



Frontier College is a national literacy organization, established in 1899 on the belief that literacy is a right. Each year, we recruit and train 2,500+ volunteer tutors who work with over 30,000 children, youth, and adults. Great-West Life, London Life and Canada Life has been generously supporting the cause of literacy at Frontier College since 1999.

Statistics Canada confirms that “literacy skill level and household income are positively related.”ⁱ

In an information-based economy, people who struggle with literacy have a hard time getting a job or making more than minimum wage. Likewise, higher literacy and numeracy skills are associated with greater employment levels and higher earnings.ⁱⁱ

In Canada, as many as 4.3 million people are living with povertyⁱⁱⁱ. Though evidence suggests that raising literacy rates is one of the best ways to change this, literacy often plays a limited role in coordinated strategies to alleviate poverty. The 2017 Literacy & Poverty Forum seeks to increase knowledge of literacy intervention as a key support for Canadians moving out of poverty.

“Certain population characteristics [...] have been found to be concentrated among the low-income population. [...] One population characteristic that has received less attention is skill level, which refers specifically to fundamental literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills.”
(Statistics Canada, 2016.^{iv})

Adults with higher levels of literacy and education make more money

Literacy is measured on a scale of 0 to 5, with 5 being the highest level.

- Household income for those with literacy level 4 or 5 is 70% higher than for those with literacy level 1 or below and 33% higher than those with literacy level 2.^v
- Average earnings for an adult with “less than high school” are \$23,000, compared to \$60,000 for adults with a university degree.^{vi}
- Among adults with a college diploma, average earnings are \$37,000 for adults with literacy level 2, compared to \$50,000 for adults with literacy level 4 or 5.^{vii}

Students from low-income homes have less educational and economic success

- The Toronto District School Board found that 47% of students from the lowest income bracket (parents earning less than \$30,000/year) were meeting the provincial standard in reading, compared to 66% of students from the highest income bracket (parents earning \$100,000/year or more).^{viii}
- A Canadian study of life-path differences associated with levels of reading found that “Young people who had higher levels of proficiency in reading at the age of 15 had higher levels of educational attainment and income by the time they were 25 than youth with lower proficiency in reading.”^{ix}

Poverty as a wall of barriers

Canada’s Chief Public Health Officer reports that children in families with financial worries may be at greater risk of learning and behaviour problems that limit their educational success, which can lead, in turn, to behaviours in adolescence that limit employment, income, and health in adulthood.^x



For many, poverty exists as a wall of compounding barriers. Things like low literacy, low income, poor health, limited mobility, social isolation, and compromised mental health can easily reinforce one another. For people in situations of poverty, access to educational services, supports, and opportunities may be blocked by other barriers in their lives.

Some groups of Canadians are more likely to experience poverty and low literacy. These include recent immigrants, Indigenous people, women, people with disabilities, single parents, seniors, and people in prison.^{xi xii xiii} Added to the fact that those with lower literacy and education levels struggle to compete in the labour market, this means that the most marginalized Canadians will have the hardest time escaping poverty and will suffer most acutely from an economic downturn.

Social return on investment

There is strong evidence that investment in literacy can benefit the Canadian economy by: reducing costs in areas such as social assistance, healthcare, and justice; increasing productivity and earnings. The 2011 report *From Poverty to Prosperity: Literacy's Impact on Canada's Economic Success* placed the annual savings in social assistance alone of raising every Canadian adult to Level 3 literacy at \$542M. The same report found research to suggest that an investment of \$18B to eliminate occupational literacy shortages would generate an additional \$100B in annual earnings.^{xiv}

"Higher literacy can boost the economic and financial success of individuals and the economy as a whole. It can reduce poverty, improve health, lift community engagement and lead to a higher standard of living. In fact, it is hard to identify any other single issue that can have such a large payoff to individuals, the economy and society."^{xv}

Literacy and poverty reduction

"The correlation between education and poverty is a proven fact. Lack of a Diploma of Secondary Studies is identified as being one of the factors that makes entering the job market difficult, and as one of the reasons for the poverty that ensues."^{xvi}

Common themes of provincial and territorial poverty reduction strategies include:

- income assistance
- tax breaks and benefits
- employment programs
- early childhood education
- affordable housing
- access to health services

While the value of literacy, education, and/or skills training is acknowledged by most provincial/territorial strategies, literacy support as a broad-reaching tool is represented unevenly, especially for adults.

Child and youth literacy

- Focus is on early childhood, whether through family literacy programs or early childhood education.
- School success is mostly measured as high school completion, though some regions also consider literacy and numeracy scores.
- Ontario's plan puts the strongest emphasis on building the literacy and numeracy skills of low-income children, reporting solid improvements in math and reading scores.
- New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan include after-school and summer programming for school-aged children.

Adult literacy

Most actions are tied to employment or workplace skills; the importance of literacy and lifelong learning to overcoming the multiple barriers of poverty is generally missing. Some notable exceptions:

- Newfoundland's Division of Adult Learning and Literacy within the Department of Education to "increase the participation of adults with low levels of education." Priorities include financial support to Literacy Centres and research into barriers to participation in adult education programs.
- New Brunswick's plan includes a priority to support "community-based initiatives in literacy, financial literacy, adult education, skill development, and workplace entry preparation."
- Nunavut's plan includes "Supporting literacy projects through funding of community literacy organizations."
- Quebec's plan supports a general principle to "offer individuals the services and measures they need to facilitate their personal growth and their integration within the job market and the life of the society."
- Saskatchewan's plan promises to enhance employment readiness and literacy programming in correctional facilities to assist offenders in gaining employment once they leave the facility.

Community-based literacy intervention

Poverty is entrenched through poverty of opportunity. For literacy to be a tool in the fight against poverty, it needs to make opportunities available to those who need them most. This means extending support beyond formal education and training programs.

Adults with low literacy skills may have negative experiences with the formal school system or face such challenges as learning disabilities, low self-esteem, unemployment, or underemployment. Children from disadvantaged homes may have less access to reading materials and technology; they may attend under-resourced schools or daycares; and their parents may have less time to spend reading at home due to challenging work schedules.^{xvii} For all learners experiencing poverty, the cost of education and training programs, whether in tuition, time commitment, or child care and transportation, can be prohibitive.

Effective literacy education:

- is delivered at the community level
- provides a non-threatening learning environment
- has a low student to teacher ratio
- sets realistic, individualized goals
- uses relevant and appropriate learning material
- employs diverse learning strategies
- has flexible policies and practices to meet the needs of learners^{xviii}

“Programs in post-secondary education, adult education, literacy, financial literacy, skills development and workplace preparation should be provided at a local level in learning friendly environments, to reach people in the community where they live.”^{xix}

“I am currently on a path to university, and being able to have relationships with university students who can give me insight into post-secondary education has been instrumental in my endeavor to finish school.”

– Learner in a Hamilton program for high school students needing alternatives to a traditional classroom environment. Frontier College provided volunteer literacy tutors. Many of these students lack essential skills and confidence in learning, due to a history of missing school starting early in their elementary school days.

"The children [...] receive one on one help with their homework which is greatly needed because the children's mothers are already busy with their own homework. The mothers do not pay for this program, which makes it easier financially for them. [...] We have had mothers graduate and become successful independent women. For example, we had a mother that became a dentist and has her own dentist office now."

– Coordinator at a low-cost housing centre in Montreal for single mothers studying full time.
Frontier College volunteers provided after-school support to children living in the housing complex.

"In today's society, if you can't read or write people look down on you and most likely won't give you a shot at most things. They think you can't do it, which isn't always true. You can be the smartest person with all the life skills, but not have the ability to read or write so you get the cuts [the short end of the stick]."

– Learner in a reduced-custody facility associated with the Saskatoon Correctional Centre.
Frontier College volunteer tutors provide one-to-one learning support for individuals who are incarcerated and offer continued tutoring assistance upon their release.

Discussion Questions

1. How has improved literacy helped to create a positive impact on the welfare of individuals or communities? What are some success stories?
2. What can be done to strengthen the profile of literacy as a vital component of poverty reduction?
3. What literacy interventions would be needed to strengthen the overall impact of poverty reduction strategies?
4. What are the challenges you are facing and how are they being addressed?
5. What systemic changes would positively impact literacy levels in Canada?

Citations

- ⁱ Heisz, Andrew, Geranda Notten and Jerry Situ. (2016). The association between skills and low income. *Insights on Canadian Society*. February 2016. Statistics Canada catalogue no. 75-006-X. Page 2. Retrieved from: <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2016001/article/14322-eng.htm>
- ⁱⁱ Hanushek, Eric A., Guido Schwerdt, Simon Wiederhold and Ludger Woessmann. (2013). *Returns to skills around the world: Evidence from PIAAC*. National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) working paper No. 19762. Page 3. doi: 10.3386/w19762
- ⁱⁱⁱ **NB:** Measuring poverty in Canada is difficult because the federal government has not endorsed a standard definition. Using the low income cut-off (LICO) published by Statistics Canada, the 2011 Census showed 4,331,000 (12.9%) of Canadians were in low income households before tax and 2,959,000 Canadians (8%) were in low-income households after tax.
- ^{iv} Heisz, Notten & Situ, 2016. Page 1.
- ^v Heisz, Notten & Situ, 2016. Page 2.
- ^{vi} Murray, Scott and Richard Shillington. (2011). *From poverty to prosperity: Literacy's impact on Canada's economic success*. Kanata, ON: Canadian Literacy and Learning Network. Page 17.
- ^{vii} Murray & Shillington, 2011. Page 17.
- ^{viii} Kovacs, Nicole and Laura McDiarmid. (2013). (Citing Rushowy, Kristin and Louise Brown, 2010.) *Youth literacy programs: A review of the literature*. London, ON: Child and Youth Network. Page 21. Retrieved from: <http://londoncyn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Literacy-Programs-A-Review-of-the-Literature-Final-Designed-Copy-2.pdf>
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- ^x Butler-Jones, David. (2009). *The Chief Public Health Officer's report on the state of public health in Canada 2009: Growing up well – Priorities for a healthy future*. Ottawa: Public Health Agency of Canada. Page 9. Retrieved from: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2009/fr-rc/pdf/cphorsphc-respcacsp-eng.pdf>
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- ^{xiv} Murray & Shillington, 2011. Page 39.
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- ^{xix} Government of New Brunswick. (2014). *Overcoming poverty together: The New Brunswick economic and social inclusion plan 2014-2019*. Page 6. Retrieved from: <http://www2.gnb.ca/content/dam/gnb/Departments/esic/pdf/NBEconomicSocialInclusionPlan2014-2019.pdf>