

2024

NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

WRITTEN SUBMISSION FOR
PRE-BUDGET CONSULTATIONS IN
ADVANCE OF THE 2024 FEDERAL BUDGET

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared by:



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Canadian
Children's
Literacy
Foundation

Fondation pour
l'alphabétisation
des enfants
canadiens

childrensliteracy.ca



125

United for Literacy
Littératie Ensemble

unitedforliteracy.ca

INTRODUCTION

ABC Life Literacy Canada, the **Canadian Children's Literacy Foundation**, and **United for Literacy** are national literacy organizations.

We work together with over 500 partners each year to provide innovative literacy, numeracy, and foundational skills support for under-represented groups in Canada.

Our programs reach nearly 30,000 children, youth, and adults in over 200 communities each year. These programs are free, high-impact, adaptable, and are delivered by community hubs and networks across the country.

The Government of Canada needs to invest in the skills of adults with low literacy, and in the early literacy skills of all young children. Literacy skills are crucial because they allow us to separate fact from fiction, share critical information, make informed decisions, and adapt to changing workplaces. Yet, according to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 49% of working-age Canadians have literacy scores below Level 3—the level needed to succeed in a 21st-century knowledge-based economy like Canada's. Almost 1 in 5 (17%) of working-age Canadians have scores of Level 0-1.¹

Indigenous people are particularly affected by low literacy skills: one Canadian study found that an estimated 60% lacked the literacy skills that the labour market requires.² These low foundational skills are a barrier to education and training opportunities. They also correlate with other issues, such as poverty, housing instability³, poor health⁴, and justice involvement.⁵

In December 2023, the OECD published results from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2022 which assesses the skills performance of 15-year-old students. Youth literacy and numeracy levels are included as key performance measures for tracking progress on Canada's Poverty Reduction Strategy, reaffirming the importance of reading, writing and math skills for moving individuals from poverty to prosperity. The 2022 results revealed that Canada performed worse in all subjects as compared to 2018, and there was a decrease in reading and math scores in all provinces. The OECD says this decline is only partly attributable to the COVID pandemic, as results have been declining for more than a decade. Based on United for Literacy's analysis of changes from 2018 to 2022, not only is Canada trending in the wrong direction, but some provinces have seen increases of more than 50% in the share of 15-year-olds who are struggling with reading and math.⁶

We commend the Government of Canada's recent investments in the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) system and the Skills for Success model: these initiatives will contribute to a better today and tomorrow.

We urge the Government of Canada to build on that landmark work by establishing a national literacy policy. This new investment in strategic and coordinated planning will both improve the low literacy skills of Canadian adults, and ensure that children are set up to achieve high literacy levels in school. It will focus on reversing Canada's literacy level decline, and will account for and address the unique needs of learners who need it most: those from under-represented and low-income communities in urban, rural, and remote locations.

Canadians and employers stand with us. Research data shows that not only does increased investment in literacy benefit employers, but that it is a priority for Canadians. A 2017 Environics public opinion poll⁷ confirmed that 87% of Canadians agree that more should be done to improve literacy rates in Canada.

Today, the impacts of the pandemic have aggravated the situation and created new challenges due to school closures leading to "COVID learning loss" and workplace disruptions and lay-offs primarily impacting lower skilled workers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This submission recommends that the Government of Canada invest \$1 million to design a National Literacy Strategy (2025–2027). This strategy will establish national standards for child, youth, and adult literacy and foundational skills proficiency. It will provide a framework for effective data sharing, coordinated skills improvement planning, and sharing of best practices and high-quality resources for learners, including those from Indigenous and Newcomer communities. Additionally, it will align the efforts of numerous stakeholders responsible for promoting the quality and effectiveness of education, training, and labour market performance.

A National Literacy Strategy will tangibly improve the lives and prosperity of Canadians. It will reduce the percentage of adults on the lower half of the literacy scale,⁸ and it will increase literacy rates in vulnerable communities. It will build a more inclusive, flexible, and prosperous economy and labour market in Canada.

ABC Life Literacy Canada, the Canadian Children’s Literacy Foundation, and United for Literacy call on the Government of Canada to develop a national literacy strategy that brings together key stakeholders and breaks down siloes of responsibility in areas such as education, training, social development, settlement services, and poverty reduction.

We recommend the 2024–2025 and 2025–2026 federal budgets put in place the resources needed to: develop a national structure and strategy for literacy and numeracy monitoring and remediation; improve data collection and the coordination of foundational skill education efforts; support and scale evidence-based interventions and proven practices as part of a coordinated response among provinces and territories; as well as include a liaison function to address the food security, housing, and health service needs of adults with low literacy skills, ensuring they are supported by available programs for Canadians living in poverty.

CITATIONS

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