

Hamilton Chamber of Commerce Literacy

Issue:

To maintain a productive workforce, Ontario 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 level.

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

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 Ontario must have a plan in place to ensure adult literacy levels improve to impact economic indicators.

In Ontario there are guidelines that inform the provincial spending, and the Academic upgrading initiative with goals and targets but there is no literacy policy or strategy enshrined in legislation such as those found in Quebec and Manitoba

The government measures 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 StatCan 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.

Two recent movements in Ontario that may make some impact on literacy include: Employment Ontario which represents a large-scale initiative of the provincial government, in terms of policy and infrastructure; and, the Ontario Learns Report, which proposes a provincial policy framework for adult education. However, Ontario needs a literacy policy to ensure ongoing sustainable funding for adults with literacy issues. 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.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Hamilton Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario.

That the provincial government creates and aligns a provincial adult literacy policy that:

- Recognizes literacy as the foundational essential skill for employment, a key component of lifelong learning and a priority in Ontario.
- 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. Health, Corrections, Citizenship and Immigration, Children's and Community Services, Ontario Works, etc.
- Literacy policy be imbedded in the Adult Education Framework.