

Literacy – For A Life of Learning!

A Collaborative Process Toward A Proposed Literacy Policy For All Albertans

*... that all Albertans may
have the literacy skills to
enable them to reach their
full potential and participate
in all aspects of our vibrant
and prosperous community.*

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Contents

WORKING TOGETHER	5
WHAT DOES “LITERACY” MEAN TODAY?	7
FOCUSING ON ALBERTA	9
The Statistics	9
A CALL TO ACTION	11
POLICY FRAMEWORK	13
A Guiding Vision	13
Pillars to Build Upon	13
Comprehensiveness	13
Awareness	14
Accessibility	14
Sustainability	14
Principles to Guide Us	14
Building a Learning Culture	15
Relevant, Quality Learning Opportunities	15
Outcomes Oriented	15
Learner Centred	15
GOALS AND STRATEGIES	17
Goal 1: Collaboration and Coordination	17
Goal 2: Awareness	19
Goal 3: Access	20
Goal 4: Sustainability	22
Goal 5: New Knowledge and Knowledge Transfer	24
CONCLUSION – THE NEXT ALBERTA	25
REFERENCES	27

4 • Literacy – For a Life of Learning!

Literacy – For A Life of Learning! was prepared collaboratively by representatives from literacy groups, literacy programs, colleges, and agencies involved in literacy across Alberta.

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Working Together

A Proposed Literacy Policy for Albertans

This proposed policy is derived from:

- the collective experience and wisdom of approximately 30 Albertans who work as Learners, Leaders and Professionals in the Literacy field.
- approximately 1,300 hours of learning and working together.
- extensive field experience and expert knowledge in the area of family, adult, workplace, aboriginal and children's literacy.
- input from more than 100 learners and others in the literacy field through Community Consultations and website input.
- an innovative model for policy development that:
 - enhances policy expertise among professionals and
 - encourages experts in the community and workplace to work with government representatives to develop policy that is meaningful to both community and government.

This comprehensive proposed literacy policy has been developed for the Alberta Government and for the community. Ensuring that literacy challenges are addressed is the joint responsibility of several ministries of government including, but not limited to Education, Advanced Education, Health, Justice, Children's Services, and Human Resources and Employment. The community, industry, and individuals. This document is a reflection of our shared ownership in addressing these challenges.

Paul emigrated to Canada 4 years ago. He was a teenage soldier and lived in refugee camps most of his life. Paul says "The first time I saw a book was in the refugee camp and that day was the day that I knew I was going to learn to read."

With the support of community organizations Paul completed pre-university studies and is now going on to college.



What Does "Literacy" Mean Today?

IN 2003 UNESCO DEFINED LITERACY AS *a continuum of learning that enables individuals to develop their knowledge and potential, pursue and achieve their goals, and participate fully in society.* (National Literacy Trust, 2006)

More specifically, literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts.

It is time to understand the traditional definition of literacy in its context of literacies. "Literacies" is a noun which collectively describes a range of knowledge and an understanding of the world which every individual has. It is through the celebration of literacies that we gain access to the world of reading and writing or to literacy as it commonly known.

The broader concept of literacies has to do with a shift from thinking about literacy as a set of cognitive skills, to recognizing literacy as including socio-cultural practices associated with reading and writing (Hamilton, 2000). This broader view recognizes and values a range of literacies that are based in everyday activities and networks, as well as the traditionally more valued institutional literacies associated with schools, workplaces, government, and similar institutions.

"Everyday" literacies are used in informal settings in homes and communities to address needs and interests that arise. They include using reading and writing to organize or document life, for personal communication, private leisure, and making sense of information or situations (Hamilton, 2000). People engage in everyday literacies to get things done rather than to develop literacy skills per se. A literacies approach recognizes the importance and relationships of oral language and literacies development (Ewing, 2003).

Yagcioglu (2003) says that "literacy is central to the ongoing struggle for democracy and self-determination. It is a matter of individual empowerment in the way it can enable one to negotiate the complexities of life." He continues by examining its impact on public policy and says that it "is empowerment in a broader sense in that literate acts are always inherently social within political, cultural, and economic contexts within which we lead our individual lives." Further he describes being fully literate as "a kind of joy ... that comes with using language to structure your world, to give voice to your ideas to create space for yourself in an

What Does “Literacy” Mean Today?

endless stream of discourse to work toward change, to reflect, to expound, to act.” Yagelski’s words describe beautifully the rationale and motivation for the call to action that this policy framework addresses.

This document defines “literacy” broadly, understanding that what it means to be literate is situational and that individuals generally acquire numerous literacies as they engage in different social situations. In keeping with this notion, literacy in this policy framework promotes its understanding through a range of developmental, socio-cultural, and media contexts.

Any approach that encourages participation, in society and communication between its members, helps to build literacies. Literacies begin with and are enhanced by social engagement and, therefore, go beyond the individual. For individuals, literacies provide the means of participating fully in society.

Current society often refers to the importance of “building a learning culture.” It is well understood that lifelong learning increases literacy skills in the individual and, as such, begins to build the foundation of a true learning culture. Imagine the learning culture that will be created through giving more attention to the foundational skills of literacy!

*A conference on Indigenous Knowledge,
held at the University of Alberta,
heard numerous Aboriginal Elders
speaking about, among other things,
education and literacy.*

*One First Nations Elder was memorable
because of his passion for the topic.*

*The following paraphrases
part of his message.*

*Because I could not read a story to him,
my grandson asked if I was dumb.*

*I told him that I could read the sky
and tell him when it would rain.*

*I could go to the field and tell him when
and where the animals had been ...*

No grandson – I am not dumb!

Focusing on Alberta

WHAT DOES ALL OF THIS MEAN FOR ALBERTA? Practically speaking, it means that Alberta should embrace the participation of *all* learners where literacies include, and are not limited to, problem solving, critical thinking, numeracy, reading, writing, and technological aptitude (beyond computers). These literacies are often known as Essential Skills.

Alberta ranks with The Yukon, British Columbia, and Saskatchewan and has average literacy and numeracy scores significantly higher than the national average (Statistics Canada, 2005). However, given the importance of reading and writing, all Albertans need to have the opportunity to gain and improve these skills and the other skills essential to live and work fully in their communities.

The Statistics

The literacy levels required in today's economy have been determined internationally, and Canada has participated in a survey to determine literacy levels among adults. The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (Statistics Canada, 2006) provides an in-depth analysis of the literacy story in Alberta. For example, we know that 42% (1,053,000) of adult Albertans and 35% (753,000) of working age Albertans, do not have the literacy skills necessary to reach their own potential in our increasingly knowledge-based economy, and therefore limit our potential as a province. Moreover, 44% (953,000) do not have the numeracy (basic math) skills needed, and almost 50% have lower-level problem-solving skills. In comparison with other countries, Canada, while in the second echelon, does not lead the pack. Alberta is amongst the top provinces in Canada, but not in the lead.

Today in Alberta 25% of our youth do not complete high school within six years (Government of Alberta, Ministry of Education, 2006). Thirty-six per cent of our population, age 16–25, have literacy levels below those required in the knowledge-based economy. We know that 90% of our citizens who do not have a high school diploma also have low-level problem-solving skills. As well, many of our immigrants do not have English literacy skills commensurate with their education levels. Over 200,000 immigrants in Alberta have literacy levels below level 3 – the level determined to be required to function fully in the

Focusing on Alberta

knowledge-based economy. Alberta's seniors as a group, like those in the rest of Canada, have the lowest levels of literacy. Either they did not attain a high level to begin with or their skills have diminished over time.

Literacy is a foundational skill that enables individuals to learn and its attainment is often understood to be associated with education levels, such as high school or university graduation. However, one cannot assume a particular literacy level based on educational achievement; unfortunately, some of our high school graduates do not have the literacy skills necessary to fully benefit from their post-secondary education.

This proposed policy demonstrates a commitment to strengthening literacy in ways that respect, cultural, social and economic diversity for Albertans of every age and ability.

Scott came from a single parent home. He had problems with learning for most of his life. He became the class clown and participated more in sports.

He had little success with academics. Scott left school and became involved in gang life. He spent many years in prison.

After leaving prison the last time, Scott met a woman and together they had a son. Scott says: "When my son started having problems in school, I realized that I needed to make more changes in my life, so I went back to school with a commitment this time.

I wanted to better myself so that my son could follow in my footsteps — footsteps that he could be proud of."

A Call to Action

IN ALBERTA THE AVERAGE LITERACY LEVELS HAVE NOT IMPROVED SINCE 1994. The Alberta government spends \$2.2 billion on Advanced Education, \$5.1 billion on the K-12 Basic Education system, and under \$10 million on community-based adult and family literacy programs. In addition over \$24 million is spent on adult literacy programs through Alberta Human Resources and Employment (Government of Alberta, 2004). At the current rate of investment, and using current services, supports, and program-delivery models, we cannot expect to improve literacy rates much over the next ten years.

Alberta needs to immediately implement a comprehensive literacy policy and learning plan for the province. The developing world is educating its workforce at unprecedented rates. If we do not respond quickly to the skills shortage that currently exists in Alberta, we are at risk of losing our “Alberta Advantage.” Through the creation of a learning and literacy culture in Alberta, we can lead the world both economically and socially.

The reasons to invest in literacy are numerous and include:

- A literate population is a healthier population; as literacy improves, wellness and productivity go up, acute and chronic care costs go down.
- People with higher literacy rates are not as likely to get in trouble with the law.
- Literacy rates correlate to productivity rates; a 1% rise in average literacy would equate to an increase in productivity of 2.5% and a 1.5% increase in GDP.
- Unemployment is on average for 9 weeks for a highly literate person, compared to 38 weeks for a person with low literacy.
- Personal income and literacy rates are directly correlated.
- Low literacy has a cyclical and intergenerational impact, i.e., vulnerable individuals may not have the same opportunities to access lifelong learning, and as a result their children may also

A Call to Action

be deprived of these same opportunities — and so it goes. The result for the broader community is a loss of voice from some of its members who are unseen and unheard.

Never before in the history of our province have we had the ability, prosperity and leadership to ensure all Albertans are included in the Alberta Advantage. The responsibility, to build the foundational literacy skills necessary, rests with government, industry, community, and with individuals. And the time is now!

This proposed policy recognizes and affirms the need for all citizens to have the literacy skills required to participate fully in society.

Lil grew up in rural Canada and was taken out of school to work to help support her family. In Lil's childhood home, books were an infrequent luxury.

Lil raised her own family and hid her poor literacy skills throughout. Lil struggled with alcoholism and yet, at the age of fifty, she decided to sober up and go back to school. Lil says: "For the first time in my life, I discovered that alcohol could never give me the high I now get from being able to read and write."

Policy Framework

THE VISION THAT GUIDES THIS POLICY FRAMEWORK FULLY SUPPORTS the Government of Alberta's vision as stated in *Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise: Alberta's Vision for the Future* (Government of Alberta, 2006a). The strategies outlined in this framework support the implementation of the Government's 20-year plan: *Today's Opportunities, Tomorrow's Promise: A Strategic Plan for the Government of Alberta* (Government of Alberta, 2006b).

A Guiding Vision

All Albertans have the literacy skills that enable them to reach their full potential and participate in all aspects of our vibrant and prosperous community.

Pillars to Build Upon

This literacy policy framework hinges on the belief that Alberta values and is committed to the development of a learning culture. Foundational to the building of a learning culture, this literacy policy framework is built on the following pillars:

Comprehensiveness

All Albertans have a shared responsibility to understand and address the challenges of low literacy. Approaches to addressing literacy challenges must have a meaningful and significant impact for people of all ages and abilities and involve the home, workplace, learning institutions, and community settings.

- Approaches to addressing literacy challenges means working with groups and learners including: adult, ESL, Francophone, workplace, and First Nations, Métis, Inuit, families, youth, and children.
- A variety of approaches and methodologies are required.

Kalvinder was shy and had trouble in school most of her life. At the age of eighteen she moved to Canada and was immediately married.

At the age of nineteen she was severely injured in a car accident. Undaunted she continued to raise four children.

When the youngest entered school so did Kalvinder! As an adult learner she received the encouragement and support that had alluded her all of her life. She finished her upgrading and is now taking pre-business courses.

Policy Framework

Awareness

A more literate society is everyone's concern, as the effects of low-literacy are wide-ranging and felt throughout all sectors and communities. There are four equally important aspects to awareness:

- To increase the understanding of the ever-changing complexity of literacy and literacy issues;
- To invite and inspire those with limited literacy skills to open the door to learning;
- To create an environment that supports rather than limits opportunities for those with low-literacy skills; and
- To increase the awareness of the literacy supports, services and programs that are available throughout the province.

Accessibility

The barriers to participation in literacy and lifelong learning will be eliminated or significantly reduced. Consistent with the Government of Alberta's commitment to ensuring that every student/learner in Alberta has the right of access to a quality basic education consistent with their needs and abilities, all Albertans will have access to affordable, quality programs, services, and supports regardless of their economic, social, cultural, or geographic situation.

Sustainability

Through the engagement of all Albertans, Alberta communities will be assured of the consistent and long-term commitments required to develop and sustain a learning culture in Alberta.

Principles to Guide Us

Concurrent with the Pillars, the following Key Principles are also critical as a foundational component for successful implementation of this policy framework.

Policy Framework

Building a Learning Culture

The pervasive, complex issues of literacy require shared ownership and joint resolve. Public, private, and voluntary organizations and individuals all have a role to play in developing and delivering literacy programs, services, and supports in a collaborative manner.

Relevant, Quality Learning Opportunities

Literacy skills are developed, both within and outside of formal programs. Each learner has opportunities to participate in ways that are personally meaningful. Informal learning must also be recognized, encouraged, and supported. It is contextual, varies culturally, and happens on a learner's own terms.

Outcomes Oriented

Programs, services, and supports must demonstrate evidence of the differences made in the lives of learners and the community. Identifying these measurable differences is a means of ensuring accountability. Measures of success must include both qualitative and quantitative information.

Learner Centred

Programs, services and supports must be learning and learner centred. This means that they all must:

- Recognize what the learner brings;
- Be tailored and meet learner needs, interests, and their cultural realities;
- Take into account diversity of individuals;
- Be based on best-practices; and
- Empower learners!



Goals and Strategies

THE FOLLOWING GOALS AND STRATEGIES ENSURE the provincial literacy policy framework is comprehensive in both its development and implementation. The goals and strategies outlined are not arranged chronologically, nor in order of importance.

Goal 1: Collaboration and Coordination

Current literacy supports and services would benefit from concerted coordination to ensure resources are used to maximum effectiveness. As a result of this collaborative and coordinated effort, there would be fewer gaps in services, a reduction in overlap of programming, and an increase in learner success.

A coordinated, provincial literacy infrastructure is created to ensure:

- A learning culture in Alberta.
- The participation of all Albertans.
- The delivery of a range of literacy programs, services and supports across the province.

STRATEGY 1.1: The Government of Alberta provides a leadership role in developing a learning culture through incorporating literacy outcomes and the appropriate measures into its evolving Business Plan.

STRATEGY 1.2: Increase collaboration within and among all stakeholders to encourage the delivery of a range of literacy programs, while maximizing existing services and supports. Stakeholders would include: governments, community agencies, basic education, public libraries, post-secondary and other public institutions, the private sector, and labour.

School was a nightmare for Cathy. After being picked on for most of her school life, at 15, she decided to drop out and started abusing alcohol and drugs. Eventually Cathy found her way to a local literacy program. Now she is a community volunteer, preparing to take her English 30 and completing her diploma. Next year she'll be attending Grant MacEwan College.

Goals and Strategies

STRATEGY I.3: Encourage and support a provincial cross-ministerial body including at a minimum: Ministers of Advanced Education, Human Resources and Employment, Education, Health, and Justice. This body would be tasked with:

- Developing and coordinating overarching literacy outcomes.
- Collaborating with and providing resources to provincial literacy initiatives.

STRATEGY I.4: Support a community coordinating body tasked with:

- Strengthening partnerships among organizations responsible for literacy.
- Centralizing and communicating information about services and initiatives of public, voluntary, and private agencies.
- Developing and ensuring ready access to a centralized resource list for service providers and clients.
- Identifying existing complementary services and creating partnerships with agencies in other sectors.
- Developing means and recommendations for knowledge transfer and translating research into practice.

Indicator of Success

- A coordinated, provincial literacy infrastructure is created.

Goals and Strategies

Goal 2: Awareness

Through enhanced awareness, Albertans are more aware of the prevalence of low-literacy in our province and understand the impact this has on all of us. They understand the possibilities that are created through a fully literate and learning society, and they are aware of the programs, services, and supports available to improve literacy levels.

STRATEGY 2.1: Develop key messages for a visible public awareness campaign. Possible elements include:

- Literacies are a foundation of learning and personal and professional development that occurs throughout a person's lifetime.
- Improved literacy is part of the solution to skills shortages, employee retention, and employee training that will lead to an economically strong and vibrant society.
- Literacy levels are a major determinant of health and health service utilization.
- Those with low levels of literacy tend to be over-represented in the justice system and face greater challenges for rehabilitation.
- People with higher literacy skills participate more fully in community and civic activities.

STRATEGY 2.2: Develop and implement a social marketing campaign that includes:

- A logo and brand.
- Short messages and/or a jingle to convey key messages.
- Engaging the media to deliver a positive, supportive message that will help reduce the stigma of low-literacy.

*"I now walk down the street, reading.
I read signs, window ads, traffic signs,
billboards and any other words I can
find."*

Goals and Strategies

- Enlisting a champion, a well-known person who would become a committed spokesperson on behalf of literacy, reinforcing key messages.
- Staging events and promoting activities that would encourage Albertans to become involved in literacy activities everyday.
- Spotlighting the range of existing literacy programs, resources, and services across Alberta.
- Raise awareness among employers, employees, workplace associations, unions, and training organizations about sustaining a literate work force.

Indicators of Success

- Increased awareness by Albertans of the issues of low-level literacy.
- Increased numbers of Albertans are aware of their own literacy.
- Increased awareness of the possibilities created for individuals and the community through enhanced literacy skills.

Goal 3: Access

All Albertans have access to literacy programs, supports, and services appropriate for their specific needs and circumstances.

STRATEGY 3.1: Increase accessibility of literacy programs, services, and supports for Albertans of every age and ability.

- Provide appropriate resources to supports, programming, and services for all Albertans including children, families, adults, those for whom English is a second language, and workplace learners.

Goals and Strategies

- Promote partnerships and collaboration among community-based organizations to maximize existing resources and expertise.

STRATEGY 3.2: Increase access for Albertans who face barriers, for example: geographic, emotional, cultural, linguistic, cognitive, and economic.

- Increase affordability by providing support for child-care, tuition, housing, transportation, living allowances, and other supports as needed for longer periods of time.
- Integrate existing technology to deliver programs, supports, and services to individuals as appropriate, for example: web-based and video-conference resources using SuperNet.
- Provide a centralized access point for resources, standardized learning, teaching, and measurement tools.

STRATEGY 3.3: Provide programs of study to ensure learners, individually and with families make progress at their own pace, and provide supports that encourage their learning goals, especially at the beginning of their learning journey.

- Offer programs of study, which incorporate, but are not limited to individualized study and include an expanded model of literacies and essential skills.
- Simplify the delivery of programs that are available, to provide a centralized access point to programs, standardized levels of achievement, and transparency for transitional learners moving within the learning system.
- Build, expand, and support Learning Centres, Resource Centres, and Family Resource Centres within communities.

A Poem by an Adult Literacy Student

*I never thought, I could do it.
I was always telling myself, you're not smart
enough.
You can't do it, so why even try.
What is encouragement, I would ask myself?
Is this how my life is supposed to be?
I know I can, I am smart as smart.
No, I was always as smart.
I will try, I don't want to watch my life fly by.
I found encouragement, I found myself.
Yes, this is how my life is supposed to be.
For I owe it all to the word LITERACY.*

Cathy

Goals and Strategies

- Provide financial assistance for assessment of need and the design and delivery of programs that are tailored to the literacy requirements of the workforce. Funding should be available to employers, workplace associations, unions, and appropriate community and training organizations.

Indicators of Success

- A comprehensive audit of learner needs and current programs, services, and supports in the province is complete.
- Literacy programs, supports, and services are of the type and in the location where they are needed in the community, workplace, or post secondary institution.
- Increased participation in literacy programs and use of services and supports.

Goal 4: Sustainability

There is a learning culture in Alberta that is evident in the high quality, professionally-delivered, well-resourced literacy programs, services, and supports available to all Albertans.

STRATEGY 4.1: Literacy providers have adequate sustainable funding to offer quality programs, services, and supports.

- The public sector provides multi-year funding commitments to literacy programs, supports, and services.
- The private and voluntary sectors participate in providing ongoing support and resources to literacy programming and services.
- Individuals are responsive to available literacy supports and services and participate in literacy programs appropriate to their needs.

Goals and Strategies

STRATEGY 4.2: The literacy field agrees to and develops professional standards/accreditation.

- The literacy field collectively develops and then adopts a range of competencies and appropriate professional standards/accreditation to deliver quality literacy programs, supports, and services.
- Professional development continues to be funded.

STRATEGY 4.3: To help meet the overarching outcomes developed by the cross-ministerial body, the literacy field develops:

- Common descriptors and benchmarks/levels of literacy proficiency.
- Some common tools for the initial and ongoing assessment of learners.
- Descriptions of promising practices for programs, supports, and services and program evaluation.

Indicators of Success

- Multi-year funding, based on the outcomes articulated, is in place.
- Literacy programs can articulate outcomes and measure their achievement.
- A range of appropriate professional standards are developed.
- Professional standards are adopted by the literacy field in Alberta.
- Increased participation in professional development.

I have struggled with learning my whole life. In school I always felt left behind. This led to a cycle of alcohol and drug abuse. I felt I couldn't learn. Since starting my program, I have found out about my literacy problems in a most non-judgmental way and I'm getting encouragement and the help I need. My self-esteem is growing.

Goals and Strategies

- Benchmarks/levels of literacy proficiency are developed by the literacy field.

Goal 5: New Knowledge and Knowledge Transfer

To ensure relevance, reliability, and continuing high standards, all literacy policies, programs, and services in Alberta are guided by current research.

STRATEGY 5.1: Create a provincial or intra provincial network for literacy research and include both traditional and community-based research opportunities.

STRATEGY 5.2: Synthesize current research, relate the information to the Alberta context, and offer service providers easy access to meaningful information that facilitates the translation of this research into practice.

STRATEGY 5.3: Gather data and report on Alberta program outcomes and results.

STRATEGY 5.4: Review research in other jurisdictions in Canada and internationally.

STRATEGY 5.5: Assess areas of highest need and target research dollars accordingly.

Indicator of Success

- Literacy policy, programs, and services are based on current research.

Conclusion – The Next Alberta

WHAT WILL ALBERTA LOOK LIKE IN 2025? Will the Next Alberta will be a more literate Alberta? Will *All Albertans have the literacy skills that enable them to reach their full potential and participate in all aspects of our vibrant and prosperous community?*

Consider what a more fully Literate Alberta might look like.

Economically – Statistics Canada estimates that a 1% increase in literacy levels would result in a 1.5% increase in the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). For Alberta, this amounts to a permanent annual increase in GDP of approximately \$3 billion.

Socially – Addressing the issues of low literacy is an investment in our future that will reduce personal, social, and economic costs and enhance the ability of individuals to reach their full potential.

The means to achieve a more prosperous and inclusive Alberta calls for the participation of all its citizens. This more inclusive Alberta requires the investment of time, money, intellect, and heart by business, government, the voluntary sector, and individuals. Through partnership and strategic planning this vision can become reality.

The time for action is now. We must dedicate the resources necessary to ensure that low literacy in Alberta is a thing of the past. With the commitment of decision makers, the awareness of the community, the action of service providers, and the participation of learners, we can respond to the challenges of low literacy and make the next one hundred years of our province even better than the first one hundred years.

"My husband was a truck driver who hurt his back. He needed new skills to get a different kind of job so he started in a literacy program. He is doing great and is even reading. He meets with his tutor for two hours each week. The other day he was filling out his own form and said: "guess what — I can spell career."





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