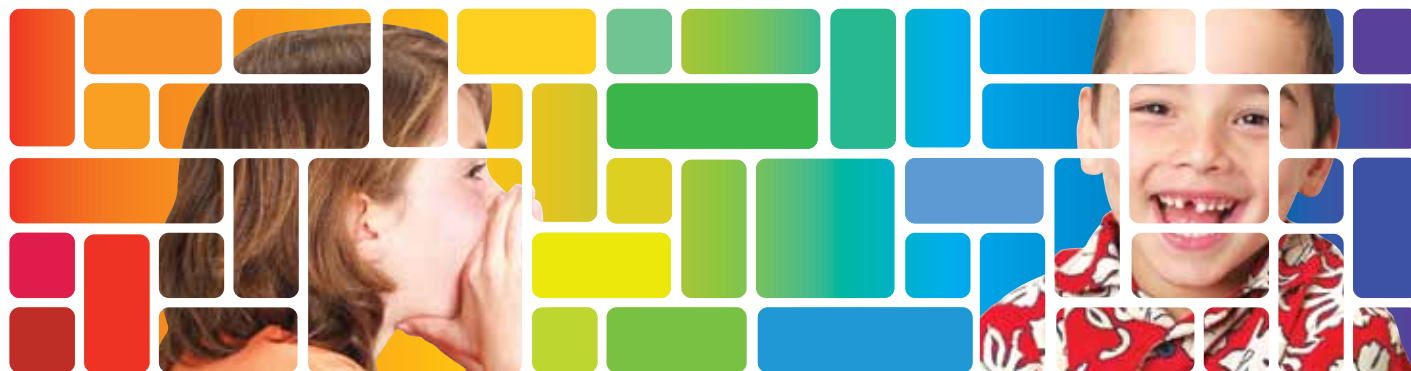


National Strategy for Early Literacy



Summary Report 2009

Prepared by
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Réseau canadien de recherche
sur le langage et l'alphabétisation

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Introduction

Literacy impacts all aspects of modern life. For individuals, it is the foundation for academic, financial, and life success; for nations, it is key to a healthy democracy and a flourishing economy. Adults with poor literacy skills are less successful in school, work less, and are unemployed longer. They require more social assistance and are more frequently in poorer health. Moreover, it is clear that the economic and social importance of literacy skills is increasing as our nation and workforce face increased global competition.

The Literacy Challenge

Low literacy skills cost Canada billions of dollars annually. The costs associated with low literacy can be summarized as: 1) opportunity costs; 2) remedial costs; and 3) intergenerational costs. Opportunity costs include increased unemployment, reduced academic achievement, lower GDP, and lower income for the individual. Remedial costs include higher costs for health care services, criminal justice systems, education, and social assistance. Finally, intergenerational costs occur when the literacy challenges of parents are passed on to the next generation.

For these reasons, it is of particular concern that well-designed national studies (e.g., the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey) have established that at least 42% of Canadian adults lack the literacy skills needed to succeed in Canada today. Moreover, repeated surveys have shown that these statistics have not improved for more than a decade.

Improving the literacy skills of Canadians is thus fundamental to numerous elements of public policy:

1. Literacy skills drive economic growth, labour market outcomes, productivity growth and innovation in firms.
2. Literacy increases the return on public investments in education and health.
3. Literacy is important for participation in the democratic process and for social engagement.

At least 42% of Canadian adults lack the literacy skills needed to succeed in Canada today. Moreover, repeated surveys have shown that these statistics have not improved for more than a decade. Raising the literacy proficiency of all Canadians to at least Level 3 would increase tax revenues by \$11 billion/year and save \$5 billion/year in unemployment and social assistance payments.

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There is a clear need both to improve communication about what is being done and why, in order to avoid duplication of effort and inefficient use of resources in planning language and literacy programs. There is also a critically important need to undertake systematic evaluations of programs that are implemented, to measure their impact, to ensure that value is received for the public resources being invested, and to identify opportunities to improve programs on an ongoing basis.

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The Benefits of Increased Literacy Skills

Improving the literacy skills of Canadians would carry extraordinary value. Studies by Statistics Canada, the University of Ottawa, and the Toronto Dominion Bank have calculated that reducing the percentage of Canadians who have low literacy skills by just 1% (from 42% of the population to 41%) would increase labour productivity by 2.5% and Canada's annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 1.5% per person, leading to a permanent increase of \$18 billion/year in Canada's GDP. Raising the literacy proficiency of all Canadians to at least Level 3 would increase tax revenues by \$11 billion/year and save \$5 billion/year in unemployment and social assistance payments.

Because the foundation for literacy skills is laid in childhood, and the benefits from improved literacy accrue over a lifetime, it is important to focus first on improving the literacy skills of Canada's children and youth. Experiences in the family, in early learning environments, and in the elementary school years have important consequences for children's long-term development. Unfortunately, while there is growing concern over the need to improve early literacy skills, and increase awareness of the costs associated with low literacy, Canada has lacked a strategy for action on this issue.

Creating a National Strategy for Early Literacy

The present initiative to create a pan-Canadian *National Strategy for Early Literacy (NSEL)* has involved:

1. Determining what is known and not known about improving early literacy outcomes.
2. Preparing policy research papers to summarize the available evidence in key areas (full papers available at <http://nsei.cllrnet.ca/category/full-paper-available/>).
3. Conducting a national public consultation to obtain advice on what can and should be done to improve literacy outcomes. This step involved the solicitation of written briefs, followed by public hearings in eight major cities across Canada.
4. Synthesizing and evaluating submissions, policy research papers, presentations and discussion at public hearings, and other relevant materials, leading to the full report. The full report reviews what can be – and is being – done to improve literacy skill outcomes for Canadian children and youth, from birth through age 16.

Barriers to Literacy Improvement

Through this process, a number of systemic and individual barriers to successful literacy outcomes for Canada's children and youth were identified. Important systemic barriers include:

1. The inability of many Canadian children to access high-quality early childhood education and care programs. This creates a particular challenge for those children who are most vulnerable to poor literacy outcomes because they lack adequate supports through their home and neighbourhood environments.
2. The inability of many Canadian children to access libraries, and other supporting programs and services, again with access challenges increasing for many of the most vulnerable Canadian children.
3. The inability of many Canadian schools to identify and deal effectively with children who already lag behind their peers when they first enter school.
4. The need to improve teacher preparation in the area of reading development and reading instruction, and to improve the quality of literacy-related instruction in Canadian classrooms.

One in four Canadian children who enter Grade 1 is significantly behind his or her peers and poorly prepared to learn. This statistic demonstrates the need to improve support for early learning. The language and literacy environment of the child's home and early learning and child care (ELCC) settings are strong determinants of early language and literacy skills. Not all children receive the support they need at home in order to be successful in school. To provide an equal opportunity for all children to grow and develop appropriately, Canada needs to invest in universally available, high quality, affordable daycare/early learning centres. Attending high quality ELCC programs can improve children's language and literacy skills, readiness for school, and early school performance. This is especially true for children from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom quality early childhood development programs can significantly improve longer-term educational and occupational outcomes.

A large and growing number of Canadian children spend time in ELCC programs, which provide a natural setting within which to help develop children's skills. Intensive early learning programs can provide significant longer-term benefits for at-risk children, including a reduced need for remedial and special education services, increased graduation rates, increased employment prospects, and reduced incidence of delinquency

The first three years of a child's life have enormous impact on the development of basic language and cognitive skills and lay the foundation for early literacy development. As parents are their children's first teachers, they need to be aware of the importance of creating a language- and literacy-rich environment in the home.

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At present, many student teachers complete their university teacher preparation programs without learning the basic scientific principles behind the development of reading skill and effective reading instruction. As a result, the substantial body of knowledge on how to teach children to read, how to identify children who have failed to acquire specific reading skills, and how to intervene effectively is not being applied in many Canadian classrooms.

and contact with the justice system. Both immediate and long-term effects of high-quality child care on the cognitive and language development of children have been documented in numerous studies. The availability of high quality early learning environments also increases workforce participation by parents: in fact, over 40% of the cost for early childhood programs in Quebec is paid for by the tax revenues obtained from mothers who would not work if affordable child care was not offered. Overall, Canadian economists estimate a \$2 return for every government dollar invested in high quality child care, reflecting reductions in costs for remedial education and provision of social services, and increased taxes paid by working parents.

Detailed studies of high quality preschool programs in the U.S. have clearly illustrated that the benefits of these programs significantly outweigh the costs. Returns to society from such programs have been estimated at between \$2.00 and \$8.74 per dollar invested. International research has also demonstrated the benefits of providing appropriate early support to at-risk children and has estimated the return on investment at up to \$7.00 for every \$1.00 invested.

In addition to the need for a comprehensive, universal ELCC system to address the early learning needs of Canadian children who do not receive appropriate support and stimulation within their home, there is an urgent need to improve literacy-related instruction in Canadian schools. Currently, many children who are well prepared to learn when they enter school nevertheless fail to acquire strong literacy skills alongside their peers due to the uneven quality of literacy-related instruction. Many jurisdictions have identified the need to improve literacy instruction in schools, but progress has been slow and the education system continues to fail too many children. It is essential that changes occur in the way that reading and writing are taught in classrooms, as classroom experience is a critically important determinant of how well children learn to read. Improving the way reading and writing are taught in Canada is therefore the single most important consideration for increasing literacy outcomes for Canadian students.

Such change requires improvements in Canada's system for preparing new teachers and in providing continuing professional education and teacher support programs. At present, many student teachers complete their university teacher preparation programs without learning the basic scientific principles behind the development of reading skill and effective reading instruction. As a result, the substantial body of knowledge on how to teach children to read, how to identify children who have failed to acquire specific reading skills, and how to intervene effectively is not being applied in many Canadian classrooms.

It is clear that most literacy challenges can be prevented through an appropriate mix of: 1) effective instruction; 2) early learning experience; 3) systematic assessments (to identify any children who experience difficulty at an early age); and 4) appropriate intervention. Many Canadian programs have been implemented in attempts to improve early literacy skills using various versions of this general approach. The most promising of these programs are reviewed in the full report. However, very few of these initiatives undergo rigorous systematic evaluation to measure impact and assess the benefits provided. A proportion of these initiatives are based, at least to some degree, on programs that have been developed and evaluated in other countries. However, because it is common for programs in different centres to vary in intensity, resources, duration, and other details, it cannot be assumed that similar benefits are associated with new implementations of programs.

Moreover, at present there is limited coordinated effort to share knowledge about programs, implementations, and outcomes. As a result, programs developed or implemented in one part of the country are rarely shared with other Canadians. Thus, we cannot be confident that Canada's return on our large public investments in this area produce the expected benefits, and we cannot identify which initiatives merit wider adoption and which require modification to improve their effectiveness.

Because of these factors, there is a clear need both to improve communication about what is being done and why, in order to avoid duplication of effort and inefficient use of resources in planning language and literacy programs. There is also a critically important need to undertake systematic evaluations of programs that are implemented, to measure their impact, to ensure that value is received for the resources being invested, and to identify opportunities to improve programs on an ongoing basis. In short, Canada requires a comprehensive approach to promote evaluation, networking and sharing of knowledge across regions and sectors in the early literacy area.

*The 2007 TD Bank Financial Group's report on the state of literacy in Canada concluded that improving the average literacy skills of Canadians is the single greatest opportunity for achieving a high return on public investment. Specifically, Canada should **invest heavily to improve early literacy** to capture the benefits that accrue over a lifetime.*

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Encourage and assist initiatives that facilitate children’s language and literacy development from a very young age.

Rationale:

Language skills provide the foundation for literacy skills, thus the language environment to which children are exposed from an early age is very important. Experience gained within the family home from the time that children are very young has a significant impact on their language development.

While most parents wish for the best outcomes for their children, not all home environments presently support optimal language development; these children begin to fall behind their peers from the very beginning. It is therefore important to provide appropriate guidance and support for the families of all infants and young children and to assist vulnerable children through centre-based, high-quality early learning and care settings that provide the needed language-rich environment.

Because infants and young children are in contact with the health care system from the beginning, it is natural to use this system to provide early guidance and support. Recognizing the importance of literacy for better health and life outcomes, many hospitals, physicians, pediatricians, and home visiting programs by nurses have initiated such programs. For example, the health-care based initiatives that distribute “books to babies” provide a natural, universal, and effective channel to help parents to value, and understand how they can support the language and literacy development of their young children.

Ongoing supports are needed as children develop. Where possible, these should build on existing community resources, such as libraries, early learning and care centres, and schools. Preschools and early learning and care programs provide a highly-favourable return on investment, especially when the child’s home environment fails to provide support for language and literacy development.

Identifying and intervening at an early age with children who are at risk for poor language, literacy and learning outcomes as a result of sensory or cognitive development factors is essential for these children’s future success. Early identification and remediation of such developmental issues can significantly improve outcomes for children and can be highly cost effective.

Poor literacy development is more likely for children living in poverty, as well as for children in certain at-risk groups. Aboriginal (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) children are especially vulnerable to poor language and literacy outcomes and must receive opportunities for participation in enriched early learning programs. Children in families where neither English nor French is spoken could also be at risk if they are not provided with supportive environments for language and literacy development. It is particularly important for agencies having responsibility for at-risk groups to provide support as a routine component of Canada’s immigrant orientation and settlement process.

Many Canadian adults have low literacy skills or are otherwise poorly equipped to assist their children to acquire the necessary language and literacy skills. Investing in improving the skills of adults can benefit children by increasing the effectiveness of parents as their child's first teacher.

The costs of the above initiatives are modest, and the returns on such investment are high.

Actions:

1. Implement initiatives that help parents to understand the importance of their child's language and literacy development and to engage in activities that support this development.
2. Build this guidance and support system around existing community resources that support early literacy such as hospitals, health clinics, libraries, schools, and early learning centres.
3. Facilitate the development of a system of high-quality, centre-based, enriched early learning and care programs for preschool children.
4. Ensure that pre-service and in-service training programs for early learning specialists provide a strong background on early language and literacy development.
5. Implement universal screening programs to identify important sensory and cognitive challenges at an early age (e.g., vision, hearing, language development, etc.) together with the appropriate intervention programs.
6. Develop targeted, evidence-based initiatives to improve outcomes for children in families where neither English nor French is spoken and for Aboriginal Canadians.
7. Support initiatives that improve the literacy skills of adults.

Recommendation #2:

Ensure that appropriate teaching strategies, shown through rigorous, evidence-based research to be effective in developing strong literacy skills, are used in all Canadian classrooms.

Rationale:

Once children enter school, teachers play a very important role in children's language and literacy development. Teachers therefore require a deep understanding of how age appropriate literacy skills are acquired, and how these can be taught. They must also understand how to evaluate weaknesses in an individual child's literacy skills and also know the range of instructional and intervention techniques that can help the child to overcome these weaknesses. It is therefore imperative that both pre-service and in-service teacher training programs provide teachers with evidence-based knowledge on how to measure and to teach fundamental literacy skills to all children.

Teacher and resource teacher education should be based on a three-tier model for teaching children to read. Through this process, all children would receive a standard baseline of core classroom instruction, sufficient for most children to learn to read. Regular assessments would quickly identify the approximately 20% of children for whom this core instruction may have been insufficient, so that supplemental instruction can be provided before they fall far behind their peers. Further assessment and intensive intervention would then be provided for the approximately 5% of children who require this level of service.

Actions:

1. Enhance Canada's teacher training programs to ensure that all graduating teachers understand: a) how children learn to read; b) what instructional methods are effective for ensuring that children acquire strong reading skills; c) how to identify a child's specific literacy weaknesses; and d) what interventions are appropriate to address each weakness.
2. Enhance in-service training programs and within-school support services to develop such understanding and skill development among current teachers.
3. Ensure that each school and school board puts in place an explicit literacy assessment, instruction, support, intervention and monitoring process, implementing the three-tier model.
4. Ensure that all children acquire fundamental literacy skills through an evidence-based instructional program that must include systematic, direct, and explicit instruction, supporting the acquisition of essential alphabetic, code-breaking skills, and the development of strong oral language, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, and reading comprehension skills.

Encourage community engagement and support for ongoing literacy development throughout the year.

Rationale:

Communities possess physical and human resources that can be harnessed at a modest cost, to improve children’s language and literacy skills. Currently, some programs organize community volunteers to provide literacy-specific tutoring for children with reading challenges. Other programs use corporate volunteers for more general tutoring and mentoring for vulnerable students and their families. In several Canadian cities, schools are now being used to provide vulnerable, inner-city children with recreation and learning programs during the summer months, when such children are otherwise likely to lose skills and fall behind their more privileged peers. These programs make use of schools that would be vacant during the summer and hire university students as program counselors. Such community-based programs require very modest investments while having the potential to yield very good returns.

In addition, at the community level, physicians can use their privileged advisory role to promote literacy among their young patients – with potential benefits for both the patients and the health care system in general. At each visit, physicians can have substantial impact by informing parents of the importance of, and ways to promote, optimal language and literacy development, and by making parents aware of relevant developmental milestones and inquiring about the individual child’s language progress.

Actions:

1. Develop and advance community-based family literacy programs.
2. Encourage programs that engage community volunteers to work with young students within the school.
3. Support community-based programs for students in at-risk communities. Programs that engage local sports teams and businesses can be particularly effective.
4. Develop summer learning programs for at-risk children.
5. Encourage paediatricians and family physicians to work with childcare providers and literacy specialists at the community level to promote literacy locally, as well as within their practices.

Improve communication and the sharing of literacy-related knowledge and resources.

Rationale:

Public awareness of the status of literacy skills in the Canadian population is low, and there is very limited appreciation of the economic, social and personal impact that this situation has for Canada. There is a special concern that Canadian businesses and the federal government are neglecting the economic and social impact of low literacy skills. Canada's investment in research and evaluation activities to improve literacy outcomes is vanishingly small.

At present, knowledge and experience gained from initiatives to improve literacy undertaken in one part of the country are rarely shared with other Canadians. This leads to needless duplication of effort and inefficient use of resources. Canada requires a comprehensive approach to facilitate networking and the sharing of information across regions and sectors in the early literacy area.

Actions:

1. Communicate the urgency of Canada's need to improve literacy skills.
2. Improve the sharing of knowledge about programs and resources across Canada.
3. Support applied research and evaluation initiatives that address gaps in our knowledge of literacy skill development. These include:
 - i. Improving measurement instruments for a range of skills and populations, including for Francophone readers and other linguistic groups.
 - ii. Developing and evaluating improved interventions and instructional techniques.
 - iii. Performing systematic evaluations of programs and initiatives.
 - iv. Facilitating knowledge transfer, exchange, and application, within and across Canada's research, policy and practice sectors.
 - v. Promoting implementation of science research to enhance our capacity to "scale up" effective instruction techniques and interventions across whole education systems.