



## Building a Pan-Canadian Strategy on Literacy and Essential Skills:

## Recommendations for the Federal Government

*Adult literacy and essential skills development are cornerstones of lifelong learning and are crucial to the success of the federal Innovation Strategy. In this paper, six Canadian national literacy organizations urge the federal government to work with stakeholders to develop a national, or pan-Canadian, strategy for adult literacy and essential skills development.*

## ***Summary - 12 Key Recommendations for the Federal Government***

- 1.** The federal government should take the lead in developing a pan-Canadian literacy and essential skills strategy built on renewed partnerships between federal, provincial, and territorial governments, national and provincial literacy organizations, and community stakeholders.
- 2.** The federal government should validate and support literacy and essential skills development as an integral component of the "culture of lifelong learning" that our country will need to meet the demands of the future.
- 3.** The federal government should expand the mandate and resources of the National Literacy Secretariat.
- 4.** HRDC should take the lead in developing protocols for examining government programs and policies through a "literacy lens". As a first step, HRDC should examine its own programs and policies to maximize their potential to support adult literacy and essential skills development.
- 5.** The voluntary sector plays an important role in literacy delivery and administration across the country. The federal government should ensure that its literacy initiatives acknowledge and support this important role and contribution.
- 6.** HRDC should develop and support policies that position adult literacy and essential skills development as a community development issue.
- 7.** The federal government should take a leadership role in supporting family literacy development, in collaboration with provincial/territorial governments and the family literacy community.
- 8.** The federal government should build on current expertise and best practices in workforce literacy through the development of tax incentives; infrastructure development; public awareness campaigns and supportive policies.
- 9.** The federal government should support the development and implementation of a multi-government Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan that is owned and maintained by Aboriginal people.
- 10.** The federal government should ensure that strategies and programs for immigrant and refugee integration take literacy and essential skills training needs into consideration.
- 11.** HRDC should work with the literacy community to increase the availability and application of technologies in the field.
- 12.** The federal government should ensure that all vital information is accessible to less literate Canadians by using plain language in its own communications and promoting the uses of plain language in all public communications.

## ***Literacy: A Cornerstone of the Innovation Agenda***

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We have serious literacy challenges in Canada: 22% of Canadian adults do not read well, and another 26% do not have the literacy skills necessary to contribute to the economic and social development of their communities and our country.<sup>1</sup> Addressing these literacy challenges is key to dealing with the most pressing issues of our time. It has implications for the workplace and the economy, innovation, child poverty, health, community safety / community development, immigrant settlement, social cohesion, and more.

The Canada of the future will need all hands on deck. Yet we are helping less than 10% of Canadians who could benefit from literacy training to develop their potential as workers, parents and citizens.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2001 and 2002 Throne Speeches, the federal government made a commitment to work with the provinces and territories and the voluntary sector to develop a national literacy strategy, as part of a comprehensive Innovation Agenda. The literacy community is eager to contribute to that development. As part of our contribution, we are in the process of developing our shared vision and agenda for adult literacy and essential skills. The realization of this vision and agenda will require action by many players, including the federal government; provincial and territorial governments; national, provincial / territorial literacy organizations; business and labour; other community partners; and individual learners and literacy workers.

In the following pages we propose guiding principles for a pan-Canadian strategy on literacy and essential skills, and outline actions we want the federal government to take in developing and implementing the strategy.

### ***Guiding Principles for a Pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy***

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- ✓ **Broad vision of literacy:** Literacy and essential skills development must be available to any adult who needs them to achieve the goals they set for themselves at work, at home, and in the community.<sup>3</sup> Our definition of literacy must encompass a range from the most basic reading, writing and numeracy skills to the equivalent of high school. Our solutions must range from very informal, community-based services to formal, institutional systems. As well, we must recognize that literacy problems are often interrelated with issues such as poverty, health, injustice and abuse, and that as a society we must tackle these too.
- ✓ **Build on success:** The pan-Canadian strategy on literacy and essential skills must recognize and build on the expertise, structures, and partnerships that already exist.

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<sup>1</sup> International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS)

<sup>2</sup> *Who wants to learn? Patterns of Participation in Canadian Literacy and Upgrading Programs*, ABC CANADA / Literacy BC, 2001

<sup>3</sup> The International Adult Literacy Survey defined literacy as "the ability to understand and use printed information at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential".

- ✓ **Community solutions** : Communities must be allowed and supported to identify their own literacy needs and define their own solutions. As well, Aboriginal governments at all levels must be involved in developing literacy strategies for their peoples.
- ✓ **Focus on future generations** : We must ensure that children's chances in life are not limited by their parents' literacy barriers. Intergenerational literacy programs and services are a key preventative approach.
- ✓ **Respect for culture and language**: Wherever possible, learners should have opportunities to become literate in their mother tongue.<sup>4</sup> In the case of French and Aboriginal learners, this should be a right. Literacy programming and materials should be culturally appropriate.
- ✓ **Stakeholder involvement** : Policies and programs at national, provincial, and local levels must be developed and implemented in consultation with the literacy community.<sup>5</sup>
- ✓ **Literacy as a necessary investment in our communities and our country** : Effective policies and programs that respond to the literacy needs of individuals, families, communities and the country will not happen without *sustained, core, operational funding*.

## ***Recommendations for Action by the Federal Government***

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***Recommendation 1: The federal government should take the lead in developing a pan-Canadian literacy and essential skills strategy built on renewed partnerships between federal, provincial, and territorial governments, national and provincial literacy organizations, and community stakeholders.***

**Action 1.1:** The federal government should declare that adult literacy and essential skills development is a national public policy priority that requires intergovernmental cooperation and increased investment.

**Action 1.2:** The Minister of HRDC should call for a national forum of relevant provincial/territorial ministers<sup>6</sup>, with the objective of developing a national agreement / accord on literacy and essential skills. The agreement should establish pan-Canadian priorities, standards, and protocols for new federal investments; and accountability measures for those investments. The development of a national accord on literacy and essential skills should engage community

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<sup>4</sup> La Fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français (FCAF) is developing a francophone literacy strategy that reflects the right of all Canadian citizens, wherever they live, to have access to literacy services in French. This strategy will be made available soon.

<sup>5</sup> Our definition of the literacy community includes learners as well as people working (paid or unpaid) in any capacity in the field.

<sup>6</sup> Literacy and essential skills are not neatly categorized in provincial or territorial ministries. For example, in some provinces and territories, literacy and essential skills development is the responsibility of Education Ministers, in others it is the responsibility of Labour Market Ministers. In addition to putting the issue on the agenda of existing forums such as CMEC and the Forum for Labour Market Ministers, we encourage the Minister to host a broader forum of “relevant” Ministers to ensure that all of the right parties are at the table.

stakeholders and should build on lessons learned from existing federal /provincial /territorial models of cooperation<sup>7</sup> as well as on exemplary provincial / territorial literacy strategies.

**Action 1.3:** As part of developing a national accord on literacy and essential skills, the federal government should work with the provinces and territories towards a system of sustained core funding for literacy program delivery. This might mean developing inter-Ministerial co-operation to ensure seamless, long-term funding where the federal government and the provincial/territorial governments work in partnership to support programs.

**Action 1.4:** Using common definitions, the federal government should determine how much money is currently being spent on adult literacy and essential skills training at the federal, provincial and territorial levels. The level of per-student spending should then be upgraded to levels comparable to K-12 and post-secondary per-student investment.

***Recommendation 2: The federal government should validate and support literacy and essential skills development as an integral component of the "culture of lifelong learning" that our country will need to meet the demands of the future.***

**Action 2.1:** The federal government should ensure that advances in adult literacy and essential skills development are key policy goals of the federal Innovation Strategy.

**Action 2.2:** The federal government should support existing and new public awareness campaigns that position literacy and lifelong learning as key values of Canadian life. It is critical that awareness campaigns are first backed up by a policy and program infrastructure. Once “hooked”, learners must be able to access supports and programs for learning.

**Action 2.3:** The Minister responsible for HRDC should help to foster a learning culture by targeting increased resources to advance horizontal and vertical integration, awareness and partnerships between federal departments, governments, and literacy and non-literacy sectors. The NLS, with an expanded mandate and increased resources, may be best positioned to identify and facilitate new partnerships. (See recommendation 3 regarding the role of an expanded NLS in championing partnerships and integration, and recommendation 4 for specific strategies related to the development of a “literacy lens”.)

**Action 2.4:** The federal government should work to foster renewed partnerships and links between all education sub-sectors (including K-12, post-secondary, family, and adult literacy / basic education / essential skills programs). In its role as knowledge broker, communicator, facilitator and deliverer of programs, the federal government can champion the creation of a seamless learning culture to amend the current situation where education subsectors are positioned as separate silos.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the National Children’s Agenda, the Early Childhood Development Accord or the National Housing Framework Agreement.

**Action 2.5:** If the federal government establishes a "Canadian Institute on Learning Information" modeled after the Canadian Institute on Public Health Information, the Minister of HRDC must ensure that literacy and essential skills is positioned as a legitimate and equal component along with the more traditional education sectors.

**Action 2.6:** The Minister of HRDC should support and fund continued research, practice, and applications around Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR). The goal should be a model where PLAR can be universally applied toward academic credit, toward requirements for a training program, or for occupational certification.<sup>8</sup>

***Recommendation 3: The federal government should expand the mandate and resources of the National Literacy Secretariat.***

The NLS already plays a crucial role in advancing adult literacy in Canada. The Secretariat has developed invaluable expertise as well as effective working partnerships with the provinces and territories, non-government organizations, literacy groups, business associations, labour unions and academics. It has fostered exemplary programs, public awareness, research and coordination. The federal government should build on this foundation by expanding the role and resources<sup>9</sup> of the NLS and ensuring that the NLS is a key component of a newly developed pan-Canadian Literacy Strategy.

**Action 3.1:** HRDC should position the NLS as the federal body responsible for facilitating a pan-Canadian literacy and essential skills strategy built on renewed partnerships between federal, provincial, and territorial governments, national and provincial literacy organizations, and community stakeholders, and increase the Secretariat's resources accordingly.

**Action 3.2:** HRDC should provide increased support to allow the NLS to be even more effective in raising awareness of literacy and essential skills development as a "horizontal issue" throughout the federal government. The expanded NLS can be proactive in increasing government-wide awareness of literacy issues, identifying opportunities, fostering partnerships, informing the literacy community of these developments, and informing other government departments of the resources and partnership opportunities within the literacy community.

**Action 3.3:** An expanded NLS should work with the literacy community and other partners to build the infrastructure necessary to support quality literacy and essential skills programming. This should include, but not be limited to:

- a) working with partners to secure longer-term, sustainable funding for literacy programs and organizations

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<sup>8</sup> Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition is defined as the process of identifying, assessing and recognizing skills, knowledge, or competencies that have been acquired through work experience, unrecognized training, independent study, volunteer activities and hobbies. (see New Approaches to Lifelong Learning (NALL) website: [www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/](http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/depts/sese/csew/nall/))

<sup>9</sup> According to HRDC departmental estimates for 2001-2002, the NLS budget was \$28.7 million – a budget comparable to one of the larger high schools in Toronto. NLS funding has not been increased since 1997.

- b) working with the community to establish appropriate accountability measures and evaluation protocols
- c) ensuring that staff and other resources are in place to foster ongoing, sustainable relationships between NLS representatives and the community
- d) ensuring that best practices are identified and shared, and providing tools to enable other programs and regions to adapt and apply these best practices
- e) developing the profession of adult literacy and essential skills, by helping the community to create employment standards, training opportunities for staff and volunteers, standards for optional certification of literacy workers, and increased recognition and "voice" within the wider education sector
- f) identifying opportunities for and supporting partnership development between literacy organizations and their provincial ministries responsible for literacy and essential skills development, and between literacy and non-literacy organizations at local, provincial / territorial and national levels
- g) acting as a neutral broker in establishing priorities, setting standards, and developing pan-Canadian accords to address mobility issues around literacy upgrading

**Action 3.4:** The NLS should promote literacy research and its dissemination by:

- a) working with the literacy community to develop a research agenda
- b) ensuring that existing literacy research is catalogued and easily accessible
- c) ensuring that knowledge from research, pilot projects and best practices is communicated within the literacy field as well as to other stakeholders and potential partners.

**Action 3.5:** The NLS should explore ways to promote the exchange of ideas and expertise within the literacy community, as well as to involve the field in building national strategies and capacity. For example, within the literacy community there is widespread interest in regular national literacy conferences. There is also interest in reviving the practice of holding "policy conversations" on themes such as literacy research, family literacy, learning technologies, etc.

***Recommendation 4: HRDC should take the lead in developing protocols for examining government programs and policies through a "literacy lens". As a first step, HRDC should examine its own programs and policies to maximize their potential to support adult literacy and essential skills development.***

**Action 4.1:** HRDC should develop protocols for a literacy "audit" of policies and programs to identify policies which impede access to adult literacy learning, and which policies and programs could be amended / expanded to maximize their potential to help adult learners increase their literacy and essential skills.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the impact of Employment Insurance policies or Labour Market Development Agreements on literacy development should be reviewed.

**Action 4.2:** After this review, HRDC should systematically adjust its policies and programs to ensure that barriers are removed and programs and policies promote maximum access to and participation in literacy and adult essential skills programs.

**Action 4.3:** After examining and adjusting its own policies and programs, HRDC should take the lead in urging and facilitating, through the development of templates and tools, other federal departments to examine and adjust their own policies and programs through this “literacy lens” in accordance with HRDC established protocols.

***Recommendation 5: The voluntary sector plays an important role in literacy delivery and administration across the country. The federal government should ensure that its literacy initiatives acknowledge and support this important role and contribution.***

**Action 5.1:** HRDC should champion a pan-Canadian strategy on literacy and essential skills that respects the important role that volunteers play in providing informal educational opportunities in the community and the workplace, while also dedicating resources to increase the capacity of voluntary literacy organizations.

**Action 5.2:** The federal government should support the development and capacity of Canada’s voluntary sector as a whole by continuing to support the long-term objectives of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI). These long-term objectives include: strengthening the voluntary sector’s capacity to meet existing and future challenges, which includes developing long-term, sustainable approaches to funding the voluntary sector, as well as enhancing the relationship between the sector and the federal government and their ability to jointly serve Canadians.

***Recommendation 6: HRDC should develop and support policies that position adult literacy and essential skills upgrading as a community development issue.***

**Action 6.1:** HRDC should explore the **Learning Communities**<sup>11</sup> model, and work to identify ways that the federal government can play a role in expanding this approach to interested communities across the country.

**Action 6.2** – The federal government, beginning with HRDC, should integrate literacy and essential skills delivery into its existing community development initiatives.

***Recommendation 7: The federal government should take a leadership role in supporting family literacy development, in collaboration with provincial/territorial governments and the family literacy community.***

Family literacy investments provide double the return on investment because they benefit both children and their parents. As well as improving childrens' outcomes at home, at school and in

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<sup>11</sup> For articles on the model and on its application in British Columbia, visit [www.vanisle.net/~rfaris](http://www.vanisle.net/~rfaris)



the community, family literacy services also help parents to achieve their own literacy goals while supporting their children's learning.

**Action 7.1:** HRDC, through the NLS and all departmental initiatives dealing with childhood development, should increase support for family literacy programs that enhance the oral language and early literacy skills of children from birth to age six.

**Action 7.2:** As advances in family literacy are crucial to the success of the National Children's Agenda (NCA), family literacy programs should be eligible for federal and provincial funds delivered through NCA initiatives. This should include, but not be limited to investments delivered through the Early Childhood Development Initiative and Child Tax Benefit re-investment funds, targeted by the provinces for social support. The Minister of HRDC should work to ensure that some of the funds delivered through the NCA are targeted at family literacy programs.

***Recommendation 8: The federal government should build on current expertise and best practices in workforce literacy through the development of tax incentives; infrastructure development; public awareness campaigns and supportive policies.***

**Action 8.1:** The workforce literacy community has already developed a wide body of research, knowledge and expertise. Through the NLS, and in partnership with the literacy community, HRDC should continue to identify and fund best practices and develop innovative new initiatives related to workplace literacy.

**Action 8.2:** The federal government should expand workforce literacy through a strategy that includes: 1) creating tax incentives for small and medium-sized businesses to make workplace and essential skills development more attractive; 2) working with the literacy community, business and labour to further build the network of workplace literacy experts; 3) making this network available to small- and medium-sized businesses across the country; 4) launching a public awareness campaign targeted at business to raise awareness, investment and commitment in the sector.

**Action 8.3:** The Minister of HRDC should review the Employment Insurance program and Labour Market Development Agreements to identify ways in which EI funds might be made accessible to more workers to pursue literacy and essential skills training.

**Action 8.4:** HRDC should use increased funding for sector councils as leverage to urge councils to include literacy and essential skills development strategies within their sectoral training plans. HRDC could offer support (and possibly incentives) in developing and implementing those strategies.

**Action 8.5:** HRDC should enhance existing partnerships with organized labour to support delivery of workplace literacy and essential skills training that is worker/learner-centred.

***Recommendation 9: The federal government should support the development and implementation of a multi-government Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan that is owned and maintained by Aboriginal people.***

**Action 9.1:** The federal government should provide a forum where representatives from First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, as well as relevant Ministers from provincial and territorial governments, and the federal Ministers responsible for HRDC and Indian and Northern Affairs can come together to develop a multi-government Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan. This Aboriginal Literacy Action Plan should build on knowledge and best practices that respect Aboriginal cultures and languages, with the goal of creating healthy, literate communities, integrated programming, meaningful educational experiences, and programs and policies to address learning and educational gaps.

**Action 9.2:** The federal government should make ongoing support and funding available to contribute to the provision of autonomous, stable Aboriginal Literacy programs.

**Action 9.3:** The federal government should review Aboriginal Human Resource Development Agreements to determine whether AHRDA's have the potential to be a funding vehicle for community based Aboriginal literacy skills development.

***Recommendation 10: The federal government should ensure that strategies and programs for immigrant and refugee integration take literacy and essential skills training needs into consideration.***

**Action 10.1:** HRDC should partner with Immigration Canada to review the apparent gap between existing newcomer language services (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) and the needs of less-literate newcomers. Newcomers who are not literate in their first language have difficulty learning either language or literacy without special integrated approaches.

**Action 10.2:** HRDC should partner with Immigration Canada to foster first language literacy programs as an important component for newcomer integration strategies.

***Recommendation 11: HRDC should work with the literacy community to increase the availability and application of technologies in the field.***

**Action 11.1:** Through the NLS and possibly in partnership with Industry Canada, HRDC should work with the literacy community to develop a strategy for, and should assign increased resources to, the use of up-to-date technologies in the field. This strategy should include increasing adult learners' access to computers; strengthening the technological support infrastructure<sup>12</sup>; increasing resources for the creation of electronic learning content; and supporting the development of new technological methodologies.

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<sup>12</sup> The National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) plays a crucial technological infrastructure role for the Canadian literacy and essential skills community.

***Recommendation 12: The federal government should ensure that all vital information is accessible to less literate Canadians by using plain language in its own communications and by promoting the use of plain language in all public communications.***

**Action 12.1:** Working with the NLS and Communications Canada, HRDC should take a leadership role in using and promoting plain language, and in helping other government departments to comply with the April 2002 Communications Policy of the Government of Canada.<sup>(13)</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See [www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs\\_pol/sipubs/comm/comm\\_e.html](http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/Pubs_pol/sipubs/comm/comm_e.html)