THE CASE FOR A NATIONAL LITERACY STRATEGY

By the National Literacy Alliance
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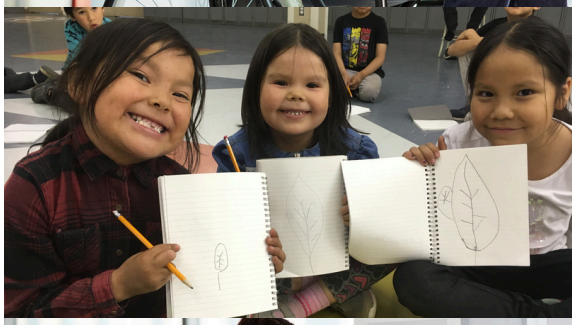

Executive Summary

Literacy is more than an individual skill; it is a national asset and a catalyst for Canada's bold future. It is strengthening our economy, empowering our people, and uniting our communities in the face of change. Literacy enables economic growth, social participation, and lifelong and life-wide learning. It is also a social determinant of health and well-being. As Canada navigates economic transitions, demographic shifts, and global challenges, ensuring all people have the foundational skills, including literacy, to succeed in learning, work, and life is not optional, it is essential, and it begins at birth.

The urgency:

In December 2024, results from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) revealed that, in Canada, 19 per cent of working-age adults struggle with basic literacy (up from 17 per cent in 2014). This means millions of people in Canada face barriers to employment, civic engagement, positive health outcomes, and family well-being. This number is growing.

The opportunity:

With coordinated and supported action, Canada can reverse this trend. Early childhood foundational skills such as basic literacy, numeracy, and social emotional abilities are critical for later learning and adaptability. Research consistently demonstrates that experiences and skill development before age five have long-lasting consequences for health, learning, and future earnings.

These early skills lay the groundwork for lifelong literacy, which empowers people to understand and apply information, solve problems, make decisions, think critically, and adapt in a rapidly changing world. Literacy is the foundation for economic resilience, social inclusion, and personal fulfillment. Thus, investing in literacy is investing in our future as individuals, as communities, and as a prosperous economy.

The return on investment is clear:

In 2018, literacy researchers estimated that a one per cent increase in average adult literacy scores would grow Canada's GDP by $67 billion, putting approximately $1,800 more into the pockets of each Canadian every year (Canada West Foundation 2018). Adjusted to today's economy, this benefit could now reach as much as $95 billion for Canada, or about $2,300 per Canadian annually. Deloitte Canada (2020) found that investments made in early literacy produce large long-term returns, and the Atkinson Centre (2021) calculated returns of $2 to $7 for every dollar invested in early care and learning. The costs of inaction, however, are equally stark: the World Literacy Foundation (2015) estimated that illiteracy costs the global economy over $1 trillion (USD) annually in direct losses.

Our recommendation

The National Literacy Alliance, comprised of organizations and individuals from the literacy and learning sector, recommends that the Government of Canada expand the mandate of the Office of Skills for Success to lead the development and implementation of a National Literacy Strategy. The strategy must be centered around equity, reflect the diverse needs and strengths of people across the country, and support accessible learning opportunities through all stages of life.

Investing in this strategy directly aligns with the federal government's ambition to build a stronger, more productive economy that works for everyone. A focus on literacy will enable Canada to scale new infrastructure, attract global talent, secure inclusive growth, and ensure that people are equipped for opportunities emerging through artificial intelligence, digital innovation, and the clean economy. A fully literate workforce and deeply engaged society require a national commitment to lifelong and intergenerational learning - from early childhood and family literacy to adult upskilling - that strengthens individuals, communities, and Canada's long-term competitiveness.

Preamble

Even with one of the highest comparative literacy rates in the world, many Canadians' literacy, numeracy, and digital skills are below what is needed to thrive in an increasingly knowledge-based, tech-driven economy. In 2018, literacy researchers estimated that a one per cent increase in average adult literacy scores would grow Canada's GDP by $67 billion, putting approximately $1,800 more into the pockets of each Canadian every year (Canada West Foundation 2018). Adjusted to today's economy, this benefit could now reach as much as $95 billion for Canada, or about $2,300 per Canadian annually. Deloitte Canada (2020) found that investments made in early literacy produce large long-term returns, and the Atkinson Centre (2021) calculated returns of $2 to $7 for every dollar invested in early care and learning. The costs of inaction, however, are equally stark: the World Literacy Foundation (2015) estimated that illiteracy costs the global economy over $1 trillion (USD) annually in direct losses.

There are fewer Canadians with high literacy levels today than in 1994, and there are more with low literacy levels (IALS, 1994; PIAAC, 2024). To ensure a fiscally sound and competitive future, Canada must act on the widening gaps in literacy, numeracy, and digital skills in our country.

As the Government of Canada seeks to remove barriers to opportunity, improving foundational skills is essential to creating one Canadian economy where everyone can contribute. This is especially important for realizing the potential of underutilized talent in every region of the country, helping all Canadians to get ahead and fully contribute to their community.

Canada has what the world wants. To ensure Canada reaches its potential as a global trade coalition builder, Canada must ensure its people reach their potential to contribute their strengths to the economy, to our society, and to their families. This starts with early and family literacy and is sustained through lifelong and life-wide learning opportunities that equip people to fully participate in and shape Canada's vibrant economic future.

Recommendation

The National Literacy Alliance recommends that the Government of Canada expand the mandate of Employment and Social Development Canada's Office of Skills for Success to research, develop, and support the implementation of a National Literacy Strategy. This strategy will address gaps in literacy, numeracy, digital, and other essential skills that underpin the prosperity and wellbeing of individuals and communities across Canada.

The National Literacy Strategy would advance equitable outcomes across provincial, territorial, federal, and Indigenous systems; foster high-quality, inclusive pathways for learning, training, and labour market integration; and strengthen capacity through evidence-based policy and community-driven innovation, tailored to specific populations and aligned with local priorities.

Because literacy is the foundation of economic resilience, social inclusion, and lifelong learning, a targeted investment would complement existing education and labour market transfer payments to the provinces and territories while enhancing the ability to address growing workplace diversity, labour mobility, and evolving workforce needs. Now is the time to close current skills gaps and prevent future ones through proactive solutions.

The learning and literacy sector in Canada includes a diverse ecosystem of local, regional, and national organizations, alongside individual experts, committed to strengthening reading, writing, numeracy, digital, and employability skills across the lifespan. The sector is united and ready to support the federal government in the development of an evidence-based National Literacy Strategy that responds to rapidly changing learning and employment contexts. The strategy would address the unique needs of Indigenous, Black, newcomer, and racialized learners, Francophones within and outside of Quebec, linguistic minorities, marginalized and institutionalized individuals, persons affected by intergenerational traumas associated with learning institutions, as well as those in rural, remote, and northern communities, leading to improved outcomes through greater access to flexible, inclusive, and accessible services and support.

By building human capital, fostering civic engagement, and preparing the workforce for critical sectors such as infrastructure, housing, AI and technology, clean energy, and defence, this strategy will position Canada to meet future challenges, strengthen national security, and drive sustainable growth.

Background

With an expanded mandate for the Office of Skills for Success and a dynamic, robust National Literacy Strategy, Canada will reduce the fragmentation of literacy support across the lifespan. This includes improving monitoring and rapid response, reducing the proportion of adults with lower literacy and skill levels, advancing Budget 2021's recognition that "45 per cent of Canadians lack the literacy, numeracy, and digital skills that are increasingly necessary to succeed in jobs in the knowledge economy" (Canada, 2021).

A new National Literacy Strategy will provide a framework for innovative cooperation across institutions, governments, and community organizations to address gaps in the acquisition and remediation of child, youth, and adult literacy and foundational skills. This is particularly important for educational and economic empowerment in communities and populations that are impacted by intergenerational poverty and under-representation in the labour market, including those from Indigenous, Black, racialized, newcomer and francophone communities across Canada.

Systemic disparities require systemic solutions: a National Literacy Strategy will improve coordination and effective data sharing across jurisdictions, advance sharing best practices and high-quality resources, and fund effective community-based programs for individuals who are struggling, and who may be further from the labour market. A central home for evidence-based literacy policy and program development, through the strategy, will allow the federal government to focus on outcomes, maximizing existing public investments and catalyzing private sector engagement, especially in workforce development and upskilling that improve productivity.

Why this matters now

A National Literacy Strategy will coordinate federal action and drive measurable change across jurisdictions. It will provide a cohesive framework for collective impact, ensuring that efforts to address literacy gaps are aligned, scalable, and sustainable. The time to act is now because:

1. **The skills gap is growing**
   As economic and technological change accelerates, the demand for foundational skills outpaces supply. Without action, inequality will deepen, reducing social cohesion and leaving employers with greater labour shortages..

2. **Jurisdictional silos limit progress**
   While many education systems are provincial and territorial responsibilities, the impacts of low literacy are national, affecting workforce participation and productivity, social and health outcomes, civic engagement, and quality of life. Federal leadership in a national solution is vital, providing coordination, sustained investment, and a framework for cooperation across jurisdictions.

3. **Underserved communities are disproportionately affected**
   Literacy disparities reflect broader systemic inequities that affect Indigenous peoples, newcomers, Black and racialized individuals, Francophones outside Quebec, and people in rural and remote areas.

4. **Canada risks falling behind**
   Other countries, including Australia, Finland, Ireland, New Zealand, and the UK, have developed national literacy or foundational skills strategies with strong government leadership, cross-sector collaboration, and long-term investment. While Canada currently scores above the OECD average in many skill domains, we also have a large proportion of individuals with low literacy skills.

5. **The literacy and learning sector is ready**
   Literacy and learning organizations across Canada are united in their call for a National Literacy Strategy. We have the data, the experience, and the solutions. We need federal commitment and leadership to scale our impact.

6. **The new federal mandate provides a unique opportunity to embed literacy into nation-building efforts.** Canada's success in housing, infrastructure, and AI innovation depends on the full participation of its people, contributing their skills, talent, creativity, and adaptability. This strategy provides a tangible method to ensure everyone can take part in building our shared future.

Call to action

The literacy and learning sector in Canada is diverse and includes organizations, individuals, and agencies mandated to support early childhood and family literacy, primary and secondary school students, and adult learners. This includes provincial, territorial, and Indigenous-governed education and literacy stakeholders from coast to coast to coast. We are united in our call for systemic improvements and greater equity in early learning, education, and lifelong skills development.

Through consultation with sector leaders, we identified a vision and five-part goal to guide the initial stages of a National Literacy Strategy.

Vision: Everyone in Canada has the literacy skills necessary to fully participate in learning, work, and in community life.

Our shared goal: Inclusive economic growth, made possible through literacy policies and programming that reduce inequity and support people most at risk of exclusion.

We, the undersigned, believe that together we can build a Canada in which:

- All families have access to language and literacy supports from birth, both at home and in the community, ensuring that every child, regardless of postal code, has a strong foundation for lifelong learning and success.

- All children and youth receive high-quality, evidence-based, and culturally inclusive reading and writing instruction, including remedial support, at school that enables them to acquire the literacy skills they need to thrive today and throughout their lives.

- All adults and out-of-school youth can access flexible learning and training opportunities, including those designed for diverse learning needs and backgrounds, in community settings and workplaces to strengthen their literacy skills for a 21st-century knowledge-based economy.

- Literacy and skills data is shared across jurisdictions to inform equitable policy and high-quality program design and evaluation, with particular attention to identifying the root causes of lower literacy outcomes to guide evidence-based prevention and remediation strategies.

- Literacy programs are accessible through plain language communication, inclusive design for diverse learning methods, and outreach and interventions that honour cultural diversity and respect the needs and strengths of underserved areas and groups.

This vision supports the Government of Canada's goals of attracting the best talent in the world, creating one Canadian economy, and ensuring that all Canadians can contribute to a secure, dynamic, and forward-looking country. This call to action is aligned with the Prime Minister's direction to bring together labour, business, and civil society to build a Canada worthy of our children and grandchildren.

BUDGET REQUEST

We recommend a federal investment that will:

- Expand the Office of Skills for Success to lead and coordinate the strategy;
- Support research and policy development aligned with the five-part goal listed above;
- Strengthen national data and evaluation systems;
- Build sector capacity to scale innovation and improve outcomes; and
- Fund scalable programs that serve:

    o learners who require only a minimal investment to meet the literacy requirements of the available jobs.

    o those, with lower literacy levels who may require a deeper investment to overcome long-standing barriers, and who will ultimately provide a larger return on that investment through reduced dependence on social services, improved involvement in their families and communities, stronger workforce participation, and increased civic engagement.

    o families through dual-generation literacy and early literacy interventions that support both caregiver upskilling and child development, breaking cycles of intergenerational poverty and exclusion

This investment aligns with the government's plan to catalyze private capital through strategic use of public funds. It will position the literacy sector to multiply the impact of federal dollars through partnerships with employers, settlement services, Indigenous governments, housing agencies, and digital training providers.

This National Literacy Strategy will expand access to foundational skills, thus reducing pressure on health, justice, and income security systems while accelerating participation in the skilled trades, and in Canada's transition to a digitally enabled workforce.

CONCLUSION

To build bold and build now, Canada also has the opportunity to invest in a further 30 per cent of the population to build the literacy skills needed for the higher-skilled jobs of today and tomorrow.

The National Literacy Alliance is ready to work with the Government of Canada to develop the strategy. Together, we can ensure that all people in Canada have the skills they need to fully participate in learning, work, and community life. Let this be a defining initiative of the 30th Canadian Ministry: one that expands opportunity and makes government more productive through outcome-focused cooperation.

Canada's greatest resource is its people. Investing in their literacy skills will create the most resilient economy in the G7. Supporting the National Literacy Strategy demonstrates vision, the courage to dismantle systemic barriers, and a shared commitment to an inclusive and prosperous future that realizes our collective Canadian potential. Now is the time to act with determination and urgency to build a strong, united country for our children and grandchildren.

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

ABC Life Literacy Canada	National
Bookmates	MB
Calgary Learns	AB
CanLearn Society	AB
Canadian Children Literacy Foundation	National
Canada West Foundation	AB
Centre for Family Literacy	AB
Children's Reading Room	ON
CNIB Deafblind Community Service	ON
Coalition ontarienne de formation des adultes (COFA)	ON
Community Literacy Ontario (CLO)	ON
Community Learning Network	AB
Davenport-Perth Neighbourhood and Community Health Centre	ON
Decoda Literacy Solutions	BC
Dolly Parton's Imagination Library/Dollywood Foundation of Canada	National
Dyslexia Canada	National
ELLA - Early Learning and Literacy Alliance Waterloo Region	ON
East York Learning Experience	ON
e-Channel	ON
First Book Canada	National
Foundations Learning & Skills Saskatchewan	SK
Gaspesie Literacy Council	QC
Ilitaqsiniq	Nunavut
Institut de coopération pour l'éducation des adultes	QC
Kate Arthur Media	QC
Kids Literacy Collective in Calgary	AB
Learning Disabilities & ADHD Network	AB
Learning Disabilities Association of PEI	PEI
LiftEd Literacy and Leadership	ON
Literacy Coalition of New Brunswick	NB
Literacy Lambton	ON
Literacy Link Eastern Ontario	ON
Literacy Network Northeast	ON
Literacy Nova Scotia	NS
Literacy Northwest	ON
Literacy Quebec	QC
Literacy Unlimited	QC
MAGNET	QC
Metro Toronto Movement for Literacy (MTML)	ON
The Mid North Network for the Coordination and Development of Adult Learning (MNN)	ON
MinibiblioPLUS / Fraser Hickson Institute	QC
National Alliance for Children and Youth (NACY)	National
NWT Literacy Council	NWT
Ontario Association of Adult and Continuing Education School Board	ON

SUPPORTING ORGANIZATIONS

• Ontario Library Association	ON
• Ontario Native Literacy Coalition	ON/First Nation
• Park Street Literacy(Education)	National
• PEI Literacy Alliance	PEI
• Peter Gzowski Foundation for Literacy	National
• Project READ Literacy Network Waterloo – Wellington	ON
• Read to me	NS
• Resilient Kids Canada	AB
• (RESDAC) Réseau pour le développement de l'alphabétisme et des compétences.	National
• Rotary Club of Calgary	AB
• Saskatchewan Literacy Network	SK
• Simcoe Muskoka Skillforce	ON
• St. Leonard's Society of Canada	National
• Storybooks Canada	BC
• The Children's Book Bank	ON
• The Reading Partnership	National
• Toronto Centre of Learning & Development	ON
• United for Literacy/Littératie Ensemble	National
• Yamaska Literacy Council	QC
• Youth Association for Academics, Athletics, & Character Education	ON
• Yukon Learn	YK
• Yukon Literacy	YK
• Yarmouth County Learning Network	NS