

**Response to Draft Discussion #2:  
A Literacy Framework for Alberta**

**Prepared by Literacy Alberta  
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## Introduction

We would like to thank the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology for the invitation to respond to the Discussion Draft #2, *A Literacy Framework for Alberta*.

In the last decade, we have seen the Government of Alberta become increasingly aware of the effects and the extent of low literacy in our province's population. The provincial reports *A Learning Alberta*, *Alberta's Commission on Learning*, the *K-3 Numeracy /Literacy Report*, *Building and Educating Tomorrow's Workforce* and *Building Vibrant Learning Communities* all agree that literacy levels have a significant impact on individuals, families and society. Most recently, the Pan-Canadian Interactive Literacy Forum gave learners, literacy practitioners, teachers, principals, employers and representatives from post secondary institutions and governments an opportunity to come together in a consultation process to develop a literacy framework for Alberta.

We are happy to see this consultation process translated into an action plan and offer our comments for your consideration.

Our comments will specifically address Section 7. Actions

## Section 7. A Literacy Framework for Alberta

### Key Component: Create more learning opportunities

#### Actions

- **Implement a public awareness campaign on the importance of developing life long literacy competencies for Albertan of all ages**

We fully endorse raising public awareness about the prevalence and impact of low literacy on the lives of all Albertans.

The report *A Learning Alberta - Government of Alberta Final Report of the Steering Committee, May 2006* emphasizes the need to promote literacy and include the importance of families reading and learning together, literacy and other foundation skills, and the value of continuous learning.

In 2006, we engaged in a consultation process with post secondary institutions, family literacy organizations, Métis representatives, CUPE, adult literacy organizations, Alberta Workplace and Essential Skills, and public libraries to develop a literacy framework. Advisors from Alberta Justice, Alberta Human Resources and Employment, Alberta Community Development, and Alberta Advanced Education also participated in this consultation. This process resulted in the document *Literacy - For a Life of Learning!* (2006, Max Bell Foundation.)

Specific strategies for rising awareness in that document include:

Develop key messages for a visible public awareness campaign. Possible elements:

- Literacies are a foundation of learning, and personal and professional development occurs throughout a person's lifetime.
- Improved literacy is part of the solution to the skills shortages, employee retention, and employee training that will lead to an economically strong and vibrant society.
- Literacy levels are a major determinant of health and health service utilization.
- Those with low levels of literacy tend to be over represented in the justice system and face greater challenges for rehabilitation.
- People with higher literacy skills participate more fully in community and civic activities.

▪ **Identify barriers to literacy learners and implement specific strategies to overcome barriers and enable more learners to access learning.**

Again, we endorse this action and would encourage you to consider both financial and non-financial barriers. Addressing barriers means meeting the learner where they are, culturally, financially, geographically, academically, and cognitively.

Situational barriers to adult learning may include multiple responsibilities for home, family and children, financial problems, lack of adequate and affordable childcare, job commitments, transportation problems, having a mobility, sensory or learning disability, and a lack of support from others. (*State of the Field Report: Barriers to Participation in Adult Learning*, May 2006).

Specifically, accessibility could be increased by providing support for daycare, tuition, housing, transportation, living allowances, and other supports as needed for longer periods of time. (*Literacy – For a Life of Learning!*) Other suggestions include:

- Integrate existing technology to deliver programs, supports, and services to individuals as appropriate, for example: web-based and video conference resources using the SuperNet
- Providing a centralized access point for resources, standardized learning, teaching, and measurement tools.

▪ **Develop special initiatives to reach out and respond to the literacy learning needs of First Nations, Métis, Inuit peoples, immigrants, francophones, and persons with disabilities.**

The *Building Vibrant Learning Communities* Report identified that although community learning providers offer accessible programs in non-threatening

settings in over 80 communities, they are limited in their ability to address many of the identified needs because of mandate and resource constraints. They recommend initiatives that allow learners, such as those with disabilities and those caring for children, to attend part-time learning in non-classroom locations in the workplace and in communities. (*Building Vibrant Learning Communities: Framework and Actions to Strengthen Community Adult Learning Councils and Community Literacy Programs*, December 20, 2007, Alberta Advanced Education and Technology.)

The Office for Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) has recently approved funding for a unique Alberta/ British Columbia proposal that will embed family literacy into the workplace. The Further Education Society of Alberta is the lead in this initiative and is building on their recent Literacy and Parenting Skills work with employees in Wal-Mart. Traditionally, men have been harder to reach with family literacy and parenting programs, but this pilot program attracted both men and women in the work place. Initiatives such as these are worth paying attention to, and building on, when addressing the complex learning needs of diverse populations.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples need to be involved in developing initiatives that are effective and culturally respectful. As well, immigrant-serving organizations need to be consulted when developing special initiatives to serve their clients. Lastly, persons with disabilities and organizations serving them need to be involved in designing and implementing programs that meet their unique and special needs.

▪ **Engage families and seniors in literacy programming.**

The importance of this action cannot be over estimated. Literacy and learning begin at birth. Parents are a child's first teachers and play an important role in helping children learn language and literacy skills. A crucial part of engaging families in literacy programming is increasing funding for family literacy programs especially those targeted to high-risk parents (e.g. young parents, those with low incomes, single parents.) Low literacy has a cyclical and intergenerational impact, i.e. vulnerable individuals may not have the same opportunities to access life long learning, and as a result, their children may also be deprived of the same opportunities. (*Literacy – For a Life of Learning!*)

Unfortunately, prose literacy scores tend to decrease as a person ages. 57.8% of seniors aged 56 – 65 and 82.1% of adults age 66 and over scored below Level 3. (International Adult Literacy Skills Survey, 2003). This means that as our health system becomes increasingly complex, many seniors do not have the literacy skills to be able to make the best use of the medical and social systems. Seniors with literacy barriers may not understand medical instructions, information about new treatment, or drug side effects.

Additionally, seniors are underrepresented in literacy programs. Traditionally, literacy funding targets those whose goal is employment. Literacy programs need to be geared to adequately address the goals, values, interests and sensory needs of older adults. Barriers such as lack of transportation and learning materials also need to be addressed. (*Literacy and Seniors*, Fact Sheet Literacy BC.)

- **Increase access in rural and remote communities.**

Literacy Alberta, the Community Learning Network and Volunteer Alberta are partners and pioneers in this area with a new project called the Innovative Communities Connecting and Networking (iCCAN). Over the next 18 months, the project will be working to connect as many of our Volunteer Tutor Adult Literacy Coordinator members as we can (limited by funds, time and interest level of the participants) to the SuperNet. Sponsored by Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, this connectivity will enable higher levels of communication and collaboration between participating organizations across the province. For example, a literacy program will be able to offer courses to learners with instructors who are hundreds of kilometers away. We are excited by the possibilities offered by this new use of technology.

Increasing access to learning also means bringing learning to Albertans in their communities and in the workplace in support of a “work and learn” approach. (*Building Vibrant Learning Communities*).

Again, the FESA initiative mentioned earlier was very successful in incorporating learning in the workplace in a way that made it accessible to workers who otherwise may not have participated.

- **Expand community and workforce literacy programs and alternative delivery approaches to increase hours and locations of literacy programming throughout Alberta.**

This action would naturally dovetail with the actions described above. It would be useful to research what sorts of initiatives have been successful in other jurisdictions. As well, funding would need to follow the implementation of new programs with increased hours and locations. Part of this funding would be used to develop capacity in the field, and to ensure that communities have the resources to recruit, train, and retain the qualified personnel needed to provide the expanded programming.

- **Engage employers and industry to provide workplace literacy and essential skills programming.**

We cannot stress enough the importance of this action on two fronts: for foreign workers and for native Albertans.

The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration recently released figures showing that, as of December 1, 2007, there were 37,257 temporary foreign workers (TFWs) in Alberta. Also in that year, 20,717 immigrants were granted permanent resident status in the province. The use of temporary foreign workers to deal with the labor market challenges facing Alberta creates a situation in which workers are at considerable risk of exploitation by employers anxious to have cheap, unskilled labor. The IALSS 2003 Report also shows that almost 60% of recent and established immigrants fall below Level 3 in prose proficiency.

While the provincial government has several programs to support TFWs, we would like to see a requirement for employers and industry to provide English as an Additional Language, and literacy and essential skills programming not only to their temporary foreign and immigrant workers but to their families as well. In many cases, when workers are recruited from other countries, the employer may provide the minimum skills training to the employee so they can do the job. However, the family is left on their own to assimilate into society.

In addition, literacy and essential skills training on the job needs to be offered to the 35% (753,000) working Albertans that do not have the literacy skills to reach their potential in our increasingly complex, knowledge based society.

Provide financial assistance to employers, workplace associations, unions, and appropriate community and training associations for doing needs assessments, and the design and delivery of programs that are tailored to the literacy requirements of the workforce. (*Literacy – For A Life of Learning!*)

Literacy Alberta has begun to reach out to employers and industry to encourage them to provide workplace literacy and essential skills training. We welcome this opportunity to work with government on further developing these workplace initiatives. We have already laid the foundation for some of this work and would be happy to share our process and methodology. Again, many models exist throughout the country and it would be beneficial to conduct research into other workplace literacy programs.

We suggest enlisting the support of unions to help motivate employers who may not see the cost benefit of workplace essential skills training programs. *Unlocking Canada's Potential: The State of Workplace and Adult Learning in Canada* (Canadian Council of Learning Report, 2007) talks about the need to make employers aware of the link between innovation/change, and training. Many employers think they profit more from training highly educated workers when, in fact, research shows that improvements to skills and literacy of lower skilled employees bring greater improvements to labor productivity, to the firm and to the overall labor market.

As well, we believe that the Government of Alberta should investigate the creation of tax incentives for employers who provide literacy and essential skills training, and for workers/learners who engage in this training.

## **Key Component: Develop a stronger curriculum**

### **▪ Recognize and value non-formal learning**

We applaud the government's recognition that non-formal learning plays an important role in helping individuals increase their literacy skills. Many small communities offer non-formal learning programs that are learner centered, relevant to the needs of disadvantaged groups, clearly focused but with flexibility in their organization and methods. Research shows that success in non-formal learning depends upon the training and motivation of the learners, the quality and relevance of learning materials and reinforcements of literacy. This action should include looking at funding considerations, to ensure that Community Adult Learning Councils and other community literacy programs have adequate funding.

Non-formal learning takes place alongside the mainstream systems of education and training, and does not typically lead to formalized certificates. Non-formal learning may take place in the workplace, civil society organizations and groups (such as youth organizations, trade unions, and political parties). It can also take place within organizations such as arts, music and sports classes. (A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning, European Commission, Unit E-3, <http://www.irlgov.ie/educ/new/LifeLongLearninghtm.htm>)

Informal learning is a natural part of everyday life and includes peer learning, trial and error and all the ways we humans learn without formal teachers.

The continuum of lifelong learning brings non-formal and informal learning more fully into the picture of what counts as learning.

A large part of recognizing the value of non-formal and informal learning lies in creating systems that allow us to measure learner accomplishments. Portfolio assessment and the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) are two ways of helping learners assess their progress both in formal and non-formal learning.

Portfolio assessment essentially involves learners gathering items (work samples) for their portfolio, reflecting on the contents of the portfolio, often in the form of a conference between the learner and the tutor, and organizing the portfolio to show progress in learning goals. They can be arranged around themes or educational goals. Portfolio assessments also teach learners how to self-evaluate and value their own learning. (*Circle of Learning*, Saskatchewan Adult Literacy Benchmarks, 2006.)

PLAR is defined as “the process of identifying, assessing and recognizing skills, knowledge, or competencies that have been acquired through work experience, unrecognized training, independent study, volunteer activities and hobbies. PLA may be applied toward academic credit, toward requirement of a training program, or for occupational certification”. (Human Resource Development, Canada (HRDC). *Prior Learning Assessment Newsletter*, 1(2). Ottawa, Ontario: Human Resource Development Canada, May, 1995:1)

Much research is available that demonstrates the effectiveness of these two assessment methods.

- **Embed literacy development across all K-12, post-secondary, adult and workforce programs.**

Foundational learning refers to the learning opportunities and supports required to attain and maintain the base skills or competencies that enable individuals to participate socially, pursue further learning, and have satisfying employment. (*A Learning Alberta*). Literacy and basic essential skills are the foundational skills needed to continue successful learning throughout the lifespan.

Again, we absolutely agree with the necessity of embedding literacy across all K-12, post secondary, adult, and workforce programs.

Sweden and the United Kingdom have national literacy strategies that cover primary and secondary school levels. England, Ireland and Australia have adult national literacy strategies worth examining. Australia’s strategy includes an Aboriginal component that might be of interest.

Alberta has the resources and the expertise to be a leader in developing this strategy.

- **Develop, evaluate, and share standardized curricula, lesson plans and teaching strategies.**

There are two parts to this action: the K-12 learners and community adult learners. While K- 12 learners and teachers would benefit from standardized curricula, lesson plans and teaching strategies, there needs to be a degree of flexibility and creativity for adult learners.

Although a structured curricula, lesson plans and teaching strategies for adult learners would be helpful to use as templates, literacy practitioners need to have the flexibility and creativity to create lesson plans tailored to learners’ unique needs. Saskatchewan Literacy Benchmark resources include samples of theme-based learning plans and simple portfolio assessment tools, sample logs for tracking learning, English phonics charts and Common Conventions of English

charts, and an annotated bibliography of professional resources. The emphasis is on contextualized learning i.e. the adult's life provides the context for any learning she undertakes and the program actively uses the individual's contexts in setting goals and planning activities to reach those goals.

- **Conduct research on the development and identification of benchmarks for quality programs and services.**

As discussed above, the Saskatchewan Literacy Network has done a great deal of work developing and implementing Adult Literacy Benchmarks for levels 1 and 2 across the province. The Benchmarks were created in response to programs and literacy practitioner requests for a consistent standard of measurement to simplify movement between literacy programs and across levels within them. They are not linked to the Canadian Language Benchmarks traditionally used in Language Instruction for Newcomers programs. This work could easily be adapted for use in Alberta literacy programs.

- **Engage adult education and training providers in the development of standard learning outcomes, assessment and reporting for adult literacy programs which are aligned with essential skills and international adult literacy measures.**

As we discussed earlier, portfolio assessment and PLAR are two effective assessment tools that can be tailored to learning outcomes identified by the learner and adult education provider. Other tools include, but are not limited to:

- The Canadian Adult Reading assessment (CARA) found on-line at [www.literacyservices.com](http://www.literacyservices.com) under shopping
- Common Assessment of Basic Skills (CABS) available at [www.lleo.ca](http://www.lleo.ca) under "assessment tools"

It would be necessary to develop assessment tools that are congruent with the benchmark system Alberta (in partnership with literacy organizations and practitioners) develops and adopts. Again, it would be helpful to do research into the efficacy of current models used nationally and internationally. Literacy Alberta is interested in being part of this research and is well placed to do so because of its connection to other provincial/territorial coalitions and the national literacy organizations.

### **Key Component: Strengthen instructor qualifications**

- **Support pre-service teacher training and professional development on the integration of literacy in all content areas and the teaching of English as a Second Language and Francisation, cultural competency and addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities.**

In order to embed literacy development across all K-12, post secondary, adult and workforce programs, the teachers and trainers themselves must be educated in literacy, English as a Second Language and Francisation. Given our culturally diverse province, it is imperative that educators develop cultural competencies.

In Alberta, it is estimated that there are between 330,000 and 660,000 people with learning disabilities. For success, individuals with learning disabilities require early identification and timely specialized assessments and interventions involving home, school, community, and workplace settings. (Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta website 2008). It is vitally important that teachers are trained to identify learning disabilities early as well as provide the appropriate accommodations, specific skill instruction and compensatory strategies for students.

- **Develop a human resource strategy to address issues affecting the attraction and retention of qualified literacy practitioners and literacy specialist teachers.**

Over the past 15 years, Literacy Alberta has had direct experience with the high rate of attrition and turnover of literacy practitioners. We lose more than 30% of our trained literacy practitioners yearly. This is widely assumed to be due to levels of program funding, inadequate compensation, and lack of employee benefits.

A comprehensive literacy framework needs to create a system in which literacy practitioners are trained professionals receiving proper recognition for the work being done, and adequate financial compensation and benefits.

- **Explore the development of a family literacy and an adult literacy practitioner credential.**

Literacy Alberta is a forerunner in the area of professional development for literacy and learning practitioners. We've entered the final phase of developing a certificate program of study for literacy practitioners. Cycle One of the Pathways program is complete; Cycles Two and Three are in development, with anticipated completion June 2009. Discussions are underway with two post-secondary institutions to "ladder" the Pathways certificate program into proposed and existing certificate and degree programs. When this laddering is accomplished, we will take care to ensure that it does not create barriers to participation, including much higher costs.

- **Support research on the identification of effective practices, and the incorporation of this knowledge into practice.**

Literacy Alberta welcomes the opportunity to consult with government on the development and identification of effective practices. We have working in this area since 1999 and bring broad experience and learning.

Literacy Alberta annually plans and hosts Best Practices seminars for literacy practitioners with funding from Alberta Advanced Education and Technology. This past year the topic was Assessment and Instruction. Understanding adult learning assessment tools as well as their application is critical to providing relevant and appropriate learning opportunities.

In addition, we held two other effective practices seminars for professionals: Impact of Violence on Learning: Lecture and Workshop presented by Dr. Jenny Horsman, and Learning Differently: Learning Disabilities Workshop (this was the second in a two part series offering practitioners strategies to address the challenges that learners who learn differently face.)

We have also worked closely with Dr. Mary Norton, esteemed literacy specialist, over the past several years, supporting her research project *Integrating Research and Practice: A Practitioner Model* completed this year.

### **Key Component: Improve coordination of policy, programs and services**

- **Establish learner pathways that allow learners to transfer between programs.**

As we discussed earlier, Alberta needs to develop a literacy benchmarks system that will create a consistent standard of measurement. This in turn, will simplify movement between literacy programs and across levels within them.

Again, it would be useful to research what other provinces and countries are doing in this area.

- **Align foundational curricula and programs across the range of learning and training providers, early learning, K-12 and adult.**

One of the priority directions in the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework for Alberta's Publicly Funded Advanced Education System* (Alberta Advanced Education and Technology, 2007) is Alignment with Community-Based Adult Learning. Specifically, Comprehensive Community Institutions will have a broader role in working with community-based adult learning partners to meet literacy and foundational learning needs, and ensuring access to the full spectrum of learning opportunities in rural areas.

While we support this ‘alignment’, care must be taken to ensure that autonomy remains at the community level. The Community Adult Learning Program has always been the most connected, flexible, and immediate vehicle for bringing timely learning opportunities to the members of the community.

- **Encourage partnerships between schools, community groups, post secondary institutions, employers, public libraries and others to coordinate programs.**

The *Building Vibrant Learning Communities* document makes two clear recommendations relevant to this action:

- Work collaboratively with community institutions and colleges to ensure foundational learning and high school equivalency programs are available
- Facilitate access to credit programming in partnership with community institutions and colleges.

The *Roles and Mandates* document talks about how this collaboration will work with the designated Comprehensive Community Institutions (CCIs), Community Consortia and Community Adult Learning Centres.

This alignment has begun, with the CCIs talking to the community organizations in some regions and there are further meetings planned.

Literacy Alberta is encouraged by this proposed action. Literacy, in the nature of grassroots movements, has lacked a coordinated approach. It is time to coordinate and align the work of literacy practitioners at all levels and across the spectrum.

- **Co-locate learner support services and facilities in local communities and regions**

This would seem to be an efficient use of resources – both human and financial. Of particular benefit would be a learner support person in each community who assists learners in navigating their way through the learning system.

- **Provide provincial leadership through a cross-ministry mechanism to coordinate literacy policies, programs and services**

We encourage and support a provincial cross-ministerial body including at a minimum: Ministers of Advanced Education and Technology, Employment and Immigration, Education, Health and Wellness, and Justice and Attorney General. This body would coordinate overarching literacy outcomes, and collaborate with and provide resources to provincial literacy initiatives. (*Literacy - For a Life of Learning!*)

## Conclusion

Again, we offer our sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology for this opportunity to respond to the Discussion Draft #2, *A Literacy Framework for Alberta*.

We congratulate government on the development of a Literacy Framework and Action Plan and welcome the opportunity to work with you to achieve its implementation.

In 2006, the Government of Alberta published *Today's Advantage, Tomorrow's Promise: Alberta's Vision for the Future*. That document spoke about the vision of Alberta as a place where **all Albertans can realize their full potential**.

Our guiding vision is that all Albertans have the literacy skills that enable them to reach their full potential and participate in all aspects of our vibrant and prosperous community. (*Literacy-For a Life of Learning!*)

Government, industry, community members, service providers, learners – we are all responsible for working together to ensure that low literacy levels are a thing of the past and that we all enjoy the full benefits of an inclusive, diverse, and prosperous Alberta. Implementing a comprehensive Literacy Framework for Alberta is essential to achieving this vision.

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