

# Saskatchewan Literacy Network

## 2010 Literacy Cafés

Volume 3: Prince Albert and North

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What are literacy practitioners passionate about?

When it comes to literacy in your region, what's working?

What are some first steps to build on what's working?



Saskatchewan  
Literacy  
Network



# What is a Literacy Café?

As a conversational process, a World Café ([www.theworldcafe.com](http://www.theworldcafe.com)) is an innovative yet simple way to host conversations about questions that matter. These conversations link and build on each other as people move between groups, share ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work or community. The World Café highlights the collective intelligence of any group. This increases people's ability to take action in pursuit of common goals.

Literacy cafes provide an opportunity for literacy stakeholders to connect and exchange information. While literacy networking groups already exist in some of the communities within Prince Albert and Northern Saskatchewan, literacy cafes can provide an opportunity for various sectors to connect. We hope to support ongoing literacy networking and collaboration in Prince Albert and throughout the Northern region of the province.

**In May 2010**, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network held discussions in Prince Albert and La Ronge. Our goals remain the same as in the project's first two years:

- To provide a networking opportunity for literacy stakeholders; and
- To ask for information that will guide our work at the Literacy Network, including our communication with decision makers.

Recognizing the challenges of geographic distance across the North, we invited literacy stakeholders to attend a literacy cafe in Prince Albert. We also met with others invested in literacy efforts from the Black Lake, Creighton, Ile-a-la-Crosse and La Ronge areas representing family literacy, K-12 and adult education, libraries, justice, community and health care initiatives.

## **We wanted to discuss:**

- Current regional literacy activities
- What is working well
- Challenges that literacy stakeholders face and observe, and
- Opportunities for action and change.

*"Good things start with a conversation."*

– **Paul Born**

This report summarizes key messages brought forward by participants, and highlights the issues that are key motivators for success as well as the challenges faced by the areas of Prince Albert and North.

# As literacy practitioners, what are you passionate about?

- Working with families.
- Seeing 'a-ha moments' in the eyes of adult learners.
- Supporting teen mothers.
- Helping people in crisis feel safe and valued.
- Giving Aboriginal literacy stakeholders a voice to work at the community level.
- The overwhelming need for literacy programs in community.

Prince Albert experiences a high teenage pregnancy rate, and like the North, has a large Aboriginal population. Discussions clearly articulated a strong sense of urgency in providing literacy programs that were culturally relevant and used as a method of family support and community development among both urban and rural settings.

*"You can only do so much in the classroom. There has to be a bridge between home and school."*

– **participant**



# When it comes to literacy in your region, what is working well?

Three key areas were repeatedly highlighted: In Prince Albert and the Northern areas of Saskatchewan, partnerships, program coordination and creativity have made a significant impact on communities to date:

## Creative Partnerships

There are many organizations working together to provide literacy programs in Prince Albert and the North:

- Family literacy programs are offered through many organizations including Aboriginal HeadStart, Early Childhood Intervention Program (ECIP) and libraries.
- Post-secondary students can connect with various learning organizations online.
- Northlands College offers tutoring, and has three workplace instructors working with employees in the mining industry.
- The Northern Saskatchewan Special Needs Housing, Employment & Recreation, Inc. (NSN), a new initiative in La Ronge working with high needs individuals, offers a weekly soup kitchen and assists in finding housing and will be incorporating an in-house computer literacy program.
- Babies, Books & Bonding, a program through the Northern Healthy Communities Partnership provides approximately 3,000 books per year to mothers and their children at each immunization.
- Come Read With Me is offered through libraries and the Prince Albert Grand Council, sometimes supported with materials, transportation and childcare.
- Interagency collaboration occurs through the Prince Albert Networking Coalition, with approximately 70 agencies involved including City Council.
- Shared services and partnerships are strong with health regions.
- The Foster Parents Association is interested in family literacy programs and information sharing.

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*"We couldn't exist without partnerships with the school divisions and the health region."*

**– participant**

- The Saskatchewan Aboriginal Literacy Network employs a Family Literacy Coordinator, providing an opportunity to help solidify approaches in family literacy programs, such as incorporating culture and language.
- The Saskatchewan Community Schools Association has 38 funded projects this year. With schools now mandated to have a community focus and membership now being open to non-community schools, requests for project funding will likely be more diverse.
- Additional childcare spaces have opened up in Prince Albert. Childcare centres exist in community buildings, and Family Futures will be opening a building downtown in the near future. This will alleviate a major barrier.
- A new activity centre has been built in Ile-a-la-Crosse.
- A partnership between Health Canada, the University of Saskatchewan and the Ile-a-la-Crosse School Division focuses on diabetes prevention and physical fitness of children.

*"Literacy is not just about reading."*

– **participant**





*"With oral storytelling, we can learn about listening, protocol, patience, and imagination."*

– **participant**

## **Creativity:**

- Many family literacy programs are going through Pakkisonon N?yah Library System in La Ronge, including Cree bingo, karaoke, and weekly storytelling nights.
- Come Read With Me is available through libraries, communities and schools.
- Northern reading challenge occurs annually, tracking reading to determine "the most readingest community in the North," with materials provided through publisher's donations that enlists participation in age groups from kindergarten to adult.
- Northern writing contests occur, including a Saskatchewan author tour.
- Read & Bake programs encourage family members to bake and read with children in the afternoons, childcare provided.
- Breakfast programs occur regularly in schools.
- Elders teach about language and culture in schools, both verbally and hands-on.

# When it comes to literacy in your region, what are the challenges?

## Engaged participation

In some communities, recreational activities are few. Parents seem reluctant to come out to programs when held in educational settings, and many lack an understanding of the importance of literacy. Some communities struggle to view literacy and education holistically, recognizing the social dilemmas that many parents are dealing with. Participants mentioned the need for an increased understanding that all social concerns, programs and successes are interconnected.

*"The parents we really want to engage are the toughest to bring out."*

– **participant**

Programs that are set up in community, such as Come Read With Me and Aboriginal Literacy and Parenting Support are poorly attended during cold months.



*"Pickups are necessary for participation."*

– **participant**

Engaging Aboriginal leaders in literacy issues can be challenging despite community interest. Participants voiced a desire for increased ability to listen respectfully to one another. A gap in programming between preschool and postsecondary can make it difficult to engage Aboriginal political leaders.

*"We're not listening to each other in our community".*

– **participant**

*"Communities say they want to preserve language, but don't take action. "*

– **participant**



## High costs

Participant mileage and accommodation expense reimbursements are required for attendance. When trained individuals disengage, the training process starts all over again. Public transportation in Prince Albert is expensive, while the gap between the wealthy and the poor seems to be growing.

*"We see an urgent need for high density, low income housing in Prince Albert, particularly in the central area where people can walk to access most programs."*

– **participant**

When practitioners and trained volunteers leave, it causes a lack of continuity, a struggle for clear communication, and knowledge and expertise leaves with them.

*"Without a Northern literacy group, we don't hear about other community literacy activities."*

– **participant**

Not surprisingly, timely and adequate finances continue to be of primary concern to literacy practitioners. Often, libraries or other organizations that are committed to running programs such as Come Read With Me are limited by time constraints and lack of funds to purchase the required books and materials.

*"Constantly seeking and writing grants and reports is very time consuming."*

– **participant**

## Logistics

Literacy practitioners and program coordinators see a strong need for things such as life skills programs and computers in the prison system, but experience extreme time constraints when working on multiple projects across the vast Northern region.

*"We need buy-in from directors in the prison system and other sectors."*

– **participant**

## Language barriers

There is a strong desire to maintain language and culture, and communities have noted resurgence in the past decade to retain language. English-based instruction is challenging to students whose first language is not English. Gaps in literacy and learning can lead to postgraduate students who are not on par with the required skill levels and expectations of the academic world. Many students find themselves caught between semi-fluency in English and their language of origin. Setting students up for success requires a realistic view of their academic standing.

*"The language of instruction is English in the academic world. Some things in academia are not well translated."*

*"Racism and language issues are focused primarily on First Nations but ESL and immigrant issues are emerging too."*

*"We need to attend to language issues proactively - not just talk about it."*

– **participants**



## Social concerns

- Prince Albert has a high teenage pregnancy rate. When young mothers are struggling to find safe housing and food, child development becomes less of a priority.
- Students looking at career choices see limited opportunities back home, and need to recognize the Northern opportunities available to them beyond social and policing services, such as geological studies.
- Although adult learners come with a great amount of knowledge and wisdom, experiential learning is undervalued institutionally.



*“With so many social agencies involved in Aboriginal communities, literacy and education seems like just one more hoop to jump through.”*

– participant



# How can we build on what's working?

## Encourage creativity

- Highlight online GED and upgrading opportunities as well as face-to-face instruction.
- Programs must be relevant to community interests and culturally appropriate.
- Use games like Scrabble, fun math games, and other innovative ideas for child/family engagement. Celebrate a child's diversity and strengths, as opposed to highlighting hunger and social issues.
- Conduct focus groups with parents, asking about what interests them in programs, and what makes attendance possible and/or impossible.

## Encourage bilingualism

There is a strong movement for First Nations students to become educators. Although federal funding is targeted toward French immersion, many Cree and Dene instructors are trained and eligible to teach in their first language.

*"I truly believe that students graduating bilingual should be celebrated, not penalized."*

– **participant**



*"There's a desire for a multilingual environment. But how we'll get there is the question."*

– **participant**



*"When elders talk, we all listen."*  
– participant



## Engage the community

Some communities struggle with inviting and allowing services to come in. We must remove the blockages so that communities welcome and receive the programs and services that are available to those who want them.

- Encourage participants to bring their children and friends.
- Engage the community by involving mentors in a reading program, such as a hockey player, the Mayor, Chief-in-Council, or others.
- Continue to engage community resource people, like elders, to lead field trips that develop cultural skills.
- Encourage parents to recognize their influence on engaging their children's imagination.
- If the word 'literacy' is intimidating to community members, talk instead about things they will identify with, such as learning circles.
- Increase opportunities for mentoring, which provides a safe opportunity for individuals to grow into greater leadership positions within their community.

# What are some first steps that we could take?

## Promotion:

- Start with educating the community so people can hear what the programs are about and know what to expect.
- Develop and distribute brochures.
- Promote programs through broadcasts on community radio channels.
- Speak at Chief-in-Council meetings to explain and promote programs.
- Educate the community about the importance of the issue.

## Develop partnerships:

- Build on relationships already developed.
- Continue with informal discussions like the one we have started today. Start an informal group like this, get together and chat.
- Hold interagency meetings – getting people around the table over shared vision and values.

## Recognize the value of all learning:

- Opportunities exist for many more institutions to avail themselves to community learning opportunities.
- Change the paradigm of volunteer service to be recognized as a valuable learning medium. Some learners have moved from a community program participant to a volunteer to a coordinator's assistant. Volunteering can be life-changing for the learner and the whole family. Creating a welcoming space where participants feel safe and valued as they walk in the door is fundamental to the success of programs. Volunteers help make this possible.



*"Volunteering equals life experience  
equals life opportunities."*

– **participant**

## Find first language resources:

- Find Aboriginal authors for young children and babies, such as Richard Van Camp's 'Welcome Song for Baby.'
- Educate the public on the cognitive processes involved in the development of multilingualism.
- Have resources such as pamphlets translated into first languages.

*"Everyone teaching within First Nations communities should at least have TESOL training."*

– **participant**

## What participants also had to say:

*"As far as literacy goes, the link to language is huge."*

*"Our cultures may be different but we all want the same thing for our children and our families."*

*"This is an opportunity for people to step forward and get involved in the social issues of literacy."*

*"I see children embracing their language. I see it happening."*

*"It's all about literacy for living, functioning and passing that on to our children and others."*

*"I deeply believe in community-based learning. We must avail ourselves with all the opportunities available in the community and learn to be an open and welcoming place so that everyone feels like they belong."*



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