

Movement for Canadian Literacy: Statistics show millions struggle with literacy

November 9, 2005: This backgrounder was prepared by the Movement for Canadian Literacy (MCL). It highlights some of the key findings from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey, provides notes on the community's response, and additional background. You can access Statistics Canada reports at www.statisticscanada.ca. MCL is a national non-profit organization representing literacy coalitions, organizations, and individuals from every province and territory: www.literacy.ca.

Overview

The International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS), released on November 9, takes a closer look at Canadians' ability to deal with everyday literacy demands.¹ In today's information-based society and economy, literacy is more important than ever. IALSS defines literacy as one's capacity to "use printed and written information to function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential". Among the major findings from IALSS are the following:

- Millions of Canadians struggle with serious literacy challenges. Four in ten working age adults, about 9 million people, scored below the literacy level experts say is necessary to cope with increasing demands in today's society.
- Low literacy is a serious challenge in every jurisdiction across Canada. Even in the highest performing provinces or territories, 3 out of 10 Canadians (16 yrs and over) struggle with very serious literacy challenges. They have difficulty with even the most basic written materials.
- The percentage of working-age Canadians who struggle with literacy has not decreased in a significant way since a similar study was conducted 10 years ago.
- IALSS confirms that aboriginal populations, linguistic minorities, and immigrants are target populations that face very serious literacy challenges.

IALSS is another serious wake-up call for Canadian decision-makers. Literacy barriers are sidelining too many Canadians and this inequality and loss of potential has serious consequences for them, their families and for communities in every province and territory.

¹ Canadians were tested and their literacy skills were gauged on a skills spectrum ranging from 1 (least skilled) to 5 (highly skilled). Grading skill levels on a continuum accepts that we no longer speak of literacy as an either/or skill set but rather as a relative measure. On this scale, level 3 is the minimum skill level considered necessary to meet the challenges of today's world.

Movement for Canadian Literacy's Response to IALSS

IALSS is another serious wake up call for Canadian decision-makers. This study confirms what the literacy community knows to be true – in every jurisdiction in Canada, too many Canadians struggle with serious literacy challenges and this is undermining our potential to succeed and thrive in today's information-based society and economy.

Millions of Canadians struggle with low literacy – we need to tap into this potential. Across Canada, 9 million working-age adults don't have the skills they need to thrive in today's world – that's more than the entire population of Quebec. Of these, 3 million Canadians, 15%, score at the very lowest literacy level.

Inaction is not working. After ten years we've seen no real progress. The only bright spot has been a decrease in the proportion of people with the most serious literacy challenges (from 16.6% to 14.4%). Those gains are a testament to the dedication of the front lines. More meaningful change demands more meaningful investments and concrete action.

Today, only a small percentage of less literate Canadians are getting the supports and training they need. Part of the problem is that for too long, the literacy community has been left to address the challenge alone, with insufficient, short-term funding and too few resources; and without the benefit of a coordinated national vision and strategy.

There's a lot at stake! A CD Howe report released just last month shows that a 1% increase in literacy skills would boost productivity by 2.5% and lead to a 1.5% permanent increase in GDP – that's \$18 billion a year. Literacy is the fuel that drives our information economy and society – IALSS shows us that it's time to tank up!

Addressing literacy must be part of the solution to other pressing issues of equity and opportunity. Immigrants, Aboriginal peoples, youth, linguistic minority communities – all of these were targeted by IALSS as populations that face particularly serious challenges.

We need a pan-Canadian literacy strategy that is national in scope, vision and standards, but flexible enough for provinces, territories and communities to identify their own needs and solutions.

The federal government is moving ahead on a literacy action plan. The last federal budget committed the government to action on literacy. As a result, Minister of State Claudette Bradshaw has been working with the community and government officials to move forward on a 10-year- action plan. Right now, Canada is one of the few industrialized countries without a national plan. We want this promise to lead to a comprehensive strategy.

Action on literacy must not be derailed by political change! With an election looming, our community is worried that our hard won gains will be lost. Productivity, economic success, social progress, healthy families – literacy advances are key to all of these and, as such, must not be sidelined because of shifting political tides.

Key Findings from the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey

- Four in ten working-age Canadians do not have the literacy skills they need to meet the ever-increasing demands of modern life.
- Among working age Canadians, 3 million (14.6%) struggle with very serious literacy challenges. They have difficulty with even the most basic written materials. Another 5.8 million (27%) can work with print information but not well. Their literacy challenges limit their potential for success in today's information based economy and society.
- Literacy is a serious challenge in every province and territory in Canada. For example, even in the highest performing jurisdictions, at least 3 out of 10 adults perform at the lowest literacy level.
- More than half of Canadians (55%) do not have the minimum numeracy skills necessary to meet the information demands of today's world.
- There has been little change in literacy proficiency between 1994 and 2003. The proportion of working age adults who scored below level 3 is the same. (However, of this group, the proportion of people with the most serious challenges has decreased from 16.6% to 14.6%.)
- The situation is critical in the Aboriginal populations studied.² Over half of the Aboriginal peoples living in the Yukon, 69% living in the Northwest Territories, and 88% living in Nunavut score below level 3 on literacy tests.³
- Immigrants don't score as well as the Canadian-born population. Overall about 60% of immigrants were below Level 3 in prose literacy. This compares to 37% of the Canadian-born population. Language appears to be a key indicator of performance. Immigrants whose mother tongue was English or French had a significantly higher average score.
- Linguistic minority populations face significant literacy challenges. In the provinces where both official languages are commonly spoken (New Brunswick, Quebec, Ontario and Manitoba), the proportion of Francophones who scored below level 3 in prose literacy is higher than the proportion of Anglophones.
- On average, Canadians score at the low end of level 3 on literacy tests – the level most experts say is necessary to function well in the knowledge based economy and society.

² The IALSS data is not representative of Aboriginal populations in Canada – it is representative of Aboriginal people living in urban areas in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and Aboriginal peoples living in selected communities in the territories.

³ It should be noted that the Inuit population in Nunavut performed at a significantly lower level of literacy proficiency than other Aboriginal Populations surveyed. However, a large majority of Inuit in Nunavut do not function in either English or French on a daily basis, the two languages used for IALSS testing.

What's Next?

This data will lead to much greater and deeper analysis of Canada's literacy challenges. Today, Stats Canada has only released a daily, summarizing highlights from a larger report expected on November 30th. This in-depth report will provide more analysis of the Canadian statistics and will include more provincial/territorial-specific analyses. In the coming months we also expect interactive data tools that will break literacy statistics down even further. For months and even years to come, analysts will be utilizing this data to provide further insight into the far-reaching extent and impacts of our literacy challenges.

These releases have enormous potential to educate and influence public policies around literacy in Canada. As a national literacy organization with the structure and mandate to represent the English literacy community across Canada, Movement for Canadian Literacy will work with the community to develop a thoughtful response and to identify opportunities to apply lessons learned in the hope of creating a more literate Canada.