

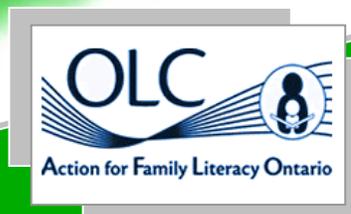
POSITION PAPER

Working Document

Family Literacy in Ontario *Putting it on the MAP!*



Action for Family Literacy Ontario
A Working Group of the Ontario Literacy Coalition



January 2006

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The Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) is a provincial adult literacy organization working to ensure that people with literacy challenges live full lives at home, at work and in their communities. The OLC envisions an Ontario where people with literacy challenges have access to high quality supports and opportunities, where they can find and use the information they need.

Action for Family Literacy Ontario (AFLO) is a provincial working group of the Ontario Literacy Coalition. AFLO works to sustain, promote, and strengthen family literacy services in Ontario through advocacy, communication and research. AFLO envisions families learning and growing together in positive, literacy-rich environments and works to ensure that family literacy is valued, encouraged, supported, and sustained in homes and communities across Ontario.

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Preface

Literacy is fundamental to Ontario's economic and competitive performance and is crucial to individual, family and social prosperity. Literacy skills are integrally related to all other aspects of life, including educational achievement, employment status, health, social welfare and political engagement. Investing in family literacy programming is a concrete, proactive and economical way to address the educational and training needs of Ontario's future.

Literacy development begins very early in a child's life. The role of the parent as the first and most important teacher to the child is, therefore, crucial. Family literacy is about the ways families use literacy and language in their daily lives. According to the 2005 Federal Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills, "Children are born into a world of language. They are immersed in the words of their parents, their siblings, and those who care for them. Their speech emerges gradually and naturally as they learn to respond to the people around them. Most children speak their first clear words sometime during their second year of life. Their vocabularies then grow very quickly. Lives of literacy begin in a family setting." (p. 35)

The literacy skills, attitudes and behaviours of parents and caregivers have a powerful impact on children's acquisition of literacy and their subsequent achievement in school. With 3.3 million adults in Ontario challenged by everyday literacy skills (International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, 2005), a substantial number of Ontario parents could benefit from support to enrich their family literacy practices. Family literacy programming is an innovative and effective strategy that focuses on developing a learning culture in the home and improving both the children's and the parent's literacy skills. This programming should be an integral piece of the continuous and preventative strategies for literacy and numeracy development across the province. Unfortunately, the family literacy field is relatively small and under-resourced.

The positions and recommended actions in this working paper are framed and informed by a recent province-wide study survey of the state of family literacy programming in Ontario, commissioned by the Ontario Literacy Coalition (OLC) and overseen by the Action for Family Literacy Ontario (AFLO), a working group of the OLC. With a focus on Anglophone programs, this study found that the family literacy field is too under-funded and under-developed to meet the level of need in the province. This study is available on the AFLO website www.aflo.on.literacy.ca

This position paper presents a vision of a professional, fully funded and secure infrastructure for family literacy. Investing in family literacy programming is a concrete and proactive way to address the educational and training needs of Ontario's future. By investing in family literacy, Ontario can take its place as a leader in the area of this important intergenerational approach.

AFLO is looking to family literacy stakeholders to reflect upon and contribute to the development of the positions and actions in this working paper. In 2006 the OLC and AFLO will be coordinating five regional forums across the province to facilitate discussion on these positions. Ultimately, AFLO will be looking to the government to recognize the needs and benefits of the proactive, preventative approach that family literacy programming provides, and to answer the call to action outlined in the final position paper.

Family Literacy in Ontario: Putting it on the MAP!

Family Literacy – A Lifelong Learning Investment

According to the 2005 *International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey*, 3.3 million adults in Ontario do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the demands of the modern, knowledge-based society, where these skills are central to success. Adults with low literacy skills have more difficulty supporting their children’s language and literacy development. The intergenerational cycle of low-literacy skills is ever more serious with modern demands for increasingly higher levels of literacy.

While there is no quick fix or one-size-fits-all approach that will, on its own, address this skills gap, family literacy programming offers a proactive and compelling approach to improving the literacy skills of parents and children simultaneously.¹ Family literacy is an innovative and effective strategy that builds on existing strengths within families and helps develop a learning culture in the home.

Unfortunately, most education policy and funding are currently limited by “silos,” where learners are segregated into specific age groups. This model, along with lack of communication between silos, does not properly support the potential of intergenerational learning.

Parents’ Role in Children’s Literacy Development

Literacy development begins very early in a child’s life. The role of the parent as the first and most important teacher to the child is, therefore, crucial. Children’s literacy and language development occurs within the family context and is profoundly affected by the types of literacy experiences the parents provide.

The Impact of Parents’ Literacy Skills on Children’s Literacy Development

Parents with lower literacy levels are at a disadvantage in supporting their children’s learning and education, and are more likely to have limited access to, or be left out of, the knowledge-based society. Adults who struggle with their own literacy issues also struggle to support their children’s education by not being able to model habits to sustain them to be successful.

¹The word “family” is used broadly here as two or more people related by blood, marriage, adoption, or commitment to care for one another. When speaking of “parents,” all caregivers are included.

Along with skill level, the attitudes and behaviours of parents and caregivers have a powerful impact on children's acquisition of literacy skills and their subsequent achievement in school. Research has shown that children of parents with limited literacy skills are at a higher risk of failing in school than children of parents with higher educational attainment. Parents need support to help them as the literacy demands on their children increase.

Literacy and the Family

The ability of parents to provide literacy-rich environments deserves our serious attention. Literacy is at the heart of all other learning in a knowledge-based society. The impact of low literacy skills weaves through all other aspects of modern life, including educational achievement, employment status, health, social welfare and political engagement.

A tremendous amount of value could be added by incorporating family literacy topics into adult-only programming, including strategies for reading with children, reading children's literature, the importance of the parent as the child's first teacher and advocating for the child in the school system. Indeed, adults often return to school so they can better support their children's literacy development. If family literacy funding enabled intergenerational learning alongside adult-only programs, significant increases could be expected in learner enrolment, attendance, retention and satisfaction.

Family Literacy Programs

Family literacy programs focus on developing literacy within the family as a whole. These programs provide meaningful opportunities for children, their parents, other family members and caregivers to learn and grow together within the program.

Family literacy is not just about reading and writing. It is about developing stronger relationships between parents and their children and getting parents involved in their children's education. It is about building stronger families and healthier communities.

Effective family literacy programs:

- Build and support literate practices at home, which, in turn, helps prepare families for literacy activities at home, school, work, and in the community.

- Help parents identify and use natural learning opportunities. Everyday tasks are used as situations to help children develop literacy and help families build and maintain relationships.
- Recognize adult family members' skills, knowledge and attitudes as powerful influences on children's emergent literacy and success in school, and provide resources that increase the motivation to learn.
- Support parents and children in school readiness and help families understand the school system and their roles in it.
- Promote community collaboration to provide a seamless, flexible and accessible system of services and supports for families with children.

The Current State of Family Literacy Programming in Ontario

A recently completed, province-wide survey ² of the state of family literacy programming in Ontario, commissioned by the Ontario Literacy Coalition and Action for Family Literacy Ontario, found many excellent family literacy programs that maintain dedicated partnerships and are an important part of the communities they service. Programs often struggle to provide these services without sustainable core funding. This often results in short-term programming, vulnerable employment for staff, lack of funds for training and resources, and a high dependency on volunteer support.

The study found that components of family literacy intervention are currently undertaken in a variety of settings and programs. Often these interventions are not explicitly identified as “family literacy” programming nor are they necessarily as integrated or coordinated as might be optimal. Programs are often too restrictive (segregated into specific age categories), do not go far enough in terms of continuing learning as a family unit throughout the school years, and currently include little direct literacy instruction for adults. A more coordinated, inclusive and accessible approach is needed.

The Need to Invest in Family Literacy Programming

Literacy is vital to the prosperity of Ontario and Ontarians. It is essential for meaningful, reasonably paid and lasting employment, and necessary to ensure future generations of skilled parents and employees. Canadians with literacy barriers tend to be in low-paid, low-skilled jobs that offer little chance of advancement or skills improvement.

² *The State of Family Literacy Programs in Ontario: Results of a Provincial Survey*, Kim Falcigno, Ontario Literacy Coalition, 2005.

Adults with limited literacy skills are very likely to be undereducated, living at or below the poverty line, either unemployed or irregularly employed, and less healthy. This represents a massive loss of potential productivity for individuals, for society and for the economy as knowledge and adaptability become increasingly essential.

The Ontario Ministry of Education currently estimates 30 per cent of high school students leave school without a diploma. The stakes will be high for these students in terms of job prospects and literacy skills. There will also be global ramifications for a province that isn't producing enough skilled trade workers, which will have a strong impact on Ontario's economy and competitive advantage.

A Vision for Family Literacy Programming in Ontario

Investing in family literacy programming is a concrete, proactive and economical way to address the educational and training needs of Ontario's future.

The vision of the Ontario Literacy Coalition and its working group, the Action for Family Literacy Ontario, is of a professional, fully funded and secure infrastructure for family literacy that would not only put family literacy on the map in this province, but would also mark Ontario as a leader in this dynamic and promising field.

A blueprint for this vision is articulated in the following five position statements and recommended actions.

There is a growing body of research that concludes that literacy development begins at birth, and is shaped by a child's experiences in the first years of life. Lives of literacy begin in a family setting.

*Federal Advisory Committee on Literacy and Essential Skills,
Towards A Fully Literate Canada*

Position A

Ontario needs a centralized, cross-ministerial directorate for family literacy, to integrate and coordinate activities, and to support partnerships.

The creation of a family literacy directorate, or similar body, is key to the four other positions.

Family literacy programming is disconnected from itself. There is not even a basic inventory of programs, let alone adequate coordination.

OLC, The State of Family Literacy in Ontario, 2005

Key Recommendation

Create and fund a cross-ministerial directorate to integrate and coordinate family literacy activities in Ontario. (For purposes of this paper, called the Family Literacy Directorate.)

Recommended Actions

1. Affiliate this directorate with either the newly formed Adult Education Policy Unit through the Ministry of Education or the adult education secretariat proposed in the *Ontario Learns* report.³
2. Define the Family Literacy Directorate's mandate clearly and communicate it to the public. Include a statement of purpose, articulated role, scope and responsibilities for supporting family literacy in Ontario. Promote the value of family literacy.
3. Coordinate priorities, goals, funding, programming and professional development decisions across ministries to support an effective way to ensure continuous service, seamless pathways, and access for children, youth, adults and families (see Appendix I).
4. Consult with key family literacy stakeholders to ensure the principles of family literacy and best practices are incorporated into all government policies and programming throughout the province.

People need literacy and numeracy skills to become informed participants in the social life of their community and engage in its development.

Kathleen Wynne, MPP and Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education,
Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System

³ *Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System* by Kathleen Wynne, MPP, reports the results of the Adult Education Review commissioned by the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and the Ministry of Education, 2005.

Position B

Family literacy programs require committed core funding to operate effectively and meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Currently too many programs depend on inconsistent, short-term project funding. Successful programs require sustained funding that covers the real costs of administration and programming.

Most family literacy programs have only project-based funding and half run on less than \$10,000 a year.

OLC, The State of Family Literacy in Ontario, 2005

Key Recommendation

Commit to a core funding structure that enables sustained family literacy programming in Ontario.

Recommended Actions

The Family Literacy Directorate should:

5. Administer a program that provides ongoing, core family literacy program funding to sustain uninterrupted, continuous delivery of services.
6. Develop a funding structure that allows and encourages programs to be innovative and responsive to a variety of unique community needs. This funding model will enable programs to better adhere to best practices in family literacy program delivery.
7. Build on the expertise of existing deliverers and foster continued partnership building in communities.

Investment in the early years will have a substantial long-term economic gain for society.

The Honourable Margaret McCain and Dr. Fraser Mustard,
Reversing the Real Brain Drain

Position C

The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities should expand the Literacy and Basic Skills program funding to include family literacy programming.

Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities funds Literacy and Basic Skills programs exclusively for adults; however, adults are only one part of the intergenerational foundation of literacy development in families.

There are many family literacy projects that have to run outside provincial adult literacy funding because of the "adults-only" criteria.

OLC, The State of Family Literacy in Ontario, 2005

Key Recommendation

Support the expansion of family literacy programming within the context of existing adult literacy programming.

Recommended Actions

8. Incorporate family literacy funding into the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities' Literacy and Basic Skills program structures in recognition that families span generations and adult learners are often parents.
9. Support the adult literacy field to do outreach and development work with existing children's literacy programs to enhance the parental component within these programs, and to encourage referral where appropriate.

Although our focus is on adult literacy, it is crucial that we ensure that children's chances in life are not limited by their parents' literacy barriers. Family literacy programs are a key preventative approach to intergenerational literacy.

*Movement for Canadian Literacy,
National Literacy Action Agenda*

Position D

The Ontario family literacy field must have ongoing, responsive professional development to encourage staff retention and professionalism.

Family literacy program participants and service providers benefit by having well-trained staff.

Ontario's family literacy practitioners strongly support the need for more in-depth training and accreditation.

OLC, The State of Family Literacy in Ontario, 2005

Key Recommendation

Support quality professional development for all family literacy professionals in Ontario.

Recommended Actions

The Family Literacy Directorate should:

10. Support family literacy professional development opportunities in Ontario.
11. Allocate funding and resources to make professional development opportunities available for family literacy practitioners.
12. Fund the creation and ongoing development of training, workshops and courses.
13. Facilitate access to credited quality professional development, including potential partnerships with post-secondary institutions in Ontario.

Literacy is the road to human progress and the means through which every man, woman and child can realize his or her full potential.

Kofi Annan
Secretary General of the United Nations

Position E

A professional family literacy field requires support for research and field development.

Research and field development projects have tremendous value. They produce grounded research, including community-generated innovations. This strengthens the community of practice by disseminating knowledge back to the field.

There is a need for more research-based programming and resource material.

OLC, The State of Family Literacy in Ontario, 2005

Key Recommendation

Invest in family literacy research and field development.

Recommended Actions

The Family Literacy Directorate should:

14. Fund research in the field of family literacy to help build the family literacy community of practice. Fund both academic research and research generated by family literacy practitioners.
15. Fund family literacy field development projects, to allow opportunities for community-generated innovation.
16. Fund research into potential accreditation models for family literacy professionals in Ontario.
17. Structure the funding to allow for dissemination of research and project findings to all family literacy practitioners in Ontario.

Education is what drives us forward, inspires innovation and creates an engaged democratic society.

The Honourable Bob Rae, Advisor to the Premier and the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities, *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*

In Closing

The five positions presented in this paper are in line with the primary recommendations made to government and the Minister of Education in Kathleen Wynne's report, *Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System*. *Ontario Learns* recommends coordinating government efforts by creating "an appropriate entity within government...to coordinate the further development and implementation of the proposed adult education policy framework and definition" (p. 47).

Forming an entity such as a secretariat, steering committee, cross-ministry working group or other unit is not unknown to government. Many examples are clearly available, not only in Ontario (Seniors' Secretariat, Women's Directorate, Office of Francophone Affairs) and in other provinces (Alberta Learning Information Service), but also nationally (Office of Native Affairs). An entity responsible for family literacy is in keeping with the Parliamentary Committee's report.

The Ontario Literacy Coalition's Action for Family Literacy Ontario working group calls upon the provincial government to support family literacy development to assist families to break the intergenerational cycle of low literacy and poverty. The rewards for investing in family literacy are many—the costs of inaction are high.

Appendix I (See Position A): Examples of some Ontario funding and programming “silos”.

Ministry	Program	Age Range Served	Description of Program
Ministry of Education	Early Reading and Math Strategies	Grades 3 - 6	Raises student achievement as measured by the Grade 3 and 6 provincial standardized assessments.
	Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat	Grades K-8	Aims to have 75 per cent of 12-year-olds reach provincial standards by-2008 by working collaboratively with schools and forging a consensus around strategies and tools that are needed.
Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities	Literacy and Basic Skills Program (MTCU funds organizations that serve the anglophone, deaf, deafened or hard-of-hearing, native & francophone adults.)	Ages 19+	Provides literacy, numeracy, essential skills and academic upgrading services to help learners achieve their goals related to further education or training, employment or independence (special emphasis on serving individuals receiving social assistance through Ontario Works).
Ministry of Children and Youth Services	Best Start	Ages 0-6	Focuses on school preparation through healthy child development, early learning, and child care services.
	Ontario Early Years Centres	Ages 0-6	Provides care and support for preschool children. Provide parents and caregivers with the opportunities to take part in programs and activities together and access information about early childhood development.
Community and Social Services	Learning, Earning and Parenting	Ages 16-21	Helps young parents on social assistance to finish high school, to learn more about being good parents and to get a job.
Ministry of Culture	Libraries	All ages	Provides a wide range of support services to public libraries.
Women’s Directorate	Violence Prevention and Economic Independence	Adult women and young women	Provides information and services to support women’s independence.

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