

# Literacy

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## Facts

## Literacy Matters

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### Literacy is important to all of us

- ▶ Literacy is necessary for full participation in our rapidly changing society.
- ▶ Our society expects workers, parents and citizens to deal with more and more information, often in many different forms.
- ▶ Many people in Ontario have trouble with reading, writing and using numbers.

### Some statistics

A survey tells us that:

- ▶ **Almost 1 in 2 Canadians age 16–69** have difficulty with the reading and writing tasks that are expected in our society.
- ▶ **In Ontario, 1 in 5 adults** have serious difficulties with any printed material.
- ▶ **Another 1 in 4 adults** can do only the simplest reading and writing tasks.

### What is literacy?

- ▶ Literacy is much more than being able to read and write. It is about reading the world rather than just reading the word.
- ▶ Literacy is about using the different forms of communication that give us further opportunities in our society — for ourselves, our families and our communities.
- ▶ Literacy helps us understand the world we live in. It also helps us understand ourselves and express our identity, our ideas, and our culture.

## Why it matters

- ▶ A strong democratic society needs citizens who are well informed, make careful judgements and participate actively as voters and community members.
- ▶ Literacy builds a foundation for lifelong learning. It helps people draw on their strengths to work toward goals for the future.
- ▶ Literacy helps people stand up for and protect their rights.
- ▶ Literacy has a big influence on our health and well-being. People with strong literacy skills are more likely to lead healthy lives, be employed and participate in their children's education.
- ▶ Strong literacy skills give people more choices about their lives, and more control over those choices.

## What we know

- ▶ The demand for higher literacy skills is growing in our society. The basic ability to read and write is not enough any more. We need to understand, interpret and use many forms of media.
- ▶ Employers are requiring higher levels of literacy and education.
- ▶ People use different kinds of literacy at home, at work and in their communities. People may be more comfortable using some forms of literacy than others.
- ▶ How we use literacy is shaped by our experiences in our daily lives and our past.
- ▶ Jobs that include using literacy skills help us build and maintain these skills.
- ▶ We lose our literacy skills if we do not practise them.

## How literacy connects

Literacy is a complex issue. It affects and is affected by:

- ▶ unemployment
- ▶ poverty
- ▶ health
- ▶ crime and violence
- ▶ children's education

There is a strong relationship between literacy, income and employment. Each one influences the others.

- ▶ Literacy improves employment opportunities and can lead to higher wages.
- ▶ Good jobs that use certain skills actually build and maintain strong literacy skills.

Breaking out of a cycle of poverty, underemployment and low literacy depends on many factors. These factors include: access to childcare, social supports and the availability of good jobs.

Breaking out of the cycle also depends on how we deal with issues of power in our society. Racism, classism and sexism affect people's access to education and employment and their ability to make positive change in their lives.

## What we can do

- ▶ We can celebrate literacy in all its forms.
- ▶ We can build lifelong learning into all aspects of our society. We can build it into workplaces, libraries, schools, and community centres. We can also link it to social activities and family life.
- ▶ As a society, we can take steps to address the issues that keep people from reaching their potential.
- ▶ We need to value lifelong learning and provide the resources to make it happen.

## Myths about literacy

### **Myth #1** People are literate or illiterate

#### **The Facts:**

- ▶ Literacy is not an all-or-nothing concept.
- ▶ Literacy is a range of abilities to communicate, think critically and make decisions in the different situations people encounter in their lives.

**Myth #2** Improving literacy guarantees employment and higher wages

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**The Facts:**

- ▶ There is a strong link between literacy, employment, and higher wages.
- ▶ Difficulty with literacy is also linked to complex social issues including poverty, health problems, racism, crime and violence.
- ▶ It is not the case that literacy alone will improve people's financial and employment situation.
- ▶ Breaking out of a cycle of poverty, underemployment and low literacy depends on many factors, such as access to childcare and social supports.
- ▶ Good jobs are also an important part of literacy. Jobs that involve using literacy skills help people build and maintain these skills.

**Myth #3** People need literacy in order to learn

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**The Facts:**

People with literacy challenges:

- ▶ learn all the time
- ▶ learn how to cope in a society full of written words using memory, oral communication and support from family and friends
- ▶ are leaders in their local communities
- ▶ learn strategies to survive in low-paying jobs, managing to feed and support their families despite many obstacles
- ▶ have many other strengths, which may include storytelling, creative ability, and working with their hands
- ▶ draw on their strengths when they use literacy for their own needs and purposes

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Sources:

1. Statistics Canada, *Reading the Future, A Portrait of Literacy in Canada*, 1996.
2. Saskatchewan Literacy Network, *Literacy Facts*.
3. UNESCO, *United Nations Literacy Decade*.