

## **Title: Workplace Skills Development Program Feasibility Study**

*- Final Report*

Organization; Saskatchewan Federation of Labour

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Complete text:

In November of 1989 the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour began an assessment of the basic reading, writing and numeracy skill requirements of its member unions. In our initial application to the Secretary of State the stated need for this activity was "to determine the feasibility of implementing in Saskatchewan a program similar to the OFL BEST program given different geography, population, ethnic composition of members, and different types of workplaces." This feasibility study began on November 1, 1989 and concluded on March 31, 1990 for a total time period of five calendar months.

When the project began we were not sure what the specific skill requirements of our membership might be or if there would be significant support for workplace literacy programs among the membership of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's affiliated unions. However, given the experience of the Ontario Federation of Labour, the results of the Southam Study of Literacy in Canada, the preliminary results of the Conference Board of Canada Study, and the endorsement and support of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's Executive Council we knew that an examination of these issues was a necessity for any organization representing the interests of labour in Canada. As Ontario Federation of Labour Director of Education, James Turk, said

It is among us - the working class of Canada - that you will find the direct victims of so-called 'illiteracy' - social conditions and educational practices which leave millions without the skills they want and need to function fully in our society. We are not the only victims - but we are the principal ones.

As the principal victims of 'illiteracy' we must, therefore, be actively in the solution.

## **Labour And Literacy - Defining The Problem**

Defining the problem of 'illiteracy' in Canada from a labour perspective presents its own problems. Too many definitions of 'the problem' focus on the individual's perceived lack of skills and lack of abilities for coping with the requirements of daily life. As labour representatives we believe a more constructive and honest definition of 'the problem' begins with the recognition that 'illiteracy' is not a problem of individual failure or individual lack of ability. We are not addressing an individual problem, we are addressing a systematic problem: the systematic failure of Canadian society to meet the needs of its members. The fact that so many of those individuals whose 'skill levels' might match textbook definitions of 'illiteracy' continue to function and survive in the workplace and the community testifies to this.

Illiteracy definitions imposed on individuals that focus on the person's so-called lack of skills add to the problem by placing greater stress on those already victimized and exacerbates the already detrimental social stigma our brothers and sisters feel. If we really wish to address the problem of illiteracy from a labour perspective, we must dispose of the notion of illiteracy altogether and focus on the self-defining needs of our members. Hopefully, by these means we will no longer be left searching for a 'definition of the problem' but will instead be defining a solution.

A labour initiated and worker controlled basic skills program must begin with the recognition of the strong learning skills each worker already possesses and utilize these learning strategies and skills in the development of stronger or new skills. The main focus and curriculum of such a skill development program must be on the individual worker's definition of his or her own skills, needs and goals. In other words a labour initiated and worker controlled basic skills program must be learner centered. However, it must also be much more than this.

Throughout all sectors of the Canadian economy many workers are experiencing dramatic changes in the skill requirements of both their working and personal lives. New technology is changing the workplace and the home, demanding that we strengthen old skills and develop new ones. Basic skills that were once adequate for success in daily life are, quite simply, no longer enough.

As workers we lose economically when employment opportunities are denied or unavailable. We lose politically when so much political debate and participation requires reasonable reading, writing, critical thinking and decision-making skills. We lose not only as individuals, but also as a collective. From a labour perspective literacy is not simply the attainment of basic reading and writing, and numeracy skills; rather, from a labour perspective literacy necessitates the development and strengthening of our skills as individuals and as a collective for critical thinking, decision-making, learning and educating. It is only through developing and strengthening all these skills that workers will no longer have to worry that they do not possess the necessary skills to act as shop stewards, to understand their contracts, to attend union educationals and workshops, to serve on local executives, to speak out in their workplaces and communities, and to take greater control of their own lives. As Jody Hanson explained in the April 1990 issue of Briarpatch:

Why aren't we teaching adult students who are on welfare to critically interpret the Welfare Act? How will learning to read the street signs in your neighbourhood help you deal with substandard housing? Can using a phone

book address the problem of not enough jobs?

As labour representatives we must address these issues - we must address the issue of literacy in the context that it affects our lives as workers.

From a labour perspective, both the methods and curriculum of Workplace Skills Development Programs must be not only workplace and learner centered but also centered on the enhancement and strengthening of our critical thinking and decision making skills. From a self-critical perspective, this means labour initiated, worker controlled, critical literacy programs that must facilitate the empowerment of workers not only their homes, places of work and communities, but also in the workers' own organizations - their trade unions. Labour education is education for empowerment - the empowerment of the individual and the collective.

## Assessment Results

In total one hundred and five (105) assessment interviews were conducted. The area breakdown on these completed interviews is as follows:

Swift Current	39
North Battleford	26
Yorkton	40

In all three centers, in addition to the expressed needs of reading, writing, numeracy, and comprehension skills, all workers interviewed expressed a need for computer preparation, computer and technological language skills. Many reported difficulties in dealing with new technology already in place and the increasing complexity of their jobs. With only a few exceptions, workers interviewed reported that they felt as though their education and training opportunities had not kept pace with the increasing and changing demands of their jobs. The majority of these exceptions occurred in North Battleford. The results of the interviews indicated that workers in North Battleford area had enjoyed greater access to existing educational programs.

The need for greater access to stress management programs was a need expressed by workers in all three of the areas and all types of workplaces. In addition, the need for public service and relation skills was expressed in all three areas and in all workplaces, with the general exceptions of the construction and maintenance crew. However, it must be added that even a few workers in the construction and repair crews expressed this need in the interests of training for a sales position or in moving up within their workplaces.

The last need that was reported by workers and management alike in all three areas was that of developing and strengthening their skills in report writing and in the preparation of company documents and official forms.

Since the focus of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour Workplace Skills Development Program has been on the individual worker's own definition and assessment of his or her skill needs our statistical groupings also reflect the individual's perception of his or her existing skills and skill needs and their subsequent effect on the quality of the individual worker's life. The skill groupings are as follows:

### Group A -

those individuals experiencing great difficulty and stress in coping with the reading, writing and comprehension demands of their workplaces and their homes; the individuals' level of literacy skills is strongly inhibiting their abilities to control the circumstances of their lives

### Group B -

those individuals while coping to some extent with the reading, writing and comprehension demands of their workplaces and their homes do not feel comfortable with their skill levels; the individual recognizes specific basic skill areas they believe require improvement

### Group C -

those individuals that while experiencing no immediately obvious difficulties with reading, writing and comprehension skills, believe their technical reading and report writing skills require improvement

Thirteen of the 105 individuals interviewed, or 13%, identified themselves as belonging to Group A. Of these thirteen individuals identifying themselves as belonging to Group A, eleven also expressed a need for upgrading their basic math skills. Thirty-nine people, or 37% identified themselves as belonging to Group B. Nineteen of these individuals identifying themselves as belonging to Group B also expressed a need for upgrading their basic math skills. Both of the skill levels expressed by Groups A and B would probably qualify as functionally illiterate by standard defining criteria. The total number of individuals interviewed identifying themselves as belonging to either Group A or B is fifty-two, or 49.5%. A total of fifteen individuals, or 14%, identified themselves as belonging to Group C. Three of the individuals identifying themselves as belonging to Group C expressed a need for basic math programs. Three individuals interviewed, 3%, expressed a need for basic math skills upgrading only. Those individuals expressing a need for basic math skills could potentially also be included in Workplace Skills Development Programs modelled after the Ontario Federation of Labour's BEST Program. These figures represent a potential program participant rate of between 52% and 67% depending on whether or not those individuals identifying themselves as belonging to Group C and not requiring basic math upgrading elected to participate.

The breakdown of needs assessment participants by type of workplace is as follows:

farm service centers	15	14%
livestock	15	14%
elevators	32	31%
repair/construction	42	40%
area manager	1	1%
TOTAL INTERVIEWS	105	100%

## **Conclusion**

Given the need demonstrated in our workplace profile of the Grain Services Union and the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour -- and the support of the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's affiliated unions - our central goal must now become developing and ensuring long- term commitment and support for a provincial Workplace Skills Development Program designed to meet the particular needs of its member unions. Accomplishing this goal will require that the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour first address two obstacles not yet faced by the BEST program.

The two main obstacles not yet addressed by the Ontario Federation of Labour's delivery model are, namely, the relatively small size of the majority of our provincial workplaces and the geographical isolation of some of these same workplaces and many others. In addition we must develop a strategy for overcoming yet another main obstacle to province-wide implementation of Workplace Skills Development Programs -- namely that of the social stigma attached to the literacy issue in this country. At the same time we cannot lose sight of the real need to obtain long-term financial support for the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour's Workplace Skills Development Programs.

Paulo Freire said that "people must learn to read their reality and write their own history". Right now, we have this potential opportunity.