

**Literacy: Key to Learning and  
Path to Prosperity –  
*An Action Plan for Atlantic Canada  
2009-2014***



***Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training***

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## 1. FOREWORD

*Literacy: Key to Learning and Path to Prosperity – An Action Plan for Atlantic Canada 2009-2014* outlines the regional initiatives that the Atlantic ministers of education and training will undertake over the next five years to promote literacy within Atlantic Canada. These initiatives will support early childhood literacy, public education, and adult and workplace literacy.

This action plan is the response to the January 2008 *Resolution Concerning Literacy* adopted at the Meeting of Atlantic Cabinets, directing the Council of Atlantic Ministers of Education and Training (CAMET) to develop an action plan to improve literacy rates in Atlantic Canada.

*Literacy: Key to Learning and Path to Prosperity – An Action Plan for Atlantic Canada 2009-2014* supports measures undertaken by provincial governments, community groups, the private sector, labour groups and the public, to promote and improve literacy skills within each province. Ministers of education and training value the collaboration and are committed to maintain these important relationships with these partners.

The literacy action plan complements the *CAMET 2009-2012 Strategic Direction* launched by the ministers of education and training on December 15, 2008. This document provides a framework for joint undertakings whereby the departments of education and training of the Atlantic provinces will address unique needs through the combination of financial and human resources.

This literacy action plan also complements steps undertaken by the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) to promote literacy throughout the country. CAMET sponsored a literacy symposium in April 2008, which provided a forum to dialogue with different stakeholders and served as the catalyst to prepare this Atlantic action plan.

## 2. BACKGROUND

Weak literacy skills can have a profound impact on people's lives. Individuals' accounts of the challenges they face are plentiful: parents unable to read to their children; adults struggling to read and understand instructions on prescription labels; workers finding it difficult to adapt to change because they have difficulty reading instruction manuals or health and safety instructions; job seekers moving from one short-term position to another because they are unable to fulfill the basic reading and writing demands of the jobs available; families unable to access benefits because they don't understand the information they're given. Too many people face these challenges on a day-to-day basis.

Studies have clearly linked literacy levels and individual, societal and economic prosperity. Raising literacy levels is therefore imperative to ensure the future prospects of the Atlantic region and its citizens. In doing so, the region must strive for excellence in its preparation of young children for learning, its education of school-age children, and in providing relevant, diverse learning opportunities for adults.

Literacy is not a static skill set, and societal changes continue to impact the level of literacy skills required by individuals. Literacy skills are developed throughout a lifetime, a continuum of learning that we all participate in, from early childhood, through public education to adulthood. Development of these skills should be seen as a natural function of lifelong learning. It is within this context that this literacy action plan for the Atlantic region has been developed.

Atlantic provincial governments recognize that the development of literacy skills is, ideally, a process which starts at an early age. *The Early Years Study in Ontario* (McCain and Mustard, 1999) and

subsequent follow-ups to these studies (McCain and Mustard, 2002; McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007) suggest that appropriate stimulation is required from a child's earliest days in order to develop the neurological connections needed to prepare the child for later cognitive development. It is argued that many children lack this stimulation, for various reasons, and that children entering school with deficits in early cognitive development are likely to find it difficult to catch up to their better prepared peers.

The proportion of students in our public education system meeting "acceptable" or higher standards on curriculum-based provincial assessments varies, but tends to be in the 70% to 80% range. While elevated, this leaves up to 30% of students, at various grade levels, performing at less than acceptable levels. In almost all pan-Canadian and international assessments, students in the Atlantic region have shown a small but persistent gap in achievement relative to the Canadian average and to the top performing provinces.

The *International Adult Literacy Skills Survey* (IALSS) is a test based on functional literacy and numeracy which measures the ability to apply different skill sets to everyday tasks or activities. When levels 1 (persons with very poor skills) and 2 (people can only deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out, and in which the tasks involved are not too complex) are discussed as being below functional literacy/numeracy levels, the implication is not that individuals at those levels are illiterate. However, if we consider the IALSS definition of literacy as "*the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community, to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential,*" the impact of being below functionally literate is still very significant.

The 2003 IALSS data showed that between 44.8% and 56% of the adult population of the different Atlantic provinces has levels 1 and 2 skills in prose literacy, and between 47.2% and 58.3% in document use. The numbers are even higher for numeracy skills. This means that more than half of adults living in the Atlantic region have below level 3 literacy and/or numeracy skills (minimum skills level suitable for coping with the demands of everyday life and work in a complex, advanced society) and would have difficulty meeting the challenges of everyday life and work. Some of the Atlantic provinces had literacy scores that were below the national average.

To compound this situation, demographic shifts, most significantly the loss of younger people to other provinces and the aging population, suggest that Atlantic Canada is not going to be able to meet labour market demands in the coming years, and the region must look to the current population to meet these needs.

Additional profiling provided in *Reading the Future*, a 2008 report from the Canadian Council on Learning, highlighted that a large proportion of those with levels 1 and 2 skills in Atlantic Canada are employed. The shift to a knowledge-based economy and changing technology has placed greater demands on everyone in the workplace. This indicates that the focus cannot solely be on helping the unemployed become more employable but also needs to be on developing the skills of those already in the workplace. Research has demonstrated that poor literacy/numeracy skills can impact productivity and innovation and these are key elements to national and regional competitiveness.

The benefits to the individual of improving literacy skills in terms of employability, wage rates, income, and healthy lifestyle, have been well reported. *Literacy Matters: A Call to Action*, a 2007 pan-Canadian report published by TD Bank, argues the strong relationship between literacy and personal income is a result of better employment opportunities. The average income level of individuals with strong (level 3) literacy skills in 2003 was \$42,239, more than double the \$20,692 of those with poor (level 1) literacy skills.

Within the workplace, surveys of companies have consistently reported benefits of improving literacy skills of employees: increased ability to undertake training; better team performance; improved labour relations; improved quality of work; increased output; fewer errors; better health and safety records; and better employee retention. When viewed at the macro level, these represent greater productivity and flexibility – essential ingredients to economic success.

A Statistics Canada study found that a 1% increase in literacy relative to other countries produces a 2.5% increase in the level of labour productivity and a 1.5% increase in output per capita compared to other nations. In 2007, this represented a potential boost in national income of \$32 billion. The IALSS report suggests that raising the literacy levels of those at level 2 to level 3 nationally would be equivalent to an increase of close to 2.5% in national literacy. Applying the same economic model, this would equate to an economic payoff of close to \$80 billion.

More recent analysis by Murray and Maccracken (2008) estimates the cost of raising the literacy levels of all adults at levels 1 and 2 to level 3 nationally (based on 2003 IALSS data), to be \$6.4 billion. Assuming that the economy can absorb all the new skills, the estimated increase in tax revenues and reductions in social assistance and E.I. would be \$16.1 billion, an estimated rate of return of 251%.

### 3. EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

Atlantic provincial governments recognize the importance of working together to promote literacy and related interventions at an early age. Numerous research studies on early brain development have revealed that appropriate stimulation is required from a child’s earliest days to accelerate development of neurological connections needed to prepare the child for later cognitive development.

Departments responsible for early childhood have agreed to participate in a review of current assessment tools, including consideration of programs to evaluate children’s development at a younger age. Ministers of education recognize the importance of this work in the context of school readiness.

Building on the success of existing provincial programs and policies in early childhood development, a joint Atlantic table will be struck to recommend regional opportunities for early childhood development, beginning with early literacy.

<p><b>Early Childhood Development</b></p>	<p><b>Goals:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ review and consider current assessment tools for provincial/regional implementation.</li> <li>✓ prepare recommendations/identify actions to promote early childhood literacy.</li> </ul>
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#### 4. PUBLIC EDUCATION

The capacity to achieve strong literacy progress for all students, regardless of their backgrounds, is a key indicator of public education success. Often referred to as “raising the bar and narrowing the gap,” the efficacy of a school system depends on its ability to both raise the overall literacy achievement levels of its population and to narrow the gap between low and high performing students.

The challenge in Atlantic Canada is to ensure an equitable future for students from Atlantic Canada with their Canadian counterparts, and to diminish the gap between higher and lower-performing Atlantic Canadian students. This will require a coherent and systematic approach, including investment in early childhood development and in formal education systems at all levels.

This section of the action plan focuses on regional activities to support current and planned provincial initiatives to improve literacy outcomes for all public education students. These initiatives are presented under four major themes: **literacy teaching, literacy learning, literacy leadership** and **literacy in the curriculum**. These themes will include the following essential elements of any effort to make significant long-term changes for improving literacy and in effecting systemic change:

- a culture of professional learning and shared leadership;
- a cohesive set of values, beliefs and understandings about language and literacy learning;
- expertise in data driven decision making;
- high quality materials and resources;
- expertise in instructional practice;
- articulated roles and coordination of all staff personnel.

<p><b>LITERACY TEACHING</b></p>	<p><b>Goal:</b> increase professional knowledge and skills in teaching literacy.</p> <p>It is the quality of teaching that makes the biggest difference to students' literacy outcomes across the phases of learning. Teachers draw on a range of teaching practices to meet the literacy learning needs of individual students and diverse student communities.</p> <p>Pre-service training is a key ingredient for teachers to acquire the necessary foundation and skills for teaching students to read and write. Departments of education recommend post-secondary education institutions offering teacher training programs place emphasis on the development and acquisition of literacy skills and child development in a cross-curricular setting.</p> <p>Professional development for teachers of aboriginal students is also of significant importance for ministers of education and training as a means to ensure the smooth transition from band schools to public schools or post-secondary institutions. Recruitment and appropriate training of aboriginal teachers is also important from a cultural and learning environment perspective.</p>
<p><b>Regional Actions:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Initiate a dialogue with post-secondary education institutions offering teacher training programs throughout the Atlantic region on how to integrate literacy skills teaching as a key component of teacher training programs, which could include literacy teaching, inclusive education, and at-risk students, etc.</li> <li>✓ Establish a network allowing teachers from the Atlantic region to share best practices relating to literacy teaching (English and French).</li> <li>✓ Develop common standards at schools and universities for teaching reading and writing (English and French).</li> <li>✓ Conduct a literature review of comprehensive literacy improvement projects that take into account students in need of support and youth at risk (French and English) (e.g., Hill &amp; Crevola, Project Literacy, Literacy Collaborative), being mindful of standards for students' outcomes.</li> <li>✓ Conduct an inventory of printed and non-printed resources available in French and English that describe teaching strategies for engaging students, especially those with learning difficulties and at-risk youth.</li> <li>✓ Develop strategies to increase access to literacy courses and professional development opportunities by partnering with other departments, universities and teacher professional organizations (English and French).</li> <li>✓ Develop or adapt professional development modules that address differentiated instruction strategies (English and French).</li> </ul>

<p><b>LITERACY LEARNING</b></p>	<p><b>Goal:</b> assess, track and improve literacy learning outcomes for all students in the context of diverse backgrounds and abilities.</p> <p>There is increasing diversity in the student population and students bring rich and diverse experiences, languages, and literacy skills to the classroom. This diversity (for example, gender, ethnicity, location and disability) creates one of the most significant challenges for literacy teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.</p>
<p><b>Regional Actions:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Renew primary assessment kits and develop one for grade 7.</li> <li>✓ Renew <i>Trousse d'appréciation de rendement en lecture</i>.</li> <li>✓ Continue to explore the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) for languages. Develop awareness and support for an Atlantic language portfolio product.</li> <li>✓ Develop a foundation document for the CEFR and language portfolio and include student assessment in each document.</li> <li>✓ Research, develop or adapt intervention resources for use with at-risk youth (English and French).</li> </ul>

<p><b>LITERACY LEADERSHIP</b></p>	<p><b>Goal:</b> enhance curriculum leadership.</p> <p>Curriculum leadership is pivotal in encouraging school communities and teachers to engage in professional development relating to literacy in the curriculum. While it is acknowledged that teachers with literacy expertise play a key role, it is imperative that literacy leadership in schools be provided by administrators. It is also acknowledged that administrators require support from other curriculum leaders to exercise this leadership.</p> <p>School board or district directors and supervisors, staff of departments and other educational leaders also have a role in providing this support. There is a need to raise curriculum leaders’ understanding of the relationships between literacy, curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment. This will enhance their capacity to manage their own and teachers’ professional development.</p> <p>There is a need for curriculum leaders to develop systems and cultures that focus on teacher professional development across the entire school community. This can be achieved by building positive cultures and articulating high aspirations and expectations in schools for all students to succeed, and by supporting professional development of their teachers.</p>
<p><b>Regional Actions:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Conduct an environmental scan of academic standards and educational programs that are presently used in the field to establish leadership standards (English and French).</li> <li>✓ Develop a framework document that will promote leadership standards (English and French).</li> <li>✓ Establish a regional literacy leaders’ institute. The first event will be intended for teachers working in the middle years (school teams, language arts’ teachers and content teachers) and will focus on literacy improvements and literacy network development. One institute for both linguistic sectors is being planned.</li> <li>✓ Develop a mentorship program to provide real-life/real-time coaching that will provide current and aspiring leaders with the theoretical basis and effective application of knowledge, skills and attitudes to support school improvements and student achievement (English and French).</li> <li>✓ In partnership with, but not limited to, universities and school districts, develop a leadership program that emphasizes student learning, curriculum, instruction and assessment, using current best practices for delivery.</li> <li>✓ Research best practices in leadership assessment and develop a model for use in Atlantic Canada (English and French).</li> </ul>

<b>LITERACY IN THE CURRICULUM</b>	<p><b>Goal: improve literacy capabilities for learning in all areas of the curriculum.</b></p> <p>If all students are to learn effectively, they must be literate in different areas of the curriculum across the various phases of learning. There is a need for school and regional leaders to ensure that all teachers integrate literacy teaching as part of their repertoires of essential skills. There is also a need for all teachers to take responsibility for the literacy learning of all their students and to develop standards for literacy in the curriculum that set clear expectations of literacy learning in each phase of learning.</p>
<b>Regional Actions:</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Renew teaching and learning strategies, and assessment strategies of the grades 7 to 9 English language arts curriculum.</li> <li>✓ Finalize the new grade 12 French language arts program; and develop the grades 11 and 12 <i>séquences didactiques</i>.</li> <li>✓ Develop Achievement Standards for Reading and Writing for francophone students from Entry to grade 9.</li> </ul>

## 5. ADULT AND WORKPLACE LITERACY

The demands today on individuals in the workplace are different from those of previous years. The skills required to prosper in a knowledge-based economy and to cope with the ever-changing demands of a technology driven society, are complex and multi-dimensional. Literacy and essential skills provide the platform for all forms of further learning.

Atlantic Canada faces a significant threat to future economic prosperity as a result of looming labour force shortages. Demographic shifts drive the need for specific, targeted action to encourage and help all Atlantic Canadian adults, including the immigrant population, to improve their literacy and essential skills. These shifts include the loss of younger educated adults to other regions, an aging population, the fast pace of change in technology, and changing skills requirements due to labour market shifts.

Actions relating to adult and workplace literacy are presented under four major themes: **Increasing Awareness; Learner Recruitment and Retention; Adult Literacy Practitioner Development;** and **Quality Standards and Guidelines**. The first two are seen as immediate priorities and the final two as longer term priorities. This action plan focuses on regional activities to support current and planned provincial initiatives and will serve as a framework for considering and acting on the issues that directly affect the region's ability to improve adult literacy levels.

<p><b>INCREASING AWARENESS</b></p>	<p><b>Goal: raise awareness of the socio-economic benefits of improving literacy and essential skills and to encourage employers and industry groups to value literacy and essential skills programs.</b></p> <p>There is a need for literacy and essential skills development to be positioned and accepted as a continuum within a lifelong learning culture, to de-stigmatize literacy skills development and eliminate the barrier of how participants might be perceived by others.</p> <p>Employer contribution and ownership is critical to the success and sustainability of workplace literacy and essential skills initiatives. It is therefore important to encourage employers to become engaged in these initiatives, and to see workplace literacy and essential skills development as an integral part of their recruitment and retention strategy.</p> <p>There is also a need to raise awareness about what support is available to those who wish to improve their skills. The general public still seems to be largely unaware of even well-established programs. Working with community groups, agencies and support groups that encounter adults with low literacy levels is one important element of a larger social awareness campaign.</p>
<p><b>Regional Actions:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Develop a carefully targeted, coordinated awareness campaign(s) which de-stigmatizes adult literacy and frames the personal and professional benefits of literacy and essential skills development within a lifelong learning culture, while promoting the socio-economic benefits of improved adult literacy and essential skills.</li> <li>✓ Develop a regional model of Literacy Champions, outlining methods of recruiting, engaging and supporting senior representatives of business and industry to not only champion workplace literacy within their own organizations, but also to use their existing business/industry networks to promote the benefits of workplace literacy within the wider business community.</li> </ul>

<p><b>LEARNER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION</b></p>	<p><b>Goal:</b> eliminate barriers to learning opportunities and assure relevance and value to the learner.</p> <p>ABC Canada research has shown that only 5-10% of adults with low literacy skills participate in literacy programs. This may be partly due to the issues of stigma and lack of awareness detailed previously but may be due to many other factors as well. Learners and potential learners identify many barriers to learning, such as family commitments, e.g., childcare and elder care; transportation and transportation costs; loss of income/benefits; and lack of available time. Although it is not always possible to eliminate all barriers to learning, it is important to identify ways of minimizing those barriers to make adult literacy and essential skills learning opportunities as accessible as possible to as many Atlantic Canadians as possible.</p> <p>There is a need to increase access points for potential learners by engaging community-based agencies, institutions and groups to play a more active role in this area. Adult learners should be able to access learning opportunities wherever they are needed – at home, local schools, local libraries, and workplaces, for example.</p> <p>Diversity of programming, flexibility in delivery methods, and relevant and contextualized resources are all important to encouraging adults to take advantage of opportunities to develop their skills. Programs need to allow for different learning contexts, learning styles, learner availability and accessibility, etc.</p>
<p><b>Regional Actions:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Investigate and implement measures of success that better reflect learner goals</li> <li>✓ Create definitions of success that are relevant and meaningful to learners and used to shape recruitment and retention measures.</li> <li>✓ Develop a culture of valuing qualitative measures in addition to quantitative measures for adult literacy and essential skills development.</li> <li>✓ Develop regional models that include literacy skills in recruitment and retention efforts.</li> <li>✓ Working with community-based agencies, institutions and groups to increase access points for learners, such as in-home, local schools, libraries, workplaces, will be a priority.</li> <li>✓ Recommend steps to address family and financial barriers.</li> <li>✓ Models will address concerns regarding the appeal, diversity, and flexibility of programs, and supportive learning environments.</li> <li>✓ Investigate a regional learner mentoring program, targeting disadvantaged and/or hard-to-reach learners.</li> </ul>

<p><b>Regional Actions (continued):</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Implement an incentives framework for employers/industry groups to support their employees' efforts to develop their literacy and essential skills, which will consider a range of incentives such as employer engagement/recognition programs such as the Welsh "Employer Pledge" program, Nova Scotia's Employer of Choice program.</li> <li>✓ Develop a regional framework of recognition and/or accreditation for workplace learning.</li> <li>✓ Investigate the use of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition for existing workplace skills as an integral part of the recognition/accreditation model.</li> <li>✓ Meaningful learning pathways for workplace literacy and essential skills development will be identified and communicated.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>ADULT LITERACY PRACTITIONER DEVELOPMENT</b></p>	<p><b>Goal: increase professional standards, knowledge and skills in teaching/facilitating adult literacy and essential skills.</b></p> <p>The quality of teaching/facilitation makes a significant difference to learners' literacy outcomes across all phases of learning. Working with adults is different than working with children (andragogy versus pedagogy), requiring different knowledge and skill sets in some areas.</p> <p>It is important that the existing knowledge and skills of adult learners is respected, valued and built upon, and equally important that the content of the learning program is challenging and relevant to the learners' expectations. Adult literacy professionals need to be able to monitor progress with the learner and adapt their learning programs accordingly.</p> <p>There is a need for adult literacy and essential skills teachers/facilitators to develop balanced approaches to teaching/learning which take into account individual learning styles, the context of individual learning, and learning goals. This implies a broad understanding of different teaching strategies, the ability to practice in environments other than the classroom, and to work with alternative forms of skills recognition such as prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) and competence-based accreditation.</p> <p>Adult literacy teaching has not historically been recognized as a professional field in the same way as teaching in schools, for many reasons. If we are to assure learners' rights to equal access to high-quality learning opportunities, the professional development of those involved in the teaching/facilitating of adult literacy and essential skills must be taken seriously. A regional approach to professional development would facilitate opportunities for professionals to network and share best practices.</p>
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<p><b>QUALITY STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES</b></p>	<p><b><u>Goal:</u> improve the quality and effectiveness of adult literacy and essential skills delivery.</b></p> <p>Experience in other countries and other provinces speaks to the challenge of ensuring that adult literacy provision is effective and of a high standard. Quality standards and measures to assure these standards, as they relate to organization, content, delivery and support systems, are key to ensuring equality of access for the learner and to maximizing the return on investment in this area.</p> <p>There is also a need for the development of a common framework for measuring the effectiveness of adult literacy and essential skills programs. Monitoring and review of programs is currently inconsistent and measures of success vary. If we wish to track our progress as a region, a shared model is required.</p> <p>There are many adult literacy and essential skills programs being delivered in different domains and diversity is important to maximize access. It is a challenge, however, to ensure the consistency, quality and effectiveness of diverse programs and it is therefore important to review, validate and share proven, high-quality program models across the Atlantic region.</p>
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## 6. CONCLUSION

The Atlantic ministers of education and training are committed to implementing the initiatives outlined in *Literacy: Key to Learning and Path to Prosperity – An Action Plan for Atlantic Canada 2009-2014* as a path to lifelong learning, beginning with early childhood literacy, and continuing with the public school education system, and adult and workplace literacy.

The Atlantic action plan forms an integral part of the CAMET priorities for the next five years and will help each Atlantic province to meet goals, not only set forth in this document, but also in existing and planned literacy initiatives in each province. This document will also provide added value to programs and initiatives undertaken by education partners, community groups, the private sector, labour groups, and the public.