



Canadian  
Children's  
Literacy  
Foundation

Fondation pour  
l'alphabétisation  
des enfants  
canadiens



Literacy:  
Learning for Life.

L'alphabétisation,  
Une leçon pour la vie.

## Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2023 Federal Budget

October 7, 2022

## List of Recommendations

### Recommendation 1:

That the Government of Canada invest \$1M to design a National Literacy Strategy (2024-2026) to align the efforts of the provincial, territorial, federal and international bodies responsible for promoting the quality and effectiveness of education, training, and labour market performance. This new strategy will establish national standards for child, youth, and adult literacy and foundational skills proficiency. It will provide a framework for effective data sharing, coordinated remediation planning, and sharing of best practices and high-quality resources for learners, including those from Indigenous and Newcomer communities. It will also allow for coordinated national efforts for preventing of low literacy. With a National Literacy Strategy, the Government of Canada will reduce the siloed nature of learning across the life cycle in Canada, in order to ultimately reduce the rate of adults on the lower half of the literacy scale, which is currently 49% of working aged Canadians. Increasing literacy rates in the communities most vulnerable to low literacy (low income, racialized, Indigenous communities) will result in a more inclusive, flexible, prosperous economy and labour market in Canada.

## Introduction

ABC Life Literacy Canada, the Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation, and Frontier College are national literacy organizations that work collaboratively with more than 700 partners annually across Canada to provide targeted and innovative literacy, numeracy, and essential skills support for the most under-represented groups in Canada’s economy. Last year, over 60,000 children, youth, and adults participated in our programs in more than 300 communities throughout the country. We deliver our programs in partnership with community and social service agencies, schools and school boards, employers, and provincial-territorial and Indigenous governments. Our combined 150+ years of experience demonstrate that, when delivered through existing community hubs, literacy and essential skills interventions are high impact, low cost, and adaptable to diverse geographies, local economies, and participant demographics.

Literacy is measured on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being the strongest skillset. The literacy challenge in Canada is obscured by the significant number of Canadians with strong skills. In fact, Canadians are unusually polarized at the two extremes of the skills spectrum. The most recent study of adult skills in OECD countries revealed that despite Canada’s high overall literacy averages, a startling 49% of working-age Canadians have literacy scores below Level 3, the level needed to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge-based economy, and an alarming 17% score in Level 0-1.<sup>1</sup> When we control the data for demographic traits, it reveals significant inequities across populations, especially among Indigenous Canadians and newcomers. Among Indigenous people—the youngest and fastest growing demographic in Canada—an estimated 60% lack the literacy skills the labour market demands.<sup>2</sup>

In times of turmoil, literacy skills are irrefutably important. Literacy allows us to separate fact from fiction, share critical information, make informed decisions, and work differently. It is at the root of emotional, social, and economic resilience.<sup>1,2</sup> It is also correlated with the likelihood of pursuing further education throughout one’s life. Low foundational skills are a barrier to formal education and training opportunities, and because low literacy is correlated with multiple other challenges—poverty, housing instability, poor health, justice involvement and isolation—Canadians who need to improve their literacy levels are less likely to access formal skills and training programs than higher-skilled learners. The Government of Canada’s 2016 *Towards a Poverty Reduction Strategy* discussion paper acknowledges that, “Lifelong training and skills upgrading is increasingly important to help Canadians adjust to changing market conditions [however] adult education and training rates are significantly lower for those with poor literacy scores.”<sup>3</sup> In this way, a sizeable portion of the population is being left behind despite the investment across orders of government in training and upskilling Canadians. It’s the skills improvement of these Canadians with the lowest literacy skills who research shows will have the biggest impact on the economy. Low literacy levels contribute directly to lost income tax revenues. Household income for those with literacy level 4 or 5 is 70% higher than

for those at level 1 or below.<sup>4</sup> Analysis from 2018 tell us that increasing Canada’s workforce’s literacy skills by an average of 1% annually would lead to a 3% annual increase in Canada’s GDP—\$54 billion dollars a year. That’s on top of a 5% increase in productivity. The route to these benefits is not in addressing the skills needs of Canada’s Level 4-5 adults: it is through improving the skills of Level 0-2 adults.<sup>5</sup>

An important parallel approach to improving the literacy skills of Canadians is focusing on our youngest learners. While K-12 education provides the mandated requirements for basic education in Canada, there are many reasons that individuals don’t master foundational literacy and numeracy: underdeveloped early literacy skills, migration/interrupted education, learning disabilities, early school leaving, and lack of learning supports. Currently, there are significant gaps in Canada’s approaches to supporting early literacy development, which are the pre-literacy and language skills needed to learn to read and, ultimately, to read to learn throughout the course of one’s life.

Students of all ages have suffered learning losses during the pandemic, with young students seeing the greatest declines. Educators need more support to help them catch up. Many Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) self-report limits in their understanding of early literacy milestones and their confidence in supporting young children’s literacy and language development.<sup>6</sup>

Canadians know that low literacy is a problem in this country. A 2017 Environics/Frontier College survey found that 87% of Canadians agree that more should be done to improve literacy rates.<sup>7</sup> Pandemic recovery and preparedness for the many uncertainties of the future make this investment only more pressing.

Improving Canada’s literacy skills will require horizontal, coordinated efforts on the parts of government, education, and training experts to lead initiatives that will reinforce and complement Canada’s world-class education and training infrastructure. We know the Government of Canada is already invested in this work. Budget 2021 and Budget 2022 made historic and timely investments in the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system, and the Skills for Success framework for lifelong learning and skills development. We applaud these needed investments, and we urge the Government of Canada to leverage that work to ensure that literacy declines can be addressed effectively.

Canada needs a new investment to support strategic, coordinated planning to prevent and remediate low literacy and foundational skills. It needs a national literacy strategy. To succeed, the new strategy must not only focus on effectively reversing the growing number of adults with low literacy skills, but also must account for and address the unique needs of learners from under-represented and low-income communities in urban, rural, and remote locations, and must address the gaps in data and supports in early literacy and K-12 literacy education.

*“Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society.”<sup>8</sup> – TD Economics*

## Recommendations

In considering priorities and proposals for the forthcoming 2023 budget, we recommend:

**That the Government of Canada invest \$1M to design a National Literacy Strategy (2024-2026) to align the efforts of the provincial, territorial, federal and international bodies responsible for promoting the quality and effectiveness of education, training, and labour market performance. This new strategy will establish national standards for child, youth, and adult literacy and foundational skills proficiency. It will provide a framework for effective data sharing, coordinated remediation planning, and sharing of best practices and high-quality resources for learners, including those from Indigenous and Newcomer communities. It will also allow for coordinated national efforts for prevention of low literacy. With a National Literacy Strategy, the Government of Canada will reduce the siloed nature of learning across the life cycle in Canada, in order to ultimately reduce the rate of adults on the lower half of the literacy scale, which is currently 49% of working aged Canadians. Increasing literacy rates in the communities most vulnerable to low literacy (low income, racialized, Indigenous communities) will result in a more inclusive, flexible, prosperous economy and labour market in Canada.**

We need to support and scale evidence-based interventions and proven practices as part of a coordinated response that enables provinces and territories to collaborate, leverage, share, and innovate to solve complex challenges to learning success for both adults and children in Canada. Establishing a robust national measurement and remediation strategy will provide rigorous evidence of the social and economic case for investments in a national literacy strategy.

Literacy development efforts need to be horizontal, holistic, and integrated across policy and program areas to ensure that barriers to effective learning are addressed. That is why we recommend that the Government of Canada, in partnership with provincial and territorial governments, invest in the development of a framework that brings together key stakeholders and breaks down siloes of responsibility (education, training, social development, settlement services, poverty reduction.) A liaison function to address food security, housing, and health

service needs can be included to support adults with lower skills and to ensure they are accessing available supports.<sup>7</sup>

### Model for support

Budget 2023-24 to include the following:

#### 1. Build the team

- Establish a Coordination team at ESDC to support the development of a horizontal strategy for improving literacy and numeracy levels in Canada

#### 2. Convene and consult

- Consult with community stakeholders that currently serve or represent groups more likely to experience poverty and low literacy, including recent immigrants, Indigenous people, people with disabilities, single parents, seniors, and people in prison<sup>8</sup>
- Leverage existing federal, provincial, and territorial expertise, infrastructure, and data systems
- Establish new national standards for literacy across the life cycle, and new data collection measures as needed (e.g. young children's literacy data).
- Align standards and performance framework to international literacy and skills assessment exercises such as the OECD's Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

#### 3. Create the strategy

- Convene relevant federal departments, provincial/territorial governments, and non-governmental organizations to establish a national literacy strategy with proficiency standards (Ministers of Education, Training & Labour Market; CMEC; Ministers of Social Services; Ministers of Immigration; Statistics Canada)
- Design the strategy to foster and promote cross-jurisdictional collaboration in sharing and implementing best practices and evidence-based interventions
- Ensure the strategy create opportunities for cost-sharing and scaling of effective program tactics across jurisdictions.
- Build in flexibility to address the unique needs and assets of rural/remote, on-reserve, and under-served communities.

## Budget 2024-25 to include:

### 1. Implement the strategy

- Build the costs of basic literacy and numeracy remediation and prevention into high profile federal initiatives, including the *National Poverty Reduction Strategy*
- improve collection of data on child and youth literacy, and improve coordination of remedial efforts between international and domestic assessment cycles (PIAAC, PISA, provincial testing.)
- Connect the strategy to healthcare-based early literacy counselling, trainings for parents on raising readers, home visitation programs, community-based family literacy programs, library programming, and book-gifting initiatives

## Citations

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<sup>1</sup> Statistics Canada. (2013) *Skills in Canada: First Results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC)* Page 17.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander, Craig. (2007) *Literacy matters: a call for action*. TD Bank Financial Group. Retrieved from: <http://www.brantskillscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Literacy-Matters-TD.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Government of Canada. (2016) *Towards a Poverty Reduction Strategy: Discussion Paper on Poverty in Canada*. Page 10. Retrieved from: <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/programs/poverty-reduction/discussion-paper.html>

<sup>4</sup> Statistics Canada. (2016) *Insights on Canadian Society: The association between skills and low income*. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2016001/article/14322-eng.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Lane, Janet and T. Scott Murray. (2018) *Literacy Lost: Canada's Basic Skills Shortfall*. Canada West Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://cwf.ca/research/publications/report-literacy-lost-canadas-basic-skills-shortfall/>

<sup>6</sup> Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation. (2022, February). *The Role of Early Literacy in Early Learning and Child Care: A Survey of Early Childhood Educators*. <https://childrensliteracy.ca/cclf/media/PDFs/ECESurvey.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada. (2016)

<sup>8</sup> Canada Without Poverty. (2017) *Just the Facts*. Retrieved from: <http://www.cwp-csp.ca/poverty/just-the-facts/>