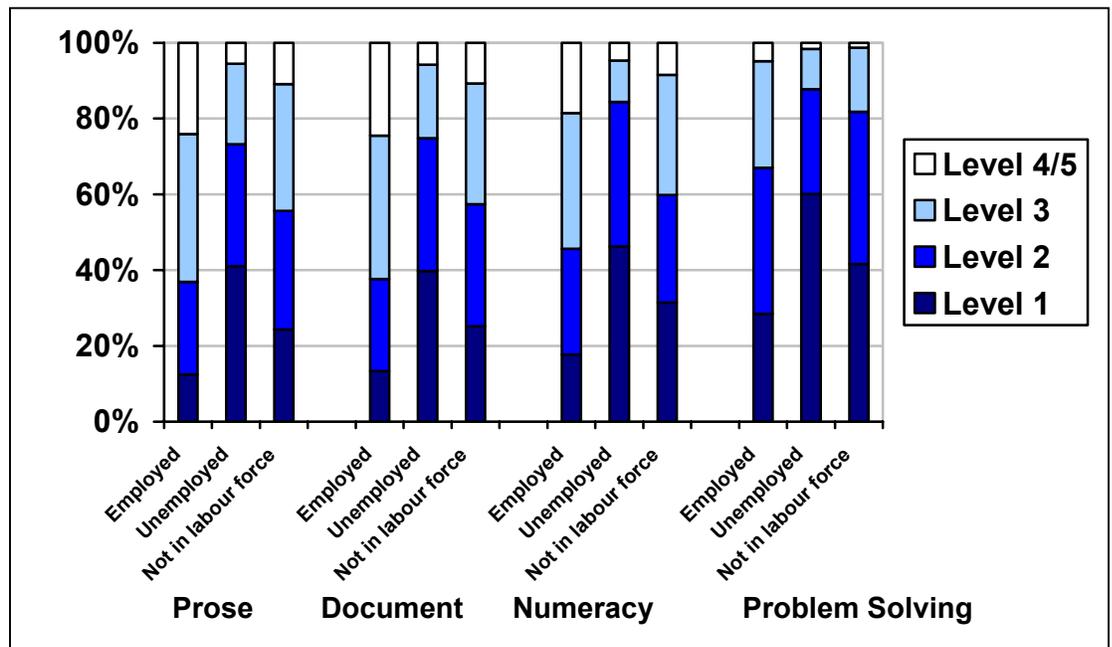
What does this mean?

Literacy is a foundational skill. The major literacy gain comes with completion of high school. It’s important for everyone (families, communities, governments, other organizations) to promote the value of education and encourage NWT children and youth to stay in school and graduate from Grade 12.

6. Labour force and literacy

In Canada and the NWT, employed people have higher average scores than those who are unemployed or not in the labour force. In the NWT, unemployed adults or those not in the labour force scored 32 points lower on the prose and document scale and 36 points lower on the numeracy scale than the national average. As well, the proportion of unemployed people scoring **below Level 3** in all four areas is significantly higher in the NWT. Here, 73% scored **below Level 3** in prose compared to 53% nationally.

Fig. 8 Per cent of labour force in NWT at each level in prose literacy and numeracy (aged 16 to 65)



Source: IALSS 2003

What does this mean?

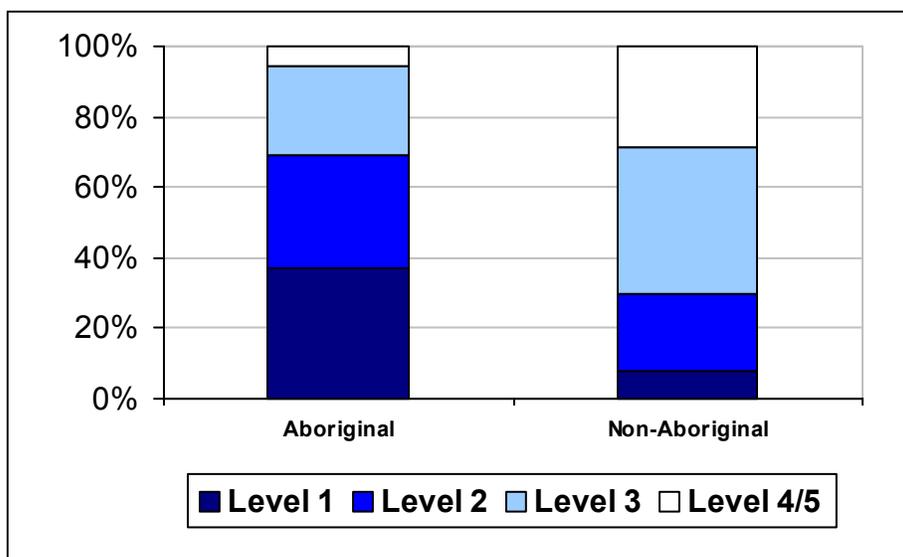
To get a job, people need higher levels of literacy than ever before. People with low levels of literacy are more likely to be unemployed, have low paying jobs, lose their jobs and be less likely to find new jobs. Unemployed people need programs and services that will enable them to reach their potential and improve their quality of life.

7. The Aboriginal population and literacy

In the past school attainment was used as a proxy measure of literacy. As a result, reliable information on the literacy levels of the Aboriginal population in the NWT has not been available until now. It's important to remember that, at least in part, the literacy performance of the Aboriginal population reflects the fact that many Aboriginal people speak English as a second language. In addition, until more recently, many had limited access to formal education.

Overall, a significant proportion of the Aboriginal population has low levels of literacy. When compared to the non-Aboriginal population, the gap is enormous. **Fig. 9** shows that approximately 69% of the Aboriginal population in the NWT scored **below Level 3** in prose literacy while approximately 70% of the non-Aboriginal population scored **at Level 3** and above.

Fig. 9 Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal prose literacy levels (aged 16 and over)



Source: IALSS 2003

When we separate out the scores of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations, the differences are considerable. On average, the non-Aboriginal population performed **at Level 3** in prose and document literacy and numeracy. The Aboriginal population performed **at Level 2** in prose literacy and numeracy, and **at Level 1** in document literacy.

Fig. 10 Comparison of NWT adult scores in each skill area (aged 16 and older)

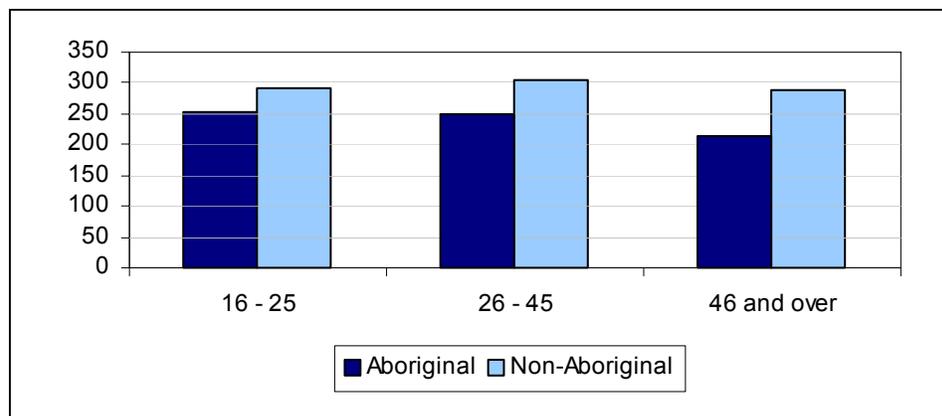
	Prose	Document	Numeracy
NWT average	275	275	265
Aboriginal	241	207	229
Non-Aboriginal	297	284	288

Source: Learning Policy Directorate, HRSDC



In the general NWT population, those aged 26-45 had the highest average scores. Among the Aboriginal population, we find the highest average scores among young people aged 16-25.

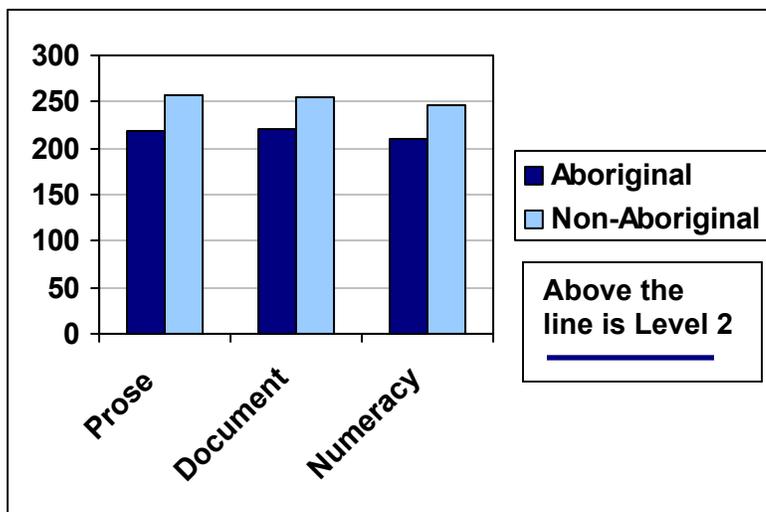
Fig.11 Comparison of Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal prose literacy scores by age group



Source: IALSS 2003

The most notable consistent differences between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations occur in prose, document and numeracy among people with less than high school education. Among the Aboriginal population with less than high school education the average score corresponds to **Level 1**. The average score for the same group in the non-Aboriginal population is **Level 2**.

Fig. 12 Average scores in the NWT for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations with less than high school education



Source: IALSS 2003

What does this mean?

The gap between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations is of critical concern, particularly at a time of significant resource development in the NWT. This gap means there are huge inequities in terms of literacy and its benefits between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations. Current programs and services are not serving the Aboriginal population well. It's critical to examine the kinds of programs the NWT offers its Aboriginal population, and to try to make the programs more relevant for them.

Conclusion

Literacy is everyone's issue! Literacy does not affect only a marginalized few. It affects children, adults, families and communities. It is connected to some of the key social challenges of our time—unemployment, poverty, health, children's learning, justice, and more. It affects the social and economic fabric of our families, our communities, our territory and our country.

We need to act, and we need to **act now**. The number of people who face severe literacy challenges in Canada, including the NWT, is significant. To change this situation, we need to:

- **Recognize that adult literacy is important.** Lifelong learning is a cornerstone for our modern civilized society. Literacy is **a basic human right** that every Canadian should enjoy.
- **Create a cohesive, integrated national system** of adult literacy programs and services. (The school system already has this.) For too long, our approach to adult literacy has been piecemeal and uncoordinated.
- **Develop a pan-Canadian strategy** that is **national** in scope, vision and standards, but **flexible** enough for provinces and territories to identify their own needs and solutions.
- **Commit consistent, long-term funding** to adult literacy programs and services. For too long, adult literacy has been the poor relation in terms of investment in learning. Rather than cuts to adult literacy (\$17.7 million in 2006), we need to **invest** in adult literacy. A 1% increase in average literacy and numeracy scores produces a 1.5% permanent increase in the gross domestic product (GDP). This amounts to a whopping \$18 million for Canada—three times the return we get if we invest in physical capital. We can achieve this in two ways:
 - By reducing the percentage of people with skills at Level 1
 - By increasing the skills in the middle where most workers are

In the NWT, we have a unique opportunity to address some of the issues related to adult literacy as the Government of the NWT develops a new literacy strategy. We need to target programs and services to those who need them most.

In the NWT, three groups in particular face huge literacy challenges:

- **Youth**
- **Unemployed people**
- **Aboriginal people**

For a long time, **youth** have been left out of strategies to improve literacy. We need to continue to encourage young people to stay in school and graduate. But we also need to recognize the significant number of youth who have left school without the skills they need to be successful in the future, and who need alternative programs. We need to develop strategies that meet the needs of these young people. And we need to involve youth in looking at what these solutions may be.

In the NWT, 73% of **unemployed people** perform **below Level 3**. By targeting unemployed people, we will be increasing their personal and economic potential—at a time when resource development companies will be hiring northern employees for the foreseeable future.

Many **Aboriginal people** have highly developed skills. They can often speak more than one language; they are grounded in traditional Aboriginal literacies; and rooted in their culture. The gap between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal populations needs to be addressed. The greater the gap is, the greater the inequities in services—not in terms of what's offered, but in terms of results. This needs to change for individuals to enjoy quality of life and for the NWT to prosper economically.

Let's give everyone in the NWT the chance they deserve to reach their potential.

For more information on this or other literacy matters, contact:

The NWT Literacy Council

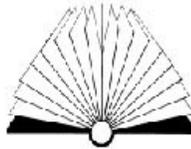
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