

Education and Enlightenment:
Literacy Awareness Kit

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**EDUCATION AND
ENLIGHTENMENT**



LITERACY AWARENESS KIT

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"Canadians face a new literacy challenge. This challenge is much more than possessing the traditional ability to read and write. It consists of having the ability to understand and use printed information — at home, in the workplace and in the community. "



Minister of Human Resources Development
Ottawa, Canada

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

GENERAL
OBJECTIVE:

**Educating the stakeholders
and enlightening the potential
literacy clientele to the
benefits and value of continued
literacy education for all.**

Literacy is No Frill

The Quebec government talks a good game when it comes to literacy. It freely admits the embarrassment of being the province with the highest rate of adult illiteracy. It knows the terrible effect on an information-age economy when so many people can barely read or write or do simple arithmetic.

And yet, barely a year after former education minister, Pauline Marois promised "concerted and vigorous action" to raise Quebec's literacy level, the reverse seems to be taking place. With an estimated one million illiterate Quebecers, the number of people enrolled in literacy classes has actually dropped by as much as 50 per cent in some areas of the province.

Five years ago, 22 000 people were signed up for literacy training. That number is now down to 12 000 and is expected to continue to drop like a stone given the funding problems of Emploi Quebec.

This agency, set up to manage job-training programs after the federal government agreed to give Quebec exclusive jurisdiction in the field, has already run through the bulk of its funds for this year. It was reduced in August to asking welfare recipients to forgo a promised \$120 bonus for enrolling in literacy classes. The bonus is meant to help recipients defray extra expenses like bus fare and could well make the difference between continuing and dropping out.

Illiteracy is a handicap that hinders an individual's ability to participate fully in society, hold down a decent job, enjoy a cultural life. It can mean that some of the most beautiful moments in life will never be experienced; reading to a grandchild, discovering great literature.

It also means, as studies have shown, that the next generation likely will suffer as well. The children from economically and socially disadvantaged areas are four times more likely than other children to have learning difficulties and 30 per cent less likely to finish high school.

For Quebec, having the highest literacy rate in the country seems virtually to guarantee a continued rate of high unemployment. ...

Literacy is not a frill. It is the bedrock under a modern society.

*Excerpt from an article which originally appeared in the Montreal Gazette -
13 September, 1999*

DEFINING LITERACY

Literacy means life-skills

- The word "illiterate" is often ill-used to describe people who have "low literacy skills." While some people cannot read at all, the vast majority of people who fall into this category have difficulty with reading, writing numbers at varying levels.
- Low literacy skills have a significant impact on their lives and on their ability to participate fully in their communities. Change is on-going in our society, and literacy skills are among the tools needed to help manage change.
- The definition of literacy is also changing. In Canada, functional literacy is defined as the ability to read and interpret printed information, write, and do mathematical calculations in order to perform everyday tasks well — at work, at home and in the community.
- The definition is now expanding to include problem-solving, oral communication skills, computer skills and the ability to work in teams. These are regarded as the basic **life skills** for today's world and the world of the future.
- Schools, home, community agencies and the workplace will have to work together to serve adults who want to upgrade skills. They will have to provide education and training. They will also have to consider simplifying some communication and combine language with other media.

Myths about literacy

It is a myth to believe that people are either literate or illiterate.

People have varying abilities and needs depending on their interests and life experience. In a rapidly changing society, all of us need to upgrade our literacy skills at some point.

It is a myth to believe that those with poor reading and writing skills are less intelligent than others.

Those who want or need to upgrade their literacy skills are generally people with many other strengths and skills.

It is a myth to believe that individuals are to blame for their own low literacy skills.

Poverty, dysfunctional families, special learning needs, moving from school to school at critical ages, and, community isolation are all major factors in people having low literacy skills.

It is a myth to believe that the schools we already have will provide the answers.

Schools are part of the solution by only part. An alarming number of our high school students are dropping out before graduation. There are also a number of high school graduates still having difficulty with basic skills.

LITERACY IN SOCIETY

Literacy is about how people communication in their lives - at home, at work, in the community.

Work

- The workplace is changing dramatically around the world. New technology is displacing jobs and large industries are downsizing.
- Information workers, sometimes called knowledge workers, make up an increasing portion of the workplace.
- Small and medium-sized businesses are growing, but they need workers with a range of skills and the ability to adapt to rapid change.
- Reading, writing and math are the basic skills required by workers who need to retrain or upgrade for the 21st century. Those without these skills risk being excluded.

Society

- Literacy affects our daily lives in concrete ways.
- Health and safety are two areas where a lack of literacy skills could pose actual physical dangers. People who have difficulty with reading, writing and numbers may not be able to follow medical instructions, read prescription labels, or handle dangerous products at work or at home.
- There is increasing recognition that social factors such as poverty, delinquency, poor health and low literacy skills are linked.

Family

- Families are in transition.
- There are growing numbers of single-parent homes and an increase in the numbers of children living in poverty. At the same time, there is a demand for families to assume more responsibility for their children's education and to work in partnership with schools.
- A parent who has difficulty with reading and writing cannot help children with homework or read to them in their early years.
- Studies have shown that the family is the strongest predictor of literacy skills and education success.

THE INTERNATIONAL ADULT LITERACY SURVEY

A Groundbreaking Survey

- In 1995, Statistics Canada and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) released the groundbreaking International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS). The first international survey of its kind, IALS provides a comparison of literacy levels across nations, languages and cultures. Initially, Canada and six other OECD nations were surveyed: the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Poland and the United States. Since then, another 17 countries have been surveyed.
- The survey defines literacy as the ability to use written information to function in society, to achieve their goals and to develop their knowledge and potential.
- IALS identifies and measures three basic types of literacy: *prose literacy* (the ability to understand and use information from texts such as news stories, poems or fiction); *document literacy* (the ability to find and use information from documents such as maps, tables or application forms); and *quantitative literacy* (the ability to make calculations with numbers embedded in text, as in balancing a chequebook or figuring out a tip).

Key Findings of IALS

- Literacy is linked to economic success. Literacy levels help determine the kind of jobs people find, the salaries they make and their ability to upgrade their work skills.
- Literacy is not fixed forever: it operates on the 'use-it-or-lose-it' principle. Those who read, write and use numbers regularly have higher literacy levels.
- Education strongly influences literacy but is not the only factor. Some less-educated people who practise their literacy skills regularly have higher literacy levels than well-educated people who do not practise their literacy skills.
- Literacy practices in the workplace are critical to maintaining a skilled, trainable workforce capable of adapting to change.

Adult literacy is an issue that requires serious attention by policy makers.

A SNAPSHOT OF LITERACY IN CANADA

Canadians' Literacy Levels

The 1994 *International Adult Literacy Survey* identified three types of literacy — *prose literacy*, *document literacy* and *quantitative literacy*— and measured proficiency at five different levels within each literacy type. Here's how Canadians, ages 16 and over, measured up on prose literacy.

- 22% of Canadians are at level 1. These people have difficulty reading and have few basic skills or strategies for decoding and working with text. Generally, they are aware that they have a literacy problem.
- 26% of Canadians are at level 2. These are people with limited skills who read but do not read well. Canadians at this level can deal only with material that is simple and clearly laid out. People at this level often do not recognize their limitations.
- 33% of Canadians are at level 3, which means that they can read well but may have problems with more complex tasks. This level is considered by many countries to be the minimum skill level for successful participation in society.
- Only 20% of Canadians are at levels 4 or 5. These people have strong literacy skills, including a wide range of reading skills and many strategies for dealing with complex materials. These Canadians can meet most reading demands and can handle new reading challenges.

Canada's Literacy Challenge

- The International Adult Literacy Survey reveals that many Canadians lack the literacy skills they need to participate fully at work and in the community. Canada's literacy challenge is to ensure that all Canadians can read and write well enough to increase their knowledge, achieve their goals and contribute to the growth of our country. Responding to the challenge is everyone's business— governments, business, labour, communities and individuals all have a role to play.

*The above percentages may not add up to 100% because of rounding.

SPEAKING POINTS

General

- Literacy plays a key role in the Government of Canada's commitment to ensuring that Canada continues to be productive, competitive and economically secure.
- Canadians must continue to learn throughout their lives so they can participate fully in the workplace and in the community. For this, they need strong literacy skills.
- Canada is moving from a resource-based economy to an information-based economy and Canadians will need the appropriate knowledge and literacy skills to prepare for the jobs of the 21st century.
- Literacy is everyone's business—governments, business, labour, communities and individuals all have a role to play in improving the literacy levels of Canadians.
- The Government of Canada invests close to \$30 million each year on literacy projects throughout the country.

Literacy—What it Means and Why it Matters

- Literacy is much more than just reading, writing and numeracy. It is the ability to *understand and use* printed information in all kinds of daily activities at home, at work and in the community.
- Literacy touches just about every aspect of our lives. It is a key to personal growth and development. It has a profound influence on our health and well being and our sense of personal security.

Literacy—What we know

- Literacy is a big factor in our economic success. That's because our literacy levels help determine the kind of jobs we find, the salaries we make and whether we're likely to experience unemployment in our lives.

Education does not "fix" literacy forever. Individuals can lose skills after the end of schooling, through lack of use, or they can gain skills through practice and additional training, even with minimal formal education.

Canada's Literacy Challenge

- The literacy needs of Canadians are changing. The basic reading and writing skills of past decades are no longer adequate.
- Surveys tell us that millions of Canadians have poor literacy skills. In fact, one in five adult Canadians does not read or write well enough to take advantage of economic opportunities.
- Our national challenge is to ensure that Canadians can read and write well enough to increase their knowledge, achieve their goals and contribute to the growth of Canada.
- The way to prevent problems resulting from weak literacy is to rethink our approach to learning. We now know that learning cannot end when we leave school. Learning must be seen as a lifelong process.

Family Literacy

- What we learn in childhood and youth stays with us forever. That's why it's so important to read to our children every day. When we do this, we're showing them that the written word is the key to learning ... and that learning can be fun.
- The Government of Canada's National Literacy Secretariat promotes family literacy to encourage lifelong learning among children and to offer support and encouragement to parents, grandparents and guardians who wish to upgrade their own reading skills.

Workplace Literacy

- A highly-skilled labour force is a key component of a strong and competitive Canadian economy. Canadian workers must have the necessary literacy skills to change, to retrain if necessary and to function as efficiently as possible in their jobs.
- Weak literacy skills are harmful to Canadian business and impose a punishing cost to the economy in lost productivity, poor communications, accidents, down time and human error.
- Fortunately, there are programs in place to help workers. Workplace literacy training is offered by hundreds of employers across Canada.

Literacy Partnerships

- The National Literacy Secretariat works with provincial and territorial governments and literacy organizations to increase awareness of literacy issues and to help find ways of dealing with these issues.
- The National Literacy Secretariat also supports national literacy organizations, including ABC CANADA, Frontier College, Laubach Literacy of Canada, the *fédération canadienne pour l'alphabétisation en français*, the Movement for Canadian Literacy and the National Adult Literacy Database.

Public Awareness Folder Education and Enlightenment

- Many influential non-literacy associations have joined with the National Literacy Secretariat to promote literacy in Canada. They include the Canadian Public Health Association, the Canadian Association of Optometrists, the Canadian Bar Association, the Consumers' Association of Canada and the YMCA

The National Literacy Secretariat develops partnerships with business and labour to foster corporate and labour awareness and involvement in literacy issues.

LEVELS OF LITERACY

Statistics Canada slots adults into five levels of literacy skills, based on how well they handle everyday tasks that range from locating plant care information in an article about "impatiens" to checking out a newspaper weather chart.

- **Level 1**—Non-readers who have serious difficulty in dealing with any printed material.
- **Level 2**—Poor readers who can deal only with simple printed material containing no complex tasks.
- **Level 3**—Average readers who can handle everyday printed material. This is the level of skill needed for entry-level jobs.
- **Levels 4/5**—High-end readers, ranging upwards from managers through professions to academics.

The "passing grade" to move up a level is 80 per cent, meaning someone with 75 per cent probability of successfully completing the average **Level 3** task is never- theless still slotted into **Level 2** and labelled low literacy.

Faced with criticism that 80 per cent is unrealistically high, Statistics Canada and other participants are seriously considering a 70 per cent passing grade for the next international survey, planned for 2002.

ABC CANADA Literacy Foundation and Decima Research

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON LITERACY

In 1990 and again in 1993, **ABC CANADA** commissioned Decima Research to conduct a nationally representative study of Canadian's attitudes about literacy. In May 1999, Decima replicated a series of questions from these earlier studies which allowed us to see changes in attitudes about literacy.

Results indicate that there have been a number of significant increases in the level of public awareness of literacy issues over the last decade.

Importance of basic skills such as reading, writing and math as compared to 10 - 20 years ago.

- In 1999, 69% of Canadians felt that "basic literacy skills are more important today than 10 - 20 years ago," compared to 63% in 1990.

This finding can be reported in a number of different ways:

- a six percent point increase;
- a 13% overall increase;
- 1.7 million more Canadians feel ...

Details comparison findings show:

- 12% more people in the youngest age bracket (18 - 24) than the oldest age bracket (65+) agreed with the statement "basic literacy skills are more important today than 10 - 20 years ago."
- 7% more people in the lowest income bracket (under \$20K) than in the highest income bracket (\$70K+) agreed with the statement, "basic literacy skills are more important today than 10 - 20 years ago."
- 72% of men vs. 65% of women agreed with the statement, "basic literacy skills are more important today than 10 - 20 years ago." This 7% gap did not exist at all in 1993.
- 11% more people than the national average in Atlantic Canada, the country's most economically depressed region, agreed that "basic literacy skills are more important today than 10 - 20 years ago."

Public Awareness Folder Education and Enlightenment

2. Awareness of literacy in Canada

- In 1993, 31% of Canadians said they had heard "a lot" about the issue of literacy in Canada, compared to 26% in 1990.

The finding can be reported as:

- a five percentage point increase;
- a 23% overall increase;
- 1.25 million more Canadians said ...

Detailed comparison findings show:

- 46% more young adults (18-24) have heard "a lot" about literacy;
- 13% fewer people said that they had heard "nothing at all" about literacy, since the 1993 survey;

12% of people with the least amount of formal education (some or less than high school) said that they have heard "nothing at all" about literacy issues.

3. Describe literacy as a problem

- In 1999, 35% of Canadians said that the issue of literacy was "a very serious problem," compared to 29% in 1990.

This finding can be reported as:

- a six percentage point increase;
- a 25% overall increase;
- 1.5 million more Canadians said ...

Detailed comparison findings show:

- 20% more people in the lowest income bracket (under \$20K) than those in the highest income bracket (\$70K+) felt that literacy is "a very serious problem."
- those with the lowest income (under 28K) and with the least formal education (some or less than high school) are the most aware that low literacy levels pose serious problems, yet they report hearing the least about literacy issues;
- older persons (65+) were much more likely than younger persons (18-24) to respond that they did not know where to look for help in the Yellow Pages TM;
- unemployed people were nearly 10% more likely than employed people to respond that they did not know where to look for help with basic literacy skills.

4. How much of a problem is inadequate reading and writing skills in the workplace?

- In 1999, 32% of Canadians felt that inadequate reading and writing skills are "a very serious problem in the workplace," compared to 24% in 1990.

This finding can be reported as:

- an eight percentage point increase;
- a 37% overall increase;
- 1.8 million more Canadians said ...

Detailed comparison findings show:

- 20% more people in the lowest income bracket (under \$20K) felt that inadequate reading and writing skills are "a very serious problem in the workplace."
- 24% more people with the least formal education (some or less than high school) than those with the highest level of education (university) felt that inadequate literacy skills are "a very serious problem in the workplace."



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418 682.5891

March 7, 2000

Inside Address

Dear -----:

Education and Enlightenment

I am pleased to present you with a Literacy Awareness Kit, prepared by the Quebec Literacy Working Group as part of this special awareness project.

The Information Kit includes pertinent background information on the subject of literacy including statistical information.

I hope that you will find this material useful as we work together to promote literacy in our area. With your efforts, and those of many other concerned citizens, I am confident we can respond successfully to Quebec's literacy challenge.

Yours sincerely,

Cynthia Dunster Michaud
Field Worker
Central Québec School Board

SAMPLE LETTER



2046, chemin Saint-Louis
Sillery (Québec) G1T 1P4
418 688.8730
418 682.5891

Sillery, le 20 mars 2000

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

XXXXXXXXXX

Objet: Éducation et éclaircissement

Monsieur:

J'ai le plaisir de vous transmettre une pochette d'information portant sur le thème de l'alphabétisation et mise au point par le Quebec Literacy Working Group (QLWG) dans le cadre d'un projet spécial de sensibilisation.

Cette pochette d'information contient des données générales sur l'alphabétisation en plus de fournir des données statistiques sur le sujet.

J'espère que vous trouverez ces renseignements utiles tout au cours de notre démarche visant à promouvoir l'alphabétisation dans votre milieu. Ces efforts, joins à ceux d'autres personnes concernées, devraient permettre de relever avec succès de défi de alphabétisation au Québec.

Sincèrement vôtre,

Cynthia Dunster Michaud
Personne oeuvrant sur le terrain
Commission scolaire Central Québec

SAMPLE LETTER

In Your Community

The Central Quebec School Board

QUEBEC CITY READING COUNCIL

The Quebec City Reading Council is a volunteer-based literacy council situated in Quebec City. The QCRC is associated with the Literacy Unit of the Central Quebec School Board.

Functions

- Services include:
 - One-to-one tutoring for adult non readers
 - Tutoring services to students at both the elementary and secondary levels
 - Tutoring academic and basic skills students at Central Quebec Learning Centre for adults

Family Literary

- Services include:
 - Reading Circles for children ages 3 - 10 during the school year on Saturdays
 - Family Literacy Days on an annual basis for parents and children
 - Parents-As-Partners programs in elementary schools
 - Literacy Exchange

Professional Development

- Services include:
 - Regular training workshops on reading, writing & numeracy for volunteers and regular sector teachers in English
 - Clear language workshops.

Public Awareness and Sensitization

- Services include:
 - Regular announcements of upcoming events in the media
 - Regular interviews on radio, tv and in the print media
 - Representation at various community events to publicize literacy
 - Regular Information Kiosks at community events

Special Projects

- Services include:
 - Teachers-As-Readers Project
 - Mailbag Reading '95 Project
 - Activities through partnerships with LLC-Q/ L VQ and LPQ
 - Peer Youth Tutors

Partners

- Central Quebec School Board
- Laubach Literacy Quebec - Canada
- Laubach Literacy Quebec/Literacy Volunteers Quebec
- Literacy Partners of Quebec
- Movement for Canadian Literacy
- Quebec Literacy Working Group
- Quebec Home & School Association
- ABC Canada Yellow Pages

Quebec City Reading Council Coordinator

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SAMPLE DOCUMENT