



Adult Literacy in Manitoba A Discussion Paper

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A Discussion Paper

Literacy is highly valued in Manitoba. However, the literacy skills of many Manitobans are not at levels which enable them as individuals to participate fully in an increasingly knowledge-based society and economy.

The government of Manitoba is concerned about this literacy challenge in our province. In order to stimulate renewed action, it has identified a Minister responsible for literacy and has passed legislation, The Adult Literacy Act, which requires the development of a provincial adult literacy strategy to address the needs of all our citizens. The Act also established the Manitoba Adult Literacy Program as a component of the strategy in order to commit to ongoing support for agencies that offer literacy programs for adults seeking to improve their literacy skills.

The strategy will be the platform for the focus and commitment of the government's action on literacy. It will also outline potential roles for community and industry partners.

Consultation with key stakeholders and the public is essential to the development of the adult literacy strategy; it will provide opportunities for a variety of input into the shaping of the strategy.

This discussion paper provides a starting point for consultation. It is expected that other issues and information will be put forward to further the deliberations.

What is Literacy?

Literacy refers to the skill base that enables people to participate and adapt to change in the workplace, the home and community life. It provides a foundation for further learning and includes the following:

- written communication skills; reading text, document use, writing
- numeracy
- thinking skills to learn and solve problems
- oral communication and interpersonal skills

In a society that is becoming more complex, and an economy that is increasingly competitive, literacy skills are critical. In fact, in a knowledge-based economy, literacy is the skill base for labour productivity. The widespread adoption of information and communication technologies (ICT) requires that individuals have literacy skills that allow them to apply these in a technical environment.

Ideally, early childhood experiences and schooling provide a strong literacy foundation. Our adult experience, training and schooling should provide the enhancements to this foundation. Literacy skills are basic for a person's development as an adult learner.

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Manitoba's Literacy Challenge

With shifting economic realities, including global communication and international commerce, the productivity of our labour force will be a crucial factor in the province's future.

Research indicates that Canadian employers do not invest in employee training and skill development at a level comparable to many other developed countries. International studies estimate that countries with 1% higher average literacy scores experience 1.5% higher GDP per capita.

In 2003, Canada participated in the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) which measured prose literacy, document use, numeracy skills, problem solving and use of information and communication technology. Canada's performance was in the middle when compared to other countries and ahead of the United States. Manitoba was generally situated at the Canadian average.

However, when we look more closely at the Manitoban situation, we see that approximately 40% of working age adults had prose literacy scores below the level considered the minimum for full participation in a knowledge-based economy and society. This represents approximately 285,000 Manitobans between the ages of 16 and 65. While a high percentage of this group is employed, their literacy skills limit their employment opportunities and ability to adapt to change in the workplace.

Demographic projections indicate that Aboriginal peoples will play a more prominent role in Manitoba's future labour force. There are literacy challenges and language issues unique to this population.

Skilled immigrants are viewed in Manitoba as an important source of future labour supply. Many new immigrants face language barriers to full labour market participation.

So far, this paper has focused on the development of literacy skills. It is important, however, to recognize that there is also evidence to indicate that learning loss can occur at all levels if people do not keep their literacy skills "fit". As well, research indicates that the education and literacy levels of adults impact the levels achieved by their children. Therefore, we all have a responsibility to develop and maintain our learning competencies. It will be important to consider the role that promotion and awareness strategies can play to communicate this message to Manitobans.

Literacy Statistics (IALSS, 2003)

Total population / 16-65 / 717,000

| Manitoba Distribution by Level | Prose | Document | Numeracy |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Level 1 | 91,000 (12.7%) | 93,210 (13.0%) | 130,494 (18.2%) |
| Level 2 | 194,000 (27.0%) | 192,873 (26.9%) | 230,157 (32.1%) |
| Level 3 | 294,000 (41.0%) | 316,197 (41.1%) | 253,101 (35.3%) |
| Level 4 / 5 | 138,000 (19.3%) | 136,230 (19.0%) | 103,248 (14.4%) |

Current Programming

At present, there are existing publicly supported adult learning systems that support the development and maintenance of adult literacy skills.

- 1. Adult Literacy Programming** provides direct instruction for individuals to develop and apply skills in reading text, document use, writing, oral communication, and numeracy. The development of thinking skills, problem-solving and computer use are typically embedded in the instruction. Manitoba's programming focuses on the first three levels of literacy which are aligned to the levels used in the IALSS assessment. Work completed at level three is eligible for credit towards a mature high school diploma.
- 2. Workplace Essential Skills:** The Essential Skills are considered to be the skills needed to be successful at work. They provide a foundation for learning other more technical or occupational specific skills. Essential Skills are reading text, document use, writing, numeracy, working with others, continuous learning, oral communications, computer use and thinking skills. Essential Skills bring a work related focus to general literacy skills. Programming is workplace or occupation specific and frequently embedded in training programs.
- 3. Adult Learning Centres (ALCs):** These Centres integrate literacy upgrading with programming for adults to obtain secondary education courses and credentials (high school diploma) required to pursue further education and employment. Some high schools also serve adults in this way.
- 4. Apprenticeship:** Strong literacy skills are foundational to the development of trades competencies and certifications.
- 5. Colleges and Universities:** These institutions provide courses of study leading to various academic and occupational credentials (certificates, diplomas and degrees). Generally, they play a key role in the development of higher level literacy skills which enable individuals to effectively manage complex information and to stimulate innovation and creativity.
- 6. Adult English as an Additional Language (EAL) Programming** provides language training for immigrants in support of settlement and labour market integration. Adult EAL Programs are referenced to the Canadian Language Benchmarks. Most participants are well educated and arrive in Manitoba with strong literacy skills. Students with interrupted schooling, or little or no formal education in their own language require specialized instruction referred to as **EAL Literacy**.

Learning loss can occur at all levels if people do not keep their literacy skills “fit”.



Literacy and Social Well Being

There are clear social benefits in areas of health, justice, social cohesion/cultural inclusion, personal empowerment, and active citizenship associated with increased literacy skills.

Health and literacy are related. Research indicates a strong relationship between a person's literacy level and his/her physical well-being. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has stated that higher literacy and numeracy help to reduce demands on health systems, important as countries struggle to finance the cost of providing health services to ageing populations.

There are also significant relationships between literacy and the justice system. There is evidence to suggest that increases in literacy levels may act to reduce crime levels.

Many Manitobans who are clients of the social services system require personal support as well as literacy development. In the long term, addressing literacy needs should support reductions to costs associated with social services.

There are clear social benefits associated with increased literacy skills.

The Consultation Process - Sharing Your Views

The consultation process will include public meetings, meetings with stakeholders, cross government discussions and the opportunity for submission of written input. A report on "What We Have Heard" through the consultation process will be prepared. This report will contribute to the development of the literacy strategy. Once the literacy strategy is developed government will play a lead role in its implementation. Continued collaboration of stakeholders will be necessary to ensure effective and relevant implementation and evaluation.

Some questions to consider:

1. What literacy-related competencies are necessary for an individual's meaningful participation in Manitoba in the year 2016?
2. What are the best ways to raise the literacy levels of all Manitobans?
3. What are the best ways to raise the literacy levels of those with the greatest literacy needs?
4. What should be the key goals and components of an adult literacy strategy?
5. In a literacy strategy, what are the key roles for government, industry, individuals and communities?
6. What would be an ideal literacy promotion campaign?
7. Should literacy be a high public policy priority?
8. How should we measure progress of the literacy strategy?

For information on the consultation process and schedule, contact:

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Information Resources

Statistics Canada. 2005. Learning a Living: First Results of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey. Ottawa: Statistics Canada

www.statcan.ca

Statistics Canada. 2005. Building on Our Competencies: Canadian Results of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey. Ottawa: Statistics Canada www.statcan.ca

National Adult Literacy Database: an online repository containing program models, teaching and learning materials, assessment tools, research documents, etc.

www.nald.ca and www.naldatwork.ca