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**Community-Driven Policies for Successful and Sustainable
Literacy Programs in Toronto and York Region**



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Executive Summary

Given the recent federal cutbacks to literacy and other social services, formally documenting the needs of the literacy community becomes increasingly important. It is essential that Toronto and York region's literacy community offer cost-effective, yet creative, strategies to address their needs that can be readily adopted by funders and top-level decision makers.

Across the field, there is broad consensus that what literacy programs need to improve adult literacy rates and increase learner participation is to reduce the fiscal vulnerability of programs and develop effective information channels between government and program stakeholders.

The literacy field in Toronto is rich in human-capital and best practices. However, threats to literacy such as flat-line funding, poor access to top-funders and decision makers, staff burn-out and poor compensation continue to hinder the progress that both the community and top-level funders hope to achieve.

To overturn these ongoing trends, we believe that these five areas are in need of the targeted policy interventions:

1. Strengthening Community Connections
2. Generating Program Resilience
3. Encouraging and Sustaining Learner-Driven Initiatives
4. Embracing Diversity and Inclusiveness
5. Building Identity and Public Education

MTML recommends continued development of asset-based solutions that develop comprehensive mechanisms to influence funders, policy makers, and other high-level decision makers. This report outlines asset-based solutions that, with further investigation, could support the literacy community in achieving their goals.



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Produced by:

The Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)

MTML Mission Statement

Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy is a network of organizations and individuals who are involved in and support adult literacy. We are an independent non-profit organization. We provide leadership and actively work to develop and promote adult literacy in Toronto and York Region.

Acknowledgements:

This is a MTML funded initiative and MTML led project.

The Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy thanks all the participants who came to the community meetings and those who contacted us individually to share their opinions and ideas. We recognize that it is the participant's commitment and dedication to the field that brought them together to discuss so openly the strengths and challenges of the literacy community. We are grateful for their ongoing input and work. MTML is especially grateful to the learners who joined the focus groups and so willingly shared their insights to us. Their perspectives and voices are essential to the overall health and well being of the literacy community.

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1. Purpose and Goals

What does the literacy community need to improve adult literacy rates and increase learner participation in Toronto and York region?

This seemingly simple question sparks vigorous and robust debate throughout Toronto and York Region's literacy community. To further encourage and learn from this debate the Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML) brought together stakeholders involved in the local literacy community – literacy workers, researchers, volunteers, and learners.¹ This report summarizes key challenges identified by the literacy community and provides strategies and opportunities that can be easily adopted by government funders, policy makers, and the literacy community.

Across the field, there is broad consensus that what literacy programs need to improve adult literacy rates and increase learner participation is to reduce the vulnerability of programs by harnessing sustained funding, increasing resources and time for staffing, and developing accessible and meaningful information channels. In other words, creative solutions are needed to address the systematic under-resourcing of the literacy field.

The next step will be to translate this sizable goal into meaningful strategies and policy directions that can be readily adopted and applied over both the short- and long-term. To do this successfully, the literacy community will need to continue to discuss their needs in order to augment and to implement the strategies identified in this report. It is important to note that the context in which literacy is situated is not static and consequently the needs of the community will always be evolving. In order to respond to the needs of the community, short and long term goals should be revisited on an ongoing basis.

Put simply, this report serves as a stepping-stone within the broader agenda of developing concrete objectives, action plans and strategies that address the literacy community's ongoing needs and future priorities which can be readily adopted by government funders and decision makers. Consequently, the purpose of this report is to facilitate and initiate realistic outcomes in the literacy community at all levels of implementation by providing effective mechanisms to influence and target relevant policy decisions.

The goals of this report are:

- 1) To initiate community mobilization and generate discussion;**
- 2) To activate community-driven approaches to planning and policy at the community-level;**
- 3) To present feasible action plans and policy directions to funders and other governmental stakeholders;**
- 4) To provide an inventory of solutions and strategies to address shared challenges, which were developed at the community-level.**

¹ Community refers to literacy stakeholders, including learners and volunteers, at the local level.



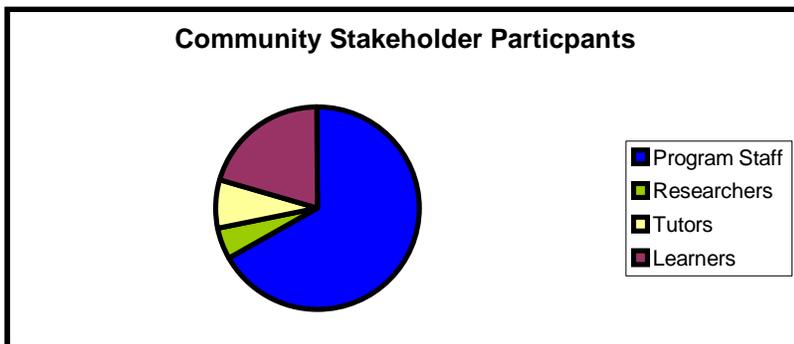
2. Method

Given that the purpose of this report is to give shape and form to the many ideas, concerns, and strategies that the literacy community often shares with each other, but rarely has the opportunity to formalize, MTML aimed to involve as many members of the literacy community as possible. This also ensures that the findings and strategies are relevant to both the community and top-level funders. This approach is important because it provides an opportunity to disseminate ideas and concerns in a formalized setting.

To achieve these goals, MTML facilitated five community consultation meetings during May and June 2006. MTML invited local community literacy stakeholders to the meetings including program staff, tutors, volunteers, researchers, and, most importantly, learners. Participants contributed to the meetings according to their comfort level while being guided through a series of questions and activities. During each community consultation, participants developed and set the core discussion themes that they considered to be assets and threats to the literacy community. Participants then developed strategies and policies to address these priority areas.² The inventory of issues and strategies that participants developed is the basis for the recommendations provided in this report.

In total, 39 individuals attended the meetings. Approximately 67 percent of the focus group participants were program staff. Learners were present at all but one focus group. Learners represented approximately 20% of focus group participants. (see figure 1).

Figure 1: Community Stakeholder Participants



Source: MTML, Community Consultation Stats, 2006

Each of the participants brought expert opinions and nuanced information to each of the meetings. It becomes quickly apparent that the themes and issues discussed are highly representative of the field and extend beyond those that were in the room. Community-based research offers a rich and textured approach to research, and is especially well suited to complex and multi-layered situations which too often get lost in more traditional approaches to research.

² For a complete description of public meeting format and questions asked, please see Appendix A:

3. Summary of Findings

There are over 80 program locations in Toronto and York Region, which are delivered by community-based, school board and college service providers reaching over 7,800 learners per year. Toronto and York region serves a diverse geographic region that includes Canada's largest urban centre as well as rural communities as far north as Lake Simcoe.

The consultations provided us with a robust inventory of strengths and challenges faced by the literacy community. Distilling all the issues raised leaves two primary concerns to the community:

- Reducing the vulnerability of programs
- Extending community voices into the various levels of government and into the public.

Assets and Strengths

The literacy community has numerous resources and strengths that allow programs to deliver high-quality and effective programming. In fact, as a community, the literacy field in Toronto is rich in human capital and best practices. For example, learners providing workshops on their experiences as consumer survivors. This provides a strong foundation for innovation and the expansion of new initiatives that will support literacy programs in areas of the highest need.

In addition to their regional network, the literacy community has several resources that they draw on, such as the Toronto Public Library, Alphaplus Centre and the Festival of Literacies among many others. These services provide a wealth of resources and networking opportunities to the literacy community and were highly praised as resources. These organizations and networks played a strong role in building both external and internal community connections.³

Programs find working with other literacy programming result in successful outcomes that build a community of best-practice. Intra-community networks were cited as a strength and a significant community asset that could be further invigorated.

The most significant strength of the literacy community in Toronto and York region is the dedication and quality of the staff, learners, and volunteers. Staff provides top-quality programming despite limited resources, funding, and time. Likewise, volunteers not only deliver contact hours but are also rich in social and human capital. Learner connections between programs were also viewed as an under-tapped asset. In other words, the experiences and knowledge of learners is often used in a given program, but the sharing of their knowledge and experiences is an asset that needs to be better utilized across the field.

³ External Community refers to non-immediate literacy stakeholders for example Apprenticeship or other Training Boards. We recognize that we are part of a larger community, however for the purposes, and clarity of this report, we will distinguish between the two. Internal community refers to immediate literacy stakeholders: program workers, learners, volunteers, researchers, network and resource staff etc.



Threats and Challenges

With four in ten Ontarians needing literacy skills to work in an information economy, the state of literacy in Canada is well understood and well documented.⁴ From the participants viewpoints is clear that the existing need in Toronto and York Region for programming is much higher than the current program capacity. Compounding this problem is that some high-needs areas are devoid of programming. In some areas of Toronto and York region, for example York Centre (Ward 9) located in North York West, 25.5% of the population have less than a grade nine education, yet there are only nine programs available. Isn't Scarborough North a more stark example?

The community of York Centre is not an exception; many communities are highly underserved despite the need shown by their population's education levels as seen in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Selected High-needs Communities in Toronto and York Region

High Needs Communities identified by literacy workers ⁵	Total Number of People with less than a grade 9 education, 2001 ⁶	Local Literacy Program Capacity ⁷	Number of Local Literacy Programs
Scarborough South ⁸	20,350	740	6
Scarborough North ⁹	22,390	55	2
Etobicoke North ¹⁰	11,195	653	8
North York West ¹¹	31,230	366	9

It is necessary to point out that because programs are already stretched beyond their capacity, due to a shortage of funding resources, the lack of learner access to programs is a regional issue, and not the failure of individual programs or program coordinators. Another community concern is the lack of appropriate and varied programming across the city; York Centre has only a single 1:1 program available to potential learners, severely curbing accessibility to programming.¹² This means significant populations of learners do not have the type of programming they require for success readily available to them. In Toronto and York region, literacy programming for youth, GED preparation, and full- and part-time programming for the lower levels, especially level 1 and level 2, is urgently needed according to both program workers and learners.

⁴ MTCU, *Dialogue: Building Tomorrow's Workforce*, 2006

⁵ The author recognizes that wards or census tracks do not bound communities. For the ease of illustration, the author has adopted all wards by relative geographic location to the LLC rather than dividing wards across perceived community boundaries.

⁶ <http://app.toronto.ca/wards/jsp/wards.jsp>, Ward Profiles, 2001

⁷ Program Capacities are taken from the 2006 – 2007 Literacy Services Plans and combined across the wards.

⁸ City of Toronto Wards 35, 36, 37, 38, 43, 44

⁹ City of Toronto Wards 39, 40, 41, 42

¹⁰ City of Toronto Wards 1,2

¹¹ City of Toronto Wards 7, 8, 9, 10, 23

¹² In York Centre, 21.4% of families are led by a single parent, which would limit time available to attend and travel to literacy programming.



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Following the distribution and type of programming, achieving sustainable funding is a top priority for participants. Current funding levels for programming, especially at the community-based programs, are unsustainable and affect staff numbers, staff time and the effective delivery of services (Figure 3). Funding levels meet the base necessities of programs, but do not recognize and consequently do not provide for the additional support work that is essential to a program’s overall success. In other words, many of the varied activities performed in a literacy program are undervalued and supported on an ad-hoc basis. A shifting emphasis of top-level funders’ from core funding to project/program funding further exacerbates this core challenge. Spin-offs from this trend threaten the overall quality, and therefore program success indicators, of literacy programming in Toronto and York region.

Figure 3: Annual Costs of Community-based Literacy Program in Toronto and York Region

Community-Based Program Annual Costs 2004 - 2005	
Area	Costs
Staffing (salary and benefits for 2.25 FTE @ \$23.50 per hour)	\$110,990
Rent	\$19,000
Program Expenses	\$28,510
Core Expenditures	\$158,500
Program Stats	
Number of Learners	110
Number of Contact Hours	14,000
Number of Contact Hours per Learner	127
Cost per Learner per Year	\$1,440.91
Cost per Contact Hour	\$11.32

Not surprisingly, nearly 100% of program workers participating in the focus group felt that they lacked time to deliver the learner-centred services that they aim to provide. Instead, staff described the time burden placed on them by program administration, namely paper work, which detracted from the core purpose of the program – serving learners. Furthermore, there was acute frustration that the lack of staff time permeated into other aspects of non-direct programming delivery such as community connections, supporting learner-driven initiatives, and public education. This issue is not only significant from a program delivery perspective, but also in terms of the community’s overall morale, and ability to participate in community development.

Collaborative community development is an area that literacy stakeholders feel should be prioritized but they find it difficult to provide the necessary time and other support required to participate effectively. Significantly, literacy stakeholders feel that there is little “safe” space for them to work cooperatively without the structure of funders. I’m not following The lack of independent forums for discussion and community development is a tricky issue between literacy programs and funders. However, if structured appropriately, the creation of “safe” place for programs to network, plan, and



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build bottom-up solutions to challenges could be of substantial benefit to top-level funders. Solutions to challenges that are “owned” by the community are often highly successful in practice.

4. Strategic Directions for Policy Change

MTML’s findings from the consultations will not be surprising given the state of literacy in Toronto and York region. Most of the challenges and threats discussed are well-documented; however we hope to move this discussion forward by inventorying a set of responses that would address community priority areas.

MTML identified five areas that are in need of targeted and innovative policy supports so that programs can more effectively and efficiently deliver programming to clients. These five areas are:

1. Strengthening Community Connections
2. Encouraging and Sustaining Learner-driven Initiatives
3. Generating Program Resilience
4. Embracing Diversity and Inclusiveness
5. Building Identity and Public Education

During the community consultations, participants developed a set of strategies and responses that apply to the funder and decision-makers and another set for programs, network, and community. While all of these stakeholders share a common interest - to provide the best programming possible to literacy learners - we recognize that the roles are different and so a different set of responses are required to have the greatest impact. Long-term recommendations need to be addressed on the five to eight year time frame, and short- to mid-term recommendations should be addressed in one to three years.



4.1 Strengthening Community Connections

Community Goals: To integrate and embed literacy issues and programs throughout the social services while at the same building stronger connections within the local literacy community to build a holistic approach to learning.

Long-term recommendations for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Transparent and communicated inter-ministerial responses to community change are required to support successful program outreach.
- 2) Funders recognize the unique challenges and strengths of Toronto and provide supports as needed.
- 3) Funding should be provided to each LLC for outreach purposes including rental of spaces, catering, and other LLC outreach materials as needed.

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) LLC tables should become a hub for building community connections by inviting community stakeholders to LLC-sponsored events on a regular basis.

Opportunities for Short-term and Mid-term Action for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Provide core funding for staff positions or paid-time for administration of innovative program initiatives that partner and/or embed with external community partners.

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) Create an annual city-wide LLC meeting where all programs meet to discuss community responses to shared priorities.
- 2) Establish strong intra-LLC program connections for both program coordinators and staff to build relationships. For example, program visits for learners, assessor and instructor meetings.



4.2 Encouraging and Sustaining Learner-driven Initiatives

Community Goals: To increase learner participation through learner-driven outreach initiatives and learner-led supports for incoming and continuing program participants.

Long-term recommendations for:

Funders and Policy Makers

1) Provide sustained operational and staff funding, and technical support for learner-driven initiatives that enhance outreach and program design.

Programs, Network and Community

1) Communicate learner and tutor success stories and encourage learners to share their successes with others during outreach.

2) Outreach campaigns should target areas where learners are most likely to receive and keep information, for example subway stations, television, radio, and the Internet.

Opportunities for Short-term and Mid-term Action for:

Funders and Policy Makers

1) Create and encourage opportunities for learners to directly communicate with funders and decision makers on an ongoing basis, for example a learner's working group, consisting of representatives from the three delivery streams and meet with policy makers on an annual basis.

Programs, Network and Community

1) Learners with specialized knowledge and experience deliver workshops to other learners and program staff, for example survivor workshops.

2) Learners become part of the local planning and policy process both at the program level and at the LLC levels. New initiatives such as a "Learner's Community Plan" may promote learner participation.

3) Celebrate learner accomplishments through a citywide learner newsletter and opportunities for learners from other programs to get together on a regular basis, i.e. on field trips.



4.3 Generating Program Resilience

Community Goals: To build program resilience by providing program workers the time and resources needed to deliver all aspects of learner-centred literacy programming.

Long-term recommendations for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Funders must recognize that programs provide essential supports and services to learners beyond those outlined by the LBS guidelines.
- 2) Develop transparent inter-ministerial responses to community change that can support successful programming.
- 3) Reduce community redundancies by stabilizing core funding and supporting opportunities for programs to work together and share resources through funding and time mechanisms.

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) Working together as a community, or in community coalitions, to seek alternative sources for funding to finance collective needs.
- 2) Collaborate with other community-service networks to gather local data and statistics relevant to literacy programs.

Opportunities for Short-term and Mid-term Action for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Funders streamline required documentation so that programs remain accountable, but are able to dedicate themselves more fully to services.

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) Programs should also explore opportunities for sharing of resources and other tasks, for example backroom administration, trips to essential services, and joint hiring of staff such as a volunteer coordinator.



4.4 Embracing Diversity and Inclusiveness

Community Goals: To make diversity a community-wide priority and embed this issue into the planning and policy process while making program staff and tutors more reflective of the communities we serve, and to make programming accessible for target populations and high-need communities.

Long-term recommendations for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Dedicate funding to initiative the number and variety of programs in high-need areas. Scarborough, North York and Etobicoke should be priorities.
- 2) New programs for target populations such as youth be developed or expanded, with appropriate supports, at existing programs.

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) Establish a diversity and inclusiveness LLC committee that will develop strategies and initiatives to assist programs in becoming more reflective of the communities they serve.

Opportunities for Short-term and Mid-term Action for:

Funders and Policy Makers

- 1) Working directly with community, establish a fiscal award to showcase programming that is successful in attracting and retaining participants reflect diversity

Programs, Network and Community

- 1) Target and groom volunteers and learners to become staff members at programs.
- 2) Match incoming learners with learner elders/mentors of the same cultural background for support.
- 3) Remove barriers that deter culturally-diverse volunteers from tutoring in programs by connecting with local cultural community groups and cultural service organizations.¹³

¹³ For an interesting report on this subject and for other recommendations, please see: [Culturally Diverse Youth and Volunteerism: How to Recruit, Train, and Retrain Culturally Diverse Youth Volunteers](#). Calgary Immigrant Aid Society: 2005



4.5 Building Identity and Public Education

Community Goals: To disseminate consistent information on literacy programming to the broader community and to develop a systematic approach to advocating for common concerns and issues.

Long-term recommendations for:

Funders and Policy Makers

1) Provide mechanisms for programs to effectively channel information to top-level funders and policy on concerns and issues on an ongoing basis.

Programs, Network and Community

1) Create a public education working group or committee, of public character, responsible for addressing common issues connected to literacy such as poverty, youth, and health, through action.

2) Create a centralized outreach campaign for educating the public, other social services and stakeholders. This is particularly important for community-based programs that are not housed within a larger institution.

3) Piggy-back a literacy campaign with community outreach that uses and promotes a broader view of literacy and learning.

Opportunities for Short-term and Mid-term Action for:

Funders and Policy Makers

1) Policy and other decision makers initiate public education campaigns that “silo-bust” and explicitly show the links between literacy and other education opportunities.

Programs, Network and Community

1) Create a city-wide literacy branding system (i.e. consistent logo) that is easily identified by learners and volunteers.

2) Continue to promote and support the Literacy Access Network through public education and funding.



5. Future Directions

Both hard and soft supports for programs, networks, and communities are essential for the successful implementation of these strategies. Likewise, the literacy community needs to be prepared, on an ongoing basis, to provide well-thought-out strategies and tools to policy makers. Fortunately, the literacy community has the tools and the resources to work towards these goals effectively.

The literacy community in Toronto and York region is made up of programs led by committed staff and volunteers who can advocate for and drive many of the initiatives outlined in this report. Working together in areas where we have shared values, priorities, and concerns, we can strategically address these areas with policy makers to push for appropriate and targeted change.

MTML recommends continued development of solutions from an asset-based approach towards the goal of developing comprehensive mechanisms to influence funders, policy makers, and other decision makers.

Future studies should focus upon:

- The urgency of strategic policy areas;
- The feasibility and piloting of recommendations;
- The functionality and purpose of community working groups so that time is used most effectively;
- Establishing a safe and effective way for learners to participate fully in the planning and community development process;
- Identifying what other stakeholders need to be part of the process and how they would participate.



6. Appendices

Appendix A: Community Consultation Meetings

Overarching Question: “What does the literacy community need to improve adult literacy rates and increase learner participation in Toronto and York Region?”

1. What do you think are the greatest strengths and challenges of the literacy community?
2. What do you think are the greatest assets and threats of the literacy community?
3. What common themes have emerged from this inventory?
[Themes developed were unique to each focus group]
4. What are the top three challenges affecting Theme X?
5. What resources and best practices do we currently have that are under- utilized?
6. What resources are needed to improve Theme X?
7. How can we use existing resources to improve Theme X?
8. How can we get the resources we need to improve Theme X?
9. Drawing on any of the themes discussed, what policies and/or initiatives would you like to see in place?
[Templates were provided to the community meeting participants]

