



# *Federal Literacy Facts*

*An update on literacy-related developments at the national level*

## **Movement for Canadian Literacy**

April 2006

### ***Transition at the National Literacy Secretariat (NLS)***

The National Literacy Secretariat (NLS) is in transition. In the coming weeks, the agency that has provided federal leadership and sparked community innovation for more than two decades will emerge under a new banner. The secretariat is merging with two other programs, the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT) and the Learning Initiatives Program (LIP), to form one larger program. Although the official name of the new program has not been announced, documents released last year referred to it as the “Adult Learning, Literacy, and Essential Skills Program”.

The merger is not news – the department has been open about the transition and has in fact solicited community input and direction. It was mandated by the federal Treasury Board more than a year ago and has been in the works for some time. The rationale for the reorganization was that although the three programs emphasized different activities in the broad areas of adult learning and literacy, they in fact carried out very similar functions. Merging the programs and streamlining accountability and reporting are expected to result in greater coherence and efficiency.

Now, as we wait for the new program to launch, the question on the top of everyone’s mind is how the agency’s connection to the literacy community, provincial and territorial governments, and other literacy stakeholders across the country will be affected. For now, the community perspective on this question appears to be mixed. Some view the merger as a potential expansion of the NLS’ mandate and capacity. Others worry that the accumulated expertise, policy development and partnerships developed over decades could be lost in the shuffle. As things progress, MCL will share whatever we learn, so stay tuned!

### ***The new government agenda: Finding room for literacy***

The Throne Speech emphasized the government’s focus on five priorities identified during the recent election campaign. These priorities are improving accountability; cutting the GST; tackling crime; moving forward on a new childcare tax benefit; and shorter wait times for medical services. Other areas addressed in the speech included democratic reform, securing Canada’s place in the world, addressing the fiscal imbalance, and promised parliamentary reviews of some key legislation.

There was no mention of literacy, skills, or even education in the speech. However, it is possible to read between the lines and find space for literacy in the government’s agenda. Connections can be made between literacy and policies that support families, give kids the best start in life, reduce crime, and improve health. In addition, the speech contained this reference to economic prosperity and improved opportunity:

*“The government will promote a more competitive, more productive Canadian economy. It will seek to improve opportunity for all Canadians, including Aboriginal peoples and new immigrants.”*

Advancing literacy is directly linked to economic competitiveness and productivity, and is key to creating opportunity. Also, literacy advances are tied to success in many federal policy areas, for example, improving prospects for Aboriginal peoples and new Canadians. The community has long recognized these connections, and has developed programs and practices that are generating real economic and social progress. Because of its potential impact on key areas of federal jurisdiction, we trust that there will still be room for literacy in the national agenda.

### **How is the transition at the NLS affecting the literacy community?**

Transition takes time – especially when combined with broader political change. As the community waits to see what shape the new program will take, delays are having some important consequences. For example, the NLS normally releases a “call for proposals” early in the new year, in time for new funding to be approved or at least in process by April 1, the beginning of the new fiscal year. As of April 18, the new program has not yet been launched, and the 2006-07 “call for proposals” has not been issued.

MCL has heard from some of its members that as a result of the delays, some important literacy initiatives across the country are on hold and possibly at risk. Also, there is a possibility that new eligibility criteria could disqualify projects that would have been funded in the past. People who care about literacy are getting an idea of what life without federal leadership, stability, and resources might be like. Across the country, it would leave many literacy organizations stranded, and in the end would be a major setback to the literacy progress that gives hope to individuals and strengthens communities. That’s why there is widespread hope that this new federal literacy program will emerge soon.

There is also hope that the new program will build upon the vision, values and operational mandate of the former NLS. Those values merited the praise of many Canadians – from Members of Parliament to members of the public. For example, in 2003 an all-party parliamentary committee praised the work of the NLS and recommended that its role be enhanced and its funding increased. Many people echoed this point during recent public consultations. We know that decision-makers are aware of this feedback and we trust that they will take it into account as final decisions about the new program are made.

### **Federal Accountability Act: Changing the way government works**

On April 11, the federal government introduced the federal *Accountability Act and Action Plan*. The Act is comprehensive and far reaching – touching on everything from political donations to government appointments. This ambitious agenda will have far reaching implications for the way government works. As a result, it could have an impact on community sector organizations that work with the government or receive support and funding from federal departments and programs. Here are some components of the Act that may interest the community sector:

- A blue-ribbon panel will identify barriers to accessing government grants and contributions. It will recommend changes to policies and practices to ensure a fair, economical and efficient delivery of grants and contributions.
- The government will put an end to policies and regulations that “reduce the effectiveness of public-service employees”, rather than promote accountability and good management. Also, financial management policies will be reviewed and streamlined
- Deputy Ministers will become “accounting officers” and will now be accountable before parliament for the management of their departments.
- The Auditor General will now have authority to “follow the money”. This means that the AG can inquire about how government funds are used by individuals or institutions that enter into funding agreements with federal departments.
- Departments must review the relevance and effectiveness of grants and contributions programs at least once every 5 years.

For more information about the Accountability Act, including fact sheets and other background material, look to the government website: [http://www.faa-lfi.gc.ca/index\\_e.asp](http://www.faa-lfi.gc.ca/index_e.asp) .