

## National Adult Literacy Policy

### Issue

To help boost productivity and labour force participation, Canada needs to allocate appropriate efforts and resources in the Literacy programs that help individuals meet current and future job demands. Grade 12 is the minimum required in over 75% of the jobs currently advertised on the Job Bank; however, at least 42% of Canada's population functions below grade 10 levels.

Although the Government of Canada is aware of the current problems facing adult literacy, it has no formal policy on which to build strategy to improve it. This is reducing the competitiveness and employment readiness of the workforce in Canada.

### Background

The economy requires a highly skilled (Grade 10 level basic skills) work force to remain competitive. A 1% increase in literacy compared to the international average is associated with a 2.5% increase in productivity and 1% increase in GDP. Also, over 25% of Canadian workers lack at least one of the four essential skills necessary to do their job. The strong association between adult literacy levels and economic success means Canada must have a plan in place to ensure adult literacy levels improve to impact economic indicators.

Both governments measure literacy rates based on their definition of literacy paraphrased as: the basic skills including prose and document comprehension, arithmetic (numeracy) and problem solving. It is this definition that Statistics Canada used for The International Adult Life Skills and Literacy Survey in 2003. The survey looked at those four basic skills in over 20,000 Canadians aged 16 or older at a 66% response rate and assessed them from Level 1 (Grade 1) to 5 (Grade 12). The results of the survey are as follows:

42% are below Level 3 (Grade 10) in prose

43% are below Level 3 (Grade 10) in document

50% are below Level 3 (Grade 10) in numeracy

69% are below Level 3 (Grade 10) in problem solving

The results of this survey are unacceptable given that Level 3 (Gr. 10) literacy is considered the initial threshold level to get and maintain employment and is also the threshold necessary to prevent many social problems. Level 1 or 2 literacy adults are more than 2.5 times as likely to be unemployed (for greater than six months in the last twelve months) than Level 3, 4 or 5 adults and more than twice as likely to be on social assistance. Level 1 or 2 adults are also less than ½ as likely to save (adjusted for income and education). A policy will create an environment that ensures adult literacy levels improve and reduce social services costs.

With the recent funding cuts to literacy by the Federal Government, and without a current literacy policy, the future of a Canada wide response to literacy issues is weak at best.

In Budget 2007, the federal government stated that the Minister of Human Resources and Social Development will work with his provincial and territorial counterparts over the coming year to determine how governments can best make use of the new investments to introduce "new programming that will, among other things, provide opportunities for literacy and basic skills upgrading, job readiness assistance, wage subsidies, on-the-job training and workplace-based skills upgrading. This will help Canadians develop the skills they need and employers

want". The Canadian Chamber fully supports these initiatives and makes the following recommendations.

### **Recommendation**

That the federal government work with the provinces/territories to create and align a national adult literacy policy that:

- Recognizes literacy as the foundational essential skill for employment, a key component of lifelong learning and a priority in Canada.
- Creates a holistic approach to improving adult literacy recognizing it is easier for children to achieve success in literacy when their parents are literate.
- Builds awareness of the basic skills deficit.
- Builds synergy amongst the ministries/government departments in order to build a strategy that addresses literacy skills, e.g. Ministry of Justice, Finance and Economic Development, Works and Housing, etc.
- Is imbedded in the Adult Education Framework.

**SUBMITTED BY THE HAMILTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE**

**THE ECONOMIC POLICY COMMITTEE SUPPORTS THIS RESOLUTION.**